2022 VCE Music Performance external assessment report

Solo performance

General comments

Please be aware that a revised study design will be implemented in 2023. This report is written in relation to the 2022 examination and refers to the study design up to 2022. Please refer to the new 2023 study design when considering the contents and implications for students in 2023.

In 2022, students who scored highly showed:

* an ability to perform accurately and fluently, often due to a secure muscle memory of the performed works
* a deep stylistic knowledge of the selected pieces
* excellent musicianship
* an engaging and personal performance
* works that were chosen to demonstrate 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.

Students who did not score well often had:

* limited or poor 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 a personal interpretation to the performance
* a program lacking variety
* a range of works performed in a similar manner
* a lack of variety in colour, technique, phrasing and other musical elements to differentiate each style
* poor ensemble skills.

Things to consider:

* 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 is compliant with the conditions published for your instrument (Criterion 1).
* Choose the correct arrangements/pieces. For contemporary instruments particularly, the arrangement is vital, as a different one than 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 is a performance and practise performing the program as a whole (Criterion 10).
* Utilise 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 work chosen sounds different and enables you to focus on showing different skills.
* 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 your technical difficulty.
* If your program is close to 25 minutes in length, ensure that you have the stamina to perform it all at the same high standard.
* There is opportunity for embellishment or improvisation (as appropriate to the style) if repeats are performed (Criterion 8).
* There is no official minimum length of a compliant program, although a compliant 10- or 15-minute program is less likely to explore as wide a range of styles, techniques and so on as a 20-minute performance.
* Be prepared for contingencies. Bring extra leads and cables, extension cords, strings, reeds and sticks, as you would for any particularly important performance (Criterion 10).
* Contemporary instrument candidates should consider performing one or a few works with a live accompaniment, such as second guitar or bass (Criterion 6).
* Except for a drum kit, contemporary guitar and bass guitar, equipment brought into the examination room must be able to be taken in and removed quickly. Aim for quality and portability.
* If you decide to verbally introduce the pieces in the performance, keep it brief and make sure it enhances the performance, so be loud and clear. Announcing the pieces is not required, but is allowed.
* Amplifiers and drum kits must be used within OHS standards and not exceed safe listening levels.
* Limit the use of drinking bottles to small occasional slips, and if needed, hydrate well before the performance. Overuse and misuse of the water bottle can detract from Criterion 10.

Specific information

Students performed a 25-minute formal recital, either on one of 34 prescribed instruments or on an approved alternative instrument.

Each performance was assessed by a panel of two trained assessors, one of whom was a specialist in the instrument, and the other who provided a perspective of typical VCE standards across a variety of instruments. Each assessor gave a mark out of 10 for each of the 10 published criteria, resulting in an overall mark out of 200. Scaling points were later applied by the VCAA, to provide a letter grade (A+ to E).

Criterion 1 – Compliance with the requirement of the task

A total of 96.25 per cent of students receive 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.

Criterion 2 – Skill in performing accurately and with clarity

Students who had prepared thoroughly throughout the year received the highest marks in Criterion 2. The discipline in their preparation was evident in their performances, and even if not flawless, their accuracy and clarity were high. There has always been a high correlation between students who gain high marks in this criterion and most of the other criteria.

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

Students who performed a range of techniques with control and fluency received the highest marks. Students who lacked that range were immediately disadvantaged in this criterion. The skill in performing with control and fluency is typified by evenness of passagework, clarity of articulation and fluent performances uninterrupted by stops and starts.

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

It is somewhat easier to learn the notes accurately than to perform with a range of tonal qualities, demonstrating that this is a higher-order task. 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 at a very soft or loud dynamic, maintaining a high quality of tone.

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 perform at a higher standard. Students who were able to perform a wide variety of articulations and who could shape phrases well gained access to the highest marks in this criterion. Students who disregarded phrasing and were limited in their use of appropriate articulations failed to achieve high marks.

Criterion 6 – Skill in differentiating the musical lines

Assessors considered three scenarios in relation to this criterion.

* Accompanied works (live): Synchronisation with the accompanist as well as appropriate balance between the soloist and accompanist, relevant to the musical demands at any given time. This meant playing softer when the accompanist was playing the melody and bringing out the melodic phrases and shapes when appropriate.
* Accompanied works (pre-recorded): Balance and synchronisation with the backing track.
* Unaccompanied works: Internal synchronisation and rhythmic stability, and the creation of a variety of implied lines where appropriate.

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

Bringing out the structure of a musical performance is akin to an author or movie director creating points of tension and release, where tension and release are highlighted to create greater effect. Musically this can occur through dynamic tension. It can also be created through tempo changes to highlight points of musical structure. Students who were less effective in this criterion often performed a program that lacked variety and interest.

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

Some students received the highest marks by choosing programs of works in very different styles. They were also able to demonstrate an understanding that referenced appropriate elements of a range of different styles. This comes from listening to a lot of music from differing styles, and learning how to appropriately include some of these elements into their own performance.

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

Results generally were high in this criterion, demonstrating that students were not performing robotically, but played with passion and feeling. This criterion 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

Some 20 per cent of students achieved a score of 10 marks for this criterion. This shows that students had prepared and rehearsed their performance techniques. Many clearly had rehearsed their entire programs thoroughly. They were able to adjust to the performance conditions such as the acoustics and aesthetics, and in many instances were able to perform with poise and authority, and a good sense of flow, despite the inevitable nerves.

Instrument-specific comments

Contemporary guitar

* If using an acoustic guitar, it is best to rely on performance technique to project the tone, rather than amplification.
* Make sure the notated solos are played.
* Particularly work on developing the 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 both performer and assessors.

Drum kit

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

Voice contemporary

* If using belting techniques, make sure the correct techniques are used so as not to damage the vocal cords.
* Take the ‘vocalise’ category seriously – sing it as expressive song. Many singers lost marks in this category as they had clearly not prepared the vocalise 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 also have some eye contact with the accompanist.
* In considering the use of an accompanist, it is often a good idea to consider beyond just using a pianist. Perhaps consider a guitarist or other instrument player for some songs.
* If the accompanist is playing too loudly, you can either 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.
* Some programs were performed with a lack of precision, 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.
* Some students demonstrated little knowledge of how to use the sustain pedal.

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 a student.
* Often intonation is 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 Prescribed list of notated works: Group performance.

Group Performance

General comments

In the 2022 performance exams, 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 individual criteria, rather than receiving a global assessment. The criteria were applied equally to all students across all instruments. Students generally showed 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 in performing in a group context.

Students who received 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 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 group 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 harmony singing.

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 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.

In 2022, students consistently met the requirements of performing two musical items 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.

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 well 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 a 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

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. 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, nor limit the ability of, the assessed performer(s) 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 (e.g. 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 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 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.

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 centre. They must remember to pack all the required equipment, including replacement strings, reeds, sticks etc. 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. All examination performances must be presented at safe volume levels.

In 2022, 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.