

2015 VCE Music Style and Composition examination report

General comments

The 2015 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.

In Section A of the examination students generally used appropriate language and terminology to frame their answers. Students who achieved high marks for this section demonstrated sophisticated aural analysis skills through their capacity to frame responses around the specific elements and devices listed in each question. Students who achieved lower marks tended to display less capacity to aurally analyse pieces and describe or discuss treatment of elements of music and use of compositional devices, and a greater tendency to make general observations about the music they heard. Students needed to tailor their responses to the questions being asked to score highly in this section of the examination.

In Section B of the examination the majority of students chose appropriate works and displayed effective examination technique through their engagement with question prompts, good time management and their understanding of the scope and style of response required by question stems such as 'describe', 'discuss' and 'explain'. Many students effectively linked the material they had learned about the music they had studied through references to and examples from these works. However, student performance was hampered in Section B by the presentation of inaccurate factual information relating to the contextual issues surrounding some works. It is vital that students and teachers access reliable, scholarly material to inform the study of set works in Section B. Wikis, blogs and internet forums may well contain relevant insights into works, but are not consistently reliable and should never be used as the sole sources for factual information/analyses of works.

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 four questions and was worth 50 marks. An audio CD that ran for 56 minutes and 16 seconds accompanied this section of the examination.

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	0	1	3	2	7	7	9	12	17	17	14	9	3	7.7

Students performed well in this question. The highest-scoring responses featured detailed descriptions of both rhythm and tone colour, the two elements of music referred to in the question. These responses were marked by accurate musical observations and the use of correct music language and terminology. Low-scoring responses tended to lack detail and students struggled to engage with correct music language and terminology. Features of the music that students could have described included, but were not limited to, the following:

Rhythm

- Fast, driving tempo with a consistent underlying pulse.
- Extensive use of mixed metre – 5/4, 4/4 and 3/4 – used to capture asymmetrical gestures.
- A simple rhythmic motive (quaver [accent] – quaver – quaver rest – quaver [accent] – quaver, or other note value at termination of motive) infuses the excerpt. Many students chose to notate this figure. This was an acceptable way to garner marks, but this strategy was not required to garner full marks.
- Rhythm as the primary structural determinant in the excerpt and more prominent than pitch as an organising force. In places, a dialogue operated between rhythm and phrases, sometimes with a pseudo antecedent-consequent relationship.
- Activity of rhythm against instrumental groups: Strings, brass, winds and percussion all featured the driving motive at some point in the excerpt. In addition, winds are used as filigree (scalic passages presented using quick, even triplet figures); brass (and occasionally strings) featured long notes that acted as a punctuating counterpoint to the main motive; percussion supported all parts with simulacra (representation/imitation) of a rock kit.
- An extensive use of rhythmic figures typically associated with heavy metal styles.

Tone colour

- A deliberately 'raucous' approach to orchestration and an application of tone colour that overtly referenced popular music styles.
- A clear 'functional division' with winds, brass, percussion and strings playing to normative orchestral roles.
- The consistently loud dynamic of the brass, combined with the deliberate use of extremes of tessitura, gave these instruments an aggressive tone colour. Use of extended techniques (such as rips and slides) in the brass added to this effect.
- Use of effects such as *pesante*, regular alterations between *pizzicato* and *arco*, non-vibrato and quick juxtaposition of register extremes created a distinct and assertive tone colour in the strings.
- Trills, slides and pitch bends in winds also made for a distinct tone colour.
- Orchestral percussion used in combination to operate in the manner of a rock kit.
- Pervasive use of *sforzando* in all instruments at various times through the excerpt impacted on the tone colour.
- Quickly shifting orchestrations and instrument combinations made issues of tone colour come to the fore in this work.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	0	0	3	3	7	13	15	21	22	12	6	6.8

Students displayed an excellent capacity to describe the sections of this excerpt. Students were free to base their descriptions on any element or elements they chose, and were able to achieve full marks. Most based their descriptions around one or more of melody, rhythm, instrumentation, tone colour and texture. High-scoring answers provided a detailed description of the sections, correctly identified the repetition embedded in the structure and were able to describe what made the A, B and C sections distinct from each other. They also featured correct music language and terminology. Lower-scoring responses tended to be characterised by less detailed and/or inaccurate information, and demonstrated less skilful ability to identify differences between the sections of the work. Features of the music that students could have referred to in their responses included, but were not limited to, the following:

This rondo consisted of sections made up as follows: ABACABA. Each section was the same length, except for the C section, which was two bars longer. The tempo did not change throughout the piece.

Significant changes of dynamics occurred through the removal or addition of parts. The piece was in a natural minor key, and did not modulate. Each section and phrase commenced with an anacrusis. Each section of the rondo form consisted of two phrases that were repeated. Each phrase had an extended note at the conclusion, which, if counting the beats, resulted in 3 ½ bars length, except for section C, which consisted of two 4 ½ bar phrases. The final note of the phrase was played with an accent. An energetic, bright mood continued throughout the entire piece. Harmony was sparse and primarily created by the use of pedal points rather than complete voicings of chords. The A section had a dominant pedal point providing another layer to this harmony. Section B did not have any accompanying layer, while section C used both tonic and dominant pedal points. The quadruple time was established by the percussion's (drum and tambourine) two-bar introduction that commenced with an up-beat and set up the moderately fast tempo.

Section A: The bright melody was played by the violin, with an accompanying line provided by another string instrument and percussion. The main melody had a limited range, consisting of the crotchet quaver rhythmic motive that repeated for the whole A section. This motive had a narrow range of a 4th and worked to establish the tonal centre of the work. The accompanying line was played on a repeated dominant note and functioned as a pedal point. The percussion instruments accompanied this section, with the low pitch drum on the first beat of each bar and the tambourine on the off beats.

Section B: Contrast was created in this section by having the texture drop back to one melody played at the octave and featuring heterophony. The melody was accompanied by the drum, without the bass notes but with the tambourine punctuating the figure. The melody was in the same key, again with a limited range and featuring repetition of melodic and rhythmic material. The melody featured some ornamentation at the end of the first bar and first half of the second bar. Again, it commenced with an anacrusis. The phrase structure was the same as section A, with long notes at the end of each phrase. Use of percussion was reduced in this section.

Section A: Repeated the material of the first section A.

Section C: Texture dropped back in contrast to Section A as there was another melody played by the solo violin, accompanied by a drum, using a lighter tone colour, and another string part that created a contrapuntal texture, often moving in contrary motion to the main melody, as well as a

bass part playing tonic and dominant pedal points. Crotchet and quaver rhythmic pattern dominated this section and the melody featured a wider range than the melodies used in sections A and B.

Section B: Return of the material used in the first section B.

Section A: Return of the material used in the previous A sections.

Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	0	0	5	16	27	38	14	4.4

This question was answered well. The highest-scoring responses featured a detailed description of the instrumentation with a correct identification (either by name or through the description) of all elements of the popular ensemble and the string and brass parts of the backing ensemble. Low-scoring responses tended to use a limited vocabulary to construct an accurate description of the instrumentation of the excerpt.

Features of the music that students could refer to in their description of the instrumentation included but were not limited to the following.

The ensemble consisted of a conventional popular group with a larger ensemble providing depth and backing.

The primary popular ensemble consisted of:

- vocals (male; popular voice, most similar to lyric tenor)
- electric guitar
- synthesiser
- bass guitar
- drums
- supporting vocals (also male – deeper voices).

The larger backing group featured:

- brass (two trombones, a trumpet and a cornet)
- string quartet (two violins, a viola and a cello)
- a baritone saxophone.

Specific names of these instruments were not required for full marks; however, accurate and appropriate music language and terminology needed to be employed in the description of each sound source.

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	0	1	1	3	7	17	17	23	14	9	8	6.6

This question required students to construct a discussion around the maintenance of interest in the work, with reference to the compositional device of contrast. This was a challenging question that elicited a spread of marks across the possible range. High-scoring responses featured discussions of the maintenance of interest in the excerpt characterised by insight into the musical workings of the excerpt and a high-order understanding of contrast as a compositional device. Lower-scoring responses tended to neglect the issue of contrast as a compositional device and instead constructed responses characterised by a description of their response to the piece and why they found it interesting. The following points are a guide to musical strategies students might have referred to in their description of how interest was maintained in the excerpt.

Interest was maintained via the following musical strategies:

- Gradual introduction of instruments (guitar, then drums, then vocals, then others; with a larger backing ensemble entering later in the excerpt) as per a normative popular music arrangement strategy.
- Conjunct, bell-shaped melody, with stepped, repeated-note descent created a clearly recognisable music construct. The repetition of this idea set up the expectation of structural change with the prospect of difference generating interest.
- Even harmonic rhythm through the first part of the excerpt provided stability and certainty. A strong, functional harmony worked in similar motion with the vocals for much of the verse and added to that certainty, but also set up an expectation of structural change (hence 'interest').
- Brass entered in what initially appeared to be an instrumental bridge with interest marked by changed instrumentation, contrasting melodic material that was more disjunct and featured a different contour to the initial idea presented by the vocal line.
- The re-entry of the vocal line after this instrumental section revealed the material of the instrumental bridge, not as a bridge to a chorus, but rather as a counterpoint to the music of the verse. This disruption of a normative structural expectation functioned to highlight issues of contrast and the way they can add interest to a work.
- The re-entry of the material of the verse revealed the structure of the excerpt to be that of a passacaglia (students did not need to know this word, but many spoke in terms of a regular, repeating bass/harmonic structure).
- Interest was further added to this structure by the addition of contrasting, but complementary material such as a counterpoint by the strings and a new vocal idea taken up by the backing singers.

Students were free to interpret the term 'interest' in whatever way they chose, but had to provide a cogent argument to this effect (for example, they could choose to disagree with the premise and claim that the work was not interesting, but needed to support this with an effective discussion of the issues such as those listed above).

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	0	2	4	7	9	12	7	14	15	11	11	6	3	7

This was a challenging question that required students to explain how the composer used pitch to build intensity. It required students to engage with three elements of music, namely melody, harmony and tonality. Students did not need to equally weight their responses around those elements. High-scoring responses were characterised by a detailed explanation of how treatment of the three elements, and (potentially) other features, worked to build intensity. These responses were further characterised by accurate musical observations and use of correct music language and terminology. Low-scoring responses demonstrated limited use of language, knowledge and analytical ability to engage deeply with the elements of harmony and tonality. The sample response below provides a guide to the qualities expected in a high-scoring response.

The composer used pitch to build intensity in this excerpt in a range of ways. There was not a single tonal centre, but the excerpt featured the use of pedal notes, whole-tone scales, chromaticism, dissonance and resolution, all to build intensity. The excerpt began calmly with a melodic motive played four times. A descending whole-tone melodic line began in the lowest strings and the bass clarinet. It was in unison, but then the instrumental parts moved in contrary motion until the lines featured intervals of fourths and fifths between them. A pedal note functioned as an anchor for the pitch in lieu of a common-practice tonal framework. The repetition of each phrase had an altered ending. The general trajectory of the pitch was 'up', with each sequence beginning on successively higher notes. The phrases became shorter in length as the excerpt

proceeded. The music moved forward with three-note rising melodic phrases ascending and was reinforced by swells in the dynamics that mirrored the shape of the phrases, each getting louder a little as the music gently moved forward. The texture became lighter as the pitch moved higher with violins and cellos moving in similar motion in parallel fourths and accompanied by other strings playing pizzicato. Each iteration of the sequence saw instruments subtracted until the section featured only a solo violin and cello.

After a *ritenuto*, the music continued into an impressionist-like texture (reminiscent of the music of Debussy) that featured a gentle, lyrical melodic line in the violins, which began with the same four-note descending whole-tone scale first heard at the start of the excerpt. It was introduced by the violins and answered by a solo cello. A gentle arpeggiated melodic line in the accompaniment was based on another pedal note. As the melody continued in the violin, the note values became shorter as the pitch ascended and the dynamics grew louder as the music increased in its sense of urgency. The cellos then played a six-note descending melodic line that featured whole tones, with each phrase again beginning on a higher note.

The music ascended in a fashion that could be described as ‘soaring’ and finally, the initial melody returned in the violins up an octave. The melodic line then descended and the note values lengthened as the music became softer. A brief instrumental flourish with a new rhythmic motive closed the excerpt. This rhythmic gesture (with snare drum flourish) provided a *de facto* tonal anchor to the music. The ebb and flow of intensity was established by the register of the motive changing through the course of the excerpt.

Section B

Section B consisted of four questions and was worth 50 marks. The questions were linked to the works that students had studied in Units 3 and 4, and addressed issues of context, music style and compositional design. The majority of students selected works that were appropriate for study (noting that the works selected for Questions 5 and 7 had to be an Australian work and a work created since 1910 respectively) and properly identified these works.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	1	4	7	5	8	16	15	14	14	13	6.6

This question related to an Australian work and asked students to explain how musical features in the work studied were representative of its style. The prompt ‘musical features’ allowed students to focus on any element of music or compositional device, or a combination of the two, present in the work studied. High-scoring responses featured accurate information and made correct use of music language and terminology. The highest-scoring responses demonstrated good insights into the style of the work, while also demonstrating that the students had a good knowledge of the work studied. Lower-scoring responses tended to feature cursory or inaccurate information, with poor links between the musical features and the issue of style.

Question 6a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	3	1	9	12	14	16	20	16	8	4.9

This question focused on a contextual issue related to the other work students had studied in Unit 3. It required students to connect the contextual issue they identified with the creation of the work. The question challenged the cohort, with a spread of results across the marks available. High-scoring responses were characterised by detailed, accurate and insightful information about

the contextual issue, with a clear notion of the influence it had on the creation of the work. Students who did not construct a discussion that demonstrated the influence of the contextual issue and instead made general and often unfocused remarks about issues of context did not score as highly on this question.

Question 6b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	4	3	8	10	7	16	11	14	13	8	7	5.6

This question required students to describe the composer's/creator's use of texture and tone colour. High-scoring responses featured a detailed description of both elements of music marked by accurate musical observations from the work and use of correct music language and terminology. Low-scoring responses tended to struggle with a correct conceptualisation of the elements and did not back up claims with examples from the work.

Question 7

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	3	2	4	6	8	4	10	13	21	14	15	6.7

This question was based on a work composed after 1910, and the majority of students answered the question based on a work composed in the correct time frame. Students were asked to explain how two compositional devices – repetition and variation – were used to create the form/structure of the work. The question was very well answered. High-scoring responses displayed a capable use of terminology, and also showed insight into the notion of repetition and variation as musical processes and did not simply use the colloquial applications of these terms.

Question 8

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	6	1	3	6	4	6	9	7	14	10	20	6	8	7.4

This question was based on the other work studied in Unit 4 and included a prompt. This question gave students the scope to draw together the material they had learned about their set work, but did not prescribe which aspect of this information needed to come to the fore in their discussion. Students did not have to deal with all of the dot points in their responses; some focused on one only through the course of the answer and others covered all these points. Both approaches could garner full marks. Students both agreed, and disagreed, with the concept outlined in the prompt, and many fine discussions were presented.