
AS MUSIC

7271/C – Composition
Report on the Examination

7271
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General points

After the process of devising, refining and publishing a new specification, it is exciting to see the first responses arrive - especially in a creative component like composition.

Administration

The vast majority of schools and colleges processed the administrative requirements of the component successfully. Schools and colleges need to include:

- a signed attendance register
- a script for each student comprising:
 - Candidate Record Form (CRF) signed by student and teacher
 - a score / lead sheet / aural guide for each of the two compositions
 - a programme note for each of the two compositions
- a CD with the audio of each composition

It is recommended that the work for each student is either enclosed in an A3 print out of the CRF, or held together by a paperclip or inside a single folder. Please do not use staples or treasury tags. It is not necessary to have spoken announcements on CDs; please make sure that they are clearly labelled, and that will suffice.

The examiners draw attention to the fact that, in accordance with Ofqual instructions, where the two compositions submitted have a combined playing time of less than the minimum stated in the specification (4 and a half minutes), students must be given a mark of zero for the component.

Composition 1: Composition to a Brief

The specification requires students to submit two compositions, the first in response to one of six briefs released by AQA in September. These six briefs have an implied relationship to the six Areas of Study. All six options were undertaken by this year's students; by far the most popular option was Brief 1 - the traditional Chorales options. Of the other five briefs, the most popular was Brief 3, the Music and Media option.

Brief 1

Question 1

This question required students to write 5 cadences, showing both an understanding of technical and stylistic aspects. For each there is need to consider:

- Key
- Type of cadence
- Part-writing

In this question, it is important to consider not only the given harmonisation of the phrase leading into each cadence, but also the first chord of the next phrase which is also provided.

Bar 4: Nearly all students realised that this required a cadence in the home key of G major. Some chose to use an interrupted cadence; this is an unlikely option for the first cadence of a chorale, especially given the bold nature of this opening 4-bar phrase in 4/4 rising towards the end of the phrase.

Two other factors needed consideration. Firstly, whether to use the dominant 7th, and secondly, how to maintain movement through the 2-beat dominant chord to sustain the sense of style of the previous three bars.

The melody in b.4, with the dominant falling to the mediant, makes it impossible to use the dominant 7th in the Alto or Tenor without creating a double major 3rd in the tonic chord. The Alto at the end of b.3 invites use of a 4-3 suspension in the cadence - a feature only a minority of students thought to use. A few created a Ic-V progression by having the Tenor moving from B to A, but this creates a different problem.

Many students (including those using the Ic-V progression mentioned above) ended the phrase with both Tenor and Bass on a G - either in unison or an octave apart. Whilst, in approach, this is a valid option, in the move into the next phrase it creates parallel octaves (in some cases by contrary motion) onto b.5¹.

Sometimes one has to resist a clever plan to create 'check' as it only leads to being put into 'checkmate' with the next move.

Bar 8: With the melody falling F# - E - D, many students saw the music has modulated to the dominant and provided a Ic - V - I cadence in D major. There was no good reason not to include the dominant 7th - most idiomatically as a quaver passing note in the Alto. A lot of students successfully worked the Tenor moving 4-3 above the Bass in the first half of the bar, and then reasoned that the leading note (C#) should resolve upwards to D. Unfortunately, this creates parallel octaves with the Bass as the music moves into b.5 - something they failed to spot. It was therefore important to use the Bachian 'dropped 5th' in this cadence.

Some students saw an alternative cadential option: writing Ic - V - I in B minor - the relative of the dominant. This is an unlikely destination halfway through a rather 4-square chorale, but on this occasion actually worked rather nicely as it makes the 1st inversion C major chord on b.9¹ (as provided in the brief) sound as a Neapolitan relationship to the preceding B minor chord.

Bar 10: Most students recognised that the relative minor (E minor) was required at this point, and wrote a I-V imperfect cadence. Some failed to realise that this requires an accidental to create a B major chord at b.10³, with an unconvincing modal outcome.

Quite a lot of students wrote two chords of minims here - disappointing given that no corresponding bars in the other phrases (b.2, 6, and 14) use minims. Some attempted having motion in the bass, with a mix of success and error. A strong option that few spotted was to use the F# in the Alto at b.9⁴ as the preparation for a crunching 9-8 suspension in b.10.

Bar 12: This was the cadence that created the most variety of response. Many saw an opportunity to return to the tonic key. It is certainly possible to use a perfect cadence in G major here, but this overlooks the wider context and creates a rather premature return to the tonic, making the final cadence less rewarding as a culmination to the chorale.

It was therefore better to stay in E minor. Some did so by using a plagal cadence at this point, which provides a good sense of cadential variety. The strongest option, though, was to write a Phrygian cadence (IV^b-V).

Bar 16: Most students found some version of a perfect cadence to finish the chorale. Some were put off by the G in the Soprano at b.15⁴ and tried to accommodate this with a plagal cadence, rarely with success. Of course, the G works fine as an anticipatory note against a leading note elsewhere in the texture to create dominant harmony, though without a dominant 7th at some point this sounds very abrasive. Those who wrote a minim II^b chord at the start of b.15 created an arguably bland and static moment just where strength is needed; II^{7b} is a far more intense and idiomatic colour here, even without movement.

A complete version of the exercise is given below – although it's important to note that this was not the only route to full marks.

The first system of the musical score consists of four measures in 4/4 time, key of E minor. The treble clef part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass clef part begins with a half note E3, followed by quarter notes F3, G3, and A3. The texture is homophonic with a clear harmonic structure.

The second system of the musical score consists of four measures in 4/4 time, key of E minor. The treble clef part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass clef part begins with a half note E3, followed by quarter notes F3, G3, and A3. The texture is homophonic with a clear harmonic structure.

The third system of the musical score consists of four measures in 4/4 time, key of E minor. The treble clef part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass clef part begins with a half note E3, followed by quarter notes F3, G3, and A3. The texture is homophonic with a clear harmonic structure.

The fourth system of the musical score consists of four measures in 4/4 time, key of E minor. The treble clef part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass clef part begins with a half note E3, followed by quarter notes F3, G3, and A3. The texture is homophonic with a clear harmonic structure.

Question 2

In this question, the challenge is to write the Alto and Tenor parts, by interpreting the harmonic implications of the Bass line provided. Aspects that are relevant include:

- Completing the harmony at each chord, considering options of inversions
- Writing good vocal lines, avoiding awkward intervals and parallel 5ths and 8ves
- Creating a good texture through well-spaced chords
- Finding opportunities for stylistic features such as passing notes, suspensions and chromatic inflection

Students tackling this question are advised to consider options. Which keys does the tune visit? What cadences are possible at the end of each phrase? Does the combination of Soprano and Bass dictate root, position, 1st inversion, 2nd inversion or even 3rd inversion (for a V^7 chord)?

When a complete draft of a harmonisation has been completed, students can explore three categories of technical options to enhance the stylistic dimension of their work:

- Passing and auxiliary notes: wherever one of the inner parts leaps by a 3rd there is a potential opportunity for the 'gap' to be filled on the half beat by a passing note. Care needs to be taken, however. Sometimes the passing note can create an issue with parallel 5ths and must be omitted; also, it is rarely effective to pass downwards through the 9th of the chord. On some occasions, an inner part that is repeating a note in crotchets can gain from the decoration of an upper or lower auxiliary note on the half beat.
- Suspensions: sometimes a note in the Alto or Tenor can be repeated on the next beat, forming a 4th, 7th or 9th with the Bass, which then resolves downwards by step to form a 4-3, 7-6 or 9-8 suspension.
- Chromaticism: this aspect is often best considered in reverse gear. For each chord, work out its dominant 7th and see whether it can fit the notes in the Soprano and Bass on the previous chord; if it can, there will be a chance to use chromaticism.

Common among solutions received were those with the following attributes, some of which are errors of technique, and some missed opportunities to create style and character:

- Chords lacking 3rds
- Inner parts with intervals of an augmented 2nd or an augmented 4th
- Parts moving in parallel 5ths or 8ves
- Minims in the melody harmonised by minims in the lower parts
- A diatonic response to the final 3rd of the piece
- Missed opportunities to use suspensions.

One possible solution to this exercise is given below:

Some features to consider here include:

- b.1-2: With both the Soprano and Bass rising at the start of the chorale, considerable care is needed to avoid parallel 5ths
- b.3: Many students found themselves with the same chord at b.2³ as in this version, only to find themselves writing parallel 5ths between the Alto and Tenor. Here the sidestep in the Tenor down to the F has been capitalised upon with the subsequent leap up to the Bb in a crotchet-minim rhythm that creates strong impetus in the first cadence pattern.
- b.4: The sense of this first cadence being less than weighty (it's a IVb-V imperfect) is enhanced by the introduction of the dominant 7th at the end of the bar leading on into the next phrase.
- b.5-7: This phrase was often well handled by students. Those who remembered that chord V is often preceded by II⁷b - a chord of considerable stylistic colour in this context - were onto a

good thing. Quite a number understood that the first beat of the bar needed to be A major in 1st inversion but failed to include a 3rd in the chord when the bass moves to root position on beat 2.

- b.8²: With the Soprano an augmented 4th above the Bass, the only chord that will work here is V^7d ; a number of students wrote instead a 2nd inversion diminished triad.
- b.9: By analysing the chords on beats 1 and 3 of this bar - G minor root position and G minor 1st inversion - it should be apparent that the most likely chord in between the two is the dominant chord of G minor: D^7 . This allows for some chromatic colour in the bar (F#).
- b.10: Here is an instance of realising that the Alto note at the end of the previous bar (D) can be re-used on the downbeat of the new bar to create a 4-3 suspension. Among the benefits of this is that it necessitates movement on the 2nd beat in a bar which many students found to be a very static. It is also worth considering the Tenor part here: the E on beat one helps the suspension (the Alto D is dissonant against the Tenor E), but the leap up to A on beat 2 not only creates more activity on this beat, it helps to avoid parallel 5ths with the bass into b.11.
- b.12-14: This phrase is quite similar to b.5-7, though in C major rather than D minor. Similar issues arise, to which a good solution is - again - to use II^7b ; however, due to the fact that the melody this time ends on the mediant, it is not possible to use the dominant 7th in b.13 without having a technical fault. (This is all the more reason to make sure it is used in b.6.)
- b.15: Another chance to spot the potential for a suspension: this time in the Tenor by re-iterating the note in b.14 (G) to produce a 7-6 suspension over the bass.
- b.16-17: An advanced student may reason that with b.17 using a G minor harmony, b.16 can end with a D major chord - the dominant of G minor; a further step is to think of preceding the dominant D major chord with chord II^7b in G minor - an opportunity to have not one, but two accidentals in the bar: Eb and F#. Here there is also a 7-6 suspension in the Tenor in b.17 and a rising melodic minor scale in the Alto used for passing notes.
- b.20: The standard $Ic - V^7 - I$ cadence is decorated with a hint of a G major chord on beat 2 ... the dominant of the C^7 chord on beat 3, giving a last moment of chromatic colour with the B \flat .

Brief 2

This year the Brief associated with Pop music took the form of a chord sequence:

The image shows a musical score for a chord sequence. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The sequence of chords is: Am, C, D, E, Am, D, G, E. The first four chords are separated from the last four by a dashed vertical line. The bass line consists of single notes: G, C, D, E, G, C, G, E.

This produced a wide variety of approaches in scoring, structure and style. Disappointingly, some work used the brief superficially by playing the sequence once or twice at the start and then becoming self-reliant for harmonic progressions for the rest of their piece. These compositions did

not tend to score highly. Those few students who wrote a pop / rock number without any use of the given chord progression did not achieve any marks.

A common device was to use chords 1-4 for the verse and chords 5-8 for the chorus. A few students thought to double the harmonic rhythm for the chorus. It was very acceptable to insert a different chord pattern as the basis for a pre-chorus. Several gained impetus by having a key change for a final chorus.

Another differentiating factor was the approach to scoring. Some used the chords just as provided for a string pad or synthesizer, others found more inventive ways to use this harmony through idiomatic strumming patterns for guitars, figurations for piano, or scored for backing strings. A neat idea was to vary this scoring at significant structural moments.

One important skill in this kind of brief is to be able to write a good melody that fits the harmony. Not many picked up on the Dorian influence of the chord sequence with its D major chords. A few were able to write stylistic bass riffs that worked with the harmony.

Brief 3

This Brief did not provide specific musical substance; here the task was to respond creatively to a film director's request for a musical cue for an heroic war film. Three distinct sections were required:

- 25 seconds of 'enigmatic suspense'
- 50 seconds of melodic dominated music building to a nostalgic and proud peak
- 45 seconds of ethereal music in high register

Nearly all students choosing this brief wrote for a large orchestra; choosing just piano was unlikely to produce the expected soundworld.

Commonly, the best aspect of the music written was its choice of timbres. There was almost ubiquitous use of tremolo strings (low register in the first section, high register in the third), and the melodies written for the second section were often written for trumpet. Harps were sometimes used for coloristic effects.

Less successful was the musical substance. In the opening section students often used dissonance, but it was rare for this to be controlled in terms of how the dissonance was achieved. A good strategy would have been to use an octatonic scale, or pulsing cluster chords, or lots of 9-8 suspension on minor triads, or maybe even a bitonal language. Few had any sort of motivic element here.

The second section rarely had a really strong melodic idea. Even more scarce was a tune that was using elements likely to create nostalgia and pride. Techniques that may have worked include: rising conjunct lines with falling 7ths, upward leaps to long appoggiaturas, sequence, or triplet crotchets. Not many students responded vividly to the film director's request that this passage should build to a pinnacle.

The final section was better handled - the 'static' instruction, making it likely that the music would be quite simple; however, some took this to be the description of the whole 45 seconds, and not - as specified in the brief - just the last 10 seconds. For some, 'high' was interpreted as being in the top half of the treble clef stave; leger lines and 8^{va} offer a world some students never think of visiting.

The strongest work in this brief was full of colour, careful pacing, and highly skilled transitions between the sections. Occasionally examiners found a score with a motif painted in dark hues in the opening section returning in peaceful beauty in the final section.

Brief 4

This brief, associated with music theatre, provided a set of lyrics to be set to music. Most students who attempted this brief realised that the lyrics provided a verse and a chorus. Some were able to capitalise on this by creating contrasting music for the two sections.

There is a clear contrast of mood in the lyrics. The verse is a series of negative responses to a long list of subjects found in a school curriculum; the chorus is a very upbeat, positive endorsement of Music as the one subject that the singer finds enjoyable to the point of obsession.

Some realised that there was also a contrast in the lyrics in terms of structure. The verse has lots of short lines. These have their own internal structure. Firstly, there is the chance of a matching pair of phrases at the start which is highlighted by the 'To me / For me' lines; this was a real chance to make these simple pairs of words stand out (maybe a rising leap and a long note on 'me'). Then follows 4 lines that include long words ('geography', 'autobiography', 'apology', 'biology') where the stress is early in the word, perhaps inviting a triplet rhythm (for '-ography' and 'ology'). Finally, there are four lines of mostly monosyllables where the energy is pithier. Those who created music that followed this structure generally reached the higher levels of the mark scheme here. The chorus had the potential to be rather dreamy in mood.

A few students are to be commended for writing second verses of lyrics - a very acceptable strategy.

Brief 5

This brief provided a syncopated riff to be the basis of a piece for jazz quartet:



As with the music provided in Brief 2, it is acceptable to have a contrasting section which does not use the riff; however, 'based on' - the rubric instruction for this Brief - means more than having a passing reference such as it being heard twice at the start and then never again. Pieces in which the riff was never heard failed to score any marks.

Most students adopted a swing groove for the riff; occasionally a piece explored both swing and straight versions. Some used the riff *ad infinitum* - without any variant, and rarely did these pieces create enough variety higher in the texture to achieve an interesting end result.

More imaginative pieces found ways to base their music on the riff without it being a straitjacket to the music. Techniques that some found helpful include:

- Using the riff in the melody with a bass line (crotchets work well here)

- Inversion
- Fragmentation
- Sequence of the first 2 bars
- Using in a different key

The very best compositions on this brief not only found interesting ways to manipulate the riff, but explored a stylish harmonic palette of added note chords, handled rhythm with flair, and explored a wide range of textural and timbral effects from their quartet. Others had limitations in one or more of these areas.

Brief 6

This brief required students to compose a folk dance that gradually increases in exuberance. Nearly all who attempt this were able to write a successful initial melody that captured the folk idiom and were able to make at least some increase in tempo.

Unfortunately, many found few other ways to create the increase in exuberance. Potential options include:

- Combining a change of tempo with a change of metre (possible a change in simple / compound)
- Decorating the melody with more notes of short duration
- Using higher registers - perhaps playing the tune in multiple octaves
- Modulating sharpwards or up a semitone
- Adding syncopation

Several students found themselves repeating the same 8- or 16-bar melody over and over. A stronger approach was to have two distinct sections to the melody. Few students seem able to compose a complementary second half to a melody. A good method is to use similar contours and rhythms but begin the second half from a different chord; IV, V and VI all offer good potential for this.

Composition 2 Free composition

It is not possible to comment in detail on the work submitted for Composition 2 - each and every composition is a unique musical entity with its own intentions, ambitions and limitations. All manner of styles were submitted: classical pastiches from Vivaldi to Einaudi, popular styles from soul to techno, jazz styles from traditional blues to Latin and bebop. The pieces of work submitted ranged from very weak to very strong pieces reaching the highest levels of the mark scheme.

From this kaleidoscope of musical creativity, the examiners highlight the following aspects.

- Good composition starts with **imagining** musical sound: those who rely too heavily on a computer can get drawn into composing by sight, leading to the compositional equivalent of 'painting by numbers'.
- A strong composition needs to have a strong **structure**. This is not just achieved by visual aspects on the score (phrase marks, double barlines, etc) but by creating contrast through

one or more of the following: key, metre, melodic contour, rhythmic identity, texture and register, choice of timbres, articulation and dynamic.

- Good musical ideas have strong musical character. This is achieved by **control** of the musical elements (as listed previously) - knowing exactly what harmonic colours, melodic contours, rhythmic cells, textural details - are responsible for the character and maintaining those features for long enough to allow the character to be effective.
- Mere repetition is soon without interest; constant change of musical ideas also quickly loses the listener's interest. It is important to be able to **explore** your musical ideas by sustaining the musical character with some variety of detail. This can be done through adapting one of the musical ingredients whilst maintaining others. A prime way is by extending the harmonic palette; at AS level, constant diatonicism and consonance is unlikely to be impressive.
- For examination purposes (and probably for practical purposes - allowing your orchestra / band / choir to perform your music) it is important to **communicate** your music on paper. This can of course be done with a detailed musical score. Alternatively, a Lead Sheet may suit the idiom of your music. Where a student chooses to submit an Aural Guide, it is advisable to structure this as a timeline. Some students submitted aural guides that referred to bar numbers, but gave no score; this invalidates the aural guide as examiners will not know where bar 110 is when they are listening to the piece in order to assess it.

It has been an exciting part of the process to see the composition submissions of the first cohort of AS students for this new specification. The examiners wish to pay tribute to the students for their hard work in creating their compositions, and to their teachers for helping them to navigate the requirements of the new specifications.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.