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Music Tripos, Part II, June 2017
External Examiner Report
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This is the third year for which I have acted as External Examiner for the Music Tripos (Part II) and I am happy to report that my experience was again a very positive one, in terms of the standard of student work, the quality of teaching provision and the process of examination. I am grateful to the Exam Board Chair (Prof. Susan Rankin), my fellow External Examiner (Prof. Martin Stokes), the other members of the Exam Board, and the administrative staff of the Music Faculty, for making this a smooth and enjoyable process, conducted with rigour and a high level of professionalism. Since it is my final year, my thanks also to those who hosted me so well in previous years.

I was sent draft examination papers in February. In most cases my comments on these were confined to small details of wording and I was otherwise satisfied that the exam papers were in good shape. In the case of one paper, however, I found a considerable degree of overlap with the paper set for the previous year's examination. After some correspondence between myself, the Exam Board Chair and the paper setter, a new paper was forthcoming. I was happy with this outcome but suggest that (a) it should be clear to all paper setters that there should be no material repetition of questions from one year to the next, and (b) there should be a clear line of responsibility for checking this is the case.

Throughout the year I was in communication with the Exam Board Chair and administrative staff and was given access to online resources before the beginning of the examination period. On arrival in Cambridge in June I was briefed by the Exam Board Chair and provided with help and support by the staff of the Faculty whenever it was needed. In collaboration with my fellow External Examiner, I was able to look at all those papers which had been referred to the Externals (where no agreement had been reached between the two internal examiners) and to sample a range of scripts across the 17 papers. In all of this we were attentive to both the range of marks for each paper and the profile of each candidate (thus scrutinising the mark book vertically as well as horizontally).

The timetable was altered this year to allow more time for marks to come in. One consequence (which may or may not have been intentional) was that the External Examiners had considerably less time than in previous years to moderate and sample marks. In previous years 3 whole days was given over to this process (Monday to

Wednesday, with a final meeting at 5pm on the third day). This year we effectively had half that time (from Wednesday 9am to Thursday 2pm). This was a bit of a rush, given the amount of material to get through, though we nevertheless accomplished everything. A happy medium between the two models might be found for future years.

In addition to all the exam scripts and portfolios made available to me, I was also given free access to solo recitals for Advanced Performance (in West Road Concert Hall). I attended one session of these recitals and stayed for the discussion of marks between examiners that followed in order to observe the process. It is hard to imagine this being conducted with greater care and professionalism and I was very impressed by both the detail of the comments and the rigour with which marks were arrived at.

I am certain that the marking standards applied, across a very diverse range of papers, are both appropriate and generally comparable to other UK institutions. Given that Cambridge attracts some of the brightest and most able music students in the country it is no surprise to see that the final classification list of 62 candidates included only two II.2 results, with the remainder being either II.1, 1st class (13 candidates) or starred 1st (5 candidates). The average marks for each of the 17 papers ranged from 64 to 69. It was pleasing to see a range of marks in the 70s awarded where appropriate though I would still encourage examiners to use marks of 80 and above for genuinely outstanding work. This is not uncommon at other institutions and it would be wrong if Cambridge students, including the most brilliant, progress with lower aggregate marks than their peers from other universities. The highest marks awarded, as in previous years, are generally found in Advanced Performance but the quality of some of the written work in musicology is equally deserving of marks in the 80s.

That said, the level of marking between different papers was generally equitable, with one exception. Both externals took a close look at the Analysis Portfolio since this had the lowest overall average and a number of papers were awarded lower than usual marks. Our shared view, based on a sample of scripts, was that marks awarded in this course were often lower than might be seen elsewhere. There was some really outstanding work produced in this course and even the weaker examples were still perfectly competent. There were also some fine examples of candidates questioning some of the standard approaches to music analysis and engaging with new theoretical perspectives and challenges to the discipline. This is impressive at UG level and should certainly be rewarded appropriately.

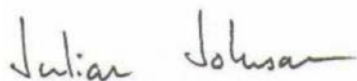
There are a few things that I mentioned in earlier reports to which I would encourage the Faculty to return.

- (i) I cannot see an argument against agreeing and publishing a policy on penalties for the late submission of work. This should not be a matter for the discretion of the Exam Board or its Chair from one year to the next. It leaves students without any sense of what penalty to expect and makes it difficult to ensure parity of treatment across different cohorts.

- All other institutions with which I am familiar have a fixed and published policy on this.
- (ii) The standard format of exam papers is 3 questions in 3 hours. One paper this year asked for 2 questions in 3 hours. I see no rationale for this and, since it is an anomaly, it makes it difficult for students to gauge their efforts and for examiners to set a different level for an unseen answer. I recommend that all papers have the same rubric in this respect.
 - (iii) Once again, the external examiners spent a disproportionate amount of time scrutinising marks of 69. If the classification of degrees were entirely a numerical matter this would not be an issue, but since it is possible to gain a 1st class with an overall average of between 68 and 70 with at least 70 in three papers, the award of a mark of 69 is frequently problematic. I have suggested before that marks of 69 are avoided. In almost every case I looked at, papers awarded 69 were worthy of at least a 70 and often significantly higher. Given that the marks awarded within the Faculty, relative to other institutions across the UK, have a tendency to be on the low side, I would suggest that where examiners are inclined to agree a mark of 69 they should simply change it to a 70. In cases where one or both of the examiners had component marks of 70 or above, there should be no hesitation in doing so.

This particular issue aside, in general I was again hugely impressed by the quality of the work I heard and read – in the case of some candidates, sustained across all six of their papers, in spite of the wide range of skills these demand. It is clear to me that the Faculty is delivering a rich and diverse set of courses, that these are generally very well taught and that they are examined rigorously and professionally. There was little weak work in any of the 17 papers and some of the best is at a level that is quite remarkable for undergraduate students. I congratulate both staff and students alike for their sustained achievement across such a broad range of musical, creative and intellectual challenges.

Yours sincerely



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