Course report 2025

National 5 Music

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 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   7,730

Number of resulted entries in 2025:   8,087

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	4,274	52.9	52.9	69
B	1,871	23.1	76.0	59
C	1,142	14.1	90.1	49
D	525	6.5	96.6	39
No award	275	3.4	100%	Not applicable

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 or equal to 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

The question paper performed as expected. Feedback from markers indicates that this was a fair and balanced paper, consistent with previous years. There was good course coverage, excerpts spanned a wide range of genres and, overall, there was an appropriate level of challenge as well as more accessible questions.

Assignment

Candidates composed in a range of styles and genres. They wrote for a number of instruments and/or voices. A few candidates used digital audio workstations.

Most candidates submitted the three required pieces of evidence — an audio file, a score or performance plan, and a composing review. Most centres submitted these files digitally.

Performance

Most candidates performed a variety of music on instruments from the approved instrument list. Most candidates met the required performance time of 8 minutes — performing on two instruments or one instrument and voice.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Many candidates demonstrated that they were well prepared for the assessment, showed familiarity with the question types and displayed appropriate exam technique. Most candidates attempted every question.

Most candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 1(a) — identifying swing
- Question 3(c) — inserting the missing notes
- Question 4(b) — identifying aria
- Question 7(a)(i) — identifying symphony
- Question 7(b)(i) — identifying rapping

Many candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 1(b) — recognising strathspey and Scotch snap
- Question 1(f) — identifying chromatic and distortion
- Question 3(b) — identifying moderato or andante as an appropriate tempo marking, and correctly inserting this above bar 1
- Question 3(d) — identifying the interval as a semitone or 2nd
- Question 4(e) — identifying homophonic as the texture

Assignment

Some candidates composed good pieces, and a few candidates composed very good or excellent pieces. These candidates imaginatively developed a range of musical ideas, selecting and using elements creatively.

Some candidates who chose instrumental or vocal timbres, and a style that they were familiar with, achieved higher marks. Many candidates who wrote for a small number of instruments were successful.

Many candidates gave at least a satisfactory account of their main decisions in their composing reviews. Some candidates gave sufficient explanation of the exploration and development of musical ideas, and satisfactory identification of strengths and/or areas for improvement.

Performance

In most performances, there was clear evidence of personalisation and choice in the varied programmes selected.

Most candidates were well prepared, and many performances were of a high standard.

Most candidates who performed on drum kit used the drum kit style bank.

Many vocal candidates performed from memory, although this is not mandatory, and they chose songs that were appropriate for their musical and technical skills.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Many candidates found the following questions challenging:

- Question 1(c) — identifying Alberti bass
- Question 2, part 3 — identifying oboe
- Question 3(e) — writing the repeat mark accurately and in the correct place
- Question 4(c) — identifying mezzo-soprano
- Question 6 — identifying anacrusis

Most candidates found the following question challenging:

- Question 1(d) — identifying the time signature as 6/8

Some candidates did not always follow the instructions for multiple choice questions, for example, only ticking one choice where two responses were required.

Assignment

Composition

Many candidates:

- who wrote for instruments that they were unfamiliar with did not demonstrate effective instrumental writing, including knowledge of their range
- did not demonstrate successful development of musical ideas appropriate to their chosen style — pieces that repeated a substantial section without any development of, for example, melody, rhythm, harmony or timbre, frequently received lower marks

Some candidates:

- struggled to write effective harmonic progressions in their chosen style, and their lack of harmonic understanding often resulted in dissonance between melodic lines and accompaniment
- composed melody lines lacking shape and a sense of phrasing

A few candidates:

- who chose to work with pre-recorded loops did not provide sufficient detail in either their performance plan or composing review to clearly show their own creative input
- submitted poor scores or performance plans; examples of this included:

  - notating only one part, with other parts only in TAB
  - not providing information about harmonies
  - not detailing the structure of the piece
  - submitting individual parts instead of a score showing all parts

A few compositions were outwith the mandatory duration. They must last a minimum of 1 minute and a maximum of 2 minutes and 30 seconds.

Composing review

Many candidates:

- did not provide sufficient explanation of their exploration and development of musical ideas
- showed limited or very limited identification of strengths and areas for improvement
- did not include enough musical detail

Performance

Most candidates' mark sheets indicated a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 8 minutes. However, during the performance assessment, a few candidates either did not attempt to perform one or more pieces, or only performed part of a piece, meaning their performances were under 8 minutes.

Where cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates played sections of music below the minimum requirements (Grade 3 or above).

A few candidates who performed chordal guitar or chordal ukulele did not provide a notated melody line, which is a requirement. A few chordal guitar and chordal ukulele candidates did not demonstrate the minimum 12 chords required.

A few drum kit candidates did not select their four styles from the drum kit style bank and did not demonstrate four-way independence in every style.

A few candidates performed keyboard programmes without left-hand chords. If a candidate plays with right hand only, they will be awarded 0 marks for the piece.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Concepts in the National 5 question paper are drawn from National 3, National 4 and National 5 concept lists, so candidates should be able to identify concepts from all three levels.

In short-answer questions, candidates should use the information provided to guide them towards the answer. For example, in question 4(e) when 'homophonic' was the answer, candidates were guided in the stem of the question to name the texture of the singing.

In question 3, when writing notation, candidates should clearly indicate whether a note is on a line or in a space. They cannot gain marks if their intention is unclear.

In question 5 and question 8, the table headings may change from year to year. Candidates should carefully read the questions to ensure their answers are relevant. Teachers and lecturers should refer to recent past papers and the specimen question paper for examples of the question styles and marking instructions.

In question 8, candidates should give answers related to the excerpt and avoid long lists of unrelated concepts. Lists of concepts unrelated to the music or extensive lists of contradictory concepts will result in candidates not accessing the full range of marks.

When preparing formal assessments, centres must consider the following information:

- A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety cannot be the only evidence submitted for the examination exceptional circumstances consideration service. Past papers are accessible on SQA's website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.

- Some questions from previous qualifications may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance, and may need to be amended.

Assignment

The following SQA [Understanding Standards](#) materials provide useful information for teachers and lecturers:

- The [assignment resource](#) (published in 2023) includes marked candidate evidence with commentaries across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels.
- The Music Assignment Catalogue, available on SQA's secure site, lists approximately 120 pieces of candidate evidence across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels, including marks and commentaries. There is a wide range of instrumentation, approaches and development of ideas in the compositions.

Composition

Teachers and lecturers should avoid structured template approaches to composition. For example, they must not set some or all of the following features in a template:

- number of instruments
- instrumentation
- prescribed harmonies in certain bars
- changes of time signature in certain bars
- prescribed rhythmic, melodic or structural features in certain bars.

These restrictive templates would go beyond the acceptable amount of reasonable assistance.

Candidates must submit a score or performance plan of their composition. Markers award 0 marks for a composition if a score or performance plan is not submitted.

Performance plans should be clear and informative, with a well-defined harmonic framework to inform the marking process. A performance plan containing only screenshots from a digital audio workstation with no other information will receive 0

marks. Candidates could include, for example, information about loops, which instrumental parts the candidate has played in, where and how an instrumental part develops, and the structure of the piece.

A score or performance plan that is only tablature (TAB) is not sufficient. Markers award 0 marks in this instance. Candidates should notate any parts written in TAB; this can be done using most notation software.

Candidates who choose to work with pre-recorded loops must ensure that they use them in the context of a wider composition. Candidates must clearly identify their creative input in their composing review, for example by stating if they created some or all of the loops, or if they were sourced from elsewhere.

If candidates compose a serial piece, they must annotate their note rows in the score. Markers award 0 marks if note rows are not annotated on the score. Candidates should refer to how they have explored and developed their rows in their composing review.

Composing review

Teachers and lecturers should:

- ensure that composing reviews are submitted in the one-page mandatory template available on the [subject page](#) of our website
- encourage candidates to write their composing review as they make their decisions and explore and develop their musical ideas. Candidates should not leave writing the review until the end of the process
- not give candidates composing review templates with, for example, pre-populated phrases that require candidates to only insert one or two words into the text at designated places

Candidates should:

- clearly identify their input in their composition. For example, they must make it clear if any part of a piano accompaniment has been realised by someone else
- clearly identify if they used any software to generate chord progressions

- indicate in their composing review if they select a chord progression and use an electronic program to devise an accompaniment
- include the main decisions they made. This could include initial ideas such as the chosen instruments and/or voices, time signature, tempo, key and initial chord progressions. They could also write about further decisions they make as they compose their piece, such as different chord progressions, key changes, structure and articulation
- include how they explored and developed their musical ideas. They should give musical detail
- include at least two strengths and/or areas for improvement. These should ideally refer to musical aspects rather than the candidate's feelings. For example, 'the middle section has a change of time signature and modulates to a minor key to show development from the first section' shows clear details of a strength, whereas 'the middle section sounds good compared to the first section' is a weak statement

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

- the flyleaf is completed accurately, and the ticks indicate whether parts of the assignment have or have not been submitted
- all digital files are clearly labelled with candidate names and which part of the assignment it contains; for example, audio, score or performance plan, or review
- all instrumental parts can be clearly heard in the audio file
- the Ex 6 form (attendance register) is completed to indicate if any candidate has not submitted an assignment and/or they have been withdrawn

Performance

Centres should make sure they are familiar with the performance sections in the course specification document, which is available on the subject page of our website. Teachers and lecturers should also refer to the information for teachers and lecturers

document for visiting assessment. This is published on SQA's secure site and issued alongside the candidate marksheets in January.

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 the candidate 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 formal assessments 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 National 5 level. Other supplementary evidence may include a certificate from a graded examination at an appropriate level.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, we aim 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, we hold 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 our 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. We 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.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).