

GENERAL COMMENTS

In the VCE VET Music performance examination, students are assessed in relation to the following units of competency.

- CUSMPF301A Develop technical skills in performance
- CUSMPF402A Develop and maintain stagecraft skills

Students are also assessed in relation to either of the following units of competency, depending on the elective they have undertaken.

- CUSMPF406A Perform music as a soloist
- CUSMPF404A Perform music as part of a group

Each student/group is required to perform an artistic and cohesive program consisting of at least three works.

It is essential that sight lines between assessors and assessed performers be carefully considered during set up, particularly in larger groups where a clear view of assessed performers is required to help discriminate between music parts. There were also a couple of instances when music stands used by performers obscured sight lines to other assessed performers on the stage. If performers are playing from computers or programmable keyboards, placement of a mirror or video camera and screen above the instrument(s) would help assessors to discern exactly what techniques are being executed. If assessors can only see the back of a computer, they cannot tell what, if anything, a performer is doing.

In general, high-scoring performances were characterised by preparedness, musicality, expressiveness, an element of individualism, technical and musical competency, an ability to adjust or adapt to the performance situation, and the delivery of a strong program – with all that this implies, including confidence, pacing, focus, energy, empathy with other performers, cohesiveness of the program and so forth.

Some students were clearly underprepared. It is important that students are made fully aware of how to optimise their marks for each and every criterion.

There were instances where backing tracks, backdrops and other technological means were used effectively to enhance the whole performance experience, but the students were always showcased as performers in their own right, performing live to a synchronised thematic commentary. It should be noted that staging elements are not included in the criteria and are not awarded marks.

When keyboard players played to backing tracks, it was sometimes hard to discern when the student was playing and when the backing track was playing. Again, a mirror or video camera and screen would verify the student's performance in this context.

There were occasions where a performer nominated as solo and had an accompanist, and the accompanist controlled the performance, starting every song and dictating the tempo and even the dynamic contrast. While this is acceptable in some industry contexts, the assessed performer should make an attempt to control the performance and not let the accompanist take over.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Criterion 1: Compliance with the requirements of the task

- i. OHS principles applied appropriately in the performance

Sound levels were generally at an appropriate volume. There were a few performances presented using volume that was too low for the energy of the music genre that was being played. It is true that OH&S principles demand a safe performing environment, but many forms of contemporary performance require a relatively high (yet safe) volume to support the requisite power of the music. That being said, it is incumbent on performers to wear earplugs when these are appropriate. The size and quality of the performance venue should always be considered.

ii. Minimum of three works performed

All students presented at least three works. It is important to construct a program with a length as close as possible to the required timing for the specific solo or group configuration in order to maximise opportunity to demonstrate musical ability and stagecraft. There were a number of short performances, of 10 minutes or so, consisting of four short works. While there is no minimum requirement for the length of a performance, these short programs sometimes reflect underpreparedness and/or lack of ability.

iii. At least one work performed from memory

Most students complied with this examination condition; however, when a student is reading from a music stand for most of the performance, it would be wise for the student to make it obvious when they are playing from memory by moving the stand to the side. This way there can be no confusion for the assessors. Stand placement needs to be considered from the audience's point of view.

iv. Requirements for group and solo configuration and use of non-assessed performers (when needed) are met

In general, the group and solo configurations were appropriate, although it should be stressed that 'solo' refers to a single, unaccompanied performer or a single performer with one accompanist. There were a number of performers designated as 'solo' who performed with groups of two or three supporting musicians.

v. Performance Program Sheet completed and submitted prior to commencement of examination

vi. Industry Statement Form completed and submitted at commencement of performance

In a number of cases there seemed to be a lack of effort in the preparation of the Industry Statement Form and Performance Program Sheet. Sometimes the Industry Statement Form was so generic that it did not clearly reflect the style of performance, target audience or performance aspirations of the student. When preparing the documentation, neatness and legibility should also be taken into account. It would seem reasonable for all members of the one group to have very similar, even identical, Industry Statements.

vii. Program performed in accordance with Industry Statement Form and the Performance Program Sheet

When sufficient information was provided on the Industry Statement Form, programs were generally performed accordingly.

Criterion 2: Skill in performing with accuracy and control

- Accuracy and control of the rhythm, pitch, articulation, timing and phrasing, tuning as appropriate to the instrument or voice and area of specialisation

Students presented for the exam with a wide range of performance skills. Many students presented programs at very advanced levels of technical ability, playing extremely difficult and advanced works. There were also many less advanced students who demonstrated that they had worked with great dedication and determination to prepare performances that were accurate and controlled, but at a lower level of difficulty. Students are advised to select music and create a program that showcases their skills, while minimising exposure to their weaknesses, in order to demonstrate the highest level of accuracy and control of pitch, tone production, tuning, timing, phrasing and articulation that their skill level and experience allows.

It is preferable for students to understand accuracy and control in relation to a primary instrument or voice and to present this to the best of their ability, rather than demonstrating poor accuracy and control on multiple instruments.

Students did not always choose to perform in the most appropriate industry context for their instrument and skill level. In some cases students presented a solo instrumental performance on an instrument that does not usually perform in the solo context – for example, a drum kit or 'rhythm guitar'. Often these students were part of a performance in a group too, supporting another student. It was observed in several cases that the solo student may have actually scored better in the group performance in which they were not assessed.

Solo vocalists who accompany themselves would be better served working with an accompanist if they are weak on their accompanying instrument.

Tuning is fundamental in this criterion. Many singers were consistently out of tune, or were able to sing a line or long phrase perfectly in tune before lapsing back into consistently poor intonation. Poor breathing techniques often lead to the ends of phrases disappearing or going out of tune. Some female singers sang in male keys and attempted to sing in registers too low for them to achieve optimum performance. Guitarists must take great care with tuning, especially when using capos.

Drummers should ensure that their key task of keeping good time is not compromised by showmanship or extended techniques.

Criterion 3: Skill in realising the expressiveness and versatility of instrument(s) (or voice(s)) or technology throughout the program

- This includes performance techniques such as maintaining a strict tempo, and artistic use of accent, crescendo, diminuendo, staccato, silence, legato, tenuto, rubato, ritardando, accelerando, pitch bending and other techniques as appropriate to the area of specialisation

Students who scored well on this criterion were able to demonstrate effortless dexterity and flexibility of technique that enhanced the expressiveness and versatility of their performance. They were also able to demonstrate outstanding artistic use of accent, crescendo, diminuendo, staccato, silence, legato, tenuto, rubato, ritardando, accelerando, pitch bending and other expressive techniques. Often high-scoring students also had a very expressive quality and projection of tone throughout the dynamic range.

Expressiveness and versatility in performance is clearly dependent on technical facility. It is often better to play within one's means than to reach for something that has the potential to cause technical mishaps and therefore a break in the expressive flow of the performance. It should also be noted that simply being able to play fast and loud is only one aspect of technique.

There were a number of instrumentalists who failed to explore all the tonal possibilities that their instruments were capable of producing. Experimentation with different playing techniques and tunings should be encouraged.

Criterion 4: Ability to use a variety of rhythms, time signatures, beat patterns, rhythmic styles, scales, chord sequences and music systems relevant to the area of specialisation

- Skill in using variety of duration (rhythm, metre, pattern) and/or melody and harmony (scales, chords, chord progressions) and music systems relevant to the area of specialisation

With the freedom to devise their own performance and choose or compose works, students have a great opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of their music understanding and ability. It was inspiring to see some students taking advantage of the opportunity to display their rhythmic skills, scales and various music systems. In particular, there was more use of applications that facilitate looping and synchronisation of multiple layers to create complex rhythmic passages. There were some particularly strong performances that employed vocal looping technology with extreme accuracy.

On the other hand, some students found it hard to sync with a backing track. Sometimes this can be due to a lack of preparation and rehearsal to a fixed beat of some kind. Such students should implement a regular practice regime using metronomic processes, learning all of their pieces thoroughly by the time of their examination. Other students were inhibited in their ability to synchronise accurately to backing tracks due to poor monitoring.

Most areas of specialisation included some variety of rhythms, time signatures, beat patterns, rhythmic styles, scales, chord sequences and music systems. Few students scored full marks in this criterion as there was limited exploration and adventurousness in arrangements and repertoire selection. Even with original works, progressions, scales and structures tend to be generally 'safe' and conformist. Many performers played a full program of works in 4/4 time, with most songs employing a simple chord progression in a major or harmonic minor key (I-V-vi-IV progressions, for example), without exploring songs within the same style or area that use different beat groupings or compound time, a variety of keys and more unusual chord progressions, etc. For example, while many may think it difficult to demonstrate a variety of rhythms, time signatures, etc., in some industry contexts (for example, punk) even performing a slower song, a song in 3/4 or with a different drum style (half-time, etc.) would automatically address the criteria and assist students to score higher marks.

The key to this criterion is to explore the breadth and range of music possibilities within a selected style or genre. It is difficult to present a cohesive, industry standard program of music by presenting a number of works from completely different time periods and genres in an attempt to add variety.

Criterion 5: Ability to phrase and shape music appropriately

- Skill in phrasing and shaping music in a manner appropriate to the area of specialisation

Melodic and rhythmic lines as well as harmonic rhythm should be shaped through phrasing in a manner that is appropriate to the chosen area of specialisation. This criterion appears to require more attention from teachers and trainers when preparing their students. There needs to be more guidance in developing the ability to listen carefully to the shape and quality of the sounds being produced and then react accordingly. Obviously, when technical ability is limited, concentration on simply getting the notes right is the main focus; however, by learning to sing the lines and visualise overall structures, the techniques involved in getting the notes right will be enhanced and provide greater success overall.

Criterion 6: Ability to demonstrate originality and innovative approaches in interpretation within the requirements of the group or as a solo performer

- Skill in interpretation and expression and the ability to demonstrate appropriate musical nuance, an individual style of musical expression, and original and innovative approaches to stage performances relevant to the area of specialisation

During the VCE VET Music program, students are encouraged to write at least one song or musical work. It is valuable for them to have the opportunity to perform original works, but this should not be confused with originality. Some students presented programs that contained only original music and often presented more of the same on a particular theme and demonstrated limited originality. Presenting a cover song with an improvisation or a variation the student has developed is an excellent way of demonstrating originality and versatility in performance. The focus is on performing with originality and innovative approaches, not simply on performing original works.

However, there were a number of outstanding performances where various technologies (loop pedals, computers, slides, effects pedals, beatboxing, etc.) and extended techniques contributed to highly original and innovative performances.

If a program is performed in karaoke fashion using backing tracks, the originality of the performance can sometimes be jeopardised if the student does not manage to show their own personal interpretation of the pieces.

Criterion 7:

Group performance

- Ability to listen critically to the performance of others and respond, interact and collaborate appropriately, adjusting the performance to achieve required outcomes relevant to the area of specialisation

or

Solo performers

- Ability to listen critically to one's own performance and continuously adjust own performance to produce the required outcomes relevant to the area of specialisation

Listening to the musicians with whom one is playing is critical in the production of a quality performance. Many groups worked well together to create an ensemble sound, constantly listening and adjusting to the dynamics of the group and the performance space. However, there was often a lack of improvisational collaboration in groups. Performers were clearly listening to each other and adjusting accordingly, but the playing tended to be safe and rigid in construction. Developing an ability to react with notes and phrases in an improvisational way would considerably enhance the dynamics of an ensemble performance.

Guitarists should check volume levels of rhythm and lead sounds so that both work in appropriate dynamic ranges. Guitarists also need to be very aware of their volume levels so that their parts can be clearly heard without drowning out others in the ensemble, or being drowned out themselves.

At several venues, balance problems within groups (especially in regards to the PA mix and EQ) meant that it was very difficult to distinguish what individual students were playing. Also, some students were playing the same part with no differentiation (for example, two guitars using the same chord voicing, the same amp set up, etc.) or where one instrument or voice drowned out the other so that only one part could be distinguished. It can only be assumed that in these cases the group is accustomed to not hearing that part, or that perhaps it is heard on stage in monitoring, even though it is not clearly heard in front of house. Good sound checks before the performance and being aware of the dynamic nature of other sounds being generated within the group are vital.

Solo performers need to listen more attentively to the quality and shape of the sound they produce. When using an accompanist, more active cooperative listening is essential for the performer. Students who adjusted their volume, phrasing and tuning to match that of co-performers and accompanists scored more highly in this criterion.

Students performing with backing tracks (often played from an MP3 player) need to be aware of the relative volume levels, differences between tracks and the tonal qualities of the backings. Some students – even though the player and sound equipment was right next to them – failed to change volume levels, even when the backing was overpowering their voice (or instrument) or was so soft as to be hardly audible.

There were also a couple of instances of students performing to backing tracks through basic wall-mounted hi-fi systems when there was a quality PA system in the room.

Students who scored highly in this criterion demonstrated outstanding differentiation of structures and characters within the music performance, as well as outstanding balance, empathy and synchronisation between music parts.

Criterion 8: Skill in presenting a cohesive program of music

- Skill in presenting an authentic (in relation to the selected area of specialisation), dynamic and well-constructed program of music with appropriate sequencing of items and appropriate choice of repertoire

A number of students presented performances that were of a very basic nature, and a number of others presented programs akin to an AMEB or VCE Music Performance program, as opposed to a focused and clearly designated industry-style performance in a specific area of specialisation or genre, which is the expectation in VCE VET Music (see Criterion 4, above).

High-scoring students presented an authentic, dynamic and well-constructed program of music with appropriate sequencing of items and choice of repertoire in relation to the selected area of specialisation. Care needs to be taken with the mixing of genres, as there were a few programs where the first half consisted of fairly straight pop or rock repertoire and the second half consisted of something completely unrelated, like polka dances or traditional folk music. It is of course possible to incorporate different influences into a performance, but this should happen in an integrated and organic way.

Care should be taken that time is not wasted unnecessarily introducing an endless stream of non-assessed performers or swapping instruments around so much that the flow of the program is interrupted. All leads and instruments should be checked before the performance and students should ensure that changeovers are quick and well organised.

There was a disturbing tendency for students to share a performance in such a way as to make it difficult for the assessors to keep up with rapid switches between performers. It is not necessary for each singer, for instance, to have an equal share of lines in every single solo song, swapping lines at a bewildering rate. This creates choppy, unbalanced and uneven performances that do not sequence properly even within a song, let alone a program. When wishing to give two or more singers equal performance time, it is unnecessary to have them swap lines within a verse or even to take turns at verses (unless the song demands otherwise, such as in a call and response type of song). If there is a group with two singers, it is acceptable and preferable for performance cohesion for performers to move from lead roles to backing roles for different songs.

The most successful performances were those in which the performers took the Industry Statement Form very seriously and played a ‘show’, sometimes with a theme, not a series of songs.

Criterion 9: Ability to observe and maintain protocols appropriate to the area of specialisation

- Skill in communicating effectively through original and innovative approaches to personal stagecraft, expressing appropriate dramatic nuance, while taking venue and style of performance into account

Many students applied an appropriate range of stagecraft skills, such that they were able to demonstrate an ability to engage with audiences through dialogue, movement or gestures. In the music industry, a performer’s image and reputation are often linked to the innovative ways in which they approach performances, not just to their ability to play an instrument or sing.

Personal stagecraft skills may include a performer’s interaction with audiences, make-up, hair and costume design, posture, movement, interaction with other performers, facial expressions, techniques for holding instruments or equipment (such as microphones), and effective use of performance space.

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In this criterion, high-scoring students demonstrated an innovative and original application of such stagecraft skills in order to express appropriate dramatic nuance, while also demonstrating a highly professional approach to adjusting to, and turning to one's advantage, changing or challenging performance conditions. Often the atmosphere or room ambience that the performer(s) created facilitated more focused and fluid performances.

Students performing with backing tracks should consider how they start and stop their backings. It is not good practice to keep walking off stage to press 'Play' and then 'Stop' for each song in the set. This problem was solved by some performers by having the player on stage with them (perhaps using a long auxiliary cable) or by putting all backings into a playlist with carefully timed gaps between songs to keep the performance flowing.

All students should consider the energy and flow of their performance and consider the time required for instrument changes, retuning, fitting capos, etc. Accomplished performers handle this with great ease; for example, by introducing a song while doing these things or by having some band members continue to play while a guitarist changes equipment. Performers could also consider segues that keep the energy of a performance building, rather than stopping for another introduction.

Criterion 10: Skill in presenting a confident performance through consistent focus and energy, and with pacing appropriate to the area of specialisation

- Skill in applying a range of personal stage skills while performing a suitably paced and focused performance

Students need to be animated and 'sell' their songs or pieces. Students need to develop ways of owning the works and should avoid being fixed to one section of the stage. Programs should be delivered as if they were a professional show, with focus, poise, flair, energy and pacing, such that the audience (in this case, the assessors) are thoroughly convinced of the authenticity of the musician and their story.

Students should be careful of presenting a program with an overly casual demeanour; for example, drinking from water bottles in an unsubtle way, even during songs, and making little or no effort to present the performance in a professional manner.