



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION
PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION
Higher 1

Candidate
Name

CT Group

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INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES

This 2-page Insert contains the reading passages for comprehension. Please detach it and fill in your particulars in the boxes above. Please retain this Insert at the end of the examination.

Passage 1. *An author discusses what music can and cannot achieve.*

- 1 In the final scene of “The Worst Person in the World”, “Águas de Março” plays in the background. A song from 1972 describing Rio de Janeiro’s rainiest month seems incongruous for a movie about a young Norwegian’s turbulent life in 2021, but it illustrates the scene perfectly. The struggles of individuals across time and space are not so unique after all.
- 2 Songs such as “Águas de Março” blossomed in Brazil in the 1970s, a golden age for 5
Brazilian culture when poets, musicians and producers cross-pollinated international ideas with local traditions to create a national identity. As various genres thrived, it became apparent that these risk-takers were doing more than creating art: at a time when songs had to be submitted to the censors and the dictatorship was known to imprison hostile artists, they still made political satire their mission and excited the public with their artistry. 10
- 3 Crippling crises and bungling leaders ensure music endures as a means for artistic expression, but it remains unclear whether music can solve real-world problems. Consider this: Shervin Hajipour’s “Baraye”, based on the tweets by Iranians reacting to the suspicious death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in 2022, became the anthem for the “Woman, Life, Liberty” movement. While the universal frustrations it recounts are intelligible to Persian 15
speakers living elsewhere, references to repressions specific to that society elude those who are used to speaking their mind and shaping their destiny. Instead, they may recognise more easily the grievances of the 1000-odd UK artistes who released a silent album entitled “Is This What We Want?” to protest against proposed legislative changes that allow companies to use material found online to train their artificial intelligence with no regard for the 20
livelihoods of the copyright owners.
- 4 While it is an infinitely creative tool with which to chart the ebb and flow of political and social trends, music’s ability to transform society is debatable. In the overcrowded music scene, songs with a message will need a big nudge from celebrities to even be noticed. Instead, catchy tunes about heartbreak, angst and parties become viral earworms. Moreover, with digital natives permitting streaming services to curate their playlists, the algorithms may 25
never recommend something that gives them pause. Besides, why would the youthful listener want to revisit the trials and tribulations dominating the news and real life? Knowing their fans crave show business at its best, ‘live’ performances by best-selling artistes are exultant singalongs punctuated by sharp choreography, flashy costumes and light-hearted patter.
- 5 There are times when frivolity takes a back seat, such as when a reel of Charles Yang’s 30
soulful rendition of Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come” at a classical concert went viral on social media. Set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in the last century, the song remains a poignant statement of unfulfilled hopes in America today. But while such clarion calls to look injustices in the eye may uplift for a few minutes, vacuous tunes continue to flood the ears of listeners everywhere. 35

Paragraphs 1 and 2 adapted from “Brazilian music reached a crescendo in 1972. Why?” (The Economist)

Passage 2. Another author writes about the benefits of music.

- 1 When the rest of the world was silent during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Italians made music. From Siena to Tuscany, neighbours started singing together, leaning out through open windows or standing on balconies to make themselves heard. Music allowed them to not feel marooned on isolated islands during the lockdown.
- 2 Indeed, music's ability to offer help and solace during emergencies is well-documented. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina two decades ago, for instance, a devastated New Orleans organised a benefit concert, an unsurprising move given that it is, after all, the birthplace of jazz. Not only did the concert raise funds for reconstruction, but it also bolstered morale. Similarly, music-themed events like the Glastonbury Festival in the United Kingdom channel millions to those displaced by calamities every year, reinforcing the idea that music can be used to support the world's most vulnerable.
- 3 Music is also valued for its power to reduce the anxiety the ailing feel as they cope with their illnesses. As a means of expression, it is especially useful for patients frustrated by their inability to verbalise their discomfort. Other patients claim that listening to music distracts them from their injuries. In other arenas, music can be a rousing force when the right notes are hit. We observe this most commonly at sport competitions. When team anthems are played, it strengthens both the players' and fans' affiliation to the team. When national anthems are sung after a hard-won victory, a similar sentiment is palpable.
- 4 Music's resonance across society has led pop luminaries to weave a tapestry of auditory experiences that incorporate the personal and the universal. Just look at how Beyoncé and Lamar used their voices to plant seeds of change in fellow Americans; Lamar's album "Alright" was a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement, while Beyoncé's "Lemonade" shone a spotlight on black identity.
- 5 We should respect the music choices made by our fellow men, be they the free downloads relished by those watching their spending or the classical music enjoyed by the well-heeled. It does not matter if we prefer different genres; our love of music allows us to converse and build understanding with one another. Music thus unifies people who might otherwise not have anything in common.

Passage 3. A Gen-Zer reflects on the purported power of music.

- 1 Unlike the stereotypical Gen-Zer, Albert approaches music with a jaundiced eye, believing only the gullible think that music can change lives. Take Lady Gaga's recent concert in Rio de Janeiro for instance; it was sponsored by the city to revitalise its economy, but after considering the logistics – 50,000 police officers, drones, surveillance technology and a post-event clean-up – one wonders whether Rio turned a profit. Adding salt to the wound were the doubts cast by a crowd density expert on the claim that 2.1 million fans had attended the free concert. In addition, instead of the inclusivity Lady Gaga is renowned for, the authorities had to counter hate speech online and even foil bomb threats.
- 2 Then there was the FireAid concert series organised after wildfires ravaged California once again earlier in the year. Supported by superstars such as Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo, the globally streamed concerts raised millions to support the victims and the restoration of critical infrastructure. Yet controversy over fund allocation became a lightning rod for recrimination for the organisers and recipients alike.
- 3 Albert also laments that inequitable access to music has worsened the social divide. Consider classical music, which has long been the preserve of the privileged. Families struggling to pay rent and medical bills cannot afford the piano lessons that the affluent deem a necessity. Neither can they attend glitzy concerts and exclusive musical performances that are common leisure pursuits for the latter. Shaped and segregated by their experiences, the privileged find it hard to interact, much less extend a helping hand to the disadvantaged in pressing times.