

2025 NCEA Assessment Report

Subject:	Music
Level:	2
Achievement standard(s):	91275, 91276, 91277

General commentary

Responses to the 2025 assessments showed that the tasks were clear and accessible to all candidates. Overall, responses showed a decline in analytical quality this year, with less precision, music vocabulary, and contextual understanding shown. Candidates often confused concepts or did not provide sufficient musical depth to support meaningful analysis. Chords, cadences, and modulations were typically known at a basic level but without application. Some candidates confused texture, and did not use score-based evidence.

Candidates would benefit from strengthening their foundational terminology and applying this to the scores provided.

Report on individual achievement standard(s)

Achievement standard 91275: Demonstrate aural understanding through written representation

Assessment

The examination consisted of three questions with parts. Candidates were required to answer all three questions.

Commentary

Overall, this paper had a clear layout and accessibly musical examples. Candidates generally identified basic elements and patterns, but without accuracy of chords, cadences, and essential score details. Confusion between musical elements, or not answering the question correctly were common barriers to aural understanding.

Strengthening musicianship skills would benefit candidates.

Grade awarding

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement** commonly:

- identified instrument groups, *tempi*, metre, dynamics, and articulation with some accuracy
- identified chords as roman numerals and jazz chords with some accuracy
- identified contours and rhythmic patterns
- identified textures, compositional devices, and timbres with some accuracy
- used some subject specific vocabulary correctly

- identified changes in chord and texture but did not describe what was happening
- identified common chords but did not differentiate between ii / IV or vi / I
- identified that the existing barlines and groupings in Question One (i) meant that it could not be in 4/4 time
- did not include important details, e.g. time signature or an *a tempo* after the conclusion of a *ritardando*.

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement with Merit** commonly:

- identified instruments, *tempi*, time signatures, and notated barlines with accuracy
- notated articulation or dynamics with accuracy
- identified a cadence and pairs of chords
- described how a compositional device was used in a jazz piece
- described how instruments and timbre were used in contrasting pieces of music
- linked identified techniques / instruments within the context of the question
- identified perfect / interrupted cadences but did not always ensure the chords written matched the cadence identified
- identified different types of instruments and changes in texture / timbre in order to support their observations.

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement with Excellence** commonly:

- transcribed melodies, syncopated rhythms, and chords, including 7th and suspended chords with a high degree of accuracy
- identified chordal phrases and cadences successfully
- added *tempi*, *tempi* changes, dynamics, time signature, barlines, and articulation markings to a score with a high level of accuracy
- demonstrated a solid grasp of exam technique for melodic dictation, even if they were not completely successful at the syncopation expected in this paper
- showed a good understanding of changes in texture / timbre / instrumentation and were able to discuss the effect these had on the extract in context
- used contextual clues to help shape their responses
- provided insightful comments about differences in the analysis questions, and supported them with evidence.

Candidates who were awarded **Not Achieved** commonly:

- confused elements of music, e.g. dynamics and texture
- confused compositional devices with the elements of music, e.g. dynamics
- did not identify the 12-Bar Blues correctly
- confused monophonic and homophonic textures
- did not accurately notate contours and rhythmic patterns
- confused instruments and instrumental groups
- misunderstood common terms and technical language, e.g. cadence, compositional technique
- misread the question; for instance, selected Melody and only discussed Accompaniment or discussed Texture in a Timbre question
- wrote about instruments not included in questions where they listed instruments
- used out-of-context effect words learned from past papers without any relevant evidence to the actual question.

- showed gaps in fundamental terminology, misidentified core elements (e.g. texture, instruments), or applied vocabulary without evidence.
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Achievement standard 91276: Demonstrate knowledge of conventions in a range of music scores

Assessment

The assessment consisted of three questions with parts. Candidates were required to answer all three questions.

Commentary

Overall, this paper provided an appropriate test of Level 2 knowledge and allowed candidates to demonstrate their understanding of score conventions across a range of musical contexts. While the structure of the exam was generally effective, some questions provided a challenge.

Candidates often demonstrated basic recognition of conventions but lacked the vocabulary and analytical depth required for Level 2. Many could identify root notes and interval quantities and demonstrated fragments of Level 1 knowledge but did not apply it to the musical scores. While they recognised basic elements such as chords, intervals, or notation symbols, they did not interpret or apply these conventions in context.

Grade awarding

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement** commonly:

- used vocabulary to demonstrate understanding, but not specific music vocabulary required for strong analysis.
- identified the root note of chords but did not differentiate between major and minor chords
- identified the quantity of intervals but often miscalculated their quality
- confused tonality with harmony
- confused syncopation with swing
- demonstrated understanding of the principles of different clefs but made errors in application
- demonstrated understanding of the basic principles of transposition but lacked the detailed knowledge for the instruments / requirements in this paper – the concept of concert pitch and which way to transpose the music for the question context was a frequent problem, as was dealing with accidentals correctly
- notated TAB but made some miscalculations with the fret numbering
- worked out key signatures but did not identify modulations.
- Candidates who were awarded Achievement with Merit commonly:
 - used specific musical vocabulary to demonstrate musical knowledge, but without the deeper level of analysis and effect needed for Excellence
 - identified the quantity of intervals but made one or two mistakes when calculating their quality
 - demonstrated understanding of, and applied, the principles of different clefs, including tenor and alto
 - demonstrated understanding of the basic principles of transposition but mismatched this with the corresponding key signatures or made mistakes when dealing with accidentals
 - notated TAB well

- identified the root note chords but made some mistakes with 7th chords, minor chords, and inversions
- identified some tonalities and modulations but did not support this with evidence such as perfect cadences.

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement with Excellence** commonly:

- interpreted the questions at a high level and used the written answers to demonstrate relevant knowledge and a high level of analytical skill
- identified all the intervals and chords asked for, and frequently all transpositions and the tab transcription, with no errors or only slight inaccuracies
- understood modulations and gave appropriate evidence for these.

Candidates who were awarded **Not Achieved** commonly:

- demonstrated basic knowledge of chords, intervals, and musical notation, but did not apply this to the musical scores
- expressed some Level 1 musical knowledge.

Achievement standard 91277: Demonstrate understanding of two substantial and contrasting music works

Assessment

The assessment consisted of one question with four parts. Candidates were expected to answer all parts.

Commentary

This year's responses indicate a noticeable decline in overall quality, marking the lowest point in nearly a decade. While several contributing factors are evident, it is clear that targeted support and clearer guidance would help reverse this trend. Although these results are disappointing for candidates and teachers, improvement is entirely achievable with appropriate intervention.

Work selection continues to play a pivotal role in candidate success. A more explicit definition of 'substantial' would be beneficial, as many candidates still select works based on personal or perceived significance rather than musical depth. This year, there was an increase in works chosen for their familiarity or personal appeal, and in a small number of cases the thematic content was not well suited to a classroom context. Clarifying expectations around suitable repertoire would support candidates when making informed choices.

Part (a) required candidates to explain the context in which the work was created and discuss how this shaped the communication of musical ideas. Many candidates demonstrated an understanding of contextual background; however, some responses relied too heavily on biographical information, with limited reference to broader historical, cultural, political, or social factors. At times, contemporary social issues, such as race, gender, or indigenous rights, were introduced without a substantial work through which these ideas could be meaningfully explored. Stronger responses considered the full context of the work and clearly explained how it influenced the composer's musical decisions.

Part (b)

This part highlighted a need for continued strengthening of candidates' understanding of musical elements. Several candidates showed uncertainty around core terminology. For example:

- tonality and harmony were sometimes conflated
- melody was discussed without reference to musical ideas, devices, or range

- rhythm was reduced to time signature and metre
- texture was described using broad adjectives rather than musical terminology.

Candidates who chose melody or structure generally produced more robust responses, often supported by specific score-based evidence. The follow-up requirement to explain how unity or contrast was created proved challenging for many, despite this being a natural extension of working with musical elements.

Candidates are encouraged to read each question carefully and plan their responses to avoid unnecessary repetition. High achievement does not require large amounts of writing. Clarity, relevance, and accuracy remain the most important factors. Some responses suggested that candidates may have prepared answers in advance, which limited their ability to address the specific demands of the questions.

Referencing the score remains essential. While many candidates included bar numbers, references alone did not always translate into deeper analysis. In several cases, selected works lacked the musical complexity needed to support perceptive discussion. To promote success, at least one work from the Western art music tradition is strongly recommended. These works provide the melodic, harmonic, and structural foundations that enable meaningful analysis. Encouragingly, a growing number of candidates are engaging with New Zealand and contemporary art music with positive outcomes.

Examples of musical works that have consistently supported strong achievement include:

- Ludwig van Beethoven – Symphony No. 5, Piano Concerto No. 3
- Johann Sebastian Bach – Brandenburg Concerto No. 5
- George Gershwin – Rhapsody in Blue
- Miles Davis – So What?
- John Williams – Jaws Suite
- Pyotr Tchaikovsky – 1812 Overture
- Marvin Gaye – What's Going On?
- Michael Nyman – Musique à Grande Vitesse
- John Psathas – Waiting for the Aeroplane
- Douglas Lilburn – Aotearoa Overture
- Gareth Farr – From the Depths Sound the Great Sea Gongs
- Jenny McLeod – Childhood

Grade awarding

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement** commonly:

- answered all parts of the paper
- included a simple explanation of the musical element or feature
- provided simple musical evidence
- made simple comparisons between works
- used musical language in part (a) to describe the ideas portrayed in both works simply – usually about instrumentation or structure
- added analysis of the elements in part (b) within the two pieces using musical language to express understanding.
- referred to whole albums or musicals, producing answers which were less specific than in the upper levels of achievement.

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement with Merit** commonly:

- demonstrated understanding of their works and answered the question closely and directly
- used musical evidence to support their answers
- analysed the social context within which the composer lived, and provided a wider social context as opposed to one specifically related to the composer.

Candidates who were awarded **Achievement with Excellence** commonly:

- demonstrated thorough understanding of their works and targeted their responses to the questions
- used musical evidence that supported their answers
- studied works that had breadth in which to answer a unity and contrast question
- studied works that both had scores
- studied works with clear similarities and differences
- wrote concisely and / or directly.

Candidates who were awarded **Not Achieved** commonly:

- gave incomplete answers
 - did not provide any musical evidence
 - displayed confusion around the musical elements – texture was often described as ‘light’ or ‘thick’, rhythm was confused with time signature and meter, and harmony was described by the key of the work with no reference to harmonic structure and chord progressions
 - studied insubstantial works that did not yield solid answers
 - did not sufficiently answer the questions
 - wrote pre-prepared answers which may have been well-constructed, but did not answer the questions clearly.
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