

The Vice-Chancellor
University of Cambridge
The Old Schools
Cambridge
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27 June 2017

Music Tripos, Part II, June 2016
External Examiner Report
Prof. Martin Stokes (King's College London)

Report

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

I am external examiner for the Music Tripos part II for this year only. I am happy to say it has been a smooth and pleasant process, and can immediately report that, everywhere I have looked, standards have been high, and the processes rigorous. I am grateful to the Chair of the examining board, Professor Susan Rankin, and the administrative staff, particularly Ms. Libby Jones, for making everything go so smoothly and enjoyably. I am also grateful to my fellow examiner, Professor Julian Johnson, for showing me the ropes.

I was sent draft examination papers in February and given an opportunity to comment on them. Though I had little to add, I was in a position to observe that they were operating at an appropriately demanding level, and that they were in good shape. I was kept in touch with relevant issues from that point on, given access to online resources, and apprised of the examining process well in advance of the meetings on 14-15 June 2017. On arrival I was given access to all papers, portfolios and dissertations, for the purposes of sampling and responding to specific questions. I was also invited to hear the remaining solo recitals. In the event (see below, concerning time limits) I decided not to, and was happy to leave this task to, and receive positive reports from, my fellow external examiner.

I was impressed by the very high quality of work across the papers. There were, quite simply, very few cases where the work was anything less than extremely good. Certainly, standards are those of peer institutions, which is to say the leading universities of the world. The work of the best students compares to, or exceeds that of, the very best students at the handful of other universities at which I have taught or examined in the UK. At Cambridge, the numbers operating at this kind of level are proportionately higher, though. It is possible this was an exceptional cohort. There were, indeed, a high proportion of starred firsts, firsts, and 2.1s, and very few 2.2s, but this seemed to me to be entirely appropriate - a reflection of the stellar students who end up at Cambridge, and, of course, the teaching they receive. But I can be clear that the standards by which they are judged, and excel, are entirely comparable to those of other UK institutions.

The papers tested students in pleasingly diverse ways, across an impressive range of skills and competencies (performance, portfolio, dissertation, written examination). The curriculum is designed so that students can develop concentrated and synergetic areas of expertise, or pick from a broader range according to interests and their preferred styles of academic performance. Students seemed to me, for the most part, to have systematically made the right choices, which is a testament to the solid advice they are receiving, whether in colleges or in the Faculty. Standards were consistent across the

various papers. The monitoring of average marks for papers at the board meeting was rigorous, generating an appropriate level of discussion about the outliers. But there was no sense in which students might have been systematically disadvantaged by a decision to work in one area rather than another.


I would encourage colleagues at Cambridge to broaden their range of marks. Fine distinctions tended to disappear the higher one went up the scale, as though gradations of excellence above 80 (which was the top mark given) were unimaginable. In cohorts as strong as this it would be good to develop finer distinctions within categories of excellence. This is, perhaps, simply another way of encouraging examiners to use higher marks.

I learned from last year's Music Tripos reports that classification criteria were not, but are now, published; it was good to see such published criteria this year, and I can confirm marking adhered closely to the published grade descriptors. There do not, as yet, appear to be published policies regarding penalties for late submission, which would be the norm at other universities I have worked or examined at, and I would recommend considering such a move.

The only other comment that I would make is that the time available for sampling and moderating papers as external examiner is quite limited, and there is a lot of work to do. This year there were a number of 69s that needed adjudicating. The rules and practices governing consideration of these borderline marks, which are all clear enough, are nonetheless quite complicated and time-consuming, especially for a first-time examiner. It may help if more of these specific borderline ambiguities were to be resolved earlier, which would allow the external examiners to concentrate on more general issues during the examining process and the Board meeting itself. Alternatively, the external examiners could simply have a bit more time built into the examining schedule.

Once again, thanks to the academic and administrative staff of the Music Faculty at Cambridge for the smoothness of the organization of the examining process, and the warm hospitality.

Yours faithfully,



Martin Stokes FBA, King Edward Professor of Music and Head of Department, King's College London