



# Course report 2025

## Advanced Higher 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: 1,747

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,647

## 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	776	47.1	47.1	70
B	454	27.6	74.7	60
C	256	15.5	90.2	50
D	116	7.0	97.3	40
No award	45	2.7	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 provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their subject knowledge, understanding of music theory and notation skills. The statistical data showed that the paper was fair and balanced, with an appropriate level of demand and challenge.

## Assignment

Most candidates submitted compositions, and a few candidates submitted arrangements. Candidates composed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Personalisation and choice were also evident, with candidates analysing a wide range of pieces and songs. Most centres submitted 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 18 minutes — performing on two instruments or one instrument and voice.

## Portfolio

As in previous years, candidates composed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Most candidates submitted two compositions and a few candidates submitted three.

## **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.

Most candidates answered questions 1(a) and (b) well. Part (a) was multiple choice and candidates identified the correct ensemble — string quartet, in part (b).

Most candidates correctly identified four beats in question 2(c)(i) and perfect cadence in question 2(c)(ii).

Many candidates correctly answered part 3 of question 3(a), homophonic, and most candidates correctly inserted barlines in question 4(d).

Most candidates answered question 5(a), which was multiple choice, well. Many candidates identified the interval of a 6th in question 5(d)(ii).

Overall, candidates appeared to have a good understanding of the requirements of question 6. This was particularly evident in question 6(a)(i), where most candidates provided concepts relevant to the music under the given headings. Many candidates also answered question 6(a)(ii) well.

#### **Assignment**

Candidates submitted compositions in a variety of styles and genres — for example, piano pieces, songs, serial compositions, jazz and blues pieces, and electronic pieces. There were also some arrangements of both traditional and popular pieces. There were fewer arrangements submitted this year that were transcriptions of

original scores. Candidates achieving higher marks demonstrated development of musical ideas and a good harmonic understanding.

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

Candidates demonstrated a good deal of personalisation and choice in the analysis component. Some candidates chose to give a bar-by-bar style of analysis, and others chose to use headings; both approaches are acceptable. Many candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the key features of the music. Most candidates included audio time codes correctly referenced to key features of the music.

## **Performance**

In most performances, there was clear evidence of personalisation and choice, 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

A few candidates found identification of diminution in question 1(a) and identification of hemiola in question 5(a) challenging.

Most candidates did not achieve the marks for question 3(a), parts 2 and 4. Candidates gave a variety of answers, including inverted pedal for part 2. In part 4, candidates answered minor instead of relative minor.

Some candidates found question 3(c) challenging. Candidates provided lower-level concepts, such as pizzicato or arco, rather than harmonics. In question 3(d), candidates provided atonality as a response rather than polytonality and most candidates did not achieve the mark.

Most candidates found circling the subdominant note very challenging for question 4(c). It should be noted that the identification of tonic, subdominant and dominant notes in the keys of C, G, F major and A minor is listed in the melody/harmony column of the literacy list at Higher level in the course specification.

In addition to question 4(c), candidates found the other musical literacy questions in this year's paper quite challenging. Many candidates did not achieve marks for questions 2(a)(i), 2(a)(ii), 2(d) and 5(d)(i). Markers commented:

- question 2(a)(i) — candidates omitted the 3 in the triplet
- question 2(a)(ii) — candidates placed the F correctly but also added a flat sign
- question 2(d) — pitches were often inaccurate
- question 5(d)(i) — candidates found identifying diminished 7th challenging

Some candidates did not achieve marks for the literacy questions 4(a) and 4(b).

Markers commented:

- question 4(a) — candidates found it challenging to transpose to the correct octave
- question 4(b) — the notes were often not clearly drawn as quavers or crotchets

Many candidates found question 5(b) challenging and incorrectly provided motet as a response rather than madrigal. Some candidates also found question 5(c) challenging and incorrectly provided chorale as a response rather than anthem.

In question 6(b)(i), candidates were required to give detailed differences and similarities. Some candidates made detailed comparisons and highlighted instrumentation, key and harmony. Some candidates also identified concepts that were found in excerpt 1 or excerpt 2 only. 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 reach an insightful conclusion. Candidates found the period identification of excerpt 1 quite challenging, and many candidates did not give a clear justification for the Classical period.

## **Assignment**

A few candidates did not submit pieces beyond the level expected at Higher and did not demonstrate a secure knowledge of harmony.

A few scores and performance plans did not match the audio or give a sufficient level of detail. In addition, a few candidates submitted serial compositions and did not annotate their rows on their scores.

Many candidates produced scores and performance plans that were quite detailed, but a few candidates presented screenshots only as a performance plan. A few arrangements were transcriptions of original scores.

Reviews of the creative process would have benefitted from greater detail on how ideas had been developed.

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 did not include an audio link, and in some analyses the time codes included were not always accurate. Teachers, lecturers and candidates should refer to the Advanced Higher course specification document, available on the

[subject page](#) of our website, which details the maximum marks available if key features have not been included.

## **Performance**

Most candidates' 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 or more pieces, or only performed part of a piece, meaning their performances were under 18 minutes.

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

A few chordal guitar and chordal ukulele candidates did not incorporate the minimum 18 chords required. In addition, a few candidates did not meet the requirements as they 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 every style.

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. If a candidate plays with right hand only or uses single-fingered chords, they will be awarded 0 marks for the piece.

## **Portfolio**

As in previous years, some candidates did not achieve higher marks as their work demonstrated a lack of harmonic awareness and development of their ideas.

## Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

### Question paper

Concepts in the Advanced Higher question paper are drawn from all levels from National 3 to Advanced Higher, so candidates are expected to have a secure understanding of concepts from all five levels.

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), 5(b) and 5(c) in this year's question paper tested three Advanced Higher concepts: polytonality, madrigal and anthem. Questions 1(b) and 3(c) tested Higher concepts: string quartet and harmonics. 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. Giving candidates regular opportunities to relate what they hear to what they see will directly benefit their attainment in these types of questions. Candidates should complete their answers, as is the case for the whole paper, in blue or black ink.

Centres should continue to remind candidates that their responses to questions 6(a)(i) and (ii) should contain the prominent concepts under each category relating to the music heard. In questions 6(a) and 6(b)(i), centres should encourage candidates to focus on identifying concepts or similarities/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 melody, harmony, texture, structure, form and timbre were detailed in the marking instructions.

The marking instructions give a variety of options that candidates could use for question 6(b)(ii). 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 consider more closely 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.

When preparing formal assessments, centres must consider the following:

- A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety must not 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 structure and content before the assessment.
- Centres may need to amend some questions from older past papers as they may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance.

## 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 ideas in the compositions.

## Composition and arrangement

Teachers and lecturers should avoid structured template approaches to composition and arrangement. 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.

Performance plans should be clear and informative, with a well-defined harmonic framework to inform the marking process. Markers award 0 marks for a performance plan containing only screenshots of a digital audio workstation with no other information. 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 review of the creative process, for example by stating if they created some or all of the loops, or they were sourced from elsewhere.

If candidates choose to 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 the review of the creative process.

In an arrangement, candidates must creatively rework their chosen music by exploring and developing musical ideas using all of the musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre. An arrangement cannot be a basic transcription from an available score.

For arrangement, candidates must include a copy of the source material used and clarify details of their input in their review.

For analysis, candidates must provide an audio recording of their chosen piece and include audio time codes.

## **Review of the creative process**

Teachers and lecturers should:

- ensure that reviews are submitted in the one-page mandatory template available on the [subject page](#) of our website
- encourage candidates to write their review of the creative process 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 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 or arrangement; for example, they must make it clear if any part of a piano accompaniment has been realised by someone else
- indicate in their review of the creative process 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 their strengths and/or areas for improvement. These should ideally refer to musical aspects rather than the candidate's feelings. They should use the analytical skills 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. Candidates must give a minimum of two strengths and/or areas for improvement

## **Evidence submission**

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
- for candidates who submit an arrangement, a copy of the original music, including any harmonies (where available)
- 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

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 them to sit it. 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.

# 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](#).