

2020 VCE Music Performance performance examination report

Solo performance examination

General comments

In 2020 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority produced an examination based on the *VCE Music Performance Adjusted Study Design for 2020 only*.

Firstly, each and every student, as well as their teachers and supporters are to be congratulated for getting through the 2020 school year. Despite the difficulty of COVID-19, many students not only got through the year, but managed to excel in their coursework and their performance examination. Assessors were very much aware of the limitations and difficulties of students having to rely on online platforms for their lessons. Apart from these limitations (for both teachers and students alike), another major hurdle was the inability to rehearse with accompanists through lockdown. Despite this, students generally managed well. Overall, the standard and quality of performances in 2020 was very high.

In 2020, students performed on a wide range (34) of prescribed instruments, as well as a number of alternative instruments. Students were required to perform a range of different genres, musical styles, techniques, tonal qualities, articulations, musical lines and structures. They had a maximum of 25 minutes in which to demonstrate their proficiency in performing as comprehensive a range as they could. Two assessors graded each student with a mark out of 10 for each of the examination criteria.

Students who scored highly had prepared programs in which every work was unique. They had chosen programs of works that demonstrated a wide range of elements, as well as evidence of tension and release in an excellent and engaging musical performance. At the same time as adhering to the musical score, they were able to bring something fresh and unique to the performance by doing more than simply mimicking an interpretation they had heard. All this was done within appropriate performance protocols, typical to each instrument performed.

Specific information

Assessment criteria

Criterion 1 – Compliance with the requirements of the task

Students and teachers were generally well aware of the requirements for each instrument as set out in the Prescribed List of Works on the VCAA website. Each instrument list outlined the rules and requirements of the performance examination for that instrument, including required categories, as well as a comprehensive list of works from which students could choose their pieces. Most instrument lists required an unaccompanied work to be performed, as well as a set number of accompanied pieces, and works written in the 20th or 21st centuries. Some problems occurred where students had not carefully read these requirements. For example, there may have been two sections of one work required to be performed as a single piece. If one section of the set was omitted, the student would not be able to access full marks. These types of compliance errors were only made by a small percentage of students.

Criterion 2 – Skill in performing accurately and with clarity

There was a clear correlation between high marks in Criterion 2 and high marks in other criteria. In other words, if students do not know the pieces accurately, or if they are unable to play the correct notes at tempo, or with hesitations, it will be less likely that high marks will be gained in this and other criteria. Preparation needs to be consistent and thorough throughout the year. In 2020, the mean score for this criterion was 7.29.

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

When the word 'range' appears in a criterion, note it well. Students might perform with much control and fluency, but if there is not a range of techniques performed, they will be unable to achieve full marks. The word 'range' is the discriminator in this criterion, as is the concept of maintaining control through dynamic and tempo transitions. In 2020, the mean score for this criterion was 7.11.

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

This criterion also references a 'range' of different tonal qualities. The choice of program is the starting point for gaining access to full marks. The quality and projection of tone throughout the dynamic range is also assessed. The ability to produce quality tone on an instrument is inherent in the performer's technical ability to control and shape the sound being made. In 2020, the mean score for this criterion was 7.14. It was a credit to students and teachers that the marks were so strong in this criterion.

Criterion 5 – Skill in expressive communication through articulation and phrasing

While musical communication is somewhat intangible, the lack of communication makes a musical work seem pointless. One way that students created musical shape was through varying the dynamics and tempi. Being absolutely secure with the mechanics of playing accurately enabled greater use of expressive tools. The use of a variety of articulations as appropriate to the style being performed made performances more interesting. Fine control of shaping through articulation and phrasing enabled students to bring music to life. This was generally handled well by students in 2020, with 45 per cent of students gaining 8 marks and above.

Criterion 6 – Skill in differentiating the musical lines

In the context of a soloist with an accompaniment, the balance, empathy and synchronisation of the soloist is being assessed. In this context, it was extremely helpful to soloists to have performed with competent and supportive accompanists (or good quality and balanced backing tracks), who were able to realise the accompaniment accurately, stylistically and empathetically. The highest-scoring performances were able to highlight the main parts as required by the composer, as well as pull back when performing the accompanying role. In the context of a solo instrument such as a piano, organ, harp or classical guitar, the highest-scoring performances were able to highlight the main themes/sections while balancing the accompanying parts. Some students really struggled to understand the structure of the musical lines in some works, so missed the opportunity to competently balance the parts. Others lacked the technical ability to create that balance. Those who did create an effective balance were able to access high marks.

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

Again, the discriminator in this criterion is the 'range' of different structures performed, as well as the ability to highlight those structures effectively. In terms of a range of structures, students who scored highly performed a variety of structures including works of differing lengths. A variety of forms, such as strophic, theme and variation, and sonata, were evident in these programs. While Criterion 6 was concerned with the smaller

scale elements used to create interest and make sense of a musical work, Criterion 7 was more about the bigger picture. Students needed to have a very clear sense of the overall structure of the work, particularly in terms of the inherent emotional highlights. Students who scored highly were able to effectively highlight the structures. The use of crescendo, diminuendo, accelerando, ritardando and, especially, a clear understanding of when and how to use silence to highlight structure were evident. It is interesting to note that more students achieved higher marks for Criterion 6 than Criterion 7.

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

Students who scored highly had chosen programs that included a wide range of styles. At the same time, they had clearly researched the stylistic conventions of the works chosen and performed with supporting accompanists who were sympathetic to the styles of music being performed. Fifty per cent of students achieved a mark of 8 and above for this criterion.

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

Some students were incredibly creative and individual in their performances but did not consider the styles being performed, thus limiting their access to full marks. This criterion invited the performer to avoid performing as a carbon copy of another performer. Many students were able to perform appropriate individual nuances such as using slight changes in dynamics or tempi, longer or shorter pauses and slight modification of articulations, especially on repeats. The mean score for this criterion was 7.11.

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

Most students scored more highly in Criterion 10 than for other criteria, with 92 per cent of students achieving a mark of 6 or higher. Students awarded the highest scores had clearly practised the flow of the performance, including appropriate stage movements. These students also demonstrated a high level of poise and focus, as well as structure and continuity of the program as a whole. It was clear that they had seen numerous live or recorded performances and were able to incorporate appropriate presentation techniques in their performance.

Advice to students

Backing tracks

Too often backing tracks were played much too softly, making it almost impossible for the performer to demonstrate any interaction with them. This was especially evident in Contemporary Voice students. While students were required to use portable playback equipment to play backing tracks, they often forgot to do a simple sound check before the performance. Many students did not have the opportunity to practise their performance in a variety of spaces with different acoustics, so were perhaps unaware of sound levels. However, the cueing of backing tracks was generally done well, allowing good flow in the performance.

Announcing

Do not announce your name, school or accompanists' names. Use the concept of 'less is more' when considering announcing anything. Too often announcing each work detracts from the performance.

Contemporary or classical sound

While vocal technique for classical and contemporary Voice shares many similarities, it is important to avoid confusion with the differences. Each style requires a different sound. Students should consider this and work towards differentiating the vocal sound.

Contemporary Voice students

Avoid any body percussion during the unaccompanied work. Even hand clapping is inappropriate in this exam. The purpose of the unaccompanied work as an assessment tool is for students to demonstrate their ability to sing without assistance.

Group performance examination

General comments

In 2020 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. In 2020 there was a high standard of preparation for the performance and confident use of a diverse range of stylistically appropriate techniques that contributed to many engaging performances.

Students who presented for the Group performance examination 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 performing in a group context.

Students who scored highly 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 ways they can maximise their marks in the criteria related to group interaction (Criterion 8) and the balance of the musical instruments (Criterion 6). These criteria require the conscious listening to and acknowledgment of other group members. They also require 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 included adapting positively to unforeseen situations: for example, when another band member forgot their part or broke a string.

Students and teachers should consider a range of individual skill areas to best approach the composition of groups and program development. It is important to place students within a group context that best allows them to meet the requirements of the criteria.

For example, when a class contains more than one vocalist, the group composition and repertoire will be informed by the individual characteristics of each student. Elements such as vocal range, tone, timbre, ability to harmonise, dynamic range and a grasp of stylistic authenticity should be determining factors in decisions pertaining to instrumentation and repertoire. The two vocalists could either present separate programs reflecting their individual strengths or work within the same ensemble, exploiting the criteria with a demonstration of cooperative skills that include a combination of lead vocals and harmonisation.

It is important that groups choose keys for songs best suited to the vocalists and residing within the technical abilities of the instrumentalists. The focus should be on selecting works that support each student to maximise their score. Students should consider transposing the works themselves to find more appropriate keys. Students should always be careful when sourcing tablature transcriptions from the internet. It is always recommended that original recordings are accessed to confirm accuracy of the arrangement.

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. Successful acoustic and a cappella versions of both prescribed and non-prescribed works were observed, as well as augmentations such as extra solos, harmonies and breakdown sections.

Students consistently met the requirement, which due to COVID-19 was to perform one musical item from the Prescribed List of Group Works. Some students performed additional works from the list, which was permissible.

When determining the final repertoire list for the examination, students should be careful about presenting a program overly weighted with original compositions.

Consideration should always be given to selections in relation to the criteria, especially regarding a range of musical styles, technique and dynamics.

Specific information

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 2020, the requirements of Criterion 1 concerning 'compliance with the requirements of the task' were met with very few exceptions.

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

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 highly in the assessment criteria when making this decision. For example, students may impact their marks by playing a second instrument that they are not particularly competent with for part of the program. Students 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.

Composition of the group

A group is defined as two or more students. 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 using different combinations of non-assessed performers during their performance as they wish. This 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 achieve the best outcome.

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 the assessed performer(s), nor limit their ability to present a program that will maximise their marks. Hence, non-assessed performers should not count in, conduct, tune, adjust instruments and equipment, lead or otherwise play a dominant or distracting role (for example, extended solos) during the performance examination. This will only reduce the number of opportunities for the assessed performers to best address all of the criteria.

Program selection

The program should contain contrasting works. Prescribed works are selected from the published list for the examination year, as the list is revised annually. If selecting works from Section B, it is important that students perform the actual section, movements and so on 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 addresses the assessment criteria.

All assessed performers should ensure that they participate significantly in presenting all works in their program. Assessed performers should present the works selected from the prescribed list at a standard that is consistent with the rest of the program. This may involve arranging works to create appropriate parts and/or allowing opportunities for improvisation, as appropriate to the style.

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 lead/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 present 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.

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 bass guitarist, for example, could use a plectrum, finger style, slapping, muting, double stopping, tapping and/or alternative tunings.

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 44 of the *VCE Music Study Design 2017–2022*).

Due to COVID-19 the time allowances were reduced in 2020.

Most assessed performers made full use of the time available. Specifically, students made sure changeovers between pieces were well rehearsed, ensuring that they made the most of their performance time.

It is recommended that the prescribed works be performed early in the program, with full participation from assessed performers, 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 venue. They must remember to pack all the required equipment, including replacement strings, reeds and sticks 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 venue at least 30 minutes before their start time. Students will have access to the examination room at least 30 minutes before 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. All examination performances must be presented at safe volume levels.

In 2020 some ensembles set their mix of instruments and voices based on the sound balance heard in and around the performance area only. Students 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 establish clear sightlines to ensure assessors can observe all performance techniques and technical skills. This may mean setting music stands to ensure 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 within the program.