

# 2020 Music Style and Composition aural and written examination report

## General comments

The 2020 VCE Music Style and Composition aural and written examination was based on the *VCE Music Adjusted Study Design for 2020 only*. In line with the alterations to the study design, the parameters for the 2020 examination were also changed. Question 3 in Section B of the examination could only call for a description of the elements of music and compositional devices; the style and contextual issues were not set for study for the post-1950 work that students and/or providers selected for study.

The examination consisted of two sections worth a total of 100 marks. The questions in Section A focused exclusively on Area of Study 1, Responses to Music. This section featured five questions based on short excerpts of music from a wide variety of geographical and historical backgrounds and was worth 70 marks. Section B featured three questions related to Area of Study 2 and was worth 30 marks.

## Specific information

### Section A

Consistent with the study design, Section A featured excerpts of music from a broad range of styles from a variety of cultures, including electronica, romantic orchestral ballet music, chamber music featuring percussion instruments, free jazz and mainstream symphonic music. Many responses demonstrated students' ability to analyse the elements of music and compositional devices found in these previously unheard excerpts of music. High-scoring responses demonstrated a clear understanding of the elements of music; this knowledge enabled students to access high marks on several questions. The ability to incorporate subjective observations about character also proved valuable on this examination. Lower-scoring responses were less detailed and showed confusion about the elements of music and compositional devices. These responses contained fewer observations about the use of the elements of music and compositional devices in the excerpts and at times character was confused with characteristics.

## Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	0	1	9	20	70	3.6

Generally, students responded well to this question. Often, students chose to include four discrete examples of repetition that they heard in the excerpt. Some examples of repetition that may have been included in responses are as follows:

- Lyrics 'Boing Boom Tschak' repeated constantly throughout excerpt.
- One-bar rhythmic phrase of the lyrics (tam, ti ta za) repeated constantly throughout excerpt.
- Four-bar rhythmic phrase consisting of the lyrics 'Boing Boom Tschak' for three bars, then electronic drum pad rhythm in bar four repeated throughout excerpt. Every four bars the rhythm  is repeated.
- Vocal percussion 'ping' on beats two and four repeats after first iteration of rhythmic phrase.
- Drum beat enters in bar nine and repeats similar rhythmic pattern throughout excerpt.
- Repetition of the word 'Tschak' creates a short motif after the 'Boing Boom Tschak' phrase, about halfway through the excerpt.
- Repetition of simple quadruple time at the same steady tempo throughout the excerpt

## Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	0	0	0	2	3	9	17	19	23	17	11	7.4

There were some fine responses to this question. Some responses were highly detailed and asserted that a particular character was established by the composer's treatment of the elements of music and compositional devices. Many students felt that the excerpt had a mechanical or robotic character, others contended that this work was mysterious, others stated it was a piece of dance music and that this was central to the character of the work. Many other characters were referenced.

Some students were confused by the word character in the question. As clearly identified in the study design, 'character' relates to subjective opinions about the excerpt. In some cases, students presented very detailed analyses of the work that did not refer to any aspects of character, such as a particular mood. In other instances, students took character to only mean musical characteristics or attributes of the excerpt. In these cases, students had not responded to a vital part of the question and therefore were unable to achieve high marks.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. It asserts that a character was established and provides evidence of this by including technical details relating to the elements of music and compositional devices.

*The composers utilize contrasting timbres and sound sources to create the eccentric, mysterious character of the work. The initial breathy, echoing vocal layers are contrasted with a bright plucky melodic synth ostinato, and reverberant, harsh electronic drums. After this a warm vocoder synth with heavily processed low vocals are used to further contrast the dry breathy vocal samples, with its reverberant timbre. Finally, a lush, soft polyphonic synth is introduced at the end of the excerpt to further contrast the preceding timbres and textures of each sound source. Various discordant sound effects are also used to create a dense soundscape. These further contrast the more melodic and rhythmic layers of the piece. The contrasting timbres of the sound sources are utilized to subvert the listener's expectation and assist in creating the mysterious yet eccentric and exciting character.*

The composers also uses variation, varying the sampled vocals throughout the excerpt such as the varying intensity of the delay on the initial vocal ostinato 'Bang, Boom, Tschak'. The variation of effects used, and treatment of the samples further subverts the listener's expectations and assists in creating the mysterious character.

The Harmony is only noticeable at the end of the excerpt, with the composer introducing the first polyphonic, chordal instrument. The lack of harmony throughout the majority of the excerpt assists in creating a more eerie mysterious mood as a tonality is not established from the beginning.

## Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	1	0.5	7	19	30	26	16	4.2

Students generally completed insightful responses to this question. The majority of students were awarded four or more marks for this question. This showed that students were able to analyse and use terminology effectively. Responses that were awarded the highest marks were able to identify the sound sources and describe how issues such as combination sounds, change of register, differing articulations and dynamics impacted on the quality of the sounds in the excerpt.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. The response displays many of the characteristics mentioned above, and clarity is added by referencing specific sections and points within the excerpt.

*The excerpt begins with a low, rumbling gong, which is contrasted by several pizzicato pluckings from a string instrument (viols), which has a light woody tone colour. Over this, bright and delicate triangles are sounded. A female vocalist enters the texture, with a piercing and bright tone colour. The viola begins to perform mellow imitations of this vocal melody. A light and ethereal harp enters in the next section, which is alter doubled by a shimmering glockenspiel. A shrill and piercing piccolo flute occasionally lowers into a lower pitch adopting a hollow and breathy tone colour. The viola performs rough and grating dissonant chords under this, with a dark and mellow tone colour.*

## Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	0.5	0.5	2	2	7	17	15	17	21	13	5	6.7

Fewer students accessed full or high marks for this question. The highest-scoring responses were able to provide a description that encapsulated the whole structure and then described the characteristics that changed, repeated or varied to create the structure of the excerpt. The students who received full marks also included observations about the layers of sound and described the way in which these layers interacted with the structure of the work. However, some students did not meet all of these requirements. In these instances, students simply described the characteristics of the work in a chronological manner without reference to structure. Other lower-scoring responses did not adequately address the changes that occurred in relation to the layers of sounds.

Some observations that may have been included in responses include:

- The whole excerpt moves from *ppp* to *fff* through building dynamics, the layering of sound and rhythmic/melodic complexity of individual parts.
- Melodic parts often work independently but with common rhythmic and melodic fragments that recur.
- Opens with tam tam *ppp*.
- Violin/viola enters with repeated note played pizzicato *pp*.
- Soprano (melisma over 'dream') *p*

- Violin/viola arco, *p*, in dialogue with soprano, often imitating motifs from the soprano, but then veering off with its own melodic line. This is punctuated by occasional notes on tam tam. Often the texture is monophonic, but becomes polyphonic when they overlap. Soprano melody ends, then sustained violin/viola note at end of the dialogue, dies away to *pp*.
- The flute entry follows, doubling some of the harp part, rhythmically and melodically. It begins with long note values then moves into triplets repeating the melodic figure. A gradual crescendo continues building.
- Glockenspiel enters, doubling the harp and flute rhythms; all play an alternating semitone triplet figure with rhythmic diminution that crescendos to build into next section. Glockenspiel and flute alternate between high and very high octaves. Flute and glockenspiel climax. The harp stops.
- Violin/Viola re-enters with rhythmic repeated chords, heavily accented (*marcato*). Dynamics are *f*. The flute continues a semitone figure in foreground, repeating between registers. The glockenspiel ends.
- Side drum enters underneath flute, then soprano re-enters, building to *ff*, the flute continues.
- The texture is quite polyphonic; consisting of flute and soprano weaving in and out in dialogue with one another, with independent rhythm on side drum (including flams) and violin/viola rhythmic chords sitting underneath. Harp re-enters with chords underneath flute and soprano. All instruments are *ff* with strong accents.
- The soprano sings *ff* with strong plosives at the start of each note. It continues dialogue with flute. The side drum ends, tam tam re-enters while violin/viola continues with strongly articulated chords.
- Music dies away with diminuendo, soprano and flute drop out. Excerpt finishes with violin/viola and tam tam, *p*.

### Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	9	22	38	30	2.9

Students generally responded well to this question. The open nature of the question allowed students to include a wide range of observations. Students included information on:

- Tonality – based in a major tonality (D major), established both through the diatonic main melody.
- Instrumentation – bassoon was the main melodic instrument.
- Melodic contour – the first three notes are an ascending tonic triad presented as a second inversion arpeggio. This is followed by descending stepwise movement from the mediant to the tonic. This phrase structure repeats twice.
- Melodic variation – on the third presentation of this phrase, it is altered slightly with a flattened mediant.
- Articulation – the melody features staccato articulation.
- Range – small range of major sixth.
- Register – the melody is set in the mid to high register of the bassoon.

### Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	1	0.5	0.5	6	10	24	27	19	12	5.7

Students responded very well to this question, with a large majority of responses being awarded five or more marks. Most students demonstrated an understanding of variation and were able to describe the changes that were applied to the pre-established pattern(s). Students were required to frame their response in subjective terms. In this case they were required to incorporate opinions on how interest was maintained. This was also generally completed well.

The following is an example of high-scoring response. It uses subject specific terminology to substantiate the analysis of variation in the excerpt. The student has also shown a clear, well-articulated understanding of variation by noting points such as redistribution of the melody, modulation and change in tempo.

*Over a steady string chordal accompaniment (in short staccato quarter notes) a brief melody is introduced by solo bassoon in a mid register, with a mellow tone colour. Interest is created through Prokofiev's textural rearrangement – redistributing the melody to a violin, over the accompaniment. This is furthered through a development of the initial melody in the low strings. Following this, Prokofiev generates interest by modulating from D major to F minor, varying the tonality of the melody, which is again presented by the bassoon. This textural arrangement is varied by Prokofiev's redistribution of the melody to an oboe in a higher register and brighter tone colour. Prokofiev then modulates through C Major to D Major, varying the tonality once again. There is also a sense of variation in the tempo of this section, as it begins to accelerate before slowing to its original speed. Dynamic interest is achieved through a gradual reduction in the intensity of the sound – followed by a sudden climax, D Major triadic chord, in the whole orchestra.*

## Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	1	0.5	0	1	3	7	11	16	15	16	17	9	3	8.0

In this question, students were required to include an explanation of contrast in the excerpt, focusing on the role that both rhythm/time and texture played. In this case, the correct use of terminology was important. In order to score high marks, students needed to make accurate observations and describe the significant differences between the two sections of the excerpt in a clear, insightful way. In some cases, students did not score well as they were unable fully describe the nature of the changes in rhythm or texture in the excerpt. Some higher-scoring responses incorporated a table or diagram to good effect.

When describing contrast with reference to rhythm/time, students may have included some of the following observations.

### Section 1

- Unclear/ambiguous meter due to heavy use of rubato, a range of note lengths, sparse texture, and sporadic melodic flurries.
- Significant sense of rhythmic 'space' due to use of silence between phrases.
- A seemingly slow to moderate tempo due to the rubato and silences, with swells and increases of speed in some melodic ideas as the speed and tension builds towards Section 1.
- A range of note lengths used in the marimba part, including longer rolls/resonant bass notes and flurries of semiquavers/demi-semiquavers in the higher, more melodic passages.
- Percussion ensemble part (woodblocks) includes a short interrupting sextuplet flurry.
- Very little repetition of rhythmic ideas, with a seemingly semi-improvised approach to shaping the solo marimba material.
- Limited sense of forward momentum and drive due to ambiguous metre, silences, rubato.

### Section 2

- Much clearer quadruple meter established by driving quaver pulses across the accompanying percussion ensemble.
- Very little sense of rhythmic 'space' due to consistent running rhythms and short note lengths across the ensemble.
- Consistently allegro, driving tempo across this section of this excerpt.
- Marimba part is made up mostly of driving quavers with offbeat accents and occasional semiquaver flurries at the end of passages.
- Percussion ensemble (drums, metallic sounds, etc.) play consistent accompanying quavers underneath the marimba part.

- Use of several repeating rhythmic motifs, in particular the ti-ka-ti-ka ta, ti-ka-ti-ka ta pattern, which recurs throughout the second section across a range of drums.
- Sense of syncopation, drive, and forward momentum created with offbeat accents and groups of three together with occasional heavy downbeats on the '1' in the marimba part placed against the driving quavers in the accompaniment.

When describing contrast with reference to texture, students may have made some of the following observations.

- The first section of this excerpt consists of a sparse and primarily monophonic texture:
  - This section is almost entirely performed by solo marimba, however, there is one brief and disruptively loud flurry of woodblock hits in the beginning in an almost 'call and response' between the marimba.
  - In the beginning of the section, melodic phrases often begin with an ascending line of single pitches followed by a double or triple stop (that is, two or three notes in a chord) roll in the mid-high register of the instrument.
  - Later in this section, there is lower register melodic material made up of single notes, which are either struck in a resonant fashion or rolled softly. This gradually moves up to a higher register and becomes quicker and louder as the tension builds into the second section.
  - There is quite a lot of silence used between phrases, which contributes to the sense of sparseness in texture, as does the generally softer dynamic than the second section.
- The second section of this excerpt consists of a busier and more dense (though primarily homophonic) texture, created primarily through the addition of the percussion ensemble accompaniment under the solo marimba:
  - The percussion ensemble accompaniment material is introduced suddenly and loudly at the beginning of the section and consists of cowbells, hand drums (conga) and bass drum. There is also a vocal chant of men's voices (once only).
  - Once the marimba re-enters, the percussion ensemble material becomes softer to leave dynamic room for the soloist, creating a clear homophonic texture with the melodic instrument (marimba) now accompanied by the unpitched instruments.
  - The melodic material in the marimba is now made up of a single note (and quite static) melody with accented double stops on downbeats and syncopated quavers, but it is clearly in the foreground due to its contrasting dynamic and timbre.
  - In the brief moments where the marimba part quiets at the end of its melodic phrases, the percussion ensemble grows in dynamics and takes the foreground for a bar or so, creating an almost 'call and response' effect between the soloist and the group.

The sudden shift from spare, monophonic solo marimba texture in Section 1 and the busier, more chaotic and driving homophony of the percussion ensemble and marimba material in Section 2 creates significant contrast between the two sections.

## Question 5a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	1	4	7	13	12	13	14	12	12	7	5	5.4

In many cases, this question revealed significant misunderstandings about the nature of articulation. Many students included comments about the instrumentation and tone colour of the excerpt. In these instances, comments not directly related to articulation were considered 'off task' and could not be awarded marks. This was despite the level of detail and accuracy in relation to other elements of music. It should be noted that articulation has a prescribed definition in the study design. This relates to the level of emphasis at the start of notes, and the nature of release and decay. Within this definition, articulation may also relate to the level of

separation between notes. Please refer to page 13 of the study design. High-scoring responses were able to refer to the level of emphasis, release and decay on a variety of instruments within the ensemble. The highest-scoring responses also referenced playing techniques and conventions. Examples of techniques and conventions related to sticking on the drum kit and the use of Harmon mute on the trombone.

Some points that may have been included in responses include:

- opens with smooth articulation on trombone
- sticks on various parts of the drum kit; snare drum, toms, cymbal, kick pedal on bass drum
- sticking on cymbal makes short, crisp articulation
- sticking on various toms are muffled, leading to an attack with less clarity
- kick pedal on bass drum a dull, resonant articulation
- crisp, clipped articulation on snare drum
- smooth articulation on saxophone – slides up to initial pitch, then legato articulation between the notes
- smooth, legato slides between notes on muted trumpet in high register
- trombone figures sometimes accent the first note in the phrase, then lip slur to other notes
- legato articulation in piano; notes are connected but with little/no use of sustain pedal
- saxophone continues to perform glissandi between notes in between short legato phrases
- drum kit part features fills; these are followed by rolls on snare drum and hits on cymbals
- unmuted trombone plays legato phrases
- plucked bass enters with strong, percussive articulation
- flute played with singing/vocalising creates a breathy, irregular and unclear start to notes
- piano plays repeated motif underneath flute, with firm accents.

## Question 5b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	1	0.5	9	24	25	29	12	4.1

In general, students' responses to this question were of a high quality. Many responses were able to encapsulate the nature of the dynamics in the excerpt very well. The references to the erratic nature of the interjections at the start of the excerpt were generally well described and the more unified nature of dynamics at the end of the excerpt were identified and described effectively in most responses.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. The level of detail and the description of the dynamics is notable. The use of metalanguage is effective and refers to specific points in the excerpt. Incorporating succinct and clear references to features of the work is an important skill.

*Kent utilizes somewhat erratic dynamics throughout the first section with each individual instrumental part being seemingly unrelated to the others. The experimental nature of the piece pairing soft, piano, phrases with screeching forte horn until the whole ensemble crescendos to a fortissimo climax where a trombone line is heard. The horn line, still accompanied by an erratic rhythm section gives way to a soft, piano phrase played on the piano and walking bass line. The rhythm section in the second section is much more relaxed and maintains constant soft dynamics whilst the solo, lead instrument, the flute, plays softly, yet with crescendos and decrescendos heard throughout. The second section starkly contrasts the discordant first section both texturally and dynamically with the contrasting texture informing the dynamic shifts.*

## Section B

Section B assessed students' understanding of the Outcome 2 works studied in Units 3 and 4. Question 3 in this section of the examination had different parameters for 2020 only. This was in line with the adjusted study design for use in 2020 only. Students were only required to describe the use of the elements of music and compositional devices in relation to their chosen post-1950 work that they studied in Unit 4.

Other than this, in this section students were required to respond to questions that focused on:

- use of compositional devices globally, and at micro and macro levels
- contextual issues
- characteristic of style
- composers' use of the elements of music.

In Section B, students responded to questions related to their chosen Australian, other and post-1950 works. It should be noted that if a response is completed about a work that does not fit the parameters for a question, marks cannot be awarded. In nearly all cases, appropriate works were referred to in the responses completed in Section B.

Many high-scoring responses were completed, with the highest-scoring showing an in-depth knowledge of the works chosen for study. In these cases, students made many direct references to the works using appropriate music terminology. However, some students had difficulty responding to questions in this section of the examination. Questions on structure posed particular challenges for students. In many cases, students were unable to clearly identify the structure of the works they had studied. Thorough research is recommended.

A broad range of works was chosen for study. Selection of works is critical to students' success in this section of the examination and it is heartening to see that in most cases students are studying works that allow them to access the full range of marks. In particular, it is important that there are sufficient resources available to thoroughly study the context and style of the works chosen.

### Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	4	0	0.5	6	11	11	15	17	18	12	6	6.3

Students were required to answer this question in relation to the Australian work they had studied in Unit 3. In order to be awarded high marks for this question, students were required to clearly describe the structure of the work and explain how contrast contributed to the creation of this structure. In some cases, students were unable to adequately describe the structure. It is important that students are able to clearly and accurately complete a summation of the structure of the works they study. This 'surface knowledge' is essential to a more in-depth description of the use of many other elements of music and compositional devices in the work. This is fundamental knowledge required in Area of Study 2

## Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	4	12	84	1.8

Students were required to answer this question in relation to the 'other' work that they studied in Unit 3. This question was generally competently answered. It is important that students are able to clearly state the contextual issues they studied in relation to the work. In some cases, students showed varying levels of confusion. It should be noted that contextual issues should have clear connections to the musical characteristics of the work.

## Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	2	3	3	7	16	22	19	14	14	5.3

This question called for an expansion of the response given in Question 2a. Many students showed levels of confusion around the events or influences leading to the creation of the work. It is important that students have thoroughly investigated the circumstances around the creation of Area of Study 2 works and are able to clearly connect this with the characteristics of those works. Students successfully explained contextual issues related to significant events in history, social movements, intellectual and philosophical schools of thought, technological advancements, characteristics and abilities of specific performers and the personal circumstances of the composers/music creators. Great care should be taken in selecting contextual issues for study. The highest-scoring responses were able to evidence the contextual issues with information on the use of compositional devices and treatment of the elements of music in the work.

## Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	0.5	1	5	8	18	16	14	14	13	8	6.4

For Question 3, students were required to complete a response about the post-1950 work studied in Unit 4.

Most students were able to complete a satisfying analysis and description of two of the specified elements of music. In general, responses that were accurate, detailed and used appropriate terminology were awarded higher marks.