

Theory Examinations May 2012: Chief Examiner's Report Grades 1 – 8

General Comments:

There were many strong responses to the questions in this session and great credit must go to the candidates and teachers who prepared for these examinations. Before looking separately at each of the grades, it would be worth making a few general comments which would apply to all of the grades:

- As always, it must be stressed that the importance of reading and fully understanding the question is essential before taking action. Ensure that the question is addressed in its fullest terms and that no part of the question is left unaddressed (e.g. in the writing of scales, arpeggios & broken chords which, even at their appearance in the early grades, require a number of elements to be considered before a satisfactory answer may be produced).
- Clarity of presentation is vital – particularly when placing notes and symbols on the stave; ambiguity in this area can only detract from the accuracy of the response and it must be expected that mark(s) will be deducted. It is always disappointing to see a promising answer jeopardised by lack of care and precision in the presentation.
- Items such as lines, beams and 'hairpins' need careful placement and should always be drawn with a ruler.
- Time signatures are naturally required at the beginning of a piece of music but, unlike the key signature, not at the beginning of every line of stave (unless there is a change of time-signature at some point).
- A double bar-line should be placed immediately after the final note – even if this is not at the end of a line.
- In questions where the candidate is required to circle five 'mistakes' in an extract, it should be noted that if MORE than five are circled, the marker will only look at the first five. Similarly, if a question asks for the names of three composers or indeed for any similar list pertaining to the contents of the syllabus, the marker will only look at the first three (or at how ever many has been asked for in the question).
- Candidates need to be quite clear about the use of chord symbols and of roman numerals, including their precise placement on the stave. Chord symbols should always be placed above the stave and Roman numerals below.

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Grade 1

There were many good workings in this grade. However, a distinct weakness was noted in Sections 3 & 4 and a fair number of discrepancies also in Section 2 where there was sometimes a confusion over clefs, the direction of scales and arpeggios and the placing of a key-signature.

The upper tonic of the arpeggio seemed to cause some doubt. It was often in this section that candidates seemed not always to be reading fully or understanding the requirements of the question.

In Section 3, a number of candidates failed to circle the 'mistakes' though in most cases an attempt was made to correct them. Five marks are awarded for the correct identification/circling of the mistakes and ten marks are available for the accurate writing out of the correct version.

Answering of the rhythm in Section 4 always produces a very mixed bag of responses in terms of quality. It goes without saying that accuracy in adherence to the time signature, placing of notes/rests on the stave line and correct grouping/beaming of notes are all necessary for a good answer but examiners are also looking for a response which reveals that some thought has been given to elements of construction, i.e. reference to the given 2-bar rhythm, combined with some variety and a convincing ending. Candidates who simply copy out the given rhythm as their answer will not be able to achieve many marks.

Care should also be taken with the labelling and placing of the tonic triad – written as a chord symbol above the music and as a Roman numeral below the music.

Grade 2

The handling of Section 2 revealed similar weaknesses to those outlined in Grade 1. Placing of the key signature was a particular point of concern, also the direction of the scale. Similarly, there was confusion over the writing of the descending part of the arpeggio of C major which was quite frequently notated as C,A,F instead of C,G,E – often only the tonics were correct.

In the first section, a number of candidates in question 1.4 overlooked the fact that the semibreve rest also acts as a whole-bar rest and there was confusion over minor/major 3rd in question 1.9.

Once more, not all candidates are careful enough to identify/circle the mistakes in Section 3 (which will automatically lose them a possible 5 marks)

In Section 6 candidates must stick to the parameters of the question. For example, if the question states that the notes of the tonic chord of D minor are to be used, the requirement is that ONLY the notes D,F & A should be used in the construction of a simple yet sufficiently imaginative melody.

As in Grade 1 there was some doubt concerning the use and placing of chord symbols/Roman numerals.

Grade 3

Sections 1, 4 & 5 were generally well answered though care should be taken with the spacing of voice parts in Section 5 (some excessively large intervals – particularly between tenor and alto – created a lack of balance in the chord); care should also be taken to ensure that the notes of a chord are well-aligned.

In Section 2 the requirements of the broken chord were sometimes not understood – the question will indicate how many notes should be placed in each group of the broken chord. There was also some confusion over the writing of the melodic minor scale.

Some candidates lost marks unnecessarily by not identifying and circling the mistakes in Section 3.

In Section 6 the melody needs to have some rhythmic interest but over-complicated (and sometimes wayward) rhythms often detract from the sense of flow. Quite a number of examples revealed little thought for the melodic shape, resulting in some very ungainly intervals. In a minor key, the leading note will need to be sharpened, and, unless the leading note moves to another note of the same chord, it is best resolved upwards onto the tonic.

Once more, the candidate needs to have complete understanding of the concept underpinning the labelling and placing of chords (chord symbols above the stave, Roman numerals below). The tonic chord in a minor key is labelled *i* not *I*.

Grade 4

Section 1 was generally well-handled though not all candidates were sure of the implications of the term 'enharmonic' in question 1.5 and quite a number failed to identify the descending harmonic minor scale in question 1.7.

Sections 4 & 7 were also quite well managed though the concept of harmonic rhythm still eluded a number of candidates.

Harmonic rhythm refers to the frequency of change in the harmony. A change in harmony at uniform intervals in the metre, for example, on every beat (or every half-beat or indeed every bar etc.) will result in a regular harmonic change. If no definite rhythmic pattern is discernible then the harmonic change may be described as irregular; where there is no change at all in the harmony, the harmonic rhythm may be described as static. There may also be combinations of these e.g. an eight bar section may begin with a regular pattern of harmonic rhythm which becomes irregular in the second half. There are good examples of these on page 9 of the Trinity College London Grade 4 *Theory of Music Workbook*.

The one other part of Section 7 which caused problems was question 7.7, although the note names were often known, many candidates wrote the notes at the wrong octave.

In Section 5 candidates need to be careful with note alignment and use of stems. The chord needs to be well-balanced for SATB and particular care should be taken when considering the placing of notes for alto and tenor. In the dominant chord of the minor key quite a number of candidates omitted to sharpen the 3rd of the chord (i.e. the sharpened leading note of the scale).

In Section 6 there were a few examples where chords (instead of a tune) had been written above the bass line. The question states:

“Use notes from the chords shown by the chord symbols to write a tune above the bass line”.

Therefore, the indicated chords are given purely to aid the candidates' selection of melody notes; the writing of chords would result in the harmonisation of the bass line rather than a single melody (or tune) above the given bass line.

The use of an unaccented passing note is often not sufficiently well understood. The requirements of the question are clear – the candidate needs to show an ability to decorate the melody with some unaccented passing notes. Accented passing notes and auxiliary notes should not be used

Grade 5

Many candidates were strong in response to Sections 1, 4 & 7.

As in previous sessions, Sections 3 & 6 are still the areas which give rise to the greatest concern.

In Section 3 the setting of words is a two-fold matter, in the first instance it is necessary to recognise where the natural stresses lie in the verse, these can then be aligned with the accents in the metre of the music.

A simple but effective rhythm can then be constructed around this, phrase lengths will always be of a conventional length.

Ensure that notes and words/syllables are accurately aligned and check also that bars have the correct number of beats.

In Section 6 it is important to remember that good melodies which fulfil the terms of the question will show the candidate's understanding of the chord symbol implications, an awareness of melodic curve and shape (larger intervals should be handled with very great care), and finally, an ability to decorate the tune in an appropriate manner but not to clutter the line with excessive ornamentation or over complicated embellishments. In terms of part-writing, an element of contrary motion with the bass line is often beneficial to the overall effect.

There were also problems with the handling of the melodic minor scale in question 2.1 and spacing of voice parts to create balanced SATB chords in Section 5 (particularly the spacing of tenor and alto). A number of candidates also overlooked the necessity to sharpen the third in chord V of a minor key.

Section 7, question 7.8, the notes in the alto clef were often written at the wrong octave.

Grade 6

A reasonable attempt was made at Section 1 though a particular weak spot was question 1.2 where the alto (instead of tenor) clef was often suggested.

At this level particular care is needed with the handling of the demands of the transposition question. The key-signature should be checked and double-checked, an error here will have serious repercussions on the musical effect and consequently on the mark awarded.

The creative heart of the paper is found in Section 3 where the candidate is required to compose an eight-bar melody. A successful melody will display some element of shape and design - in the weakest examples the melody wanders aimlessly and continues in an ungainly manner towards a less than convincing ending. Excessive use of chord outlines in the melody line will result in a lack of interest. Diminished and augmented intervals must be handled with much care.

Construction of the melody should display a good balance between the repetition (or modified repetition) of ideas and more contrasting, original ideas. Finally, candidate should always add phrasing and dynamics - these will help to fully characterise the music.

The harmonic sequence in Section 4 was well managed by many candidates although there was the odd misunderstanding.

In Section 5 the notes were often accurate but spacing and doubling of notes was sometimes weak. In Section 6 the use of Roman numerals was better handled than the chord symbols. Part-writing needs care in the completion of the cadence.

In the final section most uncertainties were concerned with the harmonic writing referred to in question 7.2 and the texture of the music in question 7.7.

GRADE 7

Sections 2, 4, 7 & 5 were generally well attempted.

In question 1.1 there was some uncertainty about writing in 12/16 time and some candidates had problems handling the 7th chord in 1.3.

Section 3 revealed some proficient answers but comments relating to the equivalent section in the Grade 6 paper also apply here.

In Section 6 the labelling of the second chord in bar two was often inaccurate. Again, greater care is generally needed with the part-writing when completing the cadence.

In the final Section, question 7.8, the composer's use of a cadence to characterise and differentiate between phrases 17- 20 and 21-24 was rarely appreciated.

Grade 8

In Section 1 there were some good answers but also a number of surprisingly weak responses - not least the handling of the transposition of the tone-row in 1.2.

As in Grades 6 & 7, the more creative task of melody writing was often compromised by lack of design and structure. A satisfactory balance needs to be struck between the repetition of the opening idea (and repeated use of its rhythm) and the incorporation of more contrasting material (see comments in Grade 6).

It was alarming, particularly at this level, to see how many candidates thought it necessary to use a time signature at the beginning of each line.

Notation was generally accurate in Section 3 but a number of candidates experienced problems with the handling of the key signature in the cor anglais and clarinet parts.

There were some worthy attempts in Section 4 though the perennial problems of part-writing, spacing, doubling, consecutives etc. all need constant attention. Candidates are urged to gain as much experience as possible in this genre by regularly 'playing-through' the many Bach chorale examples which are available - there is no better way for the style to be fully absorbed and appreciated.

An important element in the writing of these chorales is the idiomatic handling of cadence points - a good strategy always is to start the working of the chorale at such points.

Once a secure, overall harmonic framework is in place it is then necessary to have an idea of how Bach might have handled the decoration of the chord progressions. This will afford an even greater feeling of 'authenticity' and style in the writing.

Section 5 - a rather variable response overall; in question 5.7 many candidates did not notice the presence of the tied Gb from the previous bar.