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# Music

## How to get an A in the Junior Cert Music Exam



By Eve L.

*Eve L. got an A in her higher Junior Cert Music paper. Here she shares what she learned.*



Music is increasing in popularity amongst Junior Cert Students – what with a quarter of your final mark coming from your practical! It's a favourite among many, and often the very last exam sat by students in June. It's a very broad course with lots of diversity in topics and genres of music – from Traditional Irish to modern EDM. It is designed to enable all students to acquire musical skills suited to their age, varying abilities and musical experiences. It has the highest H1 acquisition at Leaving Cert level, so many keep it on for Senior Cycle. Here is a guide on how to do equally as well in Junior Cycle Music.

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## Layout

- ▶ The Music Exam at Junior Cert Level is marked out of 400, of which the written exam is 300 marks (75%) at Higher and Ordinary Level. A practical exam, which is usually sat in March or April of the year of your exam, makes up the remaining 25%. You have 2 hours in which to do the written exam; the first hour or so of which is the listening section alone.
- ▶ The written exam follows the same layout every year: it is divided into Listening, Questions 1-5, Composing, Questions 6-9 at Higher Level and 6-7 at Ordinary, and the General Study, Question 10 at Higher and 8 at Ordinary.

## Practical (25%)

The Music practical is a really important part of your exam. It is worth a quarter of your marks in total, and is secured months before your exam in June. An examiner will visit your school on a scheduled day sometime around Easter and will listen to you and your classmates as you perform 2 or 4 pieces for them -dependent on your level- and partake in one sight-reading test or aural memory test, and mark you accordingly. These results are included with your paper in June, and the correcting examiner will add on the points to your total from the written paper.

- ▶ At higher level, you have the choice to play four different pieces on one instrument, sing four different songs, or split it so that you can do two of each: for example, in my class, one girl played two pieces on her violin, and sang in groups for her last two pieces. Me, I ended up playing four pieces on the piano. This really depends on the performer – if you are able to learn 4 pieces on an instrument then by all means, go for it! I also mentioned that you can sing in groups if you want to, and you will be marked according to your contribution to the group – so sing up and be heard! You'll get marked nothing for doing nothing, and even if singing isn't your forte, you will at least get marks for holding the rhythm.
- ▶ In essence, the examiner is looking for control, note accuracy and rhythmic consistency; they want to see you ensure all notes and rhythm fit into place, and see



that you keep the tempo throughout in order to give you a high grade in the first section (control of the medium), which is worth 20% of the practical's overall marks. This comes with practice and preparation: you won't have this down unless you have your pieces by December of third year and are practicing them regularly from between them and the practical. What I found helpful for sustaining the rhythm of my piano pieces was asking my teacher to play it for me while I recorded it on my phone. The songs got stuck in my head, and I knew exactly the tempo at which they were supposed to be played. Eventually, I was able to play my pieces along with the recording taken when I first got them!

- ▶ Another 60 marks go for the standard of the performance; musicality, phrasing, dynamics, expression, and tone. You need to have a very good awareness of phrase, shape, and balance, as well as tone, breathing, intonation, and dynamics (particularly if you are a singer). I struggled with keeping in tune in songs such as 'Stars fell on Alabama' because it was out

of my range, therefore I would recommend identifying your range and abilities well in advance, so you aren't left scrambling in early March, as I was!

- ▶ All I can really advise you on here is to get good advice from a teacher and to be realistic with yourself. If you only took up violin in October, then there is no point trying to learn a long concerto. You aren't going to be frowned upon for picking an 'easy tune' – **you're marked on how, not what, you play.**
- ▶ Practise is key to a good practical. I practised for 20 minutes every day before dinner, and extra on the weekends leading up to the practical. This ensured I knew my pieces well. Practise in front of other people, too; this will get you used to performing for the examiner. It will prepare you for all eventualities, as with nerves, anything can happen. Fail to prepare and you can prepare to fail. You'll be doing yourself a disservice if you don't practise often.
- ▶ You can get the files for previous aural memory tests online. I know these were a



godsend for those among my friends who elected to do the so-called *clap-backs*.

Practice them after your main practical elements each night, and record some of your own for when those run out. I did sight reading, and practiced them by doing three once a week and writing my own once I had done all the past ones on the exam archives.

- ▶ I sound like a broken record here – but practising your pieces is half the battle; the rest is picking suitable material and going in confident on the day. It is a performance, after all, so you'll just have to

*act* confident – and the rest will follow naturally. Just sit down, take deep breaths, and put things into perspective – if you've worked hard, it can't go that far wrong. You can always ask to start again if you hit a few wrong notes – the examiner isn't going to eat you!

- ▶ Finally – you know how teachers are always on about 'keeping the examiner happy'? Well, in the case of the practical, saying please and thank you at the appropriate moments will certainly not do anything to harm your grade!

## Final Examination (75%)

The final examination is probably going to be one of your last exams in June. It takes place over 2 hours; the first half of which is on tape. You simply have to sit in the order in which it is laid out until the tape finishes – otherwise you'll be left without pages of the required information! After Question 6, it's up to you whatever way in which you choose to do the exam. It is worth 300 marks altogether and there are **three main sections**:

1. **Listening – 180 marks (60%)**
2. **Composing – 100 marks (33%)**
3. **General Study- 20 marks (7%)**

### 1. Listening – 180 marks (60%)

The **Listening Section** was by far my favourite. It was not only really interesting and diverse, but



allowed a little rote learning, as well as general musical knowledge and skill. I was lucky I loved it so much, as it is the heftiest section on the whole course – a whopping 45% of your final mark! This section follows the tape, so it's very important you don't spend an age on one question because the tape waits for no one! I learned this in the mocks. It is made up of Set Songs & Works, Irish Music, Dictation, and Chosen Songs & Works.

- ▶ **Set Songs (30 marks):** You'll have 8 set songs from 8 different genres, which will vary depending on whether you are set A, B, or C. However, you'll still have to learn the same stuff about each song. While they will *play* your set songs on the CD, I found knowing off all the relevant information very helpful as, what with nerves and the chance of it being a different version to that which you may have studied in class, you will know the features whether you can identify them in the tape or not. I made flashcards, with two columns, one with the relevant topics, e.g. 'Mood', 'Tonality', 'Rhythmic Features' and the other with the corresponding answers, e.g. 'Solemn' 'Key of C# Minor' 'Syncopation' written in them. I studied these on a weekly basis and knew them well for the exam.
- ▶ **Set Works (30 marks):** You have 3 official Set Works, but these may contain various movements within them. In Set C, I know I regarded myself as having 5! Joking aside, it is imperative you know the theory and history behind your works, as well as the musical features and definitions expected of you in Set Songs, but in much more detail. I had five different coloured sets of flashcards, and about 10 of each, because I learned off the features for every 10 bars, as Set Works tend to be very specific.
- ▶ For both the Set Songs and Works, I recommend learning them inside out, as well as familiarising yourself with what they sound like. You can do this by listening to them as you study, by downloading them on your phone, through making a CD for the car, etc. I'll put it this way – you can't know enough about your set pieces. I'd recommend getting my hands on a *Less*



*Stress More Success* or any other type of resource booklet for the notes they provide alone.

- ▶ **Irish Music (40 marks):** Irish Music was my favourite part of the exam, and the one where I always got full marks. You will hear various extracts from Irish tunes and will be expected to identify instruments, dances, and features. I made a list of all the Irish instruments and sorted them into melody, harmony, and accompaniment. I also made flashcards on the time signature and bar rhythms of the various dances, and the features of Sean Nos singing, etc. If you know the rhythm of the dances, it is easy to identify them, e.g. a jig follows the rhythm of 'rashers-and-sausages.' Part D will be a theory question with no tape – you could be asked about anything from Sharon Shannon to the Belfast Harp Festival! I would have a few sample essays in a folder that I would learn off for the exam. They don't have to be that long, as the whole section is only worth 10 marks – but it is important that you can write something. Look at previous years' examples for more insight.

- ▶ **Dictation (40 marks):** Dictation and I had a love-hate relationship. All my way from first year through Christmas of third year, I only got 17/40 in my Dictations. That's 23 marks down the drain – 6%! Thankfully, I actually got 40/40 in my mocks and similarly, I did very well in the real exam. The dictation is a melody played on a piano that you have to record. ***It is played 5 times.*** You are given the key and time signature, so all you have to fill in are the barlines and notes. Here are a few guidelines that I stuck on a sticky note inside my papers that helped me improve at dictation:

***Before you begin -***

1. **Add in the double barlines at the end of the piece and three spread out in the middle. There are 4 bars to the piece. The bar lines are worth 4 marks in total.**
2. **Check the key signature and write it down in words, e.g. D Major, and remember that the piece will end on this note, either at doh or doh<sup>1</sup>**
3. **Check the time signature. If it is in common time, as it usually is,**



there will be a maximum of 4 beats in every bar.

4. On the first listen, try to get the last rhythm and melody note and add it to the end of the fourth bar. You now have 9.5 marks.
5. On the second listen, get as much of the rhythm as you can. Quickly pen it down in rough lines as you hear it and figure out the rhythm as you hear it for the third time.
6. It will have a dotted crotchet in bar 2 or 3 of the phrase, and nearly always the first note in that bar. It will be immediately followed by a quaver. If you can get this in the right place, it is worth 2.5 marks. At this point you could have up to 22 marks.

7. Remember that the melody usually moves by step. There will never be more than leaps of 3 notes.
8. You will get up to 7 marks where pitch is incorrect, for correct contour or shape. So, even if your entire melody is wrong, you will get some marks for the same line of melody, just at a higher or lower pitch.
9. You're only filling in 10 notes and will lose marks for every extra note you put in, so count them at the end just to be sure!
10. Use the last playing of the CD to re-check the melody and rhythm. Follow it with your finger and make any adjustments you see necessary. There will be a long pause at the end.

- ▶ **Chosen Songs and Works (40 marks):** There's an easy 10 marker in this section, but it's about the only easy part – so study hard! In Question 5, you could be asked to name a song or work, its composer, and a few rhythmical or melodic features observed in it. There are about 8 categories for chosen songs -the same categories as set songs- and 6 chosen work categories. Your teacher will start building up this repertoire in first year, so it's important to keep the notes and have all the info listed above. The rest of the section requires you to listen hard to find what the examiners are looking for. This could be instruments, texture, changes in the music, etc. This is a greedy section and will require lots of work and, ahem, practise! Although, I can say that



reading the last question before you start is a good trick, because often they ask you to compare, so you can look out for what *they're* looking for! In general though, you should know the orchestra, typical feature of the genre, and listen attentively!

## 2. Composing – 100 marks (33%)

The **Composing Section** is the musician's favourite section. Here, your knowledge of notes and how to put them together is put to the test!

- ▶ **Triads (20 marks):** This is an easy 20 marks if you practise it often enough. Once you flip to this page, identify the key in which it is played. This will be played on the piano on the tape; however it isn't really necessary and won't really help you in any way. You will need to know your notes to identify

them on the spot marked X, which is always going to be on the treble clef. Name them as they are written; not in ascending order. They will then ask you what triad this forms. Now, this can be misleading. I would advise writing out all the triads in that key. This is done by-

1. *Writing out the scale in words or on the rough work staff, e.g. in G Major, that is G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G.*
2. *Then you identify the note two places above that, e.g. the next note in the triad of G Major in the Key of G Major is B Major.*
3. *Then, you have to get the note two steps above the second, which, in this case, will be D.*

As you get used to this, you won't need to write out the triads in the key, but for those struggling, it is a good idea. I did it on the day even though I was proficient at the triad section for the simple reason that sometimes it's

good to be sure! You'll need to know the notes in the bass clef in order to place that triad there, also. Finally, you just have to figure out which bar of the piece, as listed in section D, contains the most notes from the tri-



ad, as it will automatically sound best.

Practise these questions often!

- ▶ **Melodies (35 marks):** You only have to answer one of the three options here. I would recommend B or C personally, but if A is what you're comfortable with, then you do you.

*A. Here, you're given a stanza of a poem or a passage of text, of which the first line is put to music. You have to do the second; rhythm, melody, the works! I would recommend making it melismatic, or following the natural rhythm of the text as you speak it. When STUDYING, I would hum out the melody of line 1 and try to see what would naturally follow in line 2. In the exam, you can't hum!*

*B. In B, you'll be asked to compose a phrase to the opening bar. Like the dictation, barlines are important, and in this case, so is phrasing. End on the key note (doh) and formulate the rhythm and melody in such a way that doesn't contain loads of leaps or one that is syncopated. I always used the dictation as a base line – you can use the dotted crotchet bar for sure!*

*C. My favourite of the three – here you write a phrase \*similar to\* (but not the exact same as) the opening phrase. You basically just manipulate the melody and rhythms a little bit, add the barlines, phrasing – and end on DOH, and you're away. Easy :)*

Some top tips for this section include:

1. Never have a range between notes of more than 3 notes.
2. Stick to the key and do not go past the doh<sup>1</sup>.
3. Always end your piece on a cadence and have some sort of a climax/anti – climax approaching it.

- ▶ **Chord Progressions (45 marks):** You only have to answer one of the three options here. I always did C, but most people are better at cadences than I am!

This question is worth over 10% of your final mark, so whatever you choose, do so wisely!



*Section A. & B:* Here, you have to complete pieces for either a keyboard or SATB choir by adding interrupted, imperfect, plagal, and perfect cadences at the marked points. This involves looking at the key signature, and if needs be, writing out the scale for that key and identifying the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> triads in order to form the cadences required. Know the formula for the cadences, e.g. the plagal cadence is the 4<sup>th</sup> chord to the 1<sup>st</sup>. Also, don't forget to read the instructions on the actual paper, as often there can be different combina-

tions to form the same type of cadence, e.g. the imperfect cadence.

*Section C:* I loved this question because you can nearly always get full marks if you do it right. First things first – identify the key, write out the triads. And not unlike the Triads question in section D, if you try to find the key to suit the note below it, i.e. find the triad to which that note belongs – you'll probably be right. Never use the third or seventh triad, and always end with a cadence, and terminate the piece on doh.

- ▶ **Free Composition (100 marks):** You only do this question if you do not do questions 6-8. Do not attempt this if you haven't covered it in class; only 2% of people who sit this exam do this question. This question is exceptionally challenging and is really only suited to those of you who have a flair for music or have been studying it for years and years. However, if you are one of the people talented enough to even consider Question 9, then I wish you good luck!

### 3. General Study – 20 marks (7%)

The **General Study** can be good craic when it comes to studying. And, it's an easy 20-marker if you put in the smallest bit of work. You pick a topic to study; this can be a person or a concept. I chose *Louis Armstrong's Contribution to Jazz Music*, while my friend picked *Elevator Music*. Within this general study, we had to identify the category from which it comes, e.g. for me that would be the



popular tradition. I then found common features within my chosen songs that were features of Louis' contribution to jazz in general, e.g. scatting, and write about them in an essay-style answer. I would recommend doing sample essays to learn off, and mind-maps regarding the features and the point in the songs at which they can be found. It's a really expressive, enjoyable section in the exam, so make the most of it, and put in the work before the exam!

## Helpful Hints

- ▶ Get expert guidance for the practical. There's no way you're going to be spending  $\frac{1}{4}$  classes throughout the year preparing for it, so a lot has to be done at home and by pestering your teacher to hear your pieces at lunchtime! Make sure you feel well-rehearsed going in because then you're less likely to panic.
- ▶ Prioritize the practical over the theory after the February midterm. It is, after all, essential if you want to get anything higher than a C.
- ▶ If you're singing for your practical, remember that they usually take place at peak flu season – keep out of the cold, mind your voice, and get your hands on an antibiotic, should the worst happen!
- ▶ Music could very well be your last exam. It's highly possible. You'll be ***ITCHING*** to finish and may therefore not do as well in your exam if you let the excitement of finishing make you giddy and restless. Whatever you do, don't throw away all the hard work you've done in the spur of the moment; don't leave the exam early, and don't in any way approach it any differently than you did your very first exam. You'll only regret it in the long run.
- ▶ If you can't hear the text excerpt, let the superintendent know. Immediately!!!
- ▶ Don't start skipping ahead while the tape is on; you'll miss something important and kick yourself. Take advantage of the breaks by reading the next question or checking over your answers. Don't do what a classmate of mine did in the mock either; zone out while the tape is on and lose your place! Keep the focus during the tape and listen hard.
- ▶ Don't tap or hum during the exam. You could be removed from the exam hall!



- ▶ Bring a pencil and rubber for the composition section and the dictation, because Tippex just causes problems.
- ▶ Use up all the rough work staffs. Write out the scales like I mentioned in the previous sections – it won't do any harm. If there's one thing you have lots of in music; it's time. You'll have time to plan out your answers carefully.
- ▶ In the days leading up to your exam, which will most likely be a weekend break, look over your notes and past ex-

am questions to keep refreshing the mind. It will have switched from exam-mode into relaxation-mode, so you need to remind it to come back for a few days more!

- ▶ Most likely, Music is a subject you chose and have a genuine interest in. Now is your chance to show your passion and knowledge! Try your best, think musically, and take your time. After that, you just have to leave it up to the gods (of rock and roll) to see you through – good luck!



***Good luck in your music exam!***

***You're going to do wonderfully!***

