

# Component 4: Short Essay

In the examination you will be required to write a short essay of between 400-500 words, based upon issues associated with performance at an advanced level. Topics could include:

- writing about a composer whose music you have performed;
- discussing a type or style of music which you have performed;
- giving an analysis of a piece of music which you have performed;
- discussing historical and/or performance practice issues;
- commenting upon issues related to giving concerts, programme-building, concert etiquette, dress, venues and acoustics, consideration for the audience;
- discussing contemporary issues in the world of musical performance, such as funding, the role of such bodies as the Arts Council, the BBC and other broadcasters, and the use of Lottery monies in funding music making.

You will be asked to choose one title from a choice of approximately ten, so you can be confident that there will be at least one topic on which you can write with some authority and knowledge. Unless you are confident writing on a wide variety of topics, it is probably a good idea to decide beforehand what kind of essay you plan to write, and prepare accordingly. Are you someone who has a talent for detailed musical analysis? If so, it is probably a good idea to undertake a detailed study of one or two pieces you have performed, or which you know well, so that you can respond to such a question in the exam. Are you interested in composers and their lives? If so, read up on the biographies of one or two composers. Are you interested in the history of your instrument, or in performance practice issues, or in famous performers of the past? Are you interested in aesthetic matters (the 'philosophy' of music)? Are you interested in more nuts-and-bolts matters such as organising or funding concerts? Wide reading in some of these areas will help you to prepare for the exam question.

In answering any essay question, your response will naturally be affected by the preconceptions of your culture, age and personality. The examiners will be interested to know what your views and ideas are as a thinking performer. Music is often subjective and personal, and it is a useful skill to be able to analyse and articulate the reasons behind it. This should help you to become a more informed and thoughtful musician, and if you are a performer, this should enable you to play with more maturity and depth of understanding.

## Study and preparation

Here are some sample questions with pointers towards how you might respond. We suggest you answer these yourself, using the bullet-points as guides. We then look at essay technique in general.

### **1. Choose a composer whose work is relevant to your instrument and discuss your approach to the performance of a representative selection of their music, with special reference to phrasing, dynamics, articulation and style.**

- Name the composer, giving dates and musical period.
- State why you have chosen this particular composer.
- Select and detail the repertory chosen.
- What does it illustrate in terms of phrasing, dynamics, articulation and style?

For example, a work from the baroque period will display an over-arching structure that can easily be grasped, together with its use of motive and counterpoint. The phrasing will be regular and vocally

based, the tonality simple and articulation straightforward. An awareness of the influence of other art forms on this music would be a useful adjunct.

A work from the romantic period would highlight the roving harmonic content and style, the irregular phrasing, dramatic articulations, and large-scale formal structures, especially in music written towards the end of the period. An awareness of how this musical period formed the basis for much of subsequent musical development, together with the influence of other art forms and literature could be another useful adjunct.

## **2. Give an analysis of a recently-written work you have performed. Credit will be given for the use of musical quotations in support of your argument.**

- Analysis should be focused towards developing an understanding of the work structurally, technically and musically.
- Your analysis will be concerned with the nature of the chosen work; with what it embodies or signifies; with how it has come to be.
- Your analysis should answer the question 'How does it work?' and your chief method will be by comparison with other works, as it determines the structure and discovers the functions of those structural elements.

A work from the 20th century, for example, would be placed in the context of the analytical developments which took place during the first half of the century and how these developments inform our understanding. An awareness of the writings of Schenker, Schoenberg, Tovey, Jonathan Dunsby and Nicholas Cook could be helpful to your revision.

## **Planning your essay**

Having chosen your question, spend time examining the exact wording: every word is there for a purpose. Highlight the specific subject words and concepts and then scrutinise the directive words such as 'discuss' or 'assess'. Now in a list note down and number your ideas and thoughts, as the sequence of ideas is not important at this stage. Next, add, omit or amalgamate ideas and reject any weak and/or repeated ones. List the musical examples needed to support your ideas and finalise your list of ideas and thoughts.

The essay is in three sections (a structure that has served well the musical world!):

1. **Introduction.** Comment on the chosen topic, what you understand by it and what are the main issues for discussion. Comment on, and justify, the aspects you will be dealing with. Finally, comment on your general approach throughout the essay.
2. **Main body of text.** In the central section, each main point will need a new paragraph and your arguments and ideas will need to be logically arranged (this is where your list will come in handy), as you will need to create a flow to your argument rather than disjointed ideas. You will also need to look at where to make links between your paragraphs, as they are important to enable you to refer back to the original wording of the question, reinforce your points and indicate what is going to be discussed next. Remember to include the musical examples needed to support your thesis in this section.
3. **Conclusion.** Summarise your main ideas and offer a conclusion. You could also point out wider implications and future trends. End positively! Review your essay, checking content, arguments, style and grammar.

It is important to remember that your style is academic; in other words critically argumentative and not an informal 'chatty' narrative. Your examiners will be looking for a well-structured essay, showing logical reasoning and coherence. You may assume an educated readership: if you are writing an essay about Brahms' piano music, you do not need to spend time giving basic details about Brahms' life, or state that he was a German Romantic composer, etc.

'Clarity of language and vocabulary' is worth 10% of the marks. You will not necessarily receive a poor mark if your grammar, spelling and expression is not perfect, and ultimately the content is much more important; but remember that it is only through your writing that you make your case, and the better your writing is, the more effective your case will be. Perhaps most importantly of all, do not 'waffle' – i.e. do not 'pad out' your essay with information which is not relevant to the question. This will be quickly seized on by examiners and marks will be lost. If what you are writing is not helping you to answer the question, do not put it in – it is better to end up with a shorter essay which is of high quality and answers the question well.

## **General examples of essay planning**

### **Writing about a composer whose music you have performed**

- Name the composer, giving dates and musical period
- Say why you have chosen this composer. What is their significance in terms of the instrument, and/or more generally?
- Focus on the repertoire (this may be one or more pieces as required by the question). Refer to specific elements in the music, and quote musical examples.
- Bring in any additional points such as relevant biographical information, influences on the music, or the influences of this music on later developments, etc.
- What does your consideration of this repertoire demonstrate or lead you to conclude? You could be assessing the significance of this composer's work, perhaps in terms of specific parameters.

### **Analysis of music you have performed**

- Start with an overview of the structure and significant points.
- Focus in on the music, in terms of structure, techniques, thematic content, key schemes, textures, etc.
- Use any technique of analysis which seems appropriate for the work under discussion. This may include structural / tonal analysis, Schenkerian techniques, set theory, etc.
- Draw on your own experience of performing and/or listening to the work if appropriate.
- Use your analysis to suggest an answer to the question 'how and why does this music work?'

### **Discussing an issue of performance practice**

- Give a brief overview of the issue raised in the question, mentioning any particularly salient points.
- Take a historical perspective. What is known about performance on your instrument in the past? Refer to performers and writers on performance.
- What evidence is available from recordings, both historic and recent?
- If you are discussing a particular issue (e.g. 'authentic' versus 'modern' performance), consider both sides of the argument, for and against.
- Conclude by stating your view, based on the evidence presented earlier in the essay.

## Discussing issues related to concerts / recitals, etc.

- Start by focusing on the issue raised in the question, mentioning any important points directly related to it.
- Refer to examples of concerts you have attended, given, or of which you have been involved in the production.
- Give examples of 'good' and 'bad' practice, and explain why you would categorise them as such.
- Conclude by stating your view, based on the evidence presented earlier in the essay.

## Sample Questions

Having read and understood this guide, we recommend you answer the following sample questions, using the essay planner above. Further questions can be found in the specimen exam papers.

- a) How far do you consider that certain composers, through their creative work, have made a significant development to your instrument?
- b) Choosing a composition, related to your instrument, from the period 1685-1829, discuss how the approach to performance of this music has changed.
- c) Discuss the importance of the Arts Council / National Lottery funding in supporting new music at both national and local level.

For further questions, see the specimen exam papers.

## Further Reading

This is just a starting point. Read widely and extensively!

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| <i>New Essays on Performance Practice</i>                                  | F. Neumann                          | (URP, 1989)            |
| <i>Music Analysis in Theory and Practice</i>                               | Dunsby & Whittall                   | (Faber, 1986)          |
| <i>Essays in Musical Analysis</i>  | D. Tovey                            | (various volumes, OUP) |
| <i>Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance</i>                       | R. Taruskin                         | (OUP, 1995)            |
| <i>Settling the Score: A Journey Through the Music of the 20th Century</i> | ed. M. Oliver                       | (Faber, 1999)          |
| <i>Analysing Musical Multimedia</i>  | N. Cook                             | (OUP, 2000)            |
| <i>Music: A Very Short Introduction</i>                                    | N. Cook                             | (OUP, 2000)            |
| <i>Classical Music Magazine</i>  | Published by Rhinegold, Fortnightly |                        |