



2012 Music Style and Composition GA 3: Aural and written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2012 Music Style and Composition examination consisted of two sections with 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.

While many students demonstrated effective skills in aural analysis and a pleasing breadth of knowledge related to the works they had studied, others lacked the capacity to tailor the skills and knowledge they had acquired to the specific issues targeted by the examination questions.

In addition, some students did not engage with some of the core concepts embedded in the unit to an appropriate degree. The primary example of this is the way students described and discussed compositional devices. The study design identifies three compositional devices: repetition, variation and contrast. These devices operate at a range of levels in a composition, are inextricably linked to the treatment of elements of music and are the primary means by which students gain insight into the ways in which a piece of music is developed. The examination revealed that some students' understanding of these devices is limited. For example, contrast needs to be understood as more than merely 'difference' and variation needs to be seen as more than simply 'change'. The Advice for teachers section of the study design for Music Style and Composition includes a range of examples of how these devices operate. Students and teachers are encouraged to use the concepts and terminology presented in the Advice for teachers section of the study design to frame their explorations of compositional devices.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

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

Section A

Section A consisted of five questions and was worth 55 marks. An audio CD lasting 58 minutes and 13 seconds accompanied this section of the examination.

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	0	0	2	10	18	27	21	19	4	5.3

Students performed reasonably well on this question. While descriptions of tone colour were generally of a high order, many students struggled with the idea of texture. Lower-scoring responses showed an understanding of the concept of texture merely in terms of thickness and thinness; higher-scoring responses showed an understanding of texture as the interplay of music lines. Answers included but were not limited to the following.

- Tone colour: Sound sources included strings, gong, cymbals, chorus, flutes, tablas and solo vocals. Prose descriptions of sound sources (as opposed to the name of a source) were also accepted and could score highly.
- Texture: The excerpt was marked by shifting textures, with a focus on homophonic support of the vocals and an accompaniment that was interspersed with instrumental interludes that featured textural change. The excerpt featured two basic textures – monophonic and homophonic; on occasion the interplay of parts gave the suggestion of a polyphonic texture over a homophonic structure. Students were able to view the percussion parts as contributing to the texture.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Average
%	0	0	4	6	15	20	21	20	9	3	5.7

Students again displayed an appropriate degree of skill with regard to aural analysis in this question. Higher-scoring answers commented in detail on the three elements and effectively used music terminology. Lower-scoring answers tended to struggle with one or more elements. A number of students lacked the vocabulary that is needed to effectively describe harmony. Students who mentioned only two elements were able to score as high as seven out of nine for this question. The most successful responses made a clear link between the question prompt (related to the creation of a sense of stillness and movement in the work) and the elements of melody, harmony and rhythm. Answers included but were not limited to the following.

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Melody

- melodic lines that regularly returned to a pitch centre (tonic)
- repeated notes worked to imply stillness while melodic stepwise motion implied movement
- overlapping phrases worked to imply 'stasis' by demonstrating gradual change over the length of the excerpt

Harmony

- drone/pedal point worked to create a sense of stillness
- the dissonance of a second and the action of the voices breaking into parts created a sense of movement
- the tension and release of the consonance and dissonance throughout the piece implied movement (2nds and 4ths particularly implied motion)

Rhythm

- the work was defined by a simple, repeated, rhythmic motive (minim-crotchet-crotchet) and a rhythmic profile that was consistently shaped to the text (speech rhythm), with both factors working to create a sense of movement
- the absence of an overt pulse helped to create a sense of stillness
- a sense of anticipation was created by the combination of unpredictable speech rhythm and a static drone – both of these elements worked together to drive the music forward

Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	0	4	19	27	26	16	7	3.5

The rhythm of the accompaniment used a triple meter and regular iterations of a hemiola. It was also appropriate for students to speak in terms of 3/4 and 6/8 time signatures alternating. While many students performed well on this question, a significant number did not score highly because their responses did not focus on the rhythm of the accompaniment. Many spoke about the rhythm section and described issues of instrumentation rather than rhythm. Other lower-order answers struggled to make specific statements about the element of rhythm and, instead, spoke of issues linked to the 'feel' or style of the accompaniment.

Higher-scoring answers succinctly captured the rhythmic motive that characterised the accompaniment of this work and tended to differentiate between the rhythm of the percussion part and the rhythm of the bass instruments (these featured some embellishment).

Many students elected to notate the rhythm, but this was not required to achieve full marks.

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	2	2	8	11	16	25	22	12	3	4.8

The most successful answers commented on the vocal line across the course of the excerpt as working to create an overt contour that defied generic expectations in terms of word painting. For example, text that consisted of a 'question' routinely trended down in terms of contour. Mid- to high-order responses provided a description of the contour, either through notation or via diagrams (both approaches were valid) and talked about the scale that informs the pitch content of the melody (primarily Aeolian), as well as the change in tessitura from the verse to the chorus. The differences in rhythm between the verse and the chorus were also mentioned by some students, with many describing the quasi speech rhythm of the almost continuous quavers in the verse and a more stylised, varied rhythm that overtly stated the hemiola of the accompaniment in the chorus.

Other issues that framed capable responses to this question were the intervallic structure of the vocal line, with the verse being primarily stepwise (apart from a leap of a fifth at the start of several phrases), contrasted with the chorus, which featured more disjunct motion, specifically leaps that outlined triads. The use of the word 'may' in the question meant that students were not required to deal with the terms listed. However, good explanations were nevertheless characterised by descriptions of musical features working to support a broader point, in this case, the nature of change in the vocal line.

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Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	0	0	1	5	6	5	8	18	20	16	14	5	2	7.6

Students were required to construct an explanation that linked their aural analysis of the excerpt to the issue of intensity. High-scoring responses featured detailed, accurate analysis that clearly functioned as an explanation of intensity, while lower-scoring responses tended towards simple descriptions of the work.

Answers included but were not limited to

- the sense of balance that was created by the interplay of melodic phrases, punctuated by harmonic responses that were then undercut by irregular phrase lengths
- the repetition and development of the melodic motive, with each iteration more intense due to changes in melody, tessitura and dynamic
- the sectional structure worked to create intensity through the ascent in pitch
- ornamentation and embellishment of melodic line increased in each section and helped to build intensity
- the impression of more complex contrapuntal texture later in the excerpt was indicative of greater intensity
- the chromaticism increased as the excerpt progressed
- the harmonic density increased as the excerpt progressed, affecting both the texture and degree of dissonance
- the texture also rose and narrowed to become more intense
- the parallel motion of lines in the first instance contrasted with contrary motion later to produce intensity.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	1	0	2	3	6	9	14	16	17	14	12	6	0	7.3

The question elicited a range of responses from students, with some choosing to understand variation in terms of the structure of the excerpt as an actual theme and variation composition, and others choosing to understand variation specifically as a compositional device that could be discussed in terms of how it operated against various elements of music. Both approaches to the question were considered valid and could score highly. Answers included but were not limited to the following.

- The theme was presented by the solo violin, with the B section of this theme including some embellishment.
- Variation 1: The theme was set with double stops functioning as a harmonic drone (open strings of violin) and a register transfer was featured at the end of the section. This worked to alter the cadence of the theme.
- Variation 2: The melody was presented as a compound line working to reinforce the harmony (quavers in 6/8 rather than crotchet-quaver with second quaver constituting the subsidiary line). The accompaniment took up the rhythmic pulse implied by the compound line in the B section of the melody. The register transfer at the final cadence was again present, with melodic line altered further in this variation.
- Variation 3: The rhythmic impetus of the second variation continued with the violin line up the octave and increased embellishment in the form of trills. Pizzicato worked to vary the accompaniment in the B section.
- Variation 4: The melody was presented in minor, with non-functional triadic harmony and constant embellishment using trills and tremolo. The B section moved significantly away from the source melody.
- Variation 5: This variation featured significant rhythmic change, with the melody presented in repeating semiquavers and the harmony marked by regular transitions between major and minor.
- Coda (some students viewed this as a sixth variation and were not penalised): This was a continuation of the texture presented previously, but with the solo violin featuring a countermelody. The motive of the A theme was presented several times, with chromatic alterations working to the end of the composition.

Section B

Section B consisted of four questions and was worth 45 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. Students and teachers are reminded that the works selected for study must be properly identified – a number of students did not complete the information relating to work identification and, where the identity of the work was not clear from the text of a student's answer, this negatively affected the mark the student received, particularly for Questions 6 and 8, where the work studied had to be an Australian work and a work composed since 1910 respectively.

For all questions in Section B, students are expected to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the works studied, frame their responses with appropriate music language and terminology, and be able to support analysis and discussion with specific examples.

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Question 6a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	9	21	32	32	2.8

In order to achieve full marks, students had to fully identify two contextual issues. Extensive description was not required, but the identification of both issues had to be distinct. In general, the cohort was well prepared for this question.

Question 6b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Average
%	6	4	5	5	10	12	16	17	15	12	5.7

High-scoring responses to this question were characterised by discussions that linked one of the contextual issues cited in Question 6a. to the work studied. Low-scoring responses tended to simply continue with a description of a contextual issue without discussing how this issue influenced the work. Students who were prepared with specific examples from the piece they had studied tended to be well equipped to construct effective discussions.

Question 7

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	5	3	6	6	9	11	14	19	12	10	7	5.9

This question required students to consider the operation of contrast as a compositional device in two ways. Students who understood contrast merely as 'difference' and not as a musical term that can operate in a variety of ways tended to score less highly. Students who performed well on the question were able to contextualise contrast in ways that included issues such as changes to the treatment of dynamics, orchestration, melodic shapes and registers, rhythms, meters, harmonies, textures, articulation and forms.

Question 8

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	6	3	5	8	5	6	11	18	17	12	9	6.1

Students needed to answer this question with reference to a work composed after 1910. A disturbing number of students responded using works drawn from the 18th and 19th centuries, and no marks could be awarded for this question in these cases. The question required students to construct a discussion that linked the compositional device of repetition to the attributes of a particular music style. High-scoring responses demonstrated a good knowledge of the work (demonstrated via examples) and a clear understanding of the nominated style. Low-scoring responses tended to be prepared answers that simply described an aspect of repetition.

Question 9

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	7	1	3	7	5	6	5	13	13	14	12	6	7	7.1

This question made students focus on the operation of the elements of music in the other work that they studied in Unit 4. Students were asked to select elements from a list of six and were marked according to the degree of insight that they displayed into the work that they had studied. Once again, explanations that employed discipline-specific terminology and analysis supported by music examples scored highly, while generic responses that did not explain how the composer used the elements of music that were under consideration did not score highly.