

2023 VCE Music Composition aural and written external assessment report

General comments

The 2023 VCE Music Composition aural and written examination was consistent with the *VCE Music Study Design 2023–2027* and the sample examination material published in early 2023.

The questions on this examination focused exclusively on the key skills and knowledge found in Units 3 and 4 Area of Study 3, Responding. This exam featured four questions based on short excerpts of music from a variety of geographical and historical backgrounds.

While the quality of responses varied, students were able to confidently demonstrate their knowledge and skills and this led to higher marks across the cohort. Other questions proved more challenging and required a thorough understanding of the elements of music, compositional devices and concepts set for study in Area of Study 3. The elements of music, compositional devices and concepts can be found in the cross-study specifications on pages 13–19 of the *2023–2027 VCE Music Study Design*.

The highest-scoring responses demonstrated that the students had used high-order thinking skills in their analyses. This was most evident when students effectively connected issues such as interest, diversity, character, mood and emotion with the composer's use of the elements of music, compositional devices and concepts.

Lower-scoring responses showed some confusion about the definitions and concepts related to the elements of music. Students and teachers should pay particular attention to the following elements of music:

- duration
- texture
- instrumentation / tone colour.

When responding to questions on duration, students should confine their work, focusing their observations on tempo, metre and rhythm. Responses relating to the length of excerpts and phrases are off task. Responses on texture should address issues such as overall density, the number of layers and the traditional function of layers. This was at times confused with instrumentation / tone colour. Instrumentation and tone colour should solely focus on the sound sources and quality of the sound produced. Learning activities that improve students' skills in analysing, describing and discussing composers' use of these elements of music are recommended. The use of mind maps, word lists and glossaries in the teaching and learning process is also highly recommended. A variety of texts designed to improve these skills are commercially available.

Specific information

Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual 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 of more or less than 100 per cent.

Question 1a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	0	0	9	22	70	3.6

Question 1 required analysis of an excerpt from *Black Smoke* by Emily Wurramara. Part a. of the question called for an analysis of two aspects of the accompaniment, namely the accompaniment played on the guitar and the hand-held percussion instrument. Observations may have included, but are not limited to, the following.

Guitar part

This part features a rhythmic pattern of eight quavers per bar throughout the excerpt. There is emphasis on off-beats creating syncopation. The guitar plays single plucked notes on the on-beats of each bar and a chord on each quaver off-beat. This emphasises the simple quadruple metre of the work.

The harmonic structure is simple, featuring a chord progression that alternates between chord I and chord IV.

Hand-held percussion instrument part

The hand-held percussion plays on the beat throughout the section. This adds continuity, stability and drive.

This part adds interest and variation in tone colour as this is the only percussion instrument present. It is a bright, sharp, high-pitched tone, contrasting with the other instruments in the accompaniment and the vocal lines. The tone colour could be described as light and the dynamic as soft.

Question 1a. was very capably handled, with many students accurately and comprehensively describing the nature of these two parts in the accompaniment. Over 90 per cent of the cohort achieved three or four marks out of a maximum of four.

Question 1bi.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	2	8	17	37	36	3.0

Question 1b. posed a more substantial challenge for students. This question tested students' ability to analyse the compositional device contrast in two different ways. In Question 1bi., students were required to nominate two aspects of texture and how this contributed to contrast in the specified sections of the excerpt. The choice embedded in the question allowed students to address the two issues that they believed contributed most clearly to the contrast in texture. Many fine responses were completed.

Question 1bii.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	12	25	31	29	2.7

Question 1bii. was more specific and required students to refer to duration or tone colour. Once again, there were many fine responses. However, there were some responses that showed a misunderstanding about duration and included off-task information.

Question 1c.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Average
%	1	3	6	9	15	18	12	20	9	8	5.4

Question 1c. was the most challenging part of Question 1. This called for a discussion of how the elements of music were used to create a variation of Section A in Section A1. There were many examples of variation that students could have discussed. Students could have included references to melody, tone colour, structure, duration (rhythm), texture and articulation. The following student response has many fine attributes.

The faster rhythms of the vocal melody in the verse are varied in the cello at the instrumental, which plays longer sustained notes. The 'foregrounding' of the cello removes the textural layer of the pizzicato quavers in the verse, creating a more sparse texture. The articulation of the vocals is also more accented than the gradual attack and decay of the cello melody. The accompanying guitar and percussion are the exact same being repeated directly to create a unified pulse, harmonic base and rhythmic drive between both sections, making the instrumental a variation rather than an entirely new section.

Question 2a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	1	15	30	51	3.3

All of the components of Question 2 related to an excerpt from *Narrow Sea, Part 2*, composed by Caroline Shaw. Question 2a. required a description of the introduction only. This was the first 40 seconds of the excerpt. In a small number of responses, students also described Section A and Section A1. Any observations of Section A and Section A1 had to be disregarded by assessors.

Students were required to identify two instruments / sound sources and their roles. Any identification of two of the four sound sources that had some accuracy was accepted. Due to the mix of digital and acoustic sound sources and the limited time span, an empirical identification was not required. The sound sources present were the following.

Instrument	Instrument's role
Electronically generated sound emulating a plucked string sound	A melodic role. The melodic line continued throughout section, constituting a main theme. The melodic contour implies harmony achieved by the use of chord tones.
Electronically generated synthesiser playing a sound similar to a sine wave	Thickens the texture with a second, independent line. Works in counterpoint to instrument 1. This line features short bursts of sound, with large silences in between
Struck mixed percussion	This line contributes a contrasting tone colour and thickens the texture. Short, rhythmic figures are interspersed between the entries of the other two layers and silences.
Large drum, perhaps a bass drum. This too may have been sampled or electronically generated.	Provides a regular pulse, ostinato. Provides some rhythmic stability through repetition.

As this question was only worth four marks an exhaustive description of the role was not required. The following details would suffice to gain full marks.

Question 2b.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	5	23	39	32	3.0

In general, students handled this question in a competent manner, with over 70 per cent of the cohort being awarded three or four marks.

The backing vocalists' role was clearly chordal accompaniment with a chord progression being performed in three-part harmony. The simple chord progression was repeated twice within this section of the excerpt.

Melodic features of the backing vocals included:

- middle register
- limited range
- simple melody contour consisting of a four-note pattern.

Question 2c.

Mark	0	1	2	3	Average
%	5	12	39	44	2.2

Question 2c. was also well handled, with over 80 per cent of students receiving two or three marks. The melody contained many melodic features that could have been described, and as the response was only worth three marks basic, clear description was called for. Examples of melodic features that could have been included are as follows.

- based on a natural minor scale and dorian mode
- opens with an ascending perfect 5th
- uses a relatively wide range
- uses melisma
- uses mostly small steps that descend after an ascending perfect 5th at the beginning of each phrase
- uses descending sequences

- includes scalar ornaments; these could be described as turns, lower neighbour notes, mordents or trills
- tone colour characteristic of the operatic tradition; students may have mentioned the inclusion of vibrato, descriptions of placement, treatment of vowels, onset and/or articulation.

Question 2d.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	1	1	2	6	15	21	20	23	11	5.6

Question 2d. seemingly built on the observations found in the previous sections of Question 2. This part of the question called for a description of two ways that unity was created. In many responses, two elements of music were described. This approach had varied success. Detailed and clear answers that described specific points or aspects of the excerpt received high marks. There were a number of fine responses that showed a more holistic interpretation of the word 'ways'. These often categorised or made assertions about how the treatment of the elements of music were combined in the excerpt. Many of these types of responses were awarded high marks. The following is an example of an excellent student response. The student was able to describe two ways that unity was achieved in a concise and detailed way. The use of numbers emphasising the first and subsequently second way in which unity was created added to the clarity of the response.

1.

The low synth drone present throughout the excerpt introduces and maintains a static tonality which is maintained throughout, creating unity. This static tonality is emphasized by the repeated, cyclic harmony in the backing vocals which slowly cadence into the tonic chord each loop, further creating unity. The synth drone also creates unity texturally through its continual presence creating a consistent textural basis throughout.

2.

While the rhythms are very syncopated and apparently haphazard at times, the consistent rhythmic basis and use of fast, syncopated rhythmic lines throughout the percussive synth parts create unity in the extract. Many of these rhythms are consistently repeated or varied throughout, creating a consistent, underlying rhythmic basis, which is further augmented by the use of consistent tone colours in these percussive synth sounds, creating unity.

Question 3a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	0	3	3	5	23	40	26	4.7

Question 3a. required students to complete a table that identified aspects of metre, tempo and rhythmic feel in different sections of the excerpt from *Kogun* by Toshiko Akiyoshi.

The correct answers are as follows.

SECTION	A	B	A1	C
Metre	4/4 simple quadruple	5/4 quintuple, asymmetrical	Same features as A.	4/4 simple quadruple
Tempo	moderately slow, approx. 80bpm	moderately quick, approx. 120bpm		quick/allegro, approx. 140bpm
Straight or swung rhythmic feel?	straight	swung		swung

All of the information in the metre and rhythmic feel rows had to be entirely correct in order to be awarded full marks. In relation to tempo, any description of progressively increasing tempo across the three sections was awarded full marks.

Question 3b.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	1	5	19	29	29	18	3.4

Question 3b. required students to choose one section and describe the use of duration in detail. As was the case previously, some students misunderstood duration. In questions calling for an analysis of duration, students should focus on metre, tempo, rhythm and other concepts related to the components of duration. Many students chose to describe Section A in their responses. All three sections contained notable treatment of duration and responses based on any of the sections could garner full marks.

The following student response competently uses specialised music vocabulary to justify the character that is suggested. Clear and coherent references to character were required to achieve high marks.

In section A the treatment of duration, such as a slow tempo helps to establish a laidback and melancholic character.

- *The slow lento tempo helps to create a laidback character as it feels like the melody is sitting slightly behind the beat.*
- *The push and pull rubato used further establishes the laidback character.*
- *Contrasting long held notes in the bass contrasts to the short semiquavers used in the main flute melody. The contrast in the note durations help to establish the melancholic character.*
- *A strong beat is not established creating an inconsistent and irregular feeling metre. This helps establish the melancholic character.*

Question 3c.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	0	3	4	7	11	21	22	20	13	5.6

Students were required to discuss how contrast had been created between two of the sections identified in the table supplied. In their response, students were required to include references to duration and tone colour, texture, articulation or pitch. Due to the nature of the excerpt, students were able to achieve full marks regardless of their choices. As this question called for a discussion, a high level of detail and justification was required. In response to such questions, students should make clear contentions that address the question and then substantiate and justify their opinion. The following student response has many of these attributes.

There is huge contrast between section A and B. In section A the flute and brass instruments play irregular phrase lengths that differ in length. The notes they play are long and 'lazy' in the quality of duration. There are few phrases that use longer notes. This section is in 4/4 (metre). The flutes have a smooth, sonorous, pure tone colour and the brass have a smooth mellow tone colour. The bass and drums are more subtle in this section, playing much slower with the 4/4 metre established.

Section B has a clearly established rhythm and pulse, with the bass and drums establishing the beat and tempo. The flutes here play phrases of lots of short notes. These phrases are well established rhythmically. The flutes still have a smooth pure tone colour but it is less airy and sonorous, becoming sharper and more shrill with the short notes. The bass has a percussive, deep mellow tone colour, combined with the drums percussive, gravelly tone colour, this harsher tone colour contrasts the smoother tone colour of section A. The brass play short jabs of chords, not sustained long, contrasting the long notes they play in section A. They have a harsher, clearer tone colour, playing notes with a sharper quality, contrasting the smooth, mellow long notes of section A. This section is also greatly contrasting as it has an irregular 5/4 metre, further demonstrating the more rhythmically complex and rhythmic focus of this section.

Question 4a.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	0	0	9	17	74	3.7

The two parts of Question 4 were based on an excerpt from Howard Hanson's composition, *Symphony No. 2 Opus 30 'Romantic' Adagio: Allegro Moderato*.

Question 4a. called for an identification of two instruments / sound sources and a description of the tone colour of those instruments / sound sources as heard in the excerpt. The instruments used in the excerpt were:

- piccolo
- flutes
- oboes
- English horn
- clarinets
- bassoons
- contra bassoon
- horns
- trumpets in C
- trombones
- tuba

- timpani
- snare drum
- crash cymbals
- sus cymbal
- harp
- violins 1 and 2
- violas
- cellos
- double basses

A list of words that could be used to describe tone colour in the excerpt follows.

- reedy
- bright
- brassy
- clear
- harsh
- mellow
- rich
- bell-like
- sonorous
- resonant
- tremulous
- reverberant
- vibrant
- dulcet
- sweet
- dark
- brilliant
- pure
- colourful
- strident
- piercing
- raucous
- shrill
- rasping
- bleak
- desolate
- abrasive
- penetrating
- dull
- husky
- tinny
- twangy
- monotonous
- mellifluous
- booming
- whispery
- rounded
- throaty
- nasal
- forced
- breathy

- clean
- lyrical
- brash.

Any description of tone colour that was accurate was accepted. Students performed very well on this question: over 74 per cent of students were awarded full marks.

Question 4b.

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Average
%	1	2	2	4	4	8	10	11	15	18	14	7	5	7.7

Question 4b. proved to be challenging for students. Students were required to address four specific aspects of the excerpt within a discussion. These were:

- the element of music dynamics
- diversity
- musical interest
- reference to at least two instruments or families.

This was easily the most demanding question on the exam. There were many competent responses but few excellent responses. Less than 12 per cent of students were awarded eleven or twelve marks. Issues that assessors found in responses included:

- lack of accuracy in analysing the overall dynamic schema of the work
- inability to analyse the specific use of dynamics found in particular instrumental parts
- a description of dynamics that was too general and lacked examples
- a limited range of terminology and concepts
- an inability to differentiate tone colour from dynamics. Some responses indicated some confusion and misunderstandings in relation to this.

Fine responses were detailed and effectively reiterated how diversity and musical interest were created. Some high-scoring responses used subheadings, paragraphs, highlighting and visual representations to increase the clarity of communication.

The following student response is accurate, detailed and uses technical terms to effectively communicate the student's opinions on musical interest and diversity.

In the first section of the piece where a majority of instruments are playing a loud and grandiose dynamic is used. This contrasts to the second section of the piece which reduces significantly in loudness as the oboe plays the main melody. This contrast in dynamics helps to create diversity and overall increasing the musical interest. In the first section the loud dynamic is supported by the loud full brass section. The brass section was overall slightly louder than woodwind instruments and much louder than the harp arpeggio at the end of the first section. The difference in dynamics between instruments helps to create diversity as the melody becomes more diverse and varied, therefore also helping to create musical interest. The second section contains a slight crescendo as the brass melody has a louder forte dynamic. This crescendo creates musical interest as it adds flare and diversity to the section. A varying balance between instruments dynamics further highlights diversity. For example the start of the second section has a moderately soft piano dynamic played in the main oboe melody. Underneath this a very quiet pianissimo tremolo string melody is played. The varying dynamics adds a sense of depth and fragility to this section which compares to the grand and rich first section. This creates diversity in the excerpt and creates a sense of individuality, therefore establishing how musical interest is also created through dynamics.