

Component 3: Comparison of Recordings

In the exam, you will be asked to respond to questions based on recorded extracts. You will be expected to have listened to, considered and studied the recordings prior to the examination. You will NOT be allowed access to the recordings while the examination is taking place. The recordings may either be listened to on the [DipMusLCM webpage](#), or on the [CDs published by Naxos](#).

Questions will be based on pairs of recordings of the same piece, or extracts of the same piece. The recordings differ in terms of performance (e.g. recordings of two pianists performing the same work) and/or different versions of the same piece (e.g. an orchestration of a work for piano, and the original). The extracts will cover a wide range of styles and types of music.

In the examination, there will be four questions on each of the two pairs of extracts set for the year. Candidates will be required to answer ANY TWO of these questions. Questions will relate to such matters as: approaches to interpretation; technical considerations (tempo, dynamics, articulation, etc.); recording techniques; orchestration and instrumentation. Questions will require answers of 1-2 paragraphs in length, however bullet-point answers will also be acceptable

Study and preparation

The following extracts are intended to be used as practice examples for study, and are similar to those which will be used in the examination. We give below some notes and guidance on the study of these.

As you listen to each pair consider such matters as the approaches to interpretation, especially between two distinct styles of playing, for example the Coates and Debussy recordings; technical considerations such as tempo, dynamics, articulation, e.g. tracks ia and ib; recording techniques, as in the differences between a piano recording (perhaps a single stereo pair of microphones) and a full orchestral recording, which might well be multi-miked, as demonstrated by tracks iia and iib; orchestration and instrumentation, as illustrated by tracks iib and ivb. Above all, it is your listening skill which is being developed in this section. This will, hopefully, make you more aware of your own live performance, the sound you create and how you respond to the acoustic of your performing space.

Track ia (1.58) Bach: *Chaconne*, from Partita no.2 in D minor, BWV 1004 (Lucy van Dael)

This was originally written for solo violin, and in the first extract is performed on a baroque violin. Listen to the timbre of the instrument and the way the lyrical line flows with an affecting sensitivity. The strong pacing of the Chaconne means that the counterpoint is clearly defined, helped by a vivid, if close recording.

Track ib (2.54) Bach (arr Busoni): *Chaconne* (Wolf Harden)

In comparison, the famous Busoni arrangement is more expansive, the counterpoint more weighty. The recorded piano sound is faithful whilst the recorded sound itself is natural and well balanced. You will notice the difference in pitch of the modern grand piano, as well as the wider dynamic range. The tonal contrasts are well judged and Busoni's filling out of the single violin line is judiciously coloured by Wolf Harden in playing of some refinement and beauty of tone. As you listen to this version, try to visualise how Busoni has reinterpreted Bach's implied harmony for a late romantic audience.

Track iia (3.47) Eric Coates: *By the Sleepy Lagoon* (Slovak RSO)

Coates was perhaps the doyen of British light music and his orchestral works, so typical of the period between the wars, have stood the test of time. This *valse serenade*, written in 1930, will be familiar as the signature tune of the long-running BBC radio programme, *Desert Island Discs*.

In the first recording, Andrew Penny coaxes his players into giving just the right sense of languorousness. The recording is quite atmospheric, but perhaps not as ample as some; yet it allows the inner details of the scoring to be neatly caught in the recorded balance. The main theme is well shaped and the middle section has some deft touches of phrasing. The return of the melody is convincingly handled.

Track iib (3.30) Eric Coates: *By the Sleepy Lagoon* (conducted by the composer)

Taken from recordings which the composer made between 1926 and 1940, *By the Sleepy Lagoon* was recorded in September 1940.

It is instructive to compare the tempi of both recordings; which although at the same basic pulse sounds faster in the composer's version. His more subtle use of rubato, together with the period flavour of the orchestral playing, gives this performance a nostalgic charm.

The CD transfer is faithful to the originals, with some fullness of tone and clarity of texture. The only details missing are the fills at the ends of phrases: compare the start of each recording. However, in the reprise you can just pick them out of the recorded balance.

Track iia (from 19.52-24.30) Mussorgsky: *Catacombes* (from *Pictures from an Exhibition*)
for solo piano (Jeno Jando)

In 1874 an exhibition of paintings and watercolours by the Russian artist Victor Hartmann was held in Moscow. The artist, who had died in the previous year, was a close friend of Mussorgsky and a prominent member of the group of young Russian artists who were working towards the creation of purely Russian art by the elimination of all foreign influences.

Mussorgsky's set of piano pieces creates a kaleidoscope of fanciful ideas and changing colours. The painting titled *Catacombae Sepulchrum Romanum* shows Hartmann himself examining the catacombs of Paris by the light of a lantern and is the eighth picture in Mussorgsky's collection.

This macabre vision is depicted by a series of octaves and a chromatically coloured chordal descent, mainly in the lower register of the piano, but with one climactic chord above the treble stave preceded by a short semi-tonal melody. The piano score is full of sudden changes of dynamic and these are skilfully handled in this recording, and the piano tone has sufficient weight and fullness set in a realistic acoustic.

Track iib (2.04) *Catacombes* orchestrated by Ravel (Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra)

If the piano version looks like an orchestration sketch, it takes a great artist to complete the transformation. Ravel's masterly scoring dates from 1929 and is really a re-interpretation of the original, with many small alterations between the piano version and Ravel's score. The rising melody, just before the climax, is given to a solo trumpet.

The opening octaves and chords are given to the lower brass, horns, lower woodwind and double bass. This macabre scoring is faithfully captured on the recording, but perhaps lacks a certain amount of resonance and amplitude heard on other discs. The acoustic of the concert hall of the Slovak Philharmonic gives just enough bloom to the recorded sound. Yet the instrumental colour is effectively balanced and integrated and the dynamics are well caught.

Track iva (2.39) Satie: *Gymnopédie No. 1*, piano solo (Klara Kormendi)

The music of Satie is a mixture of innocence and artifice, yet at its heart it displays an inner stillness and purity. The limpid beauty of this first *Gymnopédie* (dating from 1888) is well caught on this recording, despite a rather close balance and plummy bass. However, the acoustic of the Italian Institute in Budapest adds subtle warmth to the right hand's expressive melodic line. Some may be troubled by the tempo, which in comparison with the orchestral version, seems on the fast side for the composer's marking of *Lent e douloureux*.

Track ivb (4.01) Satie: *Gymnopédie*, orchestrated by Debussy (Nancy Symphony Orchestra)

Debussy's orchestration highlights the hypnotic quality of Satie's original, especially the added harp arpeggios and suspended cymbal splashes.

Satie's original marking of *Lent e douloureux* is well sustained, making the piano version seem rather rushed. The orchestral string tone is somewhat thin and lacking warmth, whilst the opening phrase could have been more successfully shaped. The acoustic of La Salle Poinel in Nancy, France, adds a certain depth and ambient warmth to the recorded sound.

It is instructive to compare the way both Ravel and Debussy have fashioned genuine orchestral music from the original piano textures of Mussorgsky and Satie, and how both sound totally convincing.

CD Details

The extracts have been taken from the following Naxos CDs:

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| Bach: <i>Chaconne</i> | J.S. Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin Vol. 2 Busoni: Piano Music Vol. 2 | Naxos 8.554423 Naxos 8.555699 |
| Coates: <i>By the Sleepy Lagoon</i> | Elizabethan Serenade: The Best of British Light Music British Light Music: Eric Coates Selected Recordings 1926-1940 | Naxos 8.553515 Naxos 8.110173 |
| Mussorgsky: <i>Catacombes</i> | Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition / Balakirev Islamey Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition / Borodin Polovtsian Dances | Naxos 8.550044 Naxos 8.550051 |
| Satie: <i>Gymnopédie No.1</i> | Satie: Piano Works (Selection) Satie: Parade / Gymnopédies / Mercure / Relache | Naxos 8.550305 Naxos 8.554279 |

If possible, try to listen to the complete recordings of these extracts so that you experience a fuller sense of the various performances, the recorded sound of the complete disc, its engineering/re-mastering and the impact the recording venue has on the sound quality.

See also www.naxos.com for further information about each CD.

Sample Questions

- a) Compare and contrast the approach taken by the performers in the two recordings of the Bach *Chaconne*. Consider such matters as tempo, articulation, dynamics and the quality of the recorded sound.
- b) Busoni's arrangement of the Bach *Chaconne* illustrates clearly the linear clarity of Bach's original solo texture through elaborate late Romantic piano figurations. Is the elaborate piano texture conveyed to the listener in this recording? Discuss.
- c) Compare the two recordings of Eric Coates' *By the Sleepy Lagoon*. Which, in your opinion, best captures the subtitle description *valse serenade*?
- d) Comment on the recorded sound on the two Coates recordings. How do the acoustics differ?
- e) Compare the two Mussorgsky recordings, in terms of texture. How does Ravel use texture to best effect?
- f) Does the recorded sound on track iiib do justice to Ravel's vivid orchestral palette?
- g) Compare the two Satie recordings. Which one, in your opinion, projects Satie's languorous undulations more successfully?
- h) Discuss the recorded sound on track ivb. Does it enhance Debussy's orchestration?