

Music A level Assessment of Composing – Research into teacher attitudes

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Executive Summary

This paper reports on and discusses the results of a nationwide survey of secondary school music teachers' experiences in the assessment of composing in UK A-level music examinations. Data were collected through an online survey in May 2015 and 9 follow-up telephone interviews. The nationwide survey garnered 71 responses from teachers with experience of A-level music exams across a variety of state and independent school contexts.

This paper reports that the majority of music teachers have experienced inconsistent external examination marking, and, as a consequence, do not feel confident to accurately predict student grades. It also found that teachers feel external examination assessment requirements are not clear, and that many schools send compositions back for remarking after results are in. Follow-up interviews affirm that inconsistent marking has a direct impact on how composing is taught at A-level. Secondary school music teachers face increasing pressure to fulfil requirements set by examination criteria, but also wish to give their students a fulfilling creative musical experience. Past examiners of A-level composition who responded to the survey reported a lack of confidence in the system and their training. The results bring into question the subjectivity of assessment in this aspect of the music examination and the place of composing and creativity in A-level assessment.

These results come at a time when governmental focus on 'rigorous and demanding' examinations in the arts, and the introduction of the EBacc, are putting an increased strain on classroom music teachers.

Survey and Discussion

The survey began by asking the question "Have you ever been surprised by an examination grade for any of your pupils for composition at AS or A Level?". The results are quite overwhelming:

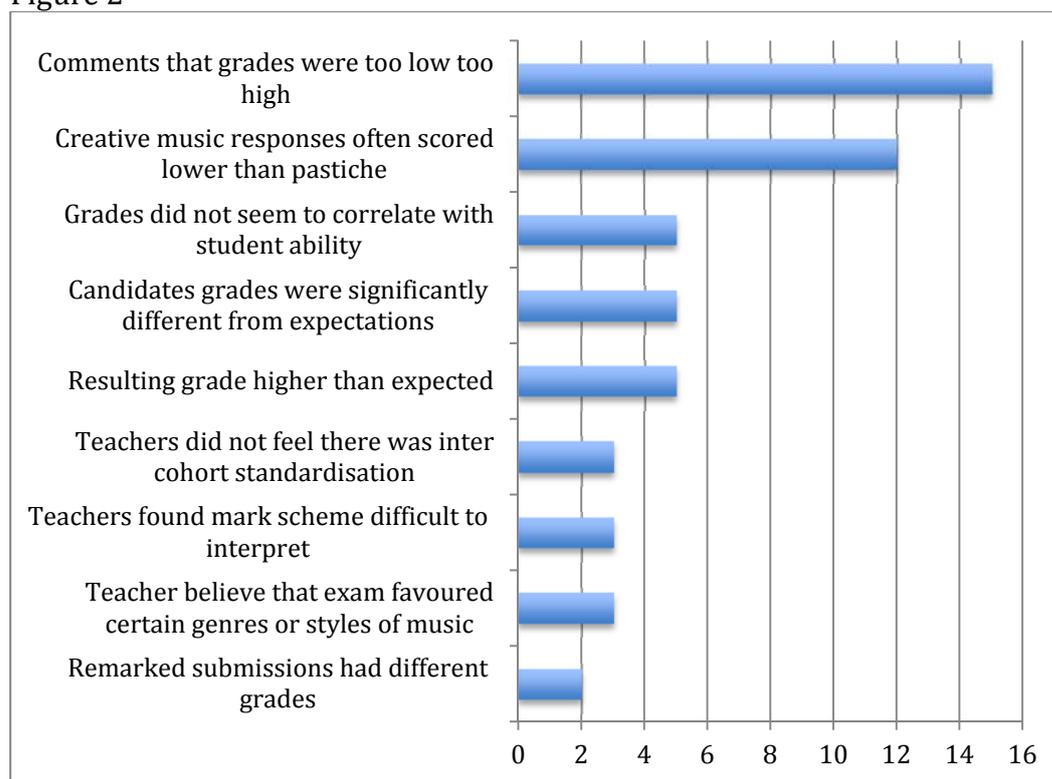
Figure 1:



Over 90% of responding teachers say that this has been the case. In assessment terms this does beg questions as to issues of validity, and, importantly, reliability of this assessment.

Teachers were given a free-text opportunity to expand on any surprises that they had with A-level composing grades. The 'top 10' results of this are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2



A number of the comments made by teachers here are most revealing. Here is a representative selection:

“Individual voice amongst the best students seems to go unrecognised. Examiners are confident dealing with a mixture of the banal and pastiche.”

“I have had a surprise on several occasions. The most memorable are a very weak student who composed a very formulaic piece getting an A with an estimate of a hopeful D. The same year an outstanding and innovative composition from a student who had won national youth composition awards got a D.”

“Every year there is a lack of consistency. We never know where we stand”

“3 compositions were submitted for AS from 3 students. 2 I expected to gain near full marks and one around a C. One gained a C, one an E and one a U. As a trained composer I feel I really understand this area of the course well and could not comprehend the grading.”

“Mark was significantly lower than I had expected. The student, I felt, had real flair and talent in composition, and this was not recognised. I had the work remarked, and the mark went up significantly.”

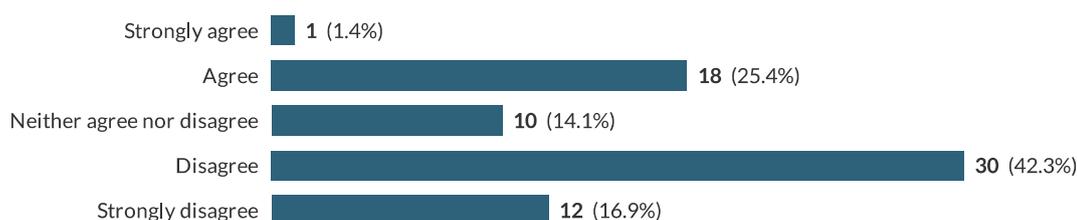
“Originality and competence seemed to gain few marks - it seems that pastiche composing against a set of tick boxes is required.”

Teacher confidence in predicting examination grades

Teachers were asked next to respond to this “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about assessment at AS and/or A Level composing”. These are the results:

I am confident at being able to accurately predict the grades my pupils will get:

Figure 3:

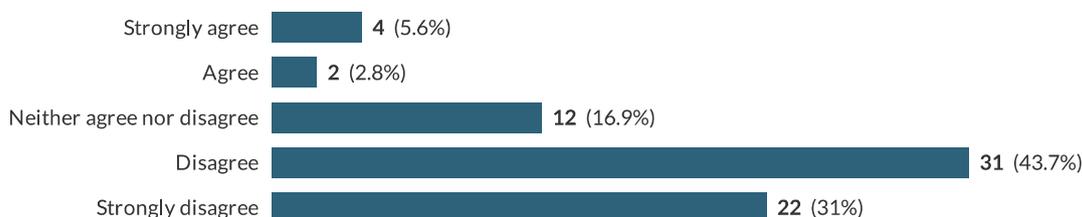


What this shows is that is that 59.2% of teachers either disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. This is a worryingly large number, as predicting A-level grade success is an important part of helping young people with the examination preparation. This point was made by a teacher in a free text comment:

It is the least "predictable" area of the A-level courses. Whilst the "middle"-level submissions get grades consistent with predictions, the "extremes" often throw up some extraordinary results - none of which give clues about what criteria (if, indeed, there are any) the assessors are using. It frequently seems arbitrary and based on the passing whimsy of the moment.

The next statement for teachers to respond to was “Results from examination boards are consistent”. Here are their replies:

Figure 4



Once again a large number of teachers disagree with this, with 74.7% reporting that this was the case for them. This is another disturbing statistic. The costs of examination entry are high, and teachers not having confidence in the

consistency – or lack thereof – in examination music is worrying. Once again this statement is amplified by what teachers had to say in their free text responses:

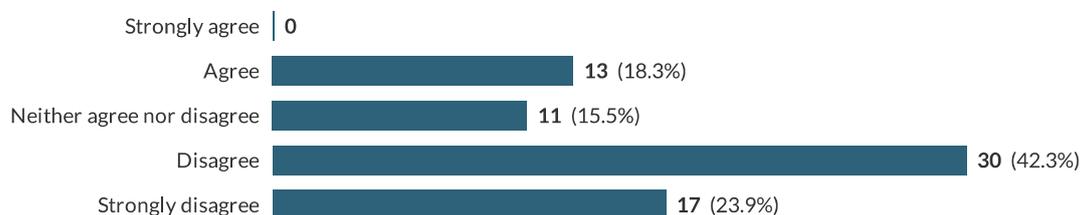
I have done training every year to try to better my skill at knowing what is being asked for, but 10 years in and I still get it wrong. I feel sorry for the students and give them cautious expected outcomes, but don't want to get their hopes up too much. It's my most contentious issue in music exam teaching. I do understand how it is hard to be subjective in marking creative work, but the criteria are woolly.

So very variable. Student who should have got a an A for composing and is now studying music at Oxford where he got a first last year for his composition work got a D where a much weaker student got a B. Seems to be no consistency on how the mark scheme is applied by examiners.

What the exam board say at composition meetings and courses does not tally with the real grades that compositions are marked at. It is very difficult to guarantee that a student will be marked consistently and fairly.

The next statement that the participating teachers were invited to respond to was this: “The assessment requirements are clear and it is easy to understand what is required of the student”. Here are their replies:

Figure 5:



Once again a worryingly high level of responses do not agree with this statement, with 66.2% of teachers saying that this was the case for them. Interestingly there were no teachers who ‘strongly agreed’ with this statement!

Once again the teachers were unequivocal in their free text responses:

I would like more specific assessment criteria that aren't ‘wishy-washy’.

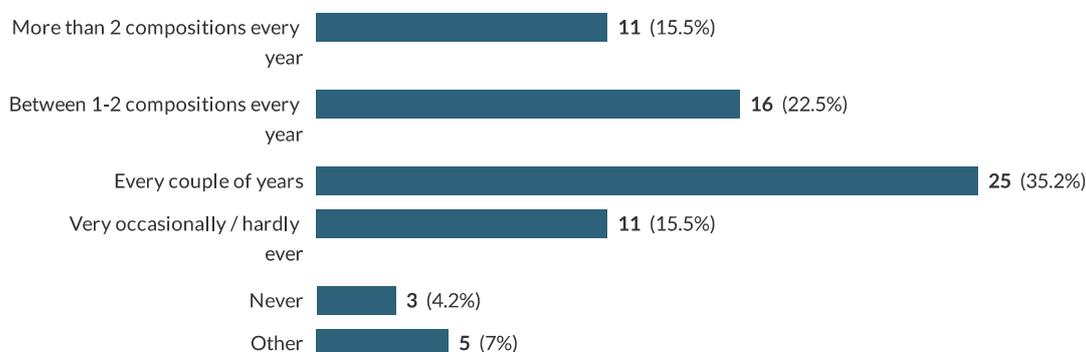
The assessment criteria and the marking criteria are way too vague to be a constructive tool in the composition process, for both the teacher and the student. The criteria are way too ambiguous and need to be considerably more detailed and/or structured - more quantitative guidelines/targets, as at the moment it is virtually all qualitative.

Remarking of A level work

We have already commented on the cost of A-level examination entries. For those teachers and schools not happy with the results their students get, having

work remarked is an option, but one that comes at a cost. In this survey the teachers were asked the question “How often do you query an examination mark and/or ask for re-marking of AS and/or A Level compositions”. Here are the results:

Figure 6:



The ‘other’ responses include new teachers, those whose work was ineligible for remarking, and those where there were financial constraints that prevented it.

What these results show is a consistent pattern of regarding composing work, with 73.2% of teachers saying that in the past few years they have asked for at least one piece of composing work to be remarked. This is another significant figure, and one which raises many concerns again with regard to the validity of examination composing assessment.

This comment in the free text responses from a former examiner is particularly worrying in this respect:

Music coursework is not remarked blind, therefore requesting remarks is not always productive as there is a tendency for them to cover one another’s backs. I know this first hand as I used to be an examiner, but lacked faith in the system/education of composition they are promoting.

This is not an isolated instance, here are another former examiner’s comments:

I have been an examiner for A2 composition in the past and have seen first hand how pieces can get wildly different marks from different people. Marks do not seem to be consistent. I’ve had fantastic students getting high fares in every other unit and then getting U’s for composing. Mark schemes for the board I teach are very vague, and although there are different options, the mark scheme is the same for each one. Not enough examples given out to teachers with reasons why they attract certain marks.

And yet another former examiner said this:

I have examined AS and A2 composition and am aware of the heated arguments and complete disparity between examiners at standardisation

meetings. I have attended INSET this year and was absolutely spot on with the course leader with my assessments (other teachers were not). However I have no faith in my judgements being accurately reflected on results day.

Commentary

What this very brief overview of teacher attitudes towards A-level composing assessment shows is that there is a great deal of disquiet in the system. Teachers reported that they have little confidence in the system, that they feel that grading is not consistent or reliable, and that A-level composing results can be something of a lottery.

Our recommendations are that teachers seem to need help and reassurance in a number of specific areas. These are:

- Having greater access to exemplar materials, with full annotations as to what, how, and why grades are awarded
- Teachers feel that they would benefit from specific and constructive feedback on student work which has been submitted for re-marking
- Teachers request specific and better-focussed training on both the teaching and assessment of composing at A-level.
- Teachers report that they feel they *can* mark accurately at GCSE level, and that GCSE seems much more consistent as a consequence. They wonder if there are ways in which best practice from GCSE could be applied at A-level
- Although assessment criteria exist, some teachers do not feel these are interpreted uniformly, and that there are both inter-cohort and intra-cohort inconsistencies.
- Some teachers feel that there is the possibility of a lack of understanding of some styles and genres of music by the examination board, and that this could unduly penalise some of their candidates.

We are concerned that the vagaries of examination composing we have described here are such that for some teachers, given the choice, they would not enter candidates for this component, thus removing composing as a taught and learned activity in schools at this level. Given the amount of money that the creative industries earn for the UK, closing off the opportunities for creative composing at this stage in the education of a young person seems to be a shame.

What we have documented here is clearly a small but representative sample of A-level music teachers. We know that at present only 1% of A-level entries are for music, and we would be saddened if this number were to fall much further. This would also place A-level music at risk in schools and colleges where group sizes became too small. Whilst there are significant concerns in this report, we hope that all stakeholders will find these results and our commentary to be of use.