

2014 Music Style and Composition GA 3: Aural and written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2014 Music Style and Composition examination consisted of two sections, worth a total of 100 marks. Both sections were compulsory. The format of the examination followed the guidelines published in the examination specifications. The style of the questions was consistent with the published sample assessment material.

Section A of the examination presented students with three pieces of music, one of which featured an excerpt followed by a second extended excerpt from the same work. The section included three questions that required students to aurally analyse music with regard to the action of the elements of music, the operation of composition devices and the forming of a critical response. Students generally performed well on the questions in Section A, with many demonstrating a good command of music terminology and the capacity to make insightful and detailed observations about the excerpts tied to each question. Students are encouraged to plan and check the structure of their responses to questions in Section A. Some students tended to focus the majority of their responses on musical phenomena that occurred early in an excerpt. The most capable responses were marked by an awareness of the excerpt as a whole, and not just isolated incidences within an excerpt.

Section B consisted of four questions that were linked to the works that students had studied in Units 3 and 4. The majority of students selected works that were appropriate for study and properly identified these works. Section B of the examination revealed that students had in general learned a great deal about the works set for study; however, a worrying tendency that emerged in many answers in this year's examination paper was that of 'proof texting'. Some students would, in response to the need to demonstrate their understanding of a work by citing examples, state a bar number as evidence of a particular music phenomena. Responses in the order of 'this occurs in bar 72 of work' were increasingly common. As a mechanism for demonstrating insight into a work, simply citing a bar number is, in general, indicative of a low-order response. High-order responses can use bar numbers, but would clarify the reference with a description. An example of this might be 'this occurs in bar 72 of the work where a modulation to the dominant marks the entry of the contrasting lyrical B-theme'. The other problem with bar numbers is that numerous students included bar number references that were inaccurate. Students and teachers should note that assessors are – as part of the training regime associated with assessing the study – made familiar with all of the works that students refer to in Section B responses.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A

Section A consisted of three questions and was worth 48 marks. An audio CD lasting 58 minutes and 24 seconds accompanied this section of the examination.

Question 1

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 19 | 24 | 13 | 15 | 5 | 6.7 |

Students performed well on this question, with the majority scoring six or more out of ten marks. The best responses demonstrated a high-order understanding of layers of sound, and were able to relate these layers to different uses of the elements of melody and instrumentation. Low-scoring responses tended to make isolated observations about elements, and struggled to contextualise layers as operating across the length of the excerpt.

Students were able to contextualise the notion of a 'layer of sound' in a range of ways. These ways included structural divisions such as 'bass line', 'accompaniment' and 'melody', or pitch/register designations such as 'high', 'medium' or 'low', or other metaphor-based approaches. All were capable of achieving full marks.

Responses could refer to but were not limited to the following details about the features and characteristics of the excerpt. (Note, the following information is set up as a narrative – students did not need to refer to all of these details or use this style of writing to achieve full marks.)

2014 Examination Report

The introduction (opening 12 seconds) of the excerpt featured:

- even four-bar phrases
- a tuba with the main melodic role; initially the tuba played on the first beat of the bar, with the woodwind and upper strings (playing pizzicato) on beats two and three
- the tuba, double bass and timpani worked to outline the tonic and dominant (and demonstrated a bass-line function)
- the tuba reinforced the tonality by playing scalar patterns drawn from an ascending minor scale.

The 'A' Section (13 seconds to 28 seconds) featured:

- violins state the melodic line. The first phrase (antecedent) was eight bars long and consisted of two even four-bar sections. The melody was simple and lyrical and featured mostly step-wise motion. It meandered around a central pitch, embellished through the use of chromatic passing notes making it more complex and colourful as it proceeded
- minor seventh arpeggios
- a second, consequent phrase had an angular melody, used repetition and had a downward trajectory
- accompaniment was on the lower strings doubled with a prominent tuba line, as well as timpani outlining the first beat of the bar. This accompaniment punctuated notes of the main melody, with woodwinds continuing to play on the second and third beats of the bar
- an evolving tuba line functioned as a countermelody.

The 'A1' repetition (28 to 43 seconds) featured:

- the second statement of the melody by the violins, with the first phrase an octave higher
- an emphasis of a wider tessitura between the violins and the tuba
- a second phrase, which was the same as its original statement in the A section, but louder
- a louder tuba line, with overall dynamics louder as the violin melody projected more in a higher register
- an altered ending to the second phrase, which moved to a new tonal centre.

The 'B' section (43 to 59 seconds) featured:

- the violins and clarinets played a new melodic idea, which was angular, dissonant and satirical, but also circled around a central pitch
- trumpets played very large intervals as they doubled notes from the violin melody on the first beat of each bar
- phrases that concluded with two repetitions of an ascending angular melodic pattern, which was accompanied by a harp glissando
- lower strings, tuba and timpani that continued to play alternating tonics and dominant notes on the first beat of each bar (the tuba no longer plays a countermelody).

The 'C' section (59 seconds to 1 minute 14 seconds) featured:

- all the strings played another new melody
- a dense texture with a rich tone colour
- a more prominent brass section with a countermelody entering and a louder dynamic
- a strong cadence on beats one and three at the end of the excerpt.

Question 2a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 19 | 22 | 19 | 18 | 9 | 7.3 |

In their responses to this question, students successfully formed critical responses around the notion of tranquillity. There were many fine responses with students isolating a range of musical features that contributed to the effect of the music and creating satisfying explanation-based critical responses. Low-scoring responses struggled to demonstrate insight into the music beyond observations about dynamics and relied more on metaphor. Students and teachers are reminded that one of the primary functions of a critical response is to provide an evidence base for a metaphorical reading of 'affect'. Ultimately, the 'tranquillity' defined by the question is in itself a metaphor. Students who used rewordings of this essential metaphor and neglected to engage with the musical detail of the excerpt, but rather used metaphors to explain a metaphor, could not score highly for this question.

Answers could include but were not limited to the following points.

- a slow tempo throughout
- a quiet dynamic throughout

2014 Examination Report

- a slow harmonic rhythm
- an extensive use of long notes, particular at the ends of phrases
- slow-quaver motion at the largo tempo helps build a sense of tranquillity
- the use of a pedal point (a low D) throughout most of the excerpt ‘grounds’ the work
- when the sopranos enter with the melody, it is with a smooth step-wise melody on a low dynamic
- tenor entry features a repetition of this melody, again soft
- the arch-like structure around the setting of the word ‘Benedictus’
- sparse texture
- short phrases structured as ‘a-b a-b’
- simple tone colour (strings and choir only for most of the excerpt)
- minimal vibrato in the string lines helped to imply stillness and tranquillity
- bass singers doubling of the pedal point halfway through excerpt emphasises the still, tranquil quality of the excerpt

Question 2b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 19 | 25 | 20 | 15 | 7 | 7.2 |

This was a well-answered question. Students effectively handled the notion of an ‘extended excerpt’ and were able to talk about contrast from a range of perspectives. In the main, students did not contextualise contrast simply as ‘difference’ but were able to engage with the concept as a compositional device, as understood in the study design.

Answers could include but were not limited to the following points.

- the sudden change of dynamics to fortissimo (maintained in the second part of excerpt 2b) contrasts to the quiet first section
- addition of percussion
- addition of woodwind and brass
- the introduction of the higher tessitura in the strings
- an increased range for all instruments in the orchestra
- addition of organ
- contrasting melodic shapes – mostly descending then ascending, with climax on the last note of the phrase (contrasts to the first section where the melody mainly ascends in an arch-like shape, then descends)
- action of motive – the fortissimo motive in the added section was an overt inversion of an idea from the quiet section. This change shows how material is related, but also highlights contrast

Question 3a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|---|---------|
| % | 1 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 11 | 7 | 5.1 |

This question required students to describe how rhythm/time was used in the excerpt. While there is no requirement to use music notation, many students correctly notated the primary rhythmic motive of the excerpt. The best responses included a description of the rhythm/time as it related to all instruments in the ensemble and not only the accompaniment.

Answers could include but were not limited to the following points.

- moderately fast tempo
- 8/8 time signature with a 3+3+2 grouping
- the main melody featured a three-note anacrusis and relied on a one-bar repeated rhythmic motive
- the melodic line sat more comfortably in 4/4, whereas the accompaniment was a consistent 8/8
- one motive was characterised by six quavers followed by two semiquavers and a quaver; another answering motive was characterised by a dotted crotchet, followed by five quavers to complete the bar
- accents on the first and fourth crotchet beat of the bar helped to unite the 8/8 and 4/4 ideas
- all rhythms operated in one-bar units
- motoric rhythm throughout (continuous motion)
- contrasting middle section on violin featuring almost continuous semi-quaver motion, which conformed to the 8/8 time of the accompaniment
- final section (accordion and strings) featured embellishment of the rhythmic motive with additional semiquavers in places

2014 Examination Report

Question 3b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|------------|
| % | 1 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 12 | 17 | 20 | 14 | 18 | 8 | 2 | 6.2 |

This question required students to engage with the notion of repetition as a compositional device, and included a prompt designed to focus students on higher-order understandings of this device. Students did not need to base their answers around the dot points of the question prompt, but high-order responses did demonstrate an understanding of the term ‘repetition’ as a compositional device, as understood in the study design, and with the depth of insight that accompanies that understanding. Low-order responses tended to contextualise repetition simply in terms of ostinato or surface-level repetition. While this work was inspired by/based on a composition by Bartok, students needed no knowledge of this and did not need to refer to Bartok’s work in order to achieve full marks.

Possible answers:

- repetition of the accompanying figure, albeit with changing instrumentation
- repetition of motivic cells, constant throughout each of the three broad sections of the work, but featuring changing melodic content
- functional division of instrumentation recurring throughout the excerpt (with repeating timbres)
- repeating accompaniment figure, but with changes in terms of dynamics and articulation
- repeated notes in violin solo in b section
- repetition of intervals – many motives were characterised by descending minor thirds plus a chromatic turn on the semiquaver figure that regularly occurred on the fourth crotchet beat of the bar.

Section B

Section B consisted of four questions and was worth 52 marks. As in previous years, students answered questions in this section in relation to a range of appropriately selected works. There was a pleasing array of Australian works and works composed since 1910 that demonstrated a diversity of style and were good vehicles for answering questions related to contextual and compositional issues. In preparing for this section of the examination, students and teachers are encouraged first and foremost to regularly listen to and aurally engage with the selected works. Students should listen to these works numerous times, and demonstrate a detailed knowledge and understanding of them arising from this listening. Some students presented very formulaic answers, and such responses tended not to score highly.

Question 4a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 4 | 1 | 12 | 16 | 22 | 16 | 29 | 4.2 |

This question asked students to describe the structure of the Australian work they studied in Unit 3. While the majority of students performed well, with detailed and insightful descriptions of structure, some students struggled to provide more than a cursory sketch of a generic structural form. Still others claimed their work had ‘no structure’ as it was through-composed. This is a conceptual error, and students and teachers are reminded that the best responses around structure will always arise from the work itself, and not merely the imposition of some kind of generic common-practice form (such as ternary or sonata form).

Question 4b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 4 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 9 | 9 | 14 | 14 | 18 | 11 | 4 | 5.9 |

This question required students to explain how the composer treated two elements of music drawn from a list of four. Students were free to construct discrete explanations of the two elements or interweave them in a single explanation that dealt with both. Both approaches could garner full marks. In representing aspects of musical knowledge that require discipline-specific terminology and deep insight into the work selected for study, this question, though straightforward in its requirements was challenging for some students. The best responses were those that did not rely on metaphor or formulaic answers, but were succinct explanations properly directed towards two elements. Students who struggled to focus on elements required by the question, and strayed, for example, into descriptions of melody and rhythm, could not score highly.

2014 Examination Report

Question 5a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 1 | 9 | 16 | 15 | 25 | 21 | 13 | 3.8 |

This question required students to describe the style of the other work they studied in Unit 3. Students were not required to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the style in question, nor engage with other examples of the style in question; however, the best responses provided a detailed description of how the style was realised in the selected work and were able to provide examples of how elements of music operated to project that style. In general, students performed well on this question.

Question 5b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|---|----|---------|
| % | 2 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 9 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 14 | 9 | 7 | 6 |

This question asked students to construct a discussion around ways in which the work selected for study was representative of the music style described in Question 5a. The two parts of Question 5 were designed to scaffold student responses by firstly encouraging them to communicate what they knew about the specific music style and secondly by drawing out discussions of style where the operation of a style within the work became apparent. Students who relied heavily on formulaic responses tended to be able to answer Question 5a. reasonably well, but struggled with Question 5b. Students who had undertaken a thorough aural analysis of their selected work supported by factual material that surrounds the work were able to construct effective discussions that demonstrated their learning.

Question 6

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 11 | 16 | 17 | 14 | 13 | 11 | 7 | 6.2 |

This question needed to be answered in relation to a work composed since 1910 and required students to discuss how two contextual issues influenced the creative process of the composer/creator in generating the work. The best responses effectively made a link between the contextual issues identified and the actual music. Students who discussed issues of context without linking these issues to the creative process of the composer with regard to the music in question did not score as highly as students who linked their discussions to the music. In general, students performed reasonably well.

Question 7

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 2 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 10 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 14 | 11 | 6 | 6.1 |

This question related to the other work studied in Unit 4 and asked students to explain the composer's/creator's use of variation in relation to melody and rhythm. There was no requirement for students to equally weight their response around the two elements, as the primary task of the question was to construct an explanation of the compositional device of variation. High-order responses focused on the device, and evidence from the work related to the two elements to support the explanation. Lower-order responses demonstrated a lack of understanding around variation as a compositional device, and were instead simply descriptions of the elements of rhythm and melody.