Course report 2023

Advanced Higher Music

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

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Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   1,757

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   1,773

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	1,143	Percentage	64.5	Cumulative percentage	64.5	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	352	Percentage	19.9	Cumulative percentage	84.3	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	165	Percentage	9.3	Cumulative percentage	93.6	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	72	Percentage	4.1	Cumulative percentage	97.7	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	41	Percentage	2.3	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

♦ 'most' means greater than 70%
♦ 'many' means 50% to 69%
♦ 'some' means 25% to 49%
♦ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the statistics and information page of SQA's website.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

Markers reported that the question paper was a fair and balanced paper, challenging in some areas but with an appropriate level of demand. The paper provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their subject knowledge and music theory and notation skills. Most candidates attempted every question. In general, candidates were well prepared for the question paper and some responses to some literacy-based questions were better than in previous years.

Assignment

The requirement to complete the assignment was removed for session 2022–23.

Performance

Most candidates were well prepared for the performance components and, as in previous years, most candidates demonstrated a good level of skills in this area. Many visiting assessors commented on candidate confidence and the high level of performance. The willingness of centres to release visiting assessors for face-to-face visits to conduct assessments was greatly appreciated.

Portfolio

Candidates composed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Personalisation and choice continue to be very evident in this component. Candidates performed well this year.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Many candidates approached the paper appropriately and were well prepared for the requirements and format of the question paper.

Questions 1(a) and 5(a), multiple-choice questions, were answered well. In question 1(a) most candidates correctly identified 3 of the 4 concepts.

Question 3(a), which asked candidates to identify the correct style of the music, sprechgesang, was answered very well and question 3(c), contemporary jazz, was also well answered by most candidates.

Question 3(b) part 2, perfect cadence, and part 4, piano trio, were well answered by most candidates.

Some of the musical literacy questions were answered well. Question 4(d), which asked candidates to write the interval of a fourth, was very well answered by most candidates.

Question 5(b)(ii), asking candidates to re-write the same pitch in the bass clef, was also well answered by many candidates. In question 2(c)(i), most candidates gave the correct explanation of the octave higher sign, and identified the key as D major in 2(c)(ii). Most candidates chose the correct second option in 5(e).

Overall, candidates appeared to have quite a good understanding of the requirements of question 6. This was particularly evident in question 6(a)(i) and (ii), where many candidates were able to provide a good number of concepts relevant to the music under the given headings. Markers also commented that candidates did not write down concepts indiscriminately. Candidates gave a good level of detail when listing instruments in this question. For example, in question 6(a)(i) a tick was given for two instruments from: bassoon; clarinet; oboe; French horn. Candidates did quite well with 6(b)(i) and made good comparisons between the excerpts. In question 6(b)(ii), many candidates correctly identified the period of excerpt 2 and gave clear justifications. Most of these were related to the prominent use of percussion, including castanets. Rhythmic features were also mentioned.

Performance

The overall standard of performances was high. Personalisation and choice were evident in most candidates' programmes, and a wide variety of instruments were presented with a range of musical styles.

Some candidates played pieces above the minimum requirements and performed very well. Most centres used the drum kit style bank and offered an appropriate spread and number of drum kit styles.

Many vocal performances were of a high standard and some performances on orchestral instruments were of a very high standard.

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Portfolio

Some candidates displayed considerable skill and imagination in their pieces, writing coherently, stylistically and imaginatively for their chosen instrument or instruments. A wide range of marks was achieved with some very good submissions.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Candidates found some of the musical literacy questions in this year's paper quite challenging.

Question 2(b)(i) was challenging for candidates. It required a high level of accuracy and understanding. Most candidates attempted to place double bar lines with dots rather than a DS or DS al Coda. The bracket in 2(b)(ii) was answered well by many candidates.

In question 3(b) part 1, candidates often wrote acciaccatura rather than appoggiatura. Other ornaments such as mordent and turn were given as answers.

In question 3(b) part 2, plagal cadence was a common incorrect answer for the cadence.

The musical literacy question 4 provided a good level of challenge. Many candidates found the identification of the cadence in question 4(a) challenging. The enharmonic equivalent, question 4(b), was answered more accurately than in previous years and candidates took care to place the sharp sign correctly. The accidental in 4(c) was often identified as a natural but was not always accurately placed.

The melodic dictation question 5(b)(i) provided challenge, as in previous years. Most candidates found questions 5(c) and 5(d) challenging. Other answers given for 5(c) were minor, bitonal or polytonality. For 5(d) other answers were syncopation, hemiola or triplets.

In question 6(b)(i), candidates were asked for detail in the paired differences in relation to tonality, harmony, instrumentation and texture. Some candidates had included unnecessary detail regarding dynamics, which was not one of the asked for categories. The concepts in the excerpt 1 and 2 only boxes provided a good balance for the level of challenge in this part of the question. In question 6(b)(ii) many candidates had difficulty identifying both periods correctly. Some candidates did not appear to be drawing together their findings from the earlier parts of the question to come to an insightful conclusion.

Performance

Most candidate mark sheets indicated a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 15 minutes. However, during the performance assessment a few candidates either did not attempt to perform one of the pieces or only performed the opening bars of one of the pieces. As a result, these programmes did not meet the minimum time requirements of 15 minutes overall.

Where judicious cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates were playing sections of music below the minimum requirements (Grade 5 or above).

Chordal guitar and ukulele candidates did not always meet the requirements, as a few did not incorporate a minimum of 18 chords into a programme.

A few drum kit candidates' programmes did not demonstrate four-way independence in all styles.

A few keyboard players did not demonstrate full fingered chords. At Advanced Higher level, candidates must play fully fingered chords throughout their entire keyboard programme.

Portfolio

Marks are awarded for developing and refining musical ideas in music that is original to the candidate. They are also awarded for the creative and assured use of compositional methods and music concepts, including melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre. As in previous years, some candidates' work demonstrated a lack of harmonic awareness which hindered the development of their ideas. Arrangements must creatively rework the original piece and should not merely be a transcription. They must also use all five elements: melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

To help prepare future candidates for the question paper, teachers and lecturers should consider the following advice and possible strategies.

Short answers (one or two words, or a phrase) will continue to specifically examine concepts introduced at Higher or Advanced Higher level. This does not apply to the 'map' question (question 3(a) in the 2023 Advanced Higher question paper). For example, questions 1(c) and 3(c) in this year's question paper tested two Advanced Higher concepts, fugue and contemporary jazz. Questions 5(c) and 5(d) tested Higher concepts: mode/modal and 3 against 2.

Centres should encourage candidates to read the stem of the question carefully. Some candidates lost marks because they did not do this.

Centres should continue to provide frequent opportunities for candidates to listen to performances, using scores where possible, to promote literacy skills and develop aural perception and discrimination. Regularly giving candidates the opportunity to relate what they hear to what they see will directly benefit candidates' attainment in these types of questions.

In questions 6(a)(i) and (ii) there were again fewer instances of candidates giving long lists of unrelated or contradictory concepts. However, centres should continue to remind candidates that their responses should contain the **prominent** concepts under each category relating to the music heard.

In questions 6(a) and 6(b)(i), centres should encourage candidates to focus on identifying concepts or similarities and differences under the given headings. They should also advise candidates that in question 6(b)(i), the number of similarities and differences will vary depending on the musical excerpts; for example, there may be more differences than similarities, or vice versa.

In question 6(b)(i), centres should advise candidates to give comprehensive answers when detailing melody, harmony, rhythm, tempi, texture and instrumentation.

In question 6(b)(ii) some candidates correctly identified the periods of both excerpts. Many identified the period of excerpt 2, 20th century/modern, correctly. Some candidates found it difficult to justify their answers and, in some instances, provided a response which did not specifically identify the features unique to the period they were referring to. The use of ornamentation was a popular justification for excerpt 1 and candidates focused on prominent percussion instruments and rhythmic features for excerpt 2. Centres should work with candidates to ensure they use the responses they gave in earlier parts of the question to point the way to a period of music, and provide relevant justifications. Centres should encourage candidates to listen to as wide a range of music as possible, and consider more closely what characterises a particular period of music. The type of work was not asked for in question 6(b) this year. Some candidates did mention that they felt that excerpt 2 was Neo-classical. Candidates needed to mention the period in order to receive a tick.

Candidates should be reminded that they should carefully read the stem of the question, including the categories asked for, as these may change from year to year. Some candidates gave unnecessary detail on dynamics.

Candidates may find it helpful to look at the detailed additional guidance for questions 6(b)(ii) in the Advanced Higher question paper marking instructions (available on SQA's Advanced Higher Music web page). Centres should access the marking instructions for past question papers and the specimen question paper. These provide considerable detail regarding acceptable answers for all questions.

If centres are submitting exceptional circumstance evidence for the question paper, the assessment papers used for prelim-type events should replicate the course assessment in terms of question type and mark allocation. It was evident this year that centres had taken on board the guidance on question paper content when making up their prelim papers.

Centres should also submit a full copy of the marking instructions, even if questions are drawn from SQA specimen or past question papers. Centres should note the importance of identifying prominent concepts in question 6 and that a balance of paired and excerpt 1 and 2 only concepts are required.

When preparing prelim and listening assessments, centres must consider the following:

♦ A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety must not be the only evidence submitted for exceptional circumstances consideration. These papers are accessible on SQA's website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the structure and content prior to assessment.
♦ Class tests or other forms of evidence must demonstrate that candidates have knowledge and understanding of concepts appropriate to the course assessment.
♦ Some questions from older past papers may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance, and may need to be amended.
♦ The marking instructions used for centre-devised assessments should reflect the marking instructions used in the final exam. Half marks are not used. Examples of marking instructions for past papers are available on SQA's website.

Assignment

A series of audio presentations is available on the Understanding Standards website to support candidates, teachers and lecturers with the re-introduction of the (composing) assignment in session 2023–24. The presentations summarise the requirements, signpost the range of Understanding Standards materials available from National 5 to Advanced Higher level, and give advice on the requirements and possible approaches to the assignment.

The assignment catalogue is available on SQA's secure website. This catalogue details all available Understanding Standards candidate evidence and commentaries. It can be used to find, for example, compositions or arrangements in a particular mark range, performance plans and those with specific instrumentation. It also gives examples of analysis.

For further details on the assignment, please refer to the information provided for the assignment in the 2018 National 5 Music Course Report and the 2019 National 5 and Higher

Music course reports. These reports are available from available from the [Music subject pages on SQA's website](#). The advice given here will apply for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assignments.

Performance

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the performance components. Centres should ensure that the music to be played is at the appropriate level (Grade 5 or above).

A few candidates' performances were under or over the required time allocation. For session 2023–24, an Advanced Higher programme should last a minimum of 18 minutes between the two instruments. The maximum time is 20 minutes. The performance time on either of the two selected instruments, or instrument and voice, must be a minimum of 6 minutes within the overall 18-minute programme. Centres must ensure that candidates adhere to the minimum and maximum time limits. Centres should also ensure that the music to be played is at the appropriate level (Grade 5 or above).

Carefully timed cuts may be appropriate to keep within the time limit, as long as they do not lower the technical demands. Centres should also consider the length of individual pieces after any cuts have been made. If significant cuts are made to a piece of music, it can become challenging for a candidate to access the full range of marks.

For guitar or ukulele programmes, centres should specify if the candidate is performing a 'chordal', 'melodic' or 'mixed' programme. Chords can be included in a melodic guitar or ukulele programme but are not counted if it is not a chordal programme.

Chordal guitar and ukulele programmes must:

- include 18 chords
- be in standard notation — this could simply be a copy of the melodic line that the guitar or ukulele is accompanying, with the chord names printed above or below the stave; tablature (TAB) alone is not sufficient for assessment purposes, and neither is a lyric sheet with only chord names and no music notation
- have a melody for candidates to play along with (played, sung or from a backing track) — this is essential to provide a context for the performance of the chords
- include melody and chords in at least one piece

Drum kit programmes should specify each style performed and style bank number. For session 2023–24, a programme must include six different styles, with four different fills within each style. Teachers and lecturers should refer to SQA's style bank for a list of acceptable styles. Drum kit programmes must exhibit four-way independence in every piece. For notated music, the minimum requirement is four bars of the groove and four fills with a performance plan or map.

Keyboard programmes must:

- include both the right and left hand in the performance

- perform full fingered chords; candidates playing single fingered chords are awarded 0 marks for that piece

To help visiting assessment run smoothly:

- Candidate mark sheets issued by SQA must be completed in pen (not pencil) by centre staff and be available to the visiting assessor at the start of each assessment session (morning or afternoon). The candidate mark sheet is the formal record of the assessment event, and it is very important that it is completed accurately.
- Centre staff should give the visiting assessors a running order with approximate timings at the start of each session.
- To avoid unexpected candidate absence disrupting the planned running order, centre staff should have the next two candidates ready to perform. This ensures the maximum use of the visiting assessor's time.
- Timetabling should take account of the candidates' chosen performance time on each instrument. It is helpful if centres consider the time allocated for each candidate performance, to make the best use of the visiting assessor's time in each centre.
- Details of the instruments, or instrument and voice used, the pieces to be performed, and all timings of pieces should be clearly indicated on the candidate mark sheet. The total length of time for each instrument or voice should also be indicated.
- Each drum kit style should be clearly named on the candidate mark sheet, irrespective of the title of the piece, for example 'Download' — rock, bank 1.

If a candidate is absent for the performance exam for health reasons or other unexpected circumstances, SQA will try to arrange an alternative date for them to sit the exam. If this is not possible, centres must submit evidence of the candidate's attainment in performance. Centre staff should submit an audio or video recording of as much of the candidate's programme as possible, along with copies of the music and the marks awarded for all the pieces performed. Many centres routinely make audio or video recordings of prelim exams for this eventuality. If centres do not have an audio or video recording of the candidate's performance programme, they should submit alternative evidence to show that the candidate has demonstrated attainment at Advanced Higher level. Other supplementary evidence may include a certificate from a graded examination at an appropriate level.

Portfolio

Centres should consider how best they can support candidates with their harmonic understanding, particularly if candidates are going to write tonal music. An increased awareness of the harmonic language used would benefit candidates, both in this part of the course and in the question paper. Focusing on the development of musical ideas, either melodically, rhythmically or harmonically, will aid understanding.

In their reviews, candidates should concentrate on the main decisions they made regarding their use of all the musical elements in their compositions or arrangements, and explaining how they explored and developed these musical elements. They should use the analytical skills developed in other parts of the course and apply these skills of critical reflection when considering the strengths and/or areas for improvement in their composition or arrangement. Understanding Standards materials are available on SQA's secure site. They include candidate evidence of Advanced Higher compositions and arrangements, together with commentaries on how they have been marked.

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Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

♦ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)

♦ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.

♦ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report.