



Course report 2024

Advanced Higher Music and Advanced Higher Music: Portfolio

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 1,773

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 1,747

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	891	Percentage	51.0	Cumulative percentage	51.0	Minimum mark required	68
B	Number of candidates	464	Percentage	26.6	Cumulative percentage	77.6	Minimum mark required	58
C	Number of candidates	266	Percentage	15.2	Cumulative percentage	92.8	Minimum mark required	48
D	Number of candidates	84	Percentage	4.8	Cumulative percentage	97.6	Minimum mark required	38
No award	Number of candidates	42	Percentage	2.4	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

Markers reported that the question paper was a fair and balanced paper, challenging in some areas but with an appropriate level of demand. The paper provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their subject knowledge and notation skills. Most candidates attempted every question. In general, candidates were well prepared for the question paper.

Assignment

Candidates scored a wide range of marks in this component and, overall, found it challenging.

The return of full course assessment meant the reintroduction of the assignment (composition) and full performance times being reinstated. The increase in performance times, combined with the reintroduction of the assignment, where learners had no previous assessment experience of composition, were considered in reaching grade boundary decisions.

Performance

Most candidates were well prepared for the performance components and, as in previous years, most candidates demonstrated a good level of skills in this area. Many visiting assessors commented on candidate confidence and the high level of performance.

Portfolio

As in previous years, candidates composed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Personalisation and choice continue to be very evident in this component. Most candidates performed well this year.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Many candidates approached the paper appropriately and were well prepared for the requirements and format of the question paper.

Many candidates answered question 1(a), which was multiple choice, well. Most candidates identified the instruments correctly in question 1(c).

Most candidates recognised and correctly identified melisma in question 2(a)(ii).

Many candidates correctly answered parts 2, 3 and 4 of question 3(c): chromatic scale, interrupted cadence and diminished triad.

Most candidates correctly identified EDM in question 3(d). Many candidates also correctly identified and notated the enharmonic equivalent in question 4(a)(i).

Question 5(a), which was multiple choice, was well answered by many candidates. Many candidates identified the turn in question 5(b) and identified the sequence of instruments playing in question 5(d). Most candidates correctly identified the irregular time signature in question 5(c) and notated rhythm in question 5(e).

Overall, candidates appeared to have quite a good understanding of the requirements of question 6. This was particularly evident in question 6(a)(i), where most candidates were able to provide a good number of concepts relevant to the music under the given headings. Many candidates also answered question 6(a)(ii) well. Markers commented that candidates did not write down concepts indiscriminately. In question 6(b)(ii), many candidates correctly identified the period of excerpt 1 and gave clear justifications. Most of these were related to the use of the harpsichord.

Assignment

Candidates submitted compositions in a variety of styles and genres. For example, piano trios, string quartets, piano pieces, songs, serial compositions, jazz and blues pieces, and electronic pieces. There were also quite a few arrangements of both traditional and popular pieces.

Candidates demonstrated a degree of personalisation and choice in the analysis component.

Performance

Personalisation and choice were evident in most candidates' programmes, and a wide variety of instruments were presented with a range of musical styles.

Some candidates played pieces above the minimum requirements and performed very well.

Most centres used the drum kit style bank and offered an appropriate spread and number of drum kit styles.

Most guitar chordal programmes were also presented correctly, contained 18 chords and incorporated a melody along with chordal accompaniment in one piece.

Portfolio

Some candidates displayed considerable skill and imagination in their pieces, writing coherently, stylistically and imaginatively for their chosen instruments. Candidates achieved a wide range of marks, with some very good submissions.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Most candidates found question 1(b), identification of augmentation challenging.

Many candidates found the following questions challenging:

- ◆ Question 2(a)(i), range of cadences
- ◆ Question 2(b), chord identification
- ◆ Question 2(c)(i), range of keys
- ◆ Question 3(b), identification of diminution

Many candidates also found some of the musical literacy questions in this year's paper quite challenging:

- ◆ The accidental in question 2(c)(ii) was often incorrect and was not always accurately placed.
- ◆ In question 4(b)(i), candidates often did not notate the correct pitches or include an accurate triplet sign.
- ◆ In question 4b(ii), answers were often lacking in accurate placement of notes and rhythm. Some candidates did not include the correct flat sign or tie.
- ◆ In question 4(a)(ii), most candidates answered 5th, rather than diminished 5th or tritone.

In question 6(b)(i), candidates were required to give detailed differences and similarities. The marking instructions highlighted paired differences in relation to genre, instrumentation, time signatures, texture, key and ornamentation. The concepts in the excerpt 1 and 2 only boxes provided a good balance for the level of challenge in this part of the question. In question 6(b)(ii) many candidates had difficulty identifying both periods correctly. Some candidates did not appear to draw together their findings from the earlier parts of the question to come to an insightful conclusion.

Assignment

This component proved challenging this year. Scores were, overall, quite detailed, but performance plans would have benefitted from more detail. Reviews would have benefitted from greater detail on how ideas had been developed.

Quite a few arrangements submitted this year were transcriptions of original scores and did not demonstrate a creative reworking of the original material.

In the analysis component, candidates would have benefitted from including more detail on not just what composers had done, but why. Candidates did not always demonstrate a perceptive understanding with detailed identification of key features of the music. Some analyses lacked any time codes, some did not include an audio link and in some the time codes were not always accurate. Teachers, lecturers and candidates should refer to page 21 of the Advanced Higher Course Specification on the [Advanced Higher Music subject page](#), which details the maximum marks available if key features have not been included.

Performance

Most candidate mark sheets indicated a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 18 minutes. However, during the performance assessment, a few candidates either did not attempt to perform one of the pieces or only performed the opening bars of one of the pieces. As a result, these programmes did not meet the minimum time requirements of 18 minutes overall.

A few programmes did not meet the minimum time requirements of 6 minutes on either of the two selected instruments, or instrument and voice.

Where judicious cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates were playing sections of music below the minimum requirements (Grade 5 or above).

Chordal guitar and ukulele candidates did not always meet the requirements, as a few did not incorporate a minimum of 18 chords into a programme. In addition, a few candidates did not meet the requirements as some did not incorporate a melody along with chordal accompaniment in at least one piece.

A few drum kit candidates' programmes did not demonstrate four-way independence in all styles.

A few keyboard players did not demonstrate full-fingered chords. At Advanced Higher level, candidates must play fully fingered chords throughout their entire keyboard programme.

Portfolio

Marks are awarded for developing and refining musical ideas in music that is original to the candidate, as well as for the creative and assured use of compositional methods and music concepts including melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre. As in previous years, some candidates' work demonstrated a lack of harmonic awareness that hindered the development of their ideas.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

To help prepare future candidates for the question paper, teachers and lecturers should consider the following advice and possible strategies to support them.

Short answers (one or two words, or a phrase) will continue to specifically examine concepts introduced at Higher or Advanced Higher level. For example, questions 3(d) and 5(b) in this year's question paper tested two Advanced Higher concepts: electronic dance music and turn. Questions 1(b) and 3(b) tested Higher concepts: augmentation and diminution. Centres should encourage candidates to read the stem of the question carefully. Some candidates lost marks because they did not do this.

Musical literacy questions continue to provide some challenge for candidates. Centres should continue to provide frequent opportunities for candidates to listen to performances, using scores where possible, to promote literacy skills and develop aural perception and discrimination. Regularly giving candidates the opportunity to relate what they hear to what they see will directly benefit their attainment in these types of questions.

In questions 6(a)(i) and (ii) there were again fewer instances of candidates giving long lists of unrelated or contradictory concepts. However, centres should continue to remind candidates that their responses should contain the prominent concepts under each category relating to the music heard. In questions 6(a) and (b)(i), centres should encourage candidates to focus on identifying concepts, similarities and differences under the given headings. They should also advise candidates that in question 6(b)(i) the number of similarities and differences will vary depending on the musical excerpts; for example, there may be more differences than similarities, or vice versa.

In question 6(b)(i), centres should advise candidates to give comprehensive answers when detailing tonality, harmony, texture and timbre. Accurate statements regarding genre, instrumentation, time signatures, texture, key and ornamentation are detailed in the marking instructions.

In question 6(b)(ii), some candidates correctly identified the periods of both excerpts. Most identified the period of excerpt 1, Baroque, and gave a correct justification. The use of the harpsichord was a common justification for excerpt 1. Candidates found the identification of excerpt 2 challenging and there was a wide range of answers, from Renaissance to twentieth century. Centres should work with candidates to ensure they use the evidence they gave in earlier parts of the question to point the way to a period of music and provide relevant justifications. Centres should encourage candidates to listen to as wide a range of music as possible and closely consider what characterises a particular period of music.

Centres are encouraged to access the marking instructions for past question papers and the specimen question paper. These provide considerable detail regarding acceptable answers for all questions.

If a centre submits exceptional circumstance evidence for the question paper, the assessment papers used for prelim-type events should replicate the course assessment in terms of question type and mark allocation. Ensuring assessments meet the criteria below will help teachers and lecturers establish candidate estimates. Centres should also submit a full copy of the marking instructions, even if questions are drawn from SQA specimen or past question papers. Centres should note the importance of identifying prominent concepts in question 6.

When preparing prelim and listening assessments, centres should consider the following:

- ◆ A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety must not be the only evidence submitted to be considered for exceptional circumstances. These papers are accessible on SQA's website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.
- ◆ Class tests or other forms of evidence must demonstrate that candidates have knowledge and understanding of concepts appropriate to the course assessment.
- ◆ Some questions from older past papers may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance, and may need to be amended.
- ◆ The marking instructions used for centre-devised assessments should reflect the marking instructions used in the final exam. Half marks are not used. You can find examples of marking instructions for past papers on SQA's website.

Assignment

The following advice may help teachers and candidates as they prepare for the assignment component. The assignment must:

- ◆ allow candidates to apply the knowledge and skills developed throughout the course to show understanding of compositional methods
- ◆ be a meaningful and challenging task that enables candidates to clearly demonstrate application of musical skills in a creative way
- ◆ allow candidates to demonstrate competence in creating and developing musical ideas and show an understanding of harmony

Candidates achieving higher marks demonstrated development of musical ideas and a good harmonic understanding. Many candidates this year did not demonstrate a secure knowledge of harmony, and modulations were often not well managed.

The composition or arrangement can contain sections of improvisation, but this must be in the context of a wider composition that demonstrates composing skills. Markers award no marks to pieces that are solely improvisation.

Candidates who choose to work with pre-recorded loops must ensure that they do this in the context of a wider composition or arrangement, and show the compositional process. The candidate's own creative input must be clearly identifiable. Candidates must provide details of their creative input in their review.

In serial compositions, tone rows should be annotated on the scores. In pieces submitted this year, rows were often inaccurate, and candidates lacked knowledge of how to craft pieces in this style.

Compositions or arrangements must last a minimum of 1 minute and a maximum of 4 minutes and 30 seconds.

The analysis must contain reference to at least five of the following elements:

- ◆ style
- ◆ melody
- ◆ harmony
- ◆ rhythm and tempo
- ◆ texture
- ◆ structure and/or form
- ◆ timbre and dynamics

We advise that candidates in the same class do not select the same piece to analyse. This has potential to increase workload for teachers and lecturers to ensure that candidates' work is their own.

For assignment, the following candidate evidence must be submitted:

- ◆ an audio recording of the composition or arrangement
- ◆ a score or performance plan of the composition or arrangement
- ◆ a review of the creative process for the composition or arrangement
- ◆ an analysis of a chosen piece of music, including reference to audio time codes
- ◆ an audio recording (for example, an audio file or web link) of the chosen piece of music used for analysis

Candidates do not need to provide edited excerpts of the audio recording. Candidates can include sections of a score or a guide to the music referencing the key features identified.

Candidates who submit an arrangement must provide a copy of the original music, including any harmonies (where available).

Some scores and performance plans submitted did not match the audio, nor give a sufficient level of detail. Presentations on the Understanding Standards website and in the assignment catalogue on SQA's secure website give good examples of both scores and performance plans.

Teachers and lecturers should:

- ◆ ensure the review of the creative process and analysis are submitted in the mandatory templates. The review of the creative process template is limited to one page. The templates are published on the [Advanced Higher Music subject page](#) on SQA's website
- ◆ ensure the composing reviews are individual to each candidate and their own work

- ◆ not give candidates composing review templates with, for example, pre-populated phrases that only require candidates to insert one or two words into the text at designated places
- ◆ encourage candidates to write the composing review as they write the piece and not leave it until the end of the process

To help the marking process run smoothly, teachers and lecturers should ensure that:

- ◆ all instrumental parts can be clearly heard on the audio file
- ◆ all audio files are in any of the following formats — MP3, MP4, WAV or WMA. Teachers and lecturers must not submit any other type of files, including music notation software files. These should be exported into an acceptable format before submission
- ◆ all digital files are clearly labelled with candidate names and which part of the assignment it contains; for example, score, analysis, review or audio file
- ◆ the flyleaf is completed accurately, and the ticks indicate the parts of the assignment submitted for the candidate

Performance

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the performance components.

An Advanced Higher programme should last a minimum of 18 minutes between the two instruments. The maximum time is 20 minutes. The performance time on either of the two selected instruments, or instrument and voice, must be a minimum of 6 minutes within the overall 18-minute programme. Centres must ensure that candidates adhere to the minimum and maximum time limits.

Centres should also ensure that the music to be played is at the appropriate level (Grade 5 or above). Carefully timed cuts may be appropriate to keep within the time limit, as long as they do not lower the technical demands. Centres should also consider the length of individual pieces after any cuts have been made. If significant cuts are made to a piece of music, it can become challenging for a candidate to access the full range of marks.

For guitar or ukulele programmes, centres should specify if the candidate is performing a 'chordal', 'melodic' or 'mixed' programme. Chords can be included in a melodic guitar or ukulele programme, but are not counted if it is not a chordal programme.

Chordal guitar and ukulele programmes must:

- ◆ include 18 chords
- ◆ be in standard notation — this could simply be a copy of the melodic line that the guitar or ukulele is accompanying, with the chord names printed above or below the staff; TAB alone is not sufficient for assessment purposes, and neither is a lyric sheet with only chord names and no music notation
- ◆ have a melody for candidates to play along with (played, sung or from a backing track) — this is essential to provide a context for the performance of the chords
- ◆ include melody and chords in at least one piece

Drum kit programmes should specify each style performed and style bank number. A programme must include six different styles, with four different fills within each style. Teachers and lecturers should refer to SQA's style bank for a list of acceptable styles. Drum kit programmes must exhibit four-way independence in every piece. For notated music, the minimum requirement is four bars of the groove and four fills with a performance plan or map.

Keyboard programmes must:

- ◆ include both the right and left hand in the performance
- ◆ perform full-fingered chords; candidates playing single-fingered chords will receive no marks for that piece

To help visiting assessment run smoothly:

- ◆ Candidate mark sheets issued by SQA must be completed in pen (not pencil) by centre staff and be available to the visiting assessor at the start of each assessment session (morning or afternoon). The candidate mark sheet is the formal record of the assessment event, and it is very important that it is completed accurately.
- ◆ Centre staff should give the visiting assessors a running order with approximate timings at the start of each session.
- ◆ To avoid unexpected candidate absence disrupting the planned running order, centre staff should have the next two candidates ready to perform. This ensures the maximum use of the visiting assessor's time.
- ◆ Timetabling should take account of the candidates' chosen performance time on each instrument. It is helpful if centres consider the time allocated for each candidate performance to make the best use of the visiting assessor's time in each centre.
- ◆ Details of the instruments, or instrument and voice used, the pieces to be performed, and all timings of pieces should be clearly indicated on the candidate mark sheet. The total length of time for each instrument or voice should also be indicated.
- ◆ Each drum kit style should be clearly named on the candidate mark sheet, irrespective of the title of the piece; for example, 'Download' — rock, bank 1.

If a candidate is absent for the performance exam for health reasons or other unexpected circumstances, SQA will try to arrange an alternative date for them to sit the exam. If this is not possible, centres must submit evidence of the candidate's attainment in performance. Centre staff should submit an audio or video recording of as much of the candidate's programme as possible, along with copies of the music and the marks awarded for all the pieces performed. Many centres routinely make audio or video recordings of prelim exams for this eventuality. If centres do not have an audio or video recording of the candidate's performance programme, they should submit alternative evidence to show that the candidate has demonstrated attainment at Advanced Higher level. Other supplementary evidence may include a certificate from a graded examination at an appropriate level.

Portfolio

Centres should consider how best they can support candidates with their harmonic understanding, particularly if candidates are going to write tonal music. An increased

awareness of the harmonic language used would benefit candidates, both in this part of the course and in the question paper. Focusing on the development of musical ideas, either melodically, rhythmically or harmonically, will aid understanding.

In their reviews, candidates should concentrate on the main decisions they made regarding their use of all the musical elements in their compositions or arrangements, and explain how they explored and developed these musical elements. They should use the analytical skills they developed in other parts of the course and apply these skills of critical reflection when considering the strengths and/or areas for improvement in their composition or arrangement.

A series of audio presentations on the Understanding Standards website is available to support candidates, teachers and lecturers with the reintroduction of the assignment. The assignment catalogue is available on SQA's secure website. The Music assignment catalogue lists approximately 120 pieces of candidate evidence across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels, including marks and commentaries. It can be used to find, for example, compositions or arrangements in a particular mark range, performance plans, and compositions and arrangements with specific instrumentation. It also gives examples of analyses.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).