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Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Level 1 Music 2025

**91950 Demonstrate understanding of music in
relation to contexts**

EXEMPLAR

Merit

TOTAL 06

I Am – Stan Walker

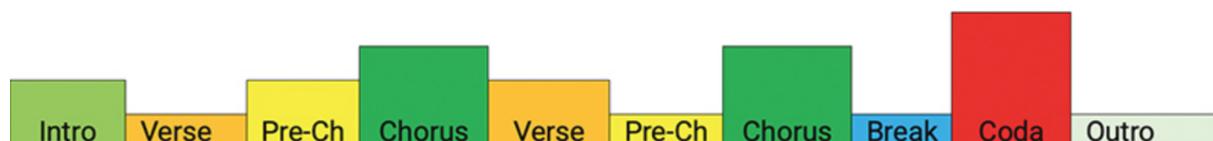
The song “I Am” by Stan Walker was released in 2023 and was written for Ava DuVernay’s film *Origin*, after she discovered Walker on YouTube singing a cover of Ultralight Beam by Kanye West, and was inspired by his voice and message. The film explores themes of identity, race, and human connection, and Walker’s song reflects these ideas through its focus on empowerment and self-worth. “I Am” celebrates cultural pride and personal strength in the face of struggle, while also representing Walker’s journey as a Māori artist finding his voice on a global stage. The purpose of the song is to inspire us with confidence and unity, connecting to both the message of the film and to the wider idea of embracing the reality of who you are.

The piece is in D minor, giving it a strong emotional base while also using brighter, major chords throughout the song in order to create a hopeful sound. The tonal centre is D, meaning that the song often returns to that note or chord to make it feel resolved. The time signature is 4/4, which is regular and steady, typical of pop music, and helps support the anthemic rhythm of the chorus. The melody of the chorus is an outline of the pentatonic scale in D, with the exception being an E on the word *ahau*.

Dm C/E F Am C/G C Dm

He__ toi-o-ra ahau nōu__ te toi nō ku-ra-wa-ka ta-ku rong-o-mai whi-ti e____

Adding on, the song follows a verse/chorus structure (strophic form) which means that each verse and chorus repeat with a bit of variation. This makes the song feel familiar and allows the message of strength and identity to build as it goes on. The texture starts out quite thin and homophonic, with Stan Walker’s voice accompanied by piano and soft instrumentation in the background, but as it develops, more layers are added. The chorus becomes thicker and almost choral, with layered harmonies that sound like a *tira* (Māori choir or collective *waiata*). This builds a feeling of community and collective power, tying back to the aforementioned film *Origin*’s themes.



The instruments used in the song are piano, drums, synths, bass, strings, and both lead and backing vocals. Even though there are no traditional Māori instruments, the song still manages to connect to Māori identity through its bilingual lyrics and collective vocal sound. The genre can be described as pop with gospel and classic soul influences, which is made apparent through the strong vocal focus, emotional delivery, and build-up in dynamics toward each chorus.

An element that clearly shows the purpose of the song is the use of layered vocals in the chorus. The repeated phrase “I am” is sung powerfully and is reinforced by harmonies, making it sound like an anthem of pride and unity. This can be heard clearly around 0:38 and 1:48 in the youtube video below

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK8OOpeYHC4&list=RDIK8OOpeYHC4&start_radio=1

The layered texture suggests collective identity rather than an individual story, showing empowerment through togetherness.

The dynamics also reflect the song’s purpose, as The verses begin softly, with restrained yet emotive vocals, and build toward the chorus as percussion and strings lift the energy. This shift mirrors a journey from vulnerability to strength, showing resilience and belief in oneself. Stan Walker’s vocal techniques are also important, because he uses melisma, falsetto, and long, sustained notes to express different emotions. His tone moves from gentle in the verses to soaring in the chorus, communicating both empowerment and pride in doing so. These expressive vocals keep the listener emotionally engaged and help to reinforce the overall purpose of pride, resilience, and belonging mentioned above.

To conclude, “I Am” combines it’s tone in D minor, 4/4 time, verse/chorus structure, and homophonic-to-choral textures to express empowerment and unity. Through its connection to Māori culture and the story of Muru, it celebrates identity and the power of community in our culture.

Piano Man – Billy Joel

“Piano Man” was released in 1973 on Billy Joel’s album of the same name as the song. The purpose of this song is to tell the stories of people in a piano bar, showing their struggles and how music connects them. Billy Joel had previously worked as a piano player in a bar before becoming famous, so this song is partially based on his real experiences and the people he met there.

Moving forward, the song is in the key of C major, giving it a warm and familiar tone. The tonal centre is C, which helps it feel grounded, but the descending chord progressions throughout bring in a bittersweet emotion. The chord structure and progression is descending, and goes from chord one (C major) to chord six (A minor) to chord four (F

major) and finishes with a brightening G.

3 $\text{♩} = 80$

Pno.

Pno.

The time signature is $\frac{3}{4}$, otherwise known as waltz time, which makes the rhythm feel a lot like a slow dance and gives the song a distinctive swaying sounding motion.

The structure of the song follows a verse/chorus form, with storytelling verses describing the different people in the bar and a chorus that repeats after each story. The chorus “Sing us a song, you’re the piano man” ties everyone in the bar together and this becomes the emotional centre of the song. There are also short instrumental parts featuring harmonica and piano inbetween sections, which work like interludes.

Adding to this, the texture is mostly homophonic, with Billy Joel’s voice carrying the melody, whilst the piano, harmonica and rhythm instruments move in accompaniment with it. Sometimes the harmonica and piano play independent lines that add slight polyphonic touches, but the overall texture stays in unity and is relatively easy to follow.

The instruments include piano, harmonica, drums, bass, accordion, acoustic guitar, and vocals. These create a mix of soft rock and folk influences. The harmonica introduces the song with a nostalgic, folk-like melody, which immediately sets a casual, almost intimate mood, almost like being inside the bar itself. The piano provides a steady rhythmic base, and the harmonica gives a storytelling feel that connects to the lyrical imagery.

The storytelling lyrics are one of the most important elements. Joel introduces characters like the bartender, waitress, and a “real estate novelist,” each one representing everyday people who find comfort in music. This storytelling shows the theme of loneliness and connection, making the listeners feel empathy for the characters. The chorus, which is easy to sing along with, reinforces the sense of community by inviting everyone to join in, just like the people in the bar.

In conclusion, “Piano Man” uses its C-major key, $\frac{3}{4}$ time, verse/chorus structure, and homophonic texture to create a reflective, emotional atmosphere. The harmonica, sing-along chorus, and narrative lyrics all work together to highlight the purpose of showing how music brings people together and helps them escape life’s hardships. The song

feels honest and human, making it both personal and universal in today's musical society.

Resource:

I Am English Translation

We are the color
Felt in the spring
You are the wind
Breathe into me
You inherit me
I inherit you
I am the language
You speak to me

As far as the eye can see (as far as the eye can see)
Everything has changed
Tell me how can we stand by
I don't wanna be the same

I am of your vitality
The source from Kurawaka
My unique sacredness

The dawn breaks
Face the light of the new day
Shine, cross over to life

We are the waters
The rivers and streams
Flow through the armor
Of a dying breed
I am with you and you are with me
Baptized in fire
We're lions in the ring

As far as the eye can see (as far as the eye can see)
Everything has changed
Tell me how can we stand by
I don't wanna be the same

I am of your vitality
The source from Kurawaka
My unique sacredness

The dawn breaks
Face the light of the new day
Shine, cross over to life

Resounding
Are your deeds
Received
Is your message
It remains

Resounding
Are your deeds
Received
Is your message
It remains

Resounding
Are your deeds
Received
Is your message
It remains

Bind together, fix, and affirm!
It is affirmed!
Bound together!
In unity!

Merit

Subject: Music

Standard: 91950

Total score: 06

Marker commentary

I Am – Stan Walker

The response establishes a clear context statement focused on empowerment, cultural pride, and personal strength. It accurately describes key musical elements including the key, chords, time signature, and the pentatonic nature of the chorus melody. The use of visual score examples, structural outlines, and discussion of genre influences strengthens the analysis. The inclusion of timestamped examples provides further clarity and supports several claims effectively. The response demonstrates a mixture of strong links and some weaker links between concepts and the stated context.

To achieve a higher grade, the response could be improved by:

- Offering further explanation of how the chords create a hopeful sound despite the minor key.
- Crafting clearer and more direct links between the musical statements and the established context.
- Explaining how and why the song's structure contributes to building strength and identity.
- Expanding the claim that collective vocal sound functions as a representation of Māori identity, using specific musical evidence.
- Providing additional examples, quotes, or musical references in the final paragraphs to maintain consistency with earlier sections.

Piano Man – Billy Joel

The response begins with a clear context statement centred on storytelling within a piano bar setting and effectively links two musical concepts to this context. Score excerpts, including highlighted bass notes, successfully support the analytical points made. The description of instrumentation appropriately connects to lyrical imagery, demonstrating understanding of how musical elements reinforce the narrative.

To achieve a higher grade, the response could be improved by:

- More explicitly tying rhythm, musical feel, and texture to the original context of storytelling and the bar setting.
- Strengthening analysis of how storytelling is conveyed through the chorus and instrumental interludes.
- Including timestamps, quotes, or specific musical examples to show how the chorus invites collective participation, reinforcing the communal atmosphere.
- Timestamps, quotes, or examples as to how the chorus invites everyone to join in.