

# Improvisation

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A guide to improvisation in  
Trinity Keyboard (Twelve) examinations

with Grade 1 examples

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# Improvisation

## Introduction

Improvisation is a valuable skill, opening the door to a wide range of music. The ability to improvise encourages self-confidence, fluency of playing and singing, memory, creativity and sense of performance, all of which support and enhance musical learning.

Of course, improvisation is by definition 'of the moment' and involves an immediate creative response. So while there are no 'right' or 'wrong' improvisations, some responses are more successful than others. To enable these to be assessed in an examination context, a set of broadly based criteria is used by examiners to recognise the full range of possible responses. These criteria can also be used by teachers and candidates to focus attention on areas for exploration and improvement.

This guide is intended to assist teachers in the preparation of their candidates. It contains an explanation of the format of the test, the criteria (together with a commentary) and gives a range of examples for different instruments and grades, showing the standard expected at pass, merit and distinction.

## Outline of the test

The Improvisation test will be administered as follows:

- There are three possible types of stimulus a candidate can use in the exam as the starting point for their improvisation:
  - Melodic: based on a series of pitches
  - Rhythmic: based on a rhythmic idea
  - Chordal: based on a set of chord symbols
- Candidates indicate their choice of stimulus on the appointment form.
- In the exam the examiner will present the candidate with the notated stimulus. The examiner will play the stimulus twice and then invite the candidate to play it back; this is to ensure the candidate has understood the stimulus.
- The candidate will then be given 30 seconds' preparation time (60 seconds for Grades 6-8) to familiarise themselves with the stimulus and to prepare for the performance of their improvisation. If they wish to, candidates can play or sing during this time.
- The candidate will then be invited to perform their improvisation.

For further information please check the latest syllabus at [www.trinitycollege.co.uk](http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk)

## The Criteria

After the candidate has chosen their response-type (melodic, rhythmic or chordal) and performed their improvisation, the following criteria are used for assessment. All criteria are used for all responses. For clarity the 3 areas for assessment at each level have been marked a), b) and c) in the table below.

### A note about style

The tests have been designed to allow improvisation in any style, and candidates have total freedom to choose the style of response that they prefer. Singers are not expected to use words, however, and will not automatically get more marks if they do.

Distinction	(9-10 marks)	a) Well controlled, imaginative and adventurous melodic responses b) Strong planning and construction with clear and appropriate harmonic vocabulary and syntax c) Full and creative use of instrumental resources, relevant to the grade.
Merit	(7-8 marks)	a) A creative approach to melodic responses b) Awareness of most harmonic implications, length generally well-planned c) Generally wide use of instrumental resources relevant to the grade.
Pass	(6-7 marks)	a) Some attempt at melodic development b) Awareness of tonality and basic harmonic procedures, appropriate length c) Use of most basic instrumental resources relevant to the grade.
Below Pass 1	(4-5 marks)	a) Little melodic development, repetitive and/or hesitant b) Poor harmonic awareness, little planning, inappropriate length c) Rudimentary use of instrumental resources relevant to the grade.
Below Pass 2	(1-3 marks)	a) Very poor evidence of melodic inventiveness or creativity, rhythmic stimulus not acknowledged b) No harmonic awareness, understanding or planning evident c) Very poor and limited use of instrumental resources relevant to the grade.

### Assessment area a)

The first point in each mark band refers to the notes that are played (or sung). While the word 'melodic' is used in this point, it should be understood that rhythmic abilities and outcomes are also addressed here.

#### Distinction

The best responses will show a high level of fluency and invention, with musical material following naturally. Most of the melodic or rhythmic hints contained in the stimulus will be recognised and their implications will be obviously understood and subsequently developed and explored.

#### Merit

At merit level there may be some slight evidence of searching or feeling for notes, with some subsequent occasional unevennesses in fluency. Inventiveness and originality will be reliable but not necessarily profound. Points of interest will mostly be recognised, though there may be some straightforward repetition of material.

#### Pass

In order to achieve a pass candidates will need to demonstrate that they have at least understood the stimulus and have used it as the basis of their own piece of music. The improvisation will show a reasonable degree of fluency. Some hesitation may be apparent in parts, though there will be a general feeling that one (or more) idea(s) are being developed and explored. Occasional points of melodic and/or rhythmic interest will be clearly apparent.

**Below Pass**

Responses which are extremely hesitant, and/or which simply repeat the initial stimulus, showing little evidence of the development of new material, are unlikely to achieve a pass. The given notes/rhythms/chords are intended as a starting-point for the creation of a piece of music, and if there is little evidence of the candidate having considered the stimulus and used it in a creative way this aim will not have been fulfilled.

**Assessment area b)**

The second point refers in each case to planning, construction and form.

This includes the overall shape of the piece and a response to the derived or implied harmonic structure.

**Distinction**

A distinction level response will have a coherent structure with appropriate phrasing and key development. Candidates will show an understanding of how different keys or modes can be successfully incorporated into a satisfying whole. At Initial and Grade 1 responses are likely to be diatonic and to stay in one key. In higher grades more modulation and/or chromaticism will be introduced.

**Merit**

Candidates achieving a merit will show a sure sense of structure and style but with occasional drift from a completely coherent conception. A good sense of key will be demonstrated although modulation may not always be confidently handled.

**Pass**

At the pass level the improvisation will show an awareness of form and style, though with possible lapses in planning. Some understanding of tonality will be evident.

**Below Pass**

In this band candidates will show limited evidence of musical shape or style. Key awareness will be inconsistent and/or not sufficiently evident.

**Assessment area c)**

Area c) covers the way in which an understanding of instrumental techniques is demonstrated. It includes areas such as range of notes used, tonal variety, articulation and dynamics. The Technical Work requirements for each grade will give an indication of the level expected.

**Distinction**

In this band the improvisation will confidently use many of the techniques available. They will be creatively integrated into a musically mature response.

**Merit**

Responses here will explore instrumental resources reasonably fully though may show some limitations in technical scope and imagination.

**Pass**

Candidates at pass level will show a basic command and awareness of instrumental resources. These may not always be used with confidence and creativity but will reflect the basic outlines of the requirements for the grade.

**Below Pass**

Here there will be a significant lack of imagination, knowledge and/or ability in using appropriate resources.

## Overview of examples

On the following pages are various possible responses to some given stimuli at Grade 1. Each of the three choices of stimulus – rhythmic, melodic and chordal – are given and the worked material is graded from Distinction to Below Pass.

These responses should be looked at as only one possible type of response as, in order to write them out coherently, strict time has been used. Other styles of improvisation that involve free time cannot, by their nature, be written down but would be admissible. Likewise, it is impossible to denote hesitancy in an answer and fluency is an important factor in the success or otherwise of any performance, whether improvised or prepared.

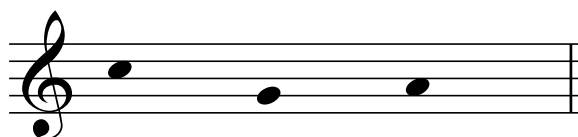
At the early grades, responses are likely to show quite strict adherence to the exact nature of the given material. At higher levels, it is quite acceptable for the stimulus itself to be varied, truncated or mixed up as part of the improvisation. Examiners will be looking for evidence of the basic and major points of the stimulus having been understood, absorbed and developed in a coherent way.

The examples that follow have not necessarily been worked for specific instruments and all stimuli can be transposed for any instrument. It is also important to remember that appropriate instrumental resources should be used in the improvisation so, for example, guitarists might use chords in their response to any of the stimuli.

# Examples of Improvisations

## Grade 1 Melodic

Example 1



### Responses at pass level

1a



The A/G in bar 3 is slightly cumbersome, but there is rhythmic drive and conviction. This only uses the notes of the stimulus, but is still partially effective.

1b



Some attempt at shape. Does not go beyond notes of the stimulus. A basic pass.

1c



A little dependent on the repeated As, and the first and third bars are identical. Only uses the notes of the stimulus. Some sense of an imperfect cadence.

1d



Rather a staid rhythm, although it does explore the 4ths and 5ths of the stimulus, with clear harmonic thinking. Quite a rambling response.

## Responses at merit level

1e



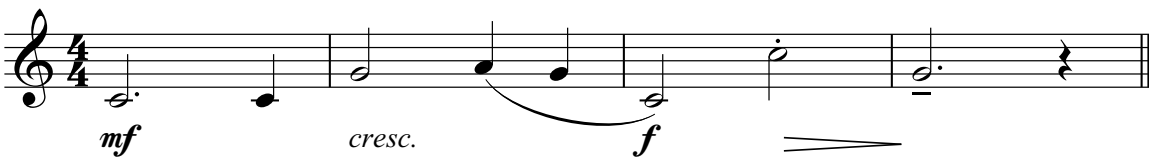
The stretch to the D in bar 3 is inspired and although using repeated notes, they are well placed and work in the whole phrase, with emphatic rhythms.

1f



A neat pair of phrases with a satisfying undulating shape in which the third note of the stimulus is placed at the start of the second bar. A clear harmonic shape, and the notes of the incipit are placed in significant places (starts of bars 1, 2 and 4, with passing notes within the phrase).

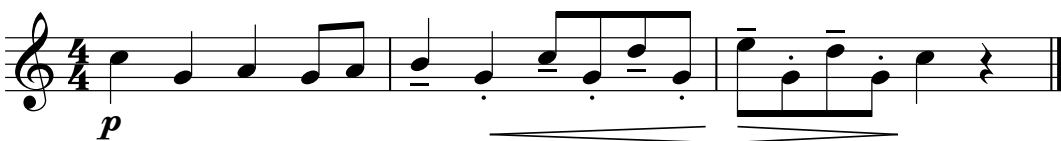
1g



This has real breadth to it, almost Brucknerian in scope if played on horn or trombone. It develops the stimulus in retrograde and shows an awareness of different pitches of the same notes, and is powerfully phrased and shaped.

## Responses at distinction level

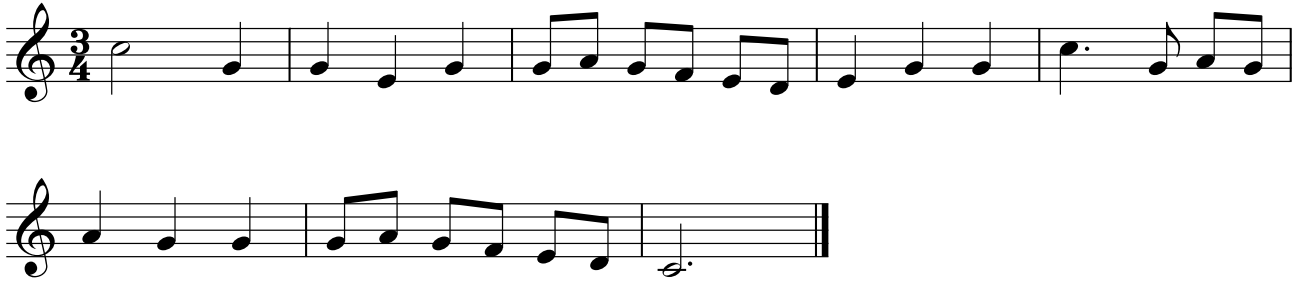
1h



An inventive response, in which the 4th of the incipit is built up into a rising and falling figure. The G is used as a pedal to form a strongly directional tonality.



1i



The notes of the stimulus are used imaginatively and with confidence, within the octave of C major scale, with rhythmic variety (bars 1 and 5), and a clear sense of underlying harmony. There is a marked sense of a waltz or Ländler.

### Responses at below pass level

1j



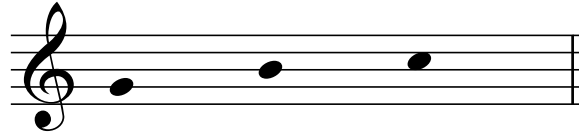
Repetitive and rhythmically rigid with no deviation from the stimulus.

1k



Rambling and fails to break (mostly) from the repeated Cs or make any reference to the A of the stimulus.

Example 2



Responses for piano

2a



2b



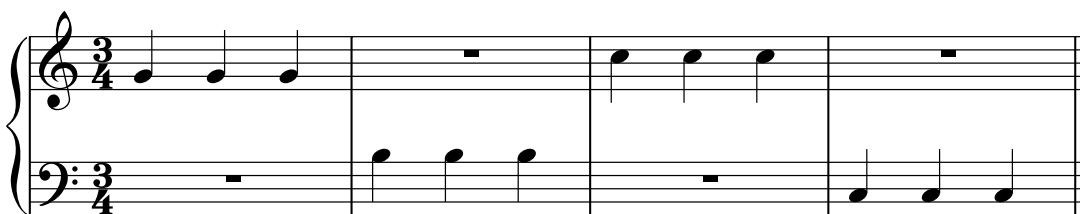
2c



2d

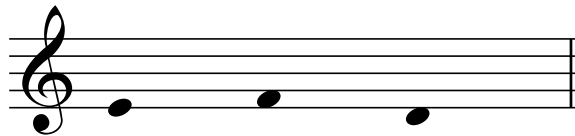


2e



A series of responses where the left hand/keyboard response becomes more elaborate and effective, reflected in the marks awarded. The melody itself is used without addition of other pitches, but with a robust rhythmic character. 2b uses a simple pedal note (which mostly fits), while 2c adds harmonic sense in a three-part texture through a simple ostinato. 2d adds a short introduction and the ostinato has a chromatic inflection. 2e shows a simple repeat of the stimulus; no true improvisation has taken place.

### Example 3



### Responses at pass level

3a



A four bar response with some rhythmic interest, some element of contrary motion, a sense of dorian mode or D minor, and movement (in bar 3) towards a sense of ending.

3b



The response sticks rigidly to the stimulus but does show increased rhythmic variety. The use of motifs, so important in jazz, is evident, and a sense of cadence helps to define structure.

### Responses at merit level

3c



An interesting choice of  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, restricted to only crotchets but with some sense of contour and a cadential feel to the last bar (with an appoggiatura if sensed in D minor).

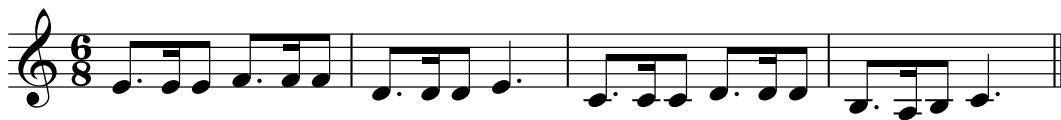
3d



More rhythmic variety and a sense of style and groove is discernible than in 3b. There is a sense of direction and plan, and a more ambitious range of instrument emerges.

### Responses at distinction level

3e



A bold choice to use repeated notes in compound time, and bars 3 and 4 are a sequence of bars 1 and 2, which establishes a clear C major ending.

3f



Answers are more idiomatic and can use chromatic notes and flattened 7ths, etc. The response is more ambitious, and the use of motifs, inversions, etc. is clearly evident. A good range of the instrument is employed.

### Responses at below pass level

3g



This offers a basic rhythm and a rambling melodic response, just playing round the notes with little evident structure.

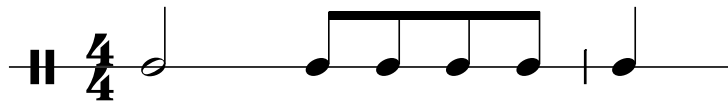
3h



This fails to acknowledge the stimulus and is without shape.

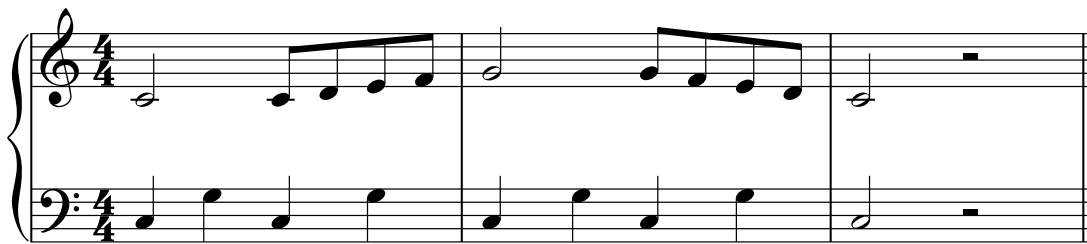
# Grade 1 Rhythmic

Example 4



## Responses at pass level

4a



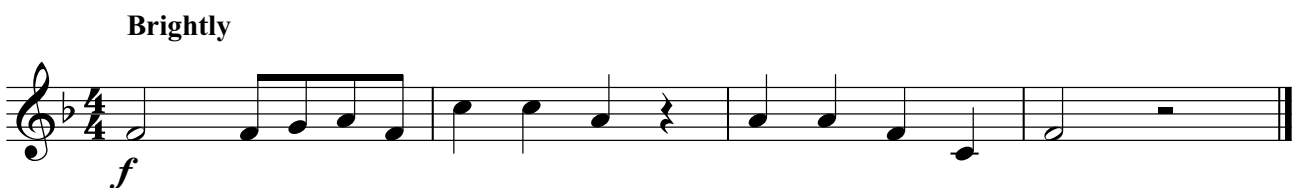
Simple scalar right hand but the left hand adds pulse and harmonic sense, albeit simply. First position used in both hands. Stimulus repeated.

4b



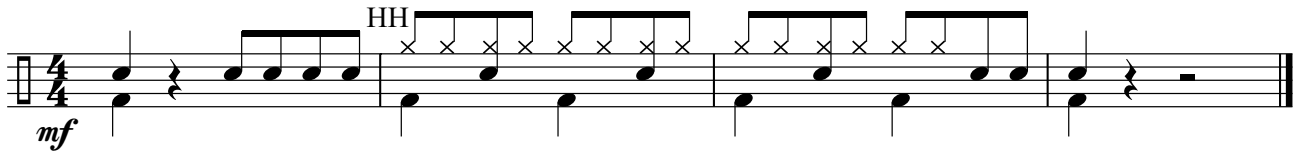
A typical response which sticks rigidly to the rhythm and a few notes – playing it safe!

4c



This response uses a range of 5 notes, and chooses to repeat one bar to make a satisfying whole. It is based on the F major scale and on intervals of a third which are common in much brass repertoire, fanfares etc. One might venture that this candidate has recently been playing Gabrieli!

4d



A fair sense of stimuli but a weak ending.

### Responses at merit level

4e

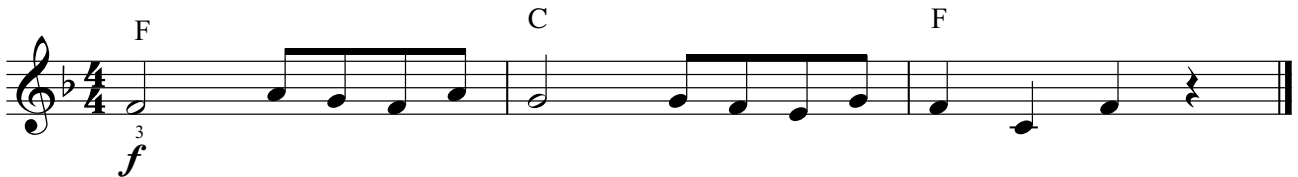
**Largo**



This response, in C major, shows a familiar right hand range (C-G) while the left hand uses a shape probably familiar to many Grade 1 pianists. There is some pleasing contrary motion in the second bar and the minims are balanced well in bar one: both hands don't have to be busy at the same time!

4f (keyboard)

**Ballad**



This candidate likes the first bar of the rhythm and chooses to repeat it, sequentially, with simple chords. The fingered chords can be interpreted freely (so the C chord in bar 2 could be root position, or C<sup>7</sup> over E etc).

4g



An interesting response which has a definite sense of G major (reflecting the G major 7th scale set for Grade 1 Jazz). Again, the range may be narrow on a sax or flute for safety.

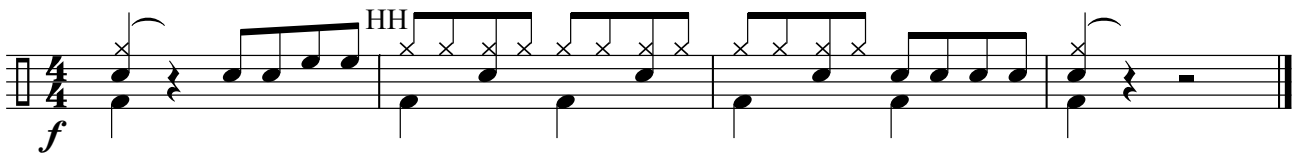
4h

**Moderato**



This response is based on the G major scale, but the slurring of the quavers reflects the requirement at this grade for scales to be offered in slurred pairs. A clear harmonic shape, tonic to dominant to tonic.

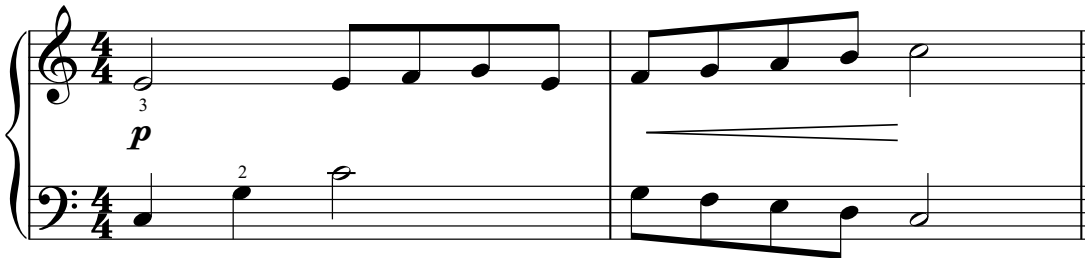
4i



Good use of stimuli with nice, even phrase.

**Responses at distinction level**

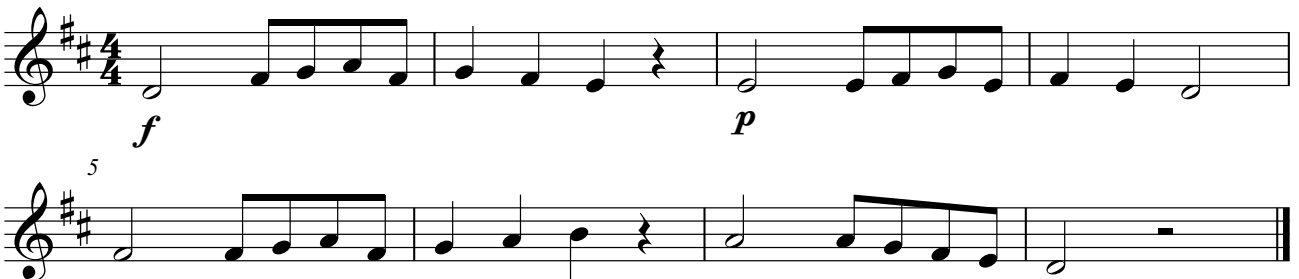
4j



It is worth comparing this response with the merit example; note a familiar LH figure at Grade 1, and some added contrary motion based on a simple scalic figure. The rhythm is clever – bar 2 is a mirror of bar 1, and the build to the cadence is neat. Easily fingered by small hands.

4k

**Moderato**



Balanced, contrasted phrases, clear harmonic sense and confident in combining these with the stimulus to make a satisfying, well-constructed phrase of vocalise.

4l

This has a sense of plan and introduces some ‘blues’ notes over a full octave.

4m

Andante

A different stylistic response, imaginative and dramatic, which uses the full range of the instrument. There is confident use of dissonance and a clear climax in bars 6 and 7, which utilises a fragment of the stimulus. The dissonance resolves onto the octave F# for a sense of ending – this example has been planned and imagined, not least in the balancing of diatonic LH and black-note RH. The pitches here are not the most important element, and could be substituted for other pitches without compromising the rhythmic identity.

4n

Good use of stimuli (between hands and feet) making use of whole drum kit and dynamic variation.



## Responses at below pass level

4o

Musical score for 4o, featuring a grand staff in 4/4 time. The right hand (RH) plays a repetitive sequence of eighth notes, while the left hand (LH) plays single notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Very repetitive, rather too long with no coherent shape or development or shaping of the stimulus. Single notes in LH = 'rudimentary use of instrumental resources'.

4p

Musical score for 4p, featuring a single staff in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of repetitive eighth notes and rests, ending with a double bar line.

Rudimentary use of the instrument, very narrow register, confused harmonically and poorly shaped.

4q

Musical score for 4q, featuring a single staff in 4/4 time. The melody consists of repetitive eighth notes and rests, ending with a double bar line.

Only 2 notes, poor use of range, and little coherent material in response to the stimulus – the repeated notes are weak and unidiomatic.

4r

Musical score for 4r, featuring a single staff in 4/4 time. The melody consists of repetitive eighth notes and rests, ending with a double bar line. The dynamic marking *mf* is present at the beginning.

No rhythmic development. Little use of kit. Repetitive.

# Grade 1 Chordal

Example 5

Musical notation for Example 5, showing four measures of chords C, G, G, and C. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, with chord symbols C, G, G, and C above the staff.

## Responses at pass level

5a

Musical notation for response 5a, showing a two-part texture. The right hand (RH) features simple scalic figures in first position, and the left hand (LH) features a simple outline of the bass of the chords. The texture is in common time (C).

A very simple LH outline of the bass of the chords, simple scalic figures in first position in the RH, some sense of a cadence in bar 4. A two-part texture.

5b

Musical notation for response 5b, showing simple four-part chords in 3/4 time. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, with a 3/4 time signature.

Simple four-part chords, with some confusion in bar 3, and a fortuitous (probably) use of the 7th in bar 2 (also in last inversion!), but the candidate obviously is used to simple LH triads (whereas the examples in merit and distinction actually articulate this harmony into various textures/rhythms).

### 5c (keyboard)

Musical notation for 5c (keyboard) in 3/4 time. The piece consists of four bars. The first bar has a C chord above it and contains a quarter note C4, a quarter note D4, and a quarter note E4. The second bar has a G chord above it and contains a dotted half note G4. The third bar has a G chord above it and contains a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The fourth bar has a C chord above it and contains a dotted half note C5.

Simple melodic shape above the given chords – the RH adds a 7th to the G in bar 3. A little plain, though a natural contour to the melody, achieved through using passing notes.

### 5d

Musical notation for 5d in 4/4 time. The piece consists of four bars. Above the first bar is a rhythmic pattern: a quarter note followed by an eighth note beamed to a quarter note, with a bracket and a '3' above it. The first bar contains a quarter note C4, a quarter note D4, and a half note E4. The second bar contains a quarter note F4, a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The third bar contains a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note G4. The fourth bar contains a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a half note D4.

This sticks rigidly to the chords but more rhythmic variety is discernible. Most candidates will stick to a 'swing' rhythm. A narrow instrumental range is employed for safety.

## Responses at merit level

### 5e

Musical notation for 5e in 3/4 time. The piece consists of four bars. The right hand (RH) plays a simple melody of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4. The left hand (LH) plays chords in root position: C4-E4-G4, D4-F4-A4, E4-G4-B4, F4-A4-C5.

The chords are used rather muddily in root position, without addition or variation, and the melody supplied over the top is very simple, though accurate harmonically.

### 5f

Musical notation for 5f in common time. The piece consists of four bars. The right hand (RH) plays simple scalic figures in first positions of C and G. The left hand (LH) plays an articulated drone in fifths: C4-G4, D4-A4, E4-B4, F4-C5.

This follows the harmonic outline of the stimulus. A simple articulated LH drone in fifths adds texture and sonority (though simply done), and the RH outlines simple scalic figures in first positions of C and G. The last bar provides an obvious sense of an ending.

5g

Waltz ♩ = c. 115



This works well above the examiner playing the chords in a simple waltz tempo and configuration as directed by the candidate. There is an opportunity to repeat the 4 bars at a different dynamic. For Grade 1 flute enough notes are used and some articulation is given, with the response confidently using scalar figures and intervals of the perfect fourth to keep it flowing.

5h

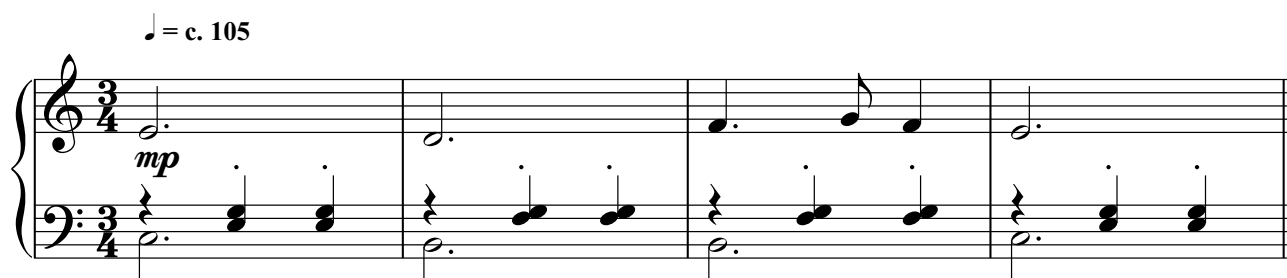


Here the melody passes more freely between the chords and employs passing notes. There is an evident thought process about how to progress from chord to chord. Some use of motifs is discernible, with the dominant 7th added to some chords. Expression and articulation should be conveyed.

## Responses at distinction level

5i

♩ = c. 105



The candidate opts for a response in  $\frac{3}{4}$  and adds an accompaniment which articulates the chord sequence and contributes to the sense of a simple waltz. The use of the dominant chord in first inversion adds interest, as does the addition of a 7th to the same chord, in a voicing that lays under the fingers well, even for a small hand.

5j

Style: 8-beat pop  
Voice: Synth Lead.

♩ = c. 120

Musical notation for 5j: A single staff in 4/4 time with a C major key signature. The melody consists of eighth notes and quarter notes. Chords C, G, G, and C are indicated above the staff. The piece ends with a repeat sign.

A well-balanced and confident response, with clear stylistic personality (calypso) and rhythmic interest, and secure handling of the harmony (with an added 7th in the RH melody (bar 3). Stronger candidates will experiment with using INTRO and OUTRO functions, and appropriate registration. The tempo suggestion here is bright and entirely appropriate to the genre. A satisfying use of rests to create interest and rhythmic life.

5k

Musical notation for 5k: A single staff in 4/4 time with a C major key signature. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes and a first/second ending. The piece ends with a repeat sign.

A more inventive rhythm employed, including rests which move the music away from the 'swing' groove. Appropriate expression and articulation such as accents are noticeable.

5l

Musical notation for 5l: A single staff in 4/4 time with a C major key signature. The melody is in bass clef and includes pizzicato markings and a first/second ending. The piece ends with a repeat sign.

Idiomatic use of pizzicato in a clear calypso rhythm which follows the harmony of the stimulus, and is centred round the bottom string of the instrument and uses simple C chord shape in bar 1. Again, a distinct stylistic choice is made by the candidate, which adds personality and rhythmic character. This example could easily be accompanied (as directed by the candidate) simply by the examiner with staccato crotchet triads.

## Responses at below pass level

5m



Repetitive and, although in two lines, unidiomatic, merely taking the top and bottom notes of the given stimulus. The candidate has added nothing.

5n



Notes are randomly selected from the chords and little rhythmic interest is added. No awareness of style is discernible.



