2021 Music Performance external assessment report

Solo performance

General comments

In 2021, two assessors assessed each student against 10 published criteria. Many of the criteria in Solo and Group performance were very similar or the same. A mark out of 10 was given by each assessor for each criterion, for a total of 200 available marks.

Each student presented a program of works from a set list or performed an approved alternative work. A total of 34 instrument lists were published last year, allowing for a very broad diversity of instruments, genres, techniques and styles. Apart from performance from these published lists, applications were made and granted for some students to perform on other instruments, often from traditional ethnic instruments such as the Carnatic violin or koto.

Students who scored highly confidently exhibited a high level of musical, technical and interpretative skills. These students demonstrated notational security, while performing within appropriate stylistic conventions and nuances.

It is imperative in this subject that students and teachers have a very clear understanding of the assessment criteria. While some students may exhibit excellent skills in some areas of performance, awareness of the ability to perform a range of techniques, styles, tonal qualities, articulations, musical lines and structures enables them to maximise their marks.

Despite the significant challenges of 2021, many students managed to achieve very high marks.

Specific information

Criterion 1 – Compliance

Most students typically get full marks for this criterion. In order to achieve this:

* navigate to the prescribed list of notated solo works, published on the VCE Music Performance webpage, and locate your instrument in this document
* look up the Music Performance (not Music Investigation) compliance requirements (it might read for example, ‘one unaccompanied work, two works from the 20/21C list, two works with live accompaniment, at least four works’)
* choose works from the prescribed list or make an application to perform a work not on the list. If you choose the latter option, you should know before the end of Term 1 whether or not the approval has been granted. As a back stop, it would be a good idea to practise both a work from the list in the chosen category and the work applied for until you receive notification of the status of the work.

Sometimes students do not comply fully if they leave out a section of a work, or if they forget to perform a work they have practised. Throughout the year keep checking that all your program is compliant. Don’t rely on someone else to check this for you.

Criterion 2 – Skill in performing accurately and with clarity

There is a strong correlation with high marks in this criterion and high marks in the rest of the program. Students who can memorise their program usually score highly in this criterion. For most instruments, memory work in the exam is not required. (Only singers are actually required to perform by memory, with some exceptions for Classical Voice as stated in the prescribed list.) To be able to perform the program from memory is definitely an advantage, even if you use the music in the exam. When you are nervous, muscle memory will often get you out of trouble.

Criterion 3 – Skill in performing a range of techniques with control and fluency

Criterion 3 introduces the concept of ‘range’. In this criterion, assessors are not only looking for control and fluency in the performance but are also expecting to hear a range of techniques. Many students perform techniques with control and fluency. However, the discriminator for the exam is the range of techniques performed. The range, which is instrument specific, usually comes from a program where that range is exploited.

Criterion 4 – Skill in producing a range of expressive tonal qualities

As with Criterion 3, this criterion is about the demonstration not only of expressive tonal qualities, but also the ability of the student to demonstrate a range of expressive tonal qualities, typically found or able to be exploited in the range of repertoire in the prescribed list or approved alternative work. While the range is a discriminator, the ability to produce excellent tone throughout the dynamic range is also a discriminator. Most students can play soft and loud, but the ability to maintain excellence of tone throughout the dynamic range is certainly a challenge to all musicians.

Criterion 5 – Skill in expressive communication through articulation and phrasing

A student could perform the referenced notation accurately without demonstrating an understanding of expressive communication, or how that is achieved. Low skill in this criterion would typically render a performance dull. Its equivalence in speech might be a monotone delivery. An engaged performer will create a variety of shapes and expressions through nuances, including accent, articulation, ornamentation and embellishments, phrasing and instrument-specific techniques.

Criterion 6 – Skill in differentiating the musical lines

The highest achievers in this criterion typically performed a wide range of textures as appropriate to their instrument. They demonstrated a variety of interactions between the parts, including balance, empathy and synchronisation between the solo and accompanying lines or between parts in a multi-part unaccompanied solo. These students typically were able to balance interactions with the parts of the accompaniment. Some of the faults that students make in this criterion include performing with a backing track that is too soft or occasionally too loud. The range of equipment used for backing tracks has included a phone and computer speakers (which in a large space are often inaudible) to fairly high-end portable play-back amplifiers. Prior to their exam, students need to practise performing in a variety of spaces from a small classroom to the largest hall available in their school, so as to be able to anticipate how to perform. In the examination room before the examination starts, students are advised to check the volume of the backing track. If there is a live accompaniment being used, students need to demonstrate skill in interacting with the accompanist.

Criterion 7 – Skill in differentiating the structures and characteristics of each work

One might compare this criterion with Criterion 5. Whereas Criterion 5 is about micro-communication and shaping, Criterion 7 is about the macro: the performer’s ability to create a sense of structure in the work. Students typically need to research the structures of the works being performed. Being thoroughly familiar with the study design, you will realise the importance of research. You should have an in-depth understanding of the formal and harmonic structure of each work being performed. If works have multiple sections or movements, decisions need to be made about the length of time between sections or movements. A range of structures reflective of the prescribed list must be performed to maximise marks in this criterion.

Criterion 8 – Skill in performing an informed interpretation of a range of styles

Over the course of the year students need to research the stylistic elements of the works being presented. Listening is the most effective way to understand stylistic and performance conventions and to ensure that this criterion is met to a high standard. Strategies include:

* listening to similar works by a range of composers
* listening to different works by the composers being studied
* listening to different styles of music and comparing the differences
* watching YouTube clips and listening to recordings
* attending live performances.

Criterion 9 – Skill in performing with musicality through creativity and individuality

Background research is key to understanding a piece of music. Creativity and individuality in the performance of a work are gained through listening to a wide range of interpretations and knowing the work thoroughly. At this point performers can find their own voice within the performance conventions. Students who scored highly in this criterion were able to perform with confidence in their knowledge of the work and their ability to apply their own interpretation.

Students who did not score well often simply copied another performer’s interpretation of the work.

Criterion 10 – Skill in presenting a musical program within appropriate performance conventions

This criterion addresses poise and focus, as well as the ability of the student to adjust to performance conditions. In performance situations, preparation and planning can mitigate the many situations that cause problems (for example, equipment failure, memory lapses, ineffective page turns, a passage that was not learnt properly, accompanists who are poorly prepared). Students who had prepared thoroughly showed confidence and were able to manage these problems and minimise the effects on the performance.

For some students, the order of the program might help to create an effective flow. For other students, the need to pace themselves is most important, especially with wind instruments. It is recommended that teachers consider these issues in the design of the program of works.

Comments on particular instruments

The following provides guidance for preparation of successful programs for particular instruments and may be useful for students and teachers. These comments are made in relation to specific instruments, but many have broad applicability for all instruments.

Contemporary popular guitar and drum kit

* Students and teachers should check the Prescribed List of Notated Solo Works on the VCAA website and read it carefully to establish that the requirements have been met. The arrangement/edition used is critical as arrangements other than the ones listed may constitute a different piece to the one prescribed, and thus incur a penalty. Some guitar students who have downloaded a TAB from the Internet may not have the correct edition or arrangement.
* Despite the minimum number of works for compliance, it is recommended that students consider how they can maximise their marks by playing the widest variety of styles possible within the 25-minute time allocation.
* Students should ensure that volumes are appropriate for the performance space and that the volume of backings are appropriately balanced. Students must not perform at levels that are occupationally unsafe. Additional warm-up/set-up time is allocated to assist.
* Where possible, students should consider using some ‘live’ backing accompaniments to demonstrate a different approach of artistic interaction.
* Drum kit students should aim to demonstrate a wide range of dynamic control and stylistic variation.
* Students should ensure that the CD backings used are those that are specified on the prescribed list.
* Students should make sure that the complete program is thoroughly rehearsed (and not just a compilation of pieces played without consideration for the movement from one piece to another).
* Music stands should be positioned so that they do not form a barrier between the performer and assessors.
* Students must ensure precise timing of effects pedals (on and off).
* Where backing tracks have fade-outs, these need to be rehearsed by the soloist.
* Guitarists might consider performing standing up in order to enhance presentation techniques.

Electric bass

* The minimum number of works required is six. Students should check the list carefully and ensure that all areas of compliance are met.
* Refer to points for contemporary popular guitar (above).
* All equipment is to be provided by the student.

Voice – contemporary popular

* Students and teachers should carefully check the Prescribed List of Notated Solo Works on the VCAA website and read it carefully to establish that all requirements have been met. Note that some works in the vocalise categories actually include two vocalises, where both must be performed as one work.
* Students must make sure that a ‘variety of styles’ is addressed in the choice of program as well as in the delivery of each song.
* Appropriate keys need to be chosen to best suit the vocal range or ‘fach’ of the student.
* The accompanist must provide a stylistic backing – especially making sure that the melody line is not present in the accompaniment. The accompanist must play to the vocal capabilities of the student and avoid playing too loudly.
* If a CD accompaniment is used, students should ensure that burnt CDs are tested in the CD player they intend to use and that the correct track is used for the backing. Where a CD has both an accompaniment only, and a melody and accompaniment, as provided with the sheet music, the correct track must be used for the performance examination.
* The number of backings allowed (a maximum of three) must not be exceeded.
* Students should consider vocal health. To avoid forcing their voice, students should choose their program wisely. The technical demands on the young voice should be considered as well as changing keys to suit a particular student’s abilities.
* If using hand or body gestures, make them appropriate to the text.
* Students must be aware that the examination is a ‘recital’, not a sing-along.

Voice – classical

* Teachers should ensure that different styles are clearly understood (for example, avoid scooping in the baroque or classical work).
* Students who select a large number of works from the ‘Ballads’, ‘Music Theatre’ and ‘Jazz/Pop’ categories should consider choosing Voice – contemporary popular rather than Voice – classical as their instrument.
* Teachers should ensure that the demands of the program can be met by the student, particularly the program length (some students are fatigued before their last song).
* If using hand or body gestures, they should be appropriate to the text.
* Students should choose their accompanist wisely. Students need to be able to create an ‘ensemble’ in which the accompanist plays a supportive rather than a dominating role.
* Students who scored highly ensured that their unaccompanied folksong and vocalise had as much attention to detail as the other works on their program.
* Students who scored highly chose a wide variety of interesting repertoire suited to their voice rather than performing ‘standard’ pieces. Students and teachers should try to explore the wide range available in every category on the list rather than staying with the most popular pieces. Teachers are encouraged to become acquainted with pieces with which they are unfamiliar to help create interesting programs and highlight their students’ abilities.
* Students who scored highly included different languages in their programs. The words were pronounced with clarity and fluency and the performer knew the meaning of each word and how to highlight important syllables, words, phrases or ideas. Including a work sung in a language other than English is not a requirement but can be a way of broadening the range of styles and characters evident in the program.
* Some pieces tend to be more demanding in terms of intonation than others. These should be selected carefully.

Piano – contemporary popular

* Students and teachers should check the Prescribed List of Notated Solo Works on the VCAA website and read it carefully to establish that the requirements have been met. The arrangement/edition used is critical as arrangements other than the ones listed may constitute a different piece to the one prescribed.
* The works on this list are technically comparable with works on the pianoforte list. The complexity of syncopated rhythms can be extremely challenging, so a disciplined approach to learning is needed.
* Accompaniments are not accepted for any works in this list (that is, no CD backing is allowed).
* Five works are required, with four categories to be represented.
* A steady beat is essential, with a clear understanding and demonstration of the difference between a swung and straight feel.
* Many students need to further develop a refined pedalling technique.
* A wider range of tonal effects needs to be explored; many students seem to want to ‘bash’ the piano.

Pianoforte

* Page turning – students should ensure continuity of performance. Assessors can assist with page turning if required.
* Although the prescribed list of works is comprehensive, the range of works selected by many students is often limited. Students who wish to showcase their capabilities might do well to explore the lesser-known works on the list.
* Students should perform within their capabilities and avoid taking on programs that are too demanding for them. They should explore a range of styles, techniques and genres that are within their capabilities.
* Students are advised to practise performing on different pianos and in different environments. Students who may be considering performing their program on a grand piano are advised to play on a grand piano as much as possible throughout their examination preparation.
* Maintenance of a disciplined practice regime throughout the whole year will enable students to maximise their potential.

Wind instruments (particularly flute)

* Students and teachers should ensure that the program can be performed within 25 minutes.
* Where the total playing time is calculated to exceed 20 minutes, it could be useful to consider placing all of the ‘required’ works early in the program.
* A student’s physical stamina needs to be balanced with the need to fulfil the criteria to the highest level.
* A strong understanding of the whole work, not just the solo part, is needed.
* While a good clarinet mouthpiece is a valuable asset, it cannot be wholly relied upon to create an excellent tone and dynamic range. Much work is needed to develop these.

Bassoon

* Students must check that the correct Vivaldi concerto is chosen.

Brass instruments

* Many of the issues are similar to issues for wind instruments, especially regarding the stamina needed to complete the performance effectively.
* Students must demonstrate thorough preparation with the accompanist.
* If performing a work that uses a backing track, students must ensure that the correct track is used in the correct way; for example, if the backing has the solo doubled on one channel, this channel must be turned off in the performance.
* Students should always check that the correct editions are used for performance.

String instruments

* Students who choose repertoire that is too difficult for them, or that doesn’t explore a range of performing techniques, often fail to maximise their score. Students should perform a range of techniques well and ensure that all works chosen are within their technical facility.
* Students who perform very long programs are advised to include all required works early in the program.
* Students should be prepared for contingencies; for example, by carrying spare strings, rosin, etc.
* Students should practise performing in a range of acoustic environments from flat to very bright. They should also become accustomed to performing in different temperatures. This will make it easier for students to adjust to performance conditions.

Group performance

General comments

In the 2021 performance exams, students were assessed against 10 criteria. Each student was assessed by two assessors and a maximum of 10 marks was available for each criterion. Many of the criteria were identical to those used in the Solo Performance examination; thus, students were assessed in both Solo and Group using either identical criteria or criteria of equal importance.

Each student was assessed on their performance according to the criteria, not globally. The criteria were applied equally to all students across all instruments. Students generally showed a high standard of preparation for the performance and confident use of a diverse range of stylistically appropriate techniques that contributed to many engaging performances.

Students who presented for the Group Performance examination performed with a diverse range of instruments, including voice, in the context of many different types of groups and ensembles. Students’ ability to address the criteria varied and was influenced by their performance skills, understanding of the music styles being performed and experience in performing in a group context.

Students who scored highly confidently exhibited a high level of musical, technical and interpretative skills, and displayed excellent interaction with the other members of the group.

Students should be conscious of ways they can maximise their marks in the criteria related to group interaction (Criterion 8) and the balance of the musical instruments (Criterion 6). These criteria require the conscious listening to and acknowledgment of other group members. They also require students to adjust their individual contribution to enhance the overall group sound.

The strong presence of poise and focus (Criterion 10) was evident in many high-scoring performances. This involved the sharing of introductions, awareness of arrangement, stage etiquette and/or movement as appropriate to the group context. Other elements included adapting positively to unforeseen situations – for example, when another band member forgot their part or broke a string.

Students and teachers should consider a range of individual skill areas to best approach the composition of groups and program development. It is important to place students within a group context that best allows them to meet the requirements of the criteria. For example, when a class contains more than one vocalist, the group composition and repertoire will be informed by the individual characteristics of each student. Elements such as vocal range, tone, timbre, ability to harmonise, dynamic range and a grasp of stylistic authenticity should be determining factors in decisions pertaining to instrumentation and repertoire. The two vocalists could either present separate programs reflecting their individual strengths or work within the same ensemble, exploiting the criteria with a demonstration of cooperative skills that include a combination of lead vocals and harmony singing.

It is important that groups choose keys for songs best suited to the vocalists and residing within the technical abilities of the instrumentalists. The focus should be on selecting works that support each student to maximise their score. Students should consider transposing the works themselves to find more appropriate keys. Students should always be careful when sourcing tablature transcriptions from the internet. It is always recommended that original recordings are accessed to confirm accuracy of the arrangement.

Students are advised to use a range of resources such as YouTube and alternative (live) versions of works as references when they are planning arrangements and interpretations. Ideas from their listening can be used to exploit their available instrumentation. Successful acoustic and a cappella versions of both prescribed and non-prescribed works were observed, as well as augmentations such as extra solos, harmonies and breakdown sections.

In 2021, students consistently met the requirements of performing two musical items from the Prescribed List of Group Works. Some students performed additional works from the list, which was permissible.

When determining the final repertoire list for the examination, students should be careful about presenting a program overly weighted with original compositions.

Consideration should always be given to selections in relation to the criteria, especially regarding a range of musical styles, technique and dynamics.

Specific information

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are applied to the whole program, not to individual works. There are 10 criteria covering all instruments and the performance of all works in the program. For each criterion, the maximum score was 10.

The examination specifications and criteria for this examination also include annotations to help unpack each criterion into components more relevant to particular instruments.

Selection of instrument

The term ‘instrument’, as used in the study design, includes voice. Students may choose to perform on more than one instrument in their performance examination; however, they should consider the likelihood of scoring well in the assessment criteria when making this decision. For example, students may impact their marks by playing a second instrument that they are not particularly competent with for part of the program. The student should be careful not to compromise the amount of time spent performing to their strengths. An opposite example might be where the student is a strong performer on more than one instrument. In this situation, there are certain criteria in which the student may benefit from performing on more than one instrument, such as ‘skill in performing a range of techniques with control and fluency’ (Criterion 3) and ‘skill in performing as a member of the group’ (Criterion 8).

The examination

Assessed students perform as members of a group or ensemble and are assessed in this context. The level of ability of other members of the group does not directly affect the assessed student’s results. Assessors concentrate on the performance of the student being assessed and on how well they meet the criteria for assessment.

Composition of the group

A group is defined as two or more students. Where a group comprises two performers only, that group may not have a non-student performer as a member. The musical parts should be arranged so that each performer is equally able to take a leading role during the performance.

However, the assessed performer(s) can vary the composition of the group using different combinations of non-assessed performers during their performance as they wish. This may enhance the ability of the assessed performer(s) to demonstrate a variety of styles and techniques. Students must decide how best to organise their group contexts in a program to help them achieve the best outcome.

Students should also be aware that non-students may only assist as part of the group within certain guidelines, as outlined in the examination specifications.

Teachers and other non-assessed performers are advised that their role, if they are participating, should not distract from, nor limit the ability of, the assessed performer(s) to present a program that will maximise their marks. Hence, non-assessed performers should not count in, conduct, tune, adjust instruments and equipment, lead or otherwise play a dominant or distracting role (e.g. extended solos) during the performance examination. This will only reduce the number of opportunities for the assessed performers to best address all of the criteria.

Program selection

The program should contain contrasting works. Prescribed works are selected from the published list for the examination year, as the list is revised annually. If selecting works from Section B, it is important that students ensure they perform the actual section, movements, etc. that are listed.

The program selected by the students is the foundation for achieving their best result. It is strongly recommended that students carefully consider the selection of works for their program, on the basis that each work contributes to a program that addresses the assessment criteria.

All assessed performers should ensure that they participate significantly in presenting all works in their program. Assessed performers should present the works selected from the prescribed list at a standard that is consistent with the rest of the program. This may involve arranging works to create appropriate parts and/or allowing opportunities for improvisation, as appropriate to the style.

When performing a work from Section A, or similar music styles, performers do not necessarily need to present accurate note-for-note transcriptions, but it is essential that the original integrity of the music be retained. Chord progressions and the main lead/melody should be faithful to the original. Variations may occur for a number of reasons, particularly if groups have instrumentation different to the original work.

Students should avoid only performing works from styles that they are most familiar with, as this may limit their ability to present a variety of styles. The assessed performer’s primary focus should be on performing a program that is diverse in style and mood. However, it is acceptable to present a program that has a range of styles within a particular type of group, as contrasting styles can exist within particular genres, such as rock or jazz. Groups can perform music that has contrasts in styles within a broader genre or style; for example, a jazz group could perform swing, bebop, west coast and/or fusion. Students should not necessarily perform styles that are not associated with the type of group that they represent.

Students should demonstrate their ability to use a range of performance techniques. Each instrument is capable of producing different timbres, dynamics and effects, and has an inherent potential to allow the performer to apply a range of performance techniques. Students should be able to demonstrate their awareness of this in their performance. A bass guitarist, for example, could use a plectrum, finger style, slapping, muting, double stopping, tapping and/or alternative tunings.

Time limits

The time allowed for the examination varies according to the number of assessed performers in a group (this can be found on page 44 of the *VCE Music Study Design*).

Most assessed performers made full use of the time available. Specifically, students made sure changeovers between pieces were well rehearsed, ensuring that they made the most of their performance time.

It is recommended that the prescribed works be performed early in the program, with full participation from assessed performers, to ensure that Criterion 1 is met within the time limit.

Setting up at the examination venue

Students are advised to check their equipment carefully before leaving for the examination centre. They must remember to pack all the required equipment, including replacement strings, reeds, sticks, etc. if appropriate. They should also bring extra power boards and extension leads, so that their planned set-up is not compromised by the placement of power points at the venue.

Students are advised to arrive at the examination centre at least 30 minutes before their start time. Students will have access to the examination room at least 30 minutes prior to the start of the examination and should use this time to set up and adjust equipment, tune their instruments and warm up. Non-assessed performers may assist in adjusting the equipment before the examination; however, once the examination has started, only the assessed performers may adjust their instruments and equipment. All examination performances must be presented at safe volume levels.

In 2021, some ensembles set their mix of instruments and voices based on the sound balance heard in and around the performance area only. Students are advised to set and check the overall dynamic balance of the presentation from both the performance/stage area and the approximate positioning of the assessors.

During the year, students should practise in a variety of rooms in order to become more adept at setting and checking appropriate dynamic requirements.

Groups should plan how they will sit or stand during the performance. Assessed performers must establish clear sightlines to ensure the assessors can observe all performance techniques and technical skills. This may mean adjusting the placement of music stands to ensure finger movement and breathing techniques are visible. The seating plan or group organisation may be varied across the program to achieve the best performance environment for each work within the program.