

2015 VCE Music Performance performance examination report

General comments

Over the course of a year, VCE Music Performance students undertake a variety of areas of study, including performance, performance technique and musicianship. They do this either as a soloist or as a member of a group. The specific key skills they are expected to develop in Unit 4 include the ability to:

- prepare, refine and present performances of a program of group and solo works that demonstrates a range of music styles and diversity of character
- demonstrate accuracy, fluency and control in the performance of selected group and solo works
- demonstrate idiomatic tone quality, clarity and variation of tone in the performance of selected group and solo works
- shape the performance of selected group and solo works through control and variation of expressive elements of music
- present informed interpretations of selected group and solo works that demonstrate balance between relevant personal, stylistic, practical, technological, historical and cultural influences
- use relevant historical and contemporary performance conventions to interpret and perform selected group and solo works
- demonstrate communication, interaction, cooperation and empathy with other musicians as appropriate to the performance of selected works
- demonstrate stylistic characteristics and refine ability to communicate awareness of musical structures in the performance of selected groups and solo work(s)
- demonstrate understanding of the roles of, and relationships between, instrumental voices in selected groups work(s), or parts within the texture of solo work(s)
- demonstrate presentation techniques and conventions of performance that are appropriate to the instrument(s), ensemble(s), works, styles and performance space(s)
- perform using effective sound production and/or sound reinforcement techniques as appropriate to acoustic properties of performance venues, style and character of selected works and performance contexts.

Specific information – Solo performance examination

Students who presented high-scoring performances included works with a wide range of characters and techniques, and demonstrated a deep stylistic understanding of each work. These students were able to make their performance fresh and personal, and had developed their interpretation far beyond the notation, while displaying outstanding musicianship. Most of these students worked with excellent accompanists (where appropriate) and this greatly enhanced the performance.

Students who presented low-scoring performances did not display a wide variety of characters or techniques across their program. Some students performed long programs with little variation and

were less able to portray the particular nuance of each style/work. In some cases their accompanists were unable to demonstrate appropriate stylistic conventions, which made it more difficult for the students to accomplish the relevant styles. Some of these students, when performing works from different categories, were unable to convey the necessary differentiation.

Assessment criteria

Criterion 1 – Compliance with the requirements of the task

Most students achieved a high score for this criterion. Typical errors included: omitting a required category, failing to perform the minimum number of works required, leaving out a significant section of a work or failing to fulfil the requirements for performing accompanied or unaccompanied works. Students should always check and re-check the requirements for each instrument in order to maximise their score.

Criterion 2 – Skill in performing accurately and with clarity

Students who learnt their works accurately were able to play with a high degree of control, phrasing, tonal shading and style. It is recommended that students learn to play their works as early in the year as possible so that they can then concentrate on interpretation, performance practice and a range of other technical and expressive aspects.

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

The discriminator in this criterion was the range of techniques performed. Students who presented high-scoring performances demonstrated a wide range of techniques in their chosen program, while also demonstrating the skill to perform those techniques with control and fluency. It is important to have a mature and disciplined technique. Strength of technique allows the performer the freedom to make a range of musical decisions. Students are advised to observe professional music performances to build their understanding of this phenomenon.

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

Students who presented high-scoring performances in relation to this criterion chose programs containing a wide variety of possible tonal effects appropriate to their instrument. A performer needs to be fully confident of their works in order to focus on other aspects of their playing. In this criterion, the quality of the sound that is made is being assessed. Often the discriminator was how that quality was maintained across a range of dynamics and was particularly telling at the dynamic extremes. When a student plays with a beautiful tone at a moderate dynamic, the tone may become harsh and forced at a very loud dynamic, or weak and unfocused at a very quiet dynamic.

Criterion 5 – Skill in expressive communication through articulation and phrasing

While music is incapable of linguistic expression (unless it is sung, and that expression is only possible through the text), it is capable of expressing that which is linguistically inexpressible. Within the instrumental context and genre, creativity of expression is achieved through the use of articulation and phrasing. Students who presented high-scoring performances for this criterion were those who (within their instrumental context) could create an expressive performance. It was evident that many students understood the nature of high-end musical performance across a wide range of instruments and genres.

Criterion 6 – Skill in differentiating the musical lines

- Accompanied works (live): Students can achieve high marks for this aspect of the criterion through performances that are synchronised and interactive with their accompanist, through

the solo line taking the appropriate role (either leading or following dependent on the musical context) and through excellent and appropriate balance between soloist and accompaniment.

- Accompanied works (pre-recorded): Students can achieve high marks for this aspect of the criterion through a high level of synchronisation and appropriate balance. Their equipment should be of an appropriate quality and set-up, and the soloist will be well rehearsed in its operation.
- Unaccompanied works: Students can achieve high marks for this aspect of the criterion if they are able to balance the various threads or lines against each other to create a performance that clearly makes sense of their relative importance within a work.

Most students achieved scores in the middle to top band of marks for this criterion. Students are advised to rehearse as much as possible with their accompanist or the playback equipment they will use in the examination. Students could also rehearse with a backing track, which may be more readily available, as is software that will enable tempo modifications.

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

The highest marks in this criterion can be achieved by selecting works with different structures. This facilitates the heightening of tension and release that is already inherent in a work in order to create its global shape and make it sound unique. Many students achieved in the high and middle bands of marks for this criterion. Students with low-scoring performances could have maximised their potential for high scores by choosing works of different structures, as well as working to highlight the structure of each work in their program.

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

Some students with low-scoring performances for this criterion chose programs where the style of each work was very similar, or where the performance of each work sounded similar. This criterion focuses specifically on a range of styles. For this examination, students are advised to listen to works in a wide range of music styles and interpretations of works as they prepare.

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

While the musical reference (notation, referenced recording or both) is the starting point in learning any work, it must eventually be interpreted with integrity. Every performer brings something different to the performance of a musical work. Students are expected to bring something of their own personality to the interpretation of their program of works. However, even if a student achieves a high score for creativity and individuality, if they have not considered sufficiently the style performed, their overall score for this criterion will not be high. Generally, the marks were strong for criterion 9, demonstrating that students are allowing their individuality and creativity to be apparent in their performances.

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

This examination is a formal, performance-based recital and the marks indicated that students treated it as such. Students are invited to treat the performance space and time as theirs. They can decide on their program order, tuning, flow of the program, dress, stage management and so on. Those who scored highly for this criterion made the space theirs and delivered a flowing, polished performance. Some formally introduced the works they were to perform and some did not. When appropriate to the style, some students used movement while others did not. It is important to remain poised throughout the performance. It was evident that students had taken care with their dress and other aspects of their presentation, and this seemed to assist students to create a special performance occasion.

Advice to students

- Accompanists should be chosen wisely. Rehearse with them as often as possible 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, the arrangement is vital (criteria 1, 3, 4, 7 and 8).
- Make sure the examination program is presented as a performance and practise performing the program as a whole (criterion 10).
- Use 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 work chosen 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 listed in the Prescribed List of Notated Solo Works. Cite the composer, the correct title and the correct category.
- Choose pieces within a range of technical difficulty that you can manage.
- If your program is close to the full 25 minutes, ensure that you have the stamina to perform it all at the same standard.
- There is opportunity for 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 and cables, extension cords, strings, reeds and sticks, as you would for any particularly important performance (criterion 10).
- Contemporary instrument performers are encouraged to play at least one work with a live accompaniment (for example, a second guitar or a bass) (criterion 6).
- Amplification 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, keep this brief and make sure it enhances the performance.
- Amplifiers and drum kits must be used within occupational health and safety (OH&S) standards. Sound must not exceed safe listening levels.
- Avoid unisons in accompaniment, either live or on backing tracks.

Instrument-specific comments

Contemporary guitar

- Try to explore a wide range of styles. Many guitarists play the same limited group of favourites on the list.
- It is a good idea to use more than one 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 on developing finger-style techniques to gain the maximum dynamic control and the ability to project tone into the room.

Drum kit

- Explore as wide a variety of styles as possible.
- The brushes piece and snare rudiments tend to be the weakest areas in this instrument. Students need to demonstrate technical control and take available opportunities to demonstrate a range of expressive qualities and variations of qualities such as tone and dynamics.

Voice – Contemporary popular

- If using belting techniques, make sure the correct techniques are used. Consider vocal hygiene.
- Take the ‘vocalise’ category seriously and sing an expressive song.
- Be aware of the category that each song comes from and sing it in the appropriate style.
- Consider the staging of the performance. Stand where you can face and address the audience, but also have some eye contact with the accompanist.
- Ensure a stylistic understanding of contemporary vocal techniques. Sing each song with a different vocal and musical approach. Avoid using the same pop licks.
- Avoid performing an exact replica of the reference recording. A more imaginative approach is required.

Contemporary piano

- Many students failed to demonstrate adequate understanding of how to use the sustain pedal.
- Some programs were performed with a lack of discipline, suggesting a higher degree of preparation is needed.

Pianoforte

- Students are advised not to take on programs that are too difficult for them to master.
- Some students demonstrated poor understanding of the use of the sustain pedal.

Wind and brass

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

Strings

- Avoid the temptation to take on works that are too difficult.
- Often intonation was the area of greatest weakness in performances.

Group performance examination

General comments

In 2015, students who selected to present their performance as a member of a group generally performed well, with a demonstrable awareness of most of the assessment criteria.

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 were also, in general, 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 required conscious listening to and acknowledgment 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-achieving 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 2015, 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 as well as 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. A number of 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.

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 2015, almost all students fulfilled all the requirements of criterion 1 concerning 'compliance with the requirements of the task'.

The examination criteria for this examination also include dot points to help unpack each criterion. 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. 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.

The assessed student's ability to maximise their score for each criterion 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 assessed 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 score. 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 or 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 at the highest level.

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 that 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.

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 melody should be faithful to the original. Variations may occur for a number of reasons, particularly if groups have instrumentation different from the original work.

Students should avoid performing only 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 genre, 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 for 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 for the 'skill in performing a range of techniques with control and fluency' criterion (criterion 3).

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, bends, double stopping, tapping and/or alternative tunings.

The assessed performer(s) should also avoid performing material that merely repeats material previously presented. This may require development of arrangements or 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 performances 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 compliance requirements are met within the time limit (criterion 1).

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 venue 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 begun, 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. During the year, students should practise in a variety of rooms in order to become accustomed to different performance spaces with varying qualities of acoustics and volume 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.