

Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Music Essay Competition Report 2011

This was the second year our music essay competition for Lower Sixth-formers has been run, and we received 32 entries from schools across the country, about the same number as in 2010. The essays were first shortlisted to ten, then carefully assessed on grounds of content, organization, originality, writing style and presentation to produce a winner, a runner-up and three equal Highly Commended. These students were presented with certificates by Senior Tutor Dr Paul Chirico during an Open Day at the College on 30th April.

This year's five set question choices were broader in scope than last year, and designed to give writers an opportunity to come up with their own ideas rather than just assemble information from books and articles. By far the most difficult question, 'What is musical genius?', actually generated the largest number of essays, at 14. A number of quite obscure quotations kept appearing in these, and a Google search on 'musical genius' soon showed why: all appeared in articles in the first two pages of search results! This is a worrying tendency. The second-most popular question was 'Should our knowledge of the personality of a composer affect our response to their works?', with ten essays. Not surprisingly, many writers focused on the greatest problem case of this subject, Wagner, although Dowland, Schumann, Britten, Shostakovich and others also featured. The difficulty with this subject proved to be breadth versus depth; those who took a historical approach and cited many composers found it more difficult to engage with the philosophical underpinnings than those who concentrated on one composer or genre.

The fascinating question 'How culture-specific is music in the modern age?' resulted in four good responses, including the competition winner. Here, there were many opportunities to range widely around styles, countries and cultures; drawing concrete conclusions was the most taxing aspect of this subject. The self-analytical essay 'Analyze, contextualize and describe your own musical tastes' also had four takers, some of whom fell down by not being quite personal enough. This is actually a very interesting subject, as trying to understand what elements of music directly engage a person, especially across genres and styles, can say much about one's education and taste. There were no takers for the last question, 'How have changing patterns of education affected the study of music?', which was a pity - how music has been studied over the centuries can explain much about both historical composition and performance.

First prize was awarded to **Jack Butterworth** of Winchester College, and Second to **Jake Sittampalam** of Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet. Three Highly Commended certificates were presented (in alphabetical order) to **Meg Kalafat** of Ipswich High School, to **Charlotte Lapham** of The Godolphin School, Salisbury and to **Abigail Tan** of South Wilts Grammar School, Salisbury.

Overall, the quality of prose was good, with some outstanding examples (even if some of the most engaging writing tended towards the journalistic). Compared to last year, overall presentation was improved, and nearly all candidates provided full reference citations and a bibliography.

Our thanks go to everyone for taking part this year, and we hope that all found the experience both challenging and interesting. Feedback from several of the writers indicated that they particularly enjoyed the opportunity to undertake an extended essay of this kind outside the A-level course.

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