

2016 VCE Music Performance performance examination report

General comments

In 2016, high-scoring students showed:

- a deep stylistic knowledge of the selected pieces
- excellent musicianship
- an engaging and personal performance
- a program of works that demonstrated a successful choice of a wide range of techniques and characters
- excellent ensemble skills with their accompanists
- an ability to adapt their technique and tone, as well as phrasing and other musical elements, to suit each different style in the program.

In 2016, low-scoring students showed some or all of the following:

- limited or little stylistic understanding of their pieces
- recurrent problems with accuracy of notation (including pitch) and/or timing issues, as well as a generally limited standard of musicianship
- a poor sense of performance conventions
- difficulty in bringing something personal to the performance
- a program that sometimes lacked variety, and/or a range of works that were all performed in a similar manner; this included a lack of variety in colour, technique, phrasing and other musical elements to differentiate each style
- poor ensemble skills.

Specific information – Solo performance examination

Assessment criteria

Criterion 1 – Compliance with the requirements of the task

In 2016, the majority of students received full marks in criterion 1. This meant that they performed the required number of works from the Prescribed List of Notated Works and from the required categories. They completed the performance of each work and fulfilled the requirements of unaccompanied performances and performances from memory where required (these students had obviously referred to the Prescribed List of Notated Works to ensure that all requirements of the task were met).

Criterion 2 – Skill in performing accurately and with clarity

In general, students performed strongly in this criterion. Students who scored the highest marks seemed to have prepared thoroughly throughout the year as the discipline in their preparation was evident in their performances. Even if their performances were not flawless, their accuracy and

clarity were high. Students who performed accurately but under tempo or whose playing lacked clarity or accuracy did not score highly.

Criterion 3 – Skill in performing a range of techniques with control and fluency

Students who performed a range of techniques with control and fluency were able to score the highest marks for this criterion. Students who lacked that range were disadvantaged in this criterion. Skill in performing with control and fluency is typified by evenness of passage work, clarity of articulation, and fluent performances uninterrupted by stops and starts.

Criterion 4 – Skill in producing a range of expressive tonal qualities

In a way it is somewhat easier to learn the notes accurately than to perform with a range of tonal qualities, which demonstrates that this is definitely a higher order requirement of the examination. The quality of a performer's tone is particularly challenged at the extremes of the dynamic range. It requires much refinement of technique and a depth of musical understanding to perform with a rich tone at a very soft dynamic, maintaining a presence and richness of tone. Similarly, it is common for the tone to become harsh at a loud dynamic.

Criterion 5 – Skill in expressive communication through articulation and phrasing

Articulation and phrasing are higher order skills. The use of a variety of articulations and an ability to phrase well enabled a number of students to gain access to the highest marks. Students who were able to perform a wide variety of articulations and who could shape phrases well were able to achieve the highest marks in this criterion. Students who disregarded phrasing and were limited in their use of appropriate articulations were unable to achieve high marks.

Criterion 6 – Skill in differentiating the musical lines

In relation to this criterion, three scenarios were considered:

- accompanied works (live) – synchronisation with the accompanist, as well as appropriate balance between the soloist and accompanist – the level of rehearsal with the accompanist was clearly evident. The highest-scoring students demonstrated a strong rapport with their accompanists, and demonstrated their own ability to lead the performance. They demonstrated a high level of synchronisation, appropriate balance and a clear understanding of the musical lines. Students who did not score highly were often poorly synchronised with their accompanist, as well as often being poorly balanced and lacking an understanding of the relationship of the roles of the musical lines
- accompanied works (pre-recorded) – balance and synchronisation with the backing track. The highest-scoring students had clearly rehearsed with the backing tracks in a variety of performing environments. They were able to adjust to the acoustics of the examination room through the use of appropriate levels and equalisation, and were therefore able to interact with the backing in a highly effective manner
- unaccompanied works – internal synchronisation and rhythmic stability, and the creation of a variety of implied lines where appropriate. The highest-scoring students were able to realise the implications of implied lines where appropriate in their performance of the unaccompanied works. They were able to maintain a strong sense of pulse and inner synchronisation. Some lower-scoring students performed the unaccompanied work adequately; however, they lacked an understanding of the implied lines where appropriate and often they lost a sense of pulse and/or inner synchronisation.

Criterion 7 – Skill in differentiating the structures and characteristics of each work

Students generally achieved well in this criterion. Higher-scoring students excelled in creating interesting performances through highlighting the structures and characteristics of the works.

Students whose performances lacked a sense of overall structure tended to score poorly in this criterion, as many of the works sounded similar, and the performances lacked an understanding of overall musical direction.

Criterion 8 – Skill in presenting an informed interpretation of a range of styles

Some students achieved the highest marks by choosing programs of works in very different styles. They were able to demonstrate their understanding of making each work sound different. Students limited their ability to achieve high marks.

Criterion 9 – Skill in performing with musicality through creativity and individuality

In general, results were higher in this criterion than in others, demonstrating that students are playing with passion and feeling. This allows – and in fact requires – students' own personalities to be evident in the performance, within the stylistic conventions of the works performed.

Criterion 10 – Skill in presenting a musical program within appropriate performance conventions

Students' results showed that they are preparing and rehearsing their performance techniques. Many had clearly rehearsed the performance of their entire programs thoroughly. They were able to adjust to the performance conditions – such as the acoustics, the aesthetics and, in many cases, equipment such as pianos – and were able to perform with poise, authority and a good sense of flow.

Advice to students

- Accompanists need to be chosen wisely. Rehearse often, and consider balance (criterion 6).
- Playback equipment for backing tracks needs to be appropriate, with levels set wisely. Do a quick sound check in the room before the performance starts (criterion 6).
- Make sure the program complies with the conditions published for your instrument (criterion 1).
- Choose the correct arrangements/pieces. For contemporary instruments particularly, the edition is vital – a different one from that cited in the Prescribed List of Notated Works is probably a different arrangement and may be considered a non-compliant work.
- Make sure the examination program is presented as a performance, and practise performing the program as a whole (criterion 10).
- Utilise the opportunities to demonstrate a diversity of styles, techniques, tonal qualities and structures within the 25 minutes allowed (criteria 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8).
- Try to craft your program so that every chosen work sounds different and enables you to focus on showing different skills (criteria 3, 4, 7 and 8).
- Fill out your program sheet clearly and use the titles and movements as published in the Prescribed List of Notated Works. Cite the composer, the correct title (including identifying number) and the correct category.
- Choose pieces within a range of technical difficulty that you can manage.
- Ensure that you have the stamina to perform all of your program at the same high standard, especially if it is close to 25 minutes in length.
- Take opportunities to include embellishment or improvisation (as appropriate to the style) if repeats are performed (criterion 8).
- The maximum time allowed is 25 minutes. There is no official minimum, although a 10- or 15-minute program is less likely to explore as wide a range of styles and techniques as a 20-minute performance.
- Be prepared for contingencies. Bring extra leads, cables, extension cords, strings, reeds and sticks, as you would for any particularly important performance (criterion 10).

- Contemporary instrument students are encouraged to perform at least one work with a live accompaniment (for example, a second guitar or a bass) (criterion 6).
- Except for drum kits, equipment brought into the examination room must be able to be taken in and removed quickly. Aim for quality and portability when selecting equipment for use in the examination.
- If you decide to verbally introduce the pieces in the performance exam, keep it brief and make sure it enhances the performance. Announcing the pieces is not required, but it is allowed.
- Amplifiers and drum kits must be used within occupational health and safety (OH&S) standards. Sound must not exceed safe listening levels.
- Limit the use of drink bottles to small occasional sips; if needed, hydrate well before the performance. Overuse and misuse of the drink bottle can detract from criterion 10.

Instrument-specific comments

Contemporary guitar

- If using an acoustic guitar, it is best to rely on performance technique rather than amplification to project the tone.
- Make sure the notated solos are played.
- Work particularly on developing finger-style techniques throughout the year.
- In the set-up time, make sure that you listen to the sound/balance from where the assessors are sitting.
- Place the backing track speaker so that it can be clearly heard by the performer and the assessors.

Drum kit

- Explore as wide a variety of styles as possible.
- The brushes piece and snare rudiments tend to be the weakest areas in drum kit.
- The use of fully enclosed headphones makes it difficult to balance the kit with the backing. It is best to cover only one ear if using headphones.

Voice – contemporary popular

- In Music Performance, Solo, a microphone may **not** be used (although a microphone may be used in Music Investigation, Solo and for Group performances).
- If using belting techniques, make sure the correct techniques are used, so as to not damage the vocal chords.
- Take the 'vocalise' category seriously – sing it as an expressive song. Many singers were not able to achieve at the highest levels for criteria 4 and 5 because they had not prepared the 'vocalise' category adequately.
- Be aware of the category that each song comes from, and sing it in the appropriate style.
- Consider how to stage the performance – stand where you can face and address the audience, but where you can also have some eye contact with the accompanist.
- In considering the use of an accompanist, it is often a good idea to think beyond just using a pianist. Perhaps consider a guitar or other instrument for some songs.
- If the accompanist is playing too loudly, you can discreetly indicate that to them between songs, or move closer to the audience.
- Make sure you tell the accompanist that they should **not** play the melody line, as you are singing it.

Contemporary piano

- Many students demonstrated little knowledge of how to use the sustain pedal. Students are advised to develop their knowledge of how to use the sustain pedal effectively.

- Some programs were performed with a lack of discipline, suggesting a higher degree of preparation is needed.

Pianoforte

- Students are advised to not take on programs that are too difficult for them to master.
- Sometimes the sustain pedal was poorly understood.

Wind and brass

- Make sure that articulation and phrasing are given due attention.
- Consider the stamina required, if performing a long program. Some students tired before the end of the performance.

Strings

- Avoid the temptation to take on works that are too difficult for you.
- Often intonation was the area of greatest weakness in performances.
- Consider performing some of the more avant-garde works, as well as some of the Australian works, found on the list.

Group performance examination

General comments

In 2016, students were assessed against 10 criteria. Each student was assessed by two assessors and a maximum of 10 marks was available for each criterion. Many of the criteria were identical to those used in the Solo Performance examination. Thus, students were assessed in both solo and group using either identical criteria or criteria of equal importance. Each student was assessed on their performance according to the criteria, not globally. The criteria were applied equally to all students across all instruments.

Students who presented for their program as a member of a group performed with a diverse range of instruments, including voice, in the context of many different types of groups and ensembles. Students' ability to address the criteria varied and was influenced by their performance skills, understanding of the music styles being performed and experience in performing in a group context.

Students who attained high marks confidently exhibited a high level of musical, technical and interpretative skills, and displayed excellent interaction with the other members of the group.

Students should be conscious of maximising their marks in the criteria related to group interaction (criterion 8) and the balance of the musical instruments (criterion 6). These criteria require conscious listening to and acknowledgement of other group members. They also required students to adjust their individual contribution to enhance the overall group sound.

The strong presence of poise and focus (criterion 10) was evident in many high-scoring performances. This involved the sharing of introductions, awareness of arrangement, stage etiquette and/or movement as appropriate to the group context. Other elements could have included adapting positively to unforeseen situations; for example, if another band member forgets their part or breaks a string.

Decisions about the group composition and performance program need to be advantageous to the group as a whole. On some occasions in 2016, there were ensembles with two or more singers splitting each song's lead vocal solo, line by line, phrase by phrase, even bar by bar, without any

reference to the use of vocal harmonies. This approach is not helpful to the assessed students and is likely to compromise their marks for a number of criteria, including stylistic considerations.

It is essential for students to be given informed guidance about the best approaches to group composition for the examination. It may, for example, be preferable to have two vocalists perform in separate examinations even though the rest of the assessed band will play for both singers. In this case, the instrumentalists will be assessed in the first examination, leaving them free to accompany the second vocalist in the second examination. Some of the songs from the first program can be repeated, along with additional songs suited to the second singer. As a result, the two vocalists can present programs that are more suited to each individual. Conversely, these two singers could work within the same ensemble, exploiting the criteria with a demonstration of sharing skills that include a combination of lead vocals and harmony singing.

It is important that groups choose keys for songs that are suited to the vocalists and that are also within the technical abilities of the instrumentalists. The focus should be on selecting songs that support each student to maximise their score. Students should consider transposing the songs themselves to find more appropriate keys. Students should be careful when sourcing tablature transcriptions from the internet; it is worth checking the original recordings for accuracy.

Students are advised to use a range of resources such as YouTube and alternative (live) versions of works as references when they are planning arrangements and interpretations. Ideas from their listening can be used to exploit their available instrumentation. Assessors observed successful acoustic and a cappella versions of both prescribed and non-prescribed works, as well as augmentations such as extra solos, harmonies and breakdown sections.

Students consistently met the requirement to perform two musical items from the Prescribed List of Group Works. Some students performed additional works from the list, which was permissible. It can be difficult for groups with two or more assessed performers to address the criteria at the highest level if they select only two works from the list. In this case, students should consider performing more than two prescribed works to allow all of the assessed performers to meet the criteria.

Teachers and students should also ensure that they put together the strongest possible program for the assessed students when they are performing an entire program of items from the list. When determining the musical program for the examination, students should be careful about selecting a majority of original compositions; they need to consider their selections in relation to the criteria, especially regarding a range of musical styles.

Specific information

Prescribed List of Group Works

Students must include at least two works from the Prescribed List of Group Works in their end-of-year performance examination program. This list is available on the VCAA website and updated annually.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are applied to the whole program, not to individual works. There are 10 criteria covering all instruments and the performance of all works in the program.

In 2016, almost all students fulfilled all the requirements of criterion 1, concerning 'compliance with the requirements of the task'.

The examination specifications and criteria for this examination also included annotations to help unpack each criterion into components that are more relevant to particular instruments. Comments

made in relation to solo performances should also be considered by students who select to perform as members of a group.

Selection of instrument

The term 'instrument', as used in the study design, includes voice. Students may choose to perform on more than one instrument in their performance examination; however, they should consider the likelihood of scoring well in the assessment criteria when making this decision. For example, students may not maximise their marks if they try to assist the balance of their group by playing an instrument that they are not particularly competent with for a considerable part of the program. The student should be careful not to compromise the amount of time spent performing to their strengths.

An opposite example might be where the student is a strong performer on more than one instrument. In this situation, there are certain criteria in which the student may benefit from performing on more than one instrument, such as 'skill in performing a range of techniques with control and fluency' (criterion 3) and 'skill in performing as a member of the group' (criterion 8).

The examination

Assessed students perform as members of a group or ensemble, and are assessed in this context. The level of ability of other members of the group does not directly affect the assessed student's results. Assessors concentrate on the performance of the student being assessed and on how well they meet the criteria for assessment.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the assessed student's ability to maximise their results depends upon the context within which each individual performs. For example, a drummer who keeps irregular time or rhythm will affect the assessed student's ability to maintain an even tempo and accurately interpret rhythm patterns, and will therefore indirectly influence the assessed student's ability to obtain their highest score.

Composition of the group

A group is defined as two or more students enrolled in a secondary school. Where a group comprises two performers only, that group may not have a non-student performer as a member. The musical parts should be arranged so that each performer is equally able to take a leading role during the performance.

However, the assessed performer(s) can vary the composition of the group during their performance as they wish, which may enhance the ability of the assessed performer(s) to demonstrate a variety of styles and techniques. Students must decide how best to organise their group contexts in a program to help them give their best performance.

Students should also be aware that non-students may only assist as part of the group within certain guidelines, as outlined in the examination specifications. Teachers and other non-assessed performers are advised that their role, if they are participating, should not distract from, or limit the ability of, the assessed performer(s) to present a program that will maximise their marks. Assessed performers should perform in a way that allows them to maximise their results in all criteria. Hence, non-assessed performers should not count in, conduct, tune, adjust instruments and equipment, lead or otherwise play a dominant or distracting role during the performance examination. This will only reduce the number of opportunities for the assessed performers to address all of the criteria.

Program selection

The program should contain at least four contrasting works, including at least two works from the Prescribed List of Group Works. Works should be selected from the published list for that

examination year, as the list is revised annually. If selecting works from Section B, it is important that students ensure they perform the actual section, movements, etc. that are listed.

The program selected by the student(s) is the foundation for achieving their best result. It is strongly recommended that students carefully consider the selection of works for their program, on the basis that each work contributes to a program that meets the assessment criteria.

As well as the prescribed works, all other selections may be considered against the following checklist.

- To what extent does the program of works address the prescribed criteria?
- Is each assessed performer sufficiently served by the program selections to best exploit the criteria and demonstrate the broadest possible range of skills and techniques?
- Does the program allow each assessed performer an opportunity to have a moment(s) 'in the spotlight' – for example, in solos or featured sections?
- Does the program conform to the time allowance for the number of students nominated for the particular group?
- Does the entire program support/reflect a consistent standard of performance?
- Is there consideration of the flow of works (the order) in relation to group logistics – for example, re-tuning or changing instruments, and movement of non-assessed performers in and out of the assessment room?

When performing a work from Section A, or similar music styles, performers do not necessarily need to present accurate note-for-note transcriptions, but it is essential that the original integrity of the music be retained. Chord progressions and the main melody should be faithful to the original. Variations may occur for a number of reasons, particularly if groups have instrumentation different to the original work.

Students should avoid only performing works from styles that they are most familiar with, as this may limit their ability to perform in a variety of styles. The assessed performer's primary focus should be on performing a program that is diverse in style and mood; however, it is acceptable to present a program that has a range of styles within a particular type of group, as contrasting styles can exist within particular genres, such as rock or jazz. Groups can perform music that has contrasts in styles within a broader genre or style; for example, a jazz group could perform swing, bebop, west coast and/or fusion. Students should not necessarily perform styles that are not associated with the type of group that they represent.

As well as scoring highly in the criterion that assesses their ability to perform a variety of styles (criterion 7), assessed performers who present a diverse program can also score higher marks in other criteria. For example, by performing a diverse program stylistically, the assessed performer(s) could also score more highly in the 'skill in using a range of performing techniques' criterion.

Students should demonstrate their ability to use a range of performance techniques. Each instrument is capable of producing different timbres, dynamics and effects, and has an inherent potential to allow the performer to apply a range of performance techniques. Students should be able to demonstrate their awareness of this in their performance. A guitarist, for example, could use a plectrum, finger style, sliding, string bends, double stopping, tapping and/or alternative tunings. Keyboard players in a contemporary band should demonstrate a range of sounds, such as strings, clavinet, organ, synth pads, etc. and some provision could be made for featured keyboard solo sections within arrangements.

Higher-scoring students explored arrangements through the use of improvisation, embellishment and ornamentation.

Time limits

The time allowed for the examination varies according to the number of assessed performers in a group (this can be found on page 46 of the *VCE Music Study Design*):

- one assessed performer – 25 minutes
- two or three assessed performers – 30 minutes
- four assessed performers – 35 minutes
- five or six assessed performers – 40 minutes.

Assessed performers are advised to make full use of the time available. Specifically, students should make sure changeovers between performance works in the program are well rehearsed to ensure that they make the most of their performance time. It is recommended that the prescribed works be performed early in the program to ensure that criterion 1 is met within the time limit.

Setting up at the examination venue

Students are advised to check their equipment carefully before leaving for the examination. They must remember to pack all the required equipment, including replacement strings if appropriate. They should also bring extra power boards and extension leads so that their planned set-up is not compromised by the placement of power points at the venue.

Students are advised to arrive at the examination centre at least 30 minutes before their start time. Students will have access to the examination room at least 30 minutes prior to the start of the examination and should use this time to set up and adjust equipment, tune their instruments and warm up. Non-assessed performers may assist in adjusting the equipment before the examination; however, once the examination has started, only the assessed performers may adjust their instruments and equipment.

When setting up, students may need to restrict their volume if another examination is underway in a nearby room. All examination performances must be presented at safe volume levels.

In 2016 it was noted that some ensembles set their mix of instruments and voices based on the sound balance heard in and around the performance area only. Students and teachers are advised to set and check the overall dynamic balance of the presentation from both the performance/stage area and the approximate positioning of the assessors. During the year, students should practise in a variety of rooms in order to become more adept at setting and checking appropriate dynamic requirements.

Groups should plan how they will sit or stand during the performance. Assessed performers must ensure that assessors can observe all performance techniques and technical skills. This may mean setting music stands so that finger movement and breathing techniques are visible. The seating plan or group organisation may be varied across the program to achieve the best performance environment for each work in the program.