

MUSIC

Paper 0410/03
Performing

General comments

The November coursework entry is much smaller than the June entry. As most of the issues relating to the November coursework are identical to those discussed in the detailed report given in June 2007, this is therefore reproduced below for guidance, together with some additional comments which arise from the November entry.

Solos

As in previous years, most of the solo performances were adequately matched to the candidates' abilities, allowing them to demonstrate a range of musical and technical skills. However, some improvised solos, particularly for drum-kit, demonstrated a very limited range of skills indeed. There is no reason not to submit improvised solos, but Centres are asked to consider the sort of repertoire that is prescribed for Grade 4 and 5 Drum Kit syllabuses when advising candidates and assessing their work – the simple, repetitive patterns that some candidates performed do not even begin to explore the range of technical and musical skills possible on the drum kit, but were marked as if they were equivalent to far more advanced notated compositions. The same problem arose for some guitarists, who played pieces consisting of nothing but a repeated four-bar chord sequence with no serious technique needed at all.

Ensembles

It is again necessary to state that the advice given repeatedly over the last few years is ignored by some Centres. Performing as a member of an ensemble is one of the most exciting things a young musician can be involved in, and should be seen as central to the whole syllabus, not an exam "obstacle" to be overcome. Many Centres continue to provide excellent and imaginative ensemble performing opportunities for their candidates, which perfectly match their abilities. However, there are still far too many examples where candidates who have demonstrated excellent instrumental or vocal skills in the solo section performed ensemble music which was so undemanding – or in some cases not even an ensemble – that they completely failed to demonstrate their true ability, and gained far fewer marks than might otherwise have been the case.

Once again, there were a number of pieces submitted as ensemble performances which were in fact solos, and the Moderators were forced to significantly reduce these candidates' marks. It is necessary to repeat almost exactly the advice given last year: an ensemble performance should normally consist of three or more live performers; the candidate's part should not be consistently doubled, and the candidate should demonstrate true ensemble skills with the other players. A general rule of thumb is if the candidate's part could be described as a solo, then it is unlikely to qualify as an ensemble. For instance, some candidates played or sang pieces accompanied by two instruments (for instance piano and drums, or piano and bass), but they were still clearly performing as a soloist; in pieces like this, the accompanying instruments respond to the needs of the soloist, whereas in a true ensemble all the performers will be interacting with each other. Another problem which arose a number of times this year was vocal "duets" in popular or show styles which actually consisted of the singers singing in alternation – never together – and therefore demonstrating no ensemble skills. Exceptions to the need for at least three instruments include acting as an accompanist (e.g. on the piano, accompanying another instrumentalist or singer) and piano duets. If there is any doubt about the suitability of a piece, then please contact CIE who will be happy to provide guidance.

In all of these cases, the Moderators feel that better advice from Centres would have resulted in significantly higher marks for some candidates.

It is again necessary to remind some Centres that where an ensemble consists of more than one instrument or voice of the same type, it is impossible for the Moderator to know which performer is the candidate if no further information (specifically sheet music) is provided by the Centre.

Assessment

It is pleasing that many Centres mark their candidates' performances realistically and accurately, taking the distance training materials as a benchmark standard, but there was a significant increase this year in the number of Centres who assessed the coursework far too leniently, at all levels of the ability range. Centres are reminded that to be gaining the highest marks, candidates need to perform for at least four minutes, at approximately Grade 4 or 5 Level. In some cases, performances which demonstrated hardly any musical or technical skills at all were still being given marks in double figures. Please consider the statements in the assessment criteria very carefully.

Some Centres include very useful comments supporting the marks awarded in the space provided on the working marksheet. It would be extremely helpful if all Centres did this, commenting on the performance submitted, not the perceived progress of the candidate during the course. The assessment must focus objectively and exclusively on the performance that is sent for moderation. It is vital that this working marksheet is included in the coursework package. It has become necessary to ask that Centres check the addition and transfer of marks more carefully in future submissions – there were numerous mathematical errors this year.

There are still some Centres which persist in using half marks; please only use whole numbers.

Presentation of coursework

Most Centres organised the recordings effectively, with clear announcements of candidates' details on cassette tapes, and clear track listings for performances submitted on CD. [DVD is acceptable, but owing to the different formats VHS is not.]

Centres must check the final version of the tape/CD they submit: in some cases the CD didn't work at all, and there were a number of recordings this year which were incomplete. Please try to record the performances in a room which is affected as little as possible by external noise or interruptions within the room itself. It is again necessary to remind some Centres that CDs must be finalised properly so that they can be played on a stereo, not just on a computer. A number of cassette tapes arrived in Cambridge almost completely broken as a result of being posted without adequate packaging – please put tapes into a small padded envelope, or protect with bubble-wrap.

There were a very large number of Centres this year who submitted the coursework without any accompanying sheet music. It is a requirement of the syllabus that copies of the sheet music should be sent, with the sole exception of music which has been improvised. It is extremely difficult to moderate ensemble performances in particular when there is no sheet music to clearly show the candidates' part.

Centres are reminded that the performing and composing coursework must be sent in separate packages, and that a separate recording is needed for each.

MUSIC

<p>Paper 0410/04 Composing</p>
--

General comments

The general quality of work was very variable indeed. Some Centres produced submissions that were as good as – possibly better than – any that have been presented in the past. In other Centres the work was of a very poor standard indeed. The average standard seemed rather lower than it has often been.

It was encouraging to observe clear evidence that the best candidates had followed a well-planned and purposeful course of study. However, a significant number of candidates seem to have been left to their own devices, and to have floundered as a result. It is important that all candidates receive appropriate guidance at all stages in the composing process; some appear to have received little or none.

Assessment

Most Centres were generally consistent in their internal marking, and the rank order of candidates was usually correct. However, some Centres were lenient in their marking, sometimes by a substantial margin.

Scores

There was a noticeable increase in the number of scores produced using computer notation programs such as Finale or Sibelius. Most of these looked very impressive and had received full marks. However, closer inspection often revealed serious shortcomings in terms of the correct grouping of notes and/or rests, the correct beaming of quavers and semiquavers and other editorial matters. Candidates who use such programs still need to learn how to apply the normal rules of music theory, which other candidates demonstrate through their handwritten scores.

Very few candidates this year had relied on computer-generated ideas produced by programs such as Cakewalk, Cubase or Reason. This was a marked improvement on last year.

The small number of candidates who compose genuine examples of electro-acoustic music, which cannot be notated conventionally, still need to submit something to take the place of a score. On its own, a simple print-out of the computer screen diagrams is insufficient for these purposes: a written account of the composing process, explaining the decisions taken in the course of creating the music, is needed in addition.

Recordings

Recordings of pieces were roughly evenly split between live performances and synthesised ones taken direct from a computer notation. In almost all cases the live performances were superior to the synthesised ones – not because they were without mistakes, but because they brought the music to life in a way that a computer never can. This was true even when the live performances were really quite inaccurate; the Moderators could always tell what was intended, and could invariably form a better impression of how the piece was meant to sound than they could with a note-perfect but arid performance generated by the computer.

In some cases where recordings had been generated from the computer, all parts were played using a piano sound, even when the pieces were intended for an ensemble of orchestral instruments. This does not give a true impression of the intended sound of the composition and is unhelpful both to the candidates concerned and to the Moderators. If candidates are using notation or sequencing programs, they need to learn how to set the correct sounds so that the music plays back as it should.

There was a marked increase in the number of Centres that submitted the recordings on CD rather than on cassette. CDs are always preferable: it is important, however, to stress the need for CDs to be playable on standard domestic hi-fi equipment. Centres are asked to ensure that they use **CD-R** format only, and do not submit recordings on CD-RW. Similarly, Centres are specifically asked not to submit recordings using Windows Media Player or similar formats that can only be played on a computer, since the Moderators do not necessarily have access to the same software that was used in the production of the CD.

Specific Problems

1 Administration

There were several instances of the following problems:

- Incorrect addition of marks;
- Incorrect transcription of marks from individual Working Mark Sheets to the Summary Mark Sheet and/or to the MS1 Computer Mark Sheet;
- Illegible marks on the MS1;
- Omission of important documentation (e.g. no individual Working Mark Sheets, no Moderator's copy of the MS1);
- Performing work (sheet music and/or recordings) enclosed in the same envelope with the Composing submission

Without all the correct forms, correctly and fully completed, the Moderators' task becomes very difficult, or even impossible.

2 Incomplete Submissions

In a significant number of cases there was no recording of one or more of a candidate's compositions, and no explanation of the omission. Centres are reminded that **all** pieces must be recorded.

3 Quality of Recordings

The recordings submitted by some Centres were of a very poor quality indeed. In some cases the level at which the recording had been made was so low that it was impossible to hear the music. In others, the levels varied to an unacceptable degree from piece to piece, or between spoken announcements and the recorded music. It would be very helpful to the Moderators if Centres could make every effort to ensure that the playback volume does not need to be adjusted at the start of successive tracks. There were a few cases where the levels of certain tracks were so high that there was a danger of damage to loudspeakers, and severe distortion of the candidates' music. It does not help the candidates if recordings are so quiet that the music is inaudible, or so loud that it is unintelligible because of the distortion.

4 Order of Pieces in the Submission

Most Centres had taken trouble to ensure that the recordings were grouped together by candidate (in the correct order of candidate number), that the individual pieces on the CD or cassette were in the correct order of numbering (piece 1 first, then piece 2 and finally piece 3), and that the scores were also arranged in this order. However, there were still cases where the scores were in an apparently random order, or where it was impossible to tell which piece had been assessed as piece 1, piece 2 or piece 3.

5 Holistic Adjustments

Many Centres take the opportunity offered in the current syllabus to make a holistic adjustment of the total mark for one or more candidates. These adjustments are almost always used to increase the mark, but the Moderators invariably find that the unadjusted mark was more accurate.