

Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Music Essay Competition Report 2010

This was the first year the music essay competition for Lower Sixth-formers has been run, and we were very pleased to have received 30 entries from schools across the country. The standard was uniformly high, so 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 Highly Commended. These students were presented with certificates by Senior Tutor Dr Paul Chirico during an Open Day at the College in April.

All of the five set question choices were answered, although some generated more responses than others. The most popular was “‘To fully appreciate the music of the past, one must first understand the historical context of its production’”. Discuss with reference to a composer, genre or pieces of your choice’, probably because it gave candidates the best opportunity to display their existing knowledge. There were 20 essays in this category, and composers discussed included Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Smetana, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. Religious music and Jazz featured in several answers, and specific instrumental repertoire was usefully explored, for example by a cellist. One candidate intriguingly made use of an experimental psychology project she devised. However, by far the most popular composer tackled was Shostakovich, with no fewer than five essays, all of very good quality. Shostakovich is of course one of the best subjects for historical contextualization, but this was still a surprise!

There were five essays on the topic ‘How has the medium of listening (live or through recording) affected our perception of musical works in the modern age?’, including the winning essay. Answers here concentrated on the impact of technology, modes of listening and purpose; some fascinating contemporary examples were presented, showing a real awareness of the complex issues involved.

For some reason, only one candidate each tackled the interesting questions ‘How do we assign aesthetic value to the different musics of the past and present?’ and the ‘Discuss the portrayal of women in an opera or by a composer of your choice’. Perhaps the first of these was seen as too philosophical and the second too limiting. There were three answers to ‘What are the uses and limitations of the classical system of music notation?’, most of which focused on the technicalities of notational systems; here, some more detailed exploration of what it actually ‘means’ to notate an essentially aural art would have been valuable.

First prize was awarded to Lauren Spiceley of Farnborough Sixth Form College, and Second to Aimée Presswood of Edgbaston High School. Three Highly Commended awards certificates were presented, to Corinna Keefe of St Leonard’s - Mayfield School, to Natalie Price of Guilsborough School and to Daisy Gibbs of St Swithun’s School,

Winchester. Marking at this level was very close, and we were interested to see that all five winners were female.

Overall, the quality of prose was good, with some outstanding examples. Presentation varied from the capable to the professional, although comparatively few candidates appreciated the full niceties of formal footnoting, citation and bibliography.

Our thanks go to all the candidates for taking part this year, and we hope that they found the experience both challenging and interesting. Feedback from several of the writers indicated that they particularly enjoyed undertaking an extended essay of this kind.

The next competition will take place in Spring 2011, and the essay questions announced at the beginning of the autumn term this year.

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