

# Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

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Pearson Edexcel GCE  
Portfolio 2 (6MT03) Paper 01

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## General Introduction

This feedback is provided to centres on this year's submitted coursework. Covering responses to the three tasks, log book and administrative details. The report is intended to provide additional support to centres and guidance on how to improve students' outcomes. As this is the last year of the current spec, there are some references to practices and approaches that will be useful for the new spec.

### Task 3A – Sequenced Integrated Performance

The best work was typified by:

- accurate and mostly complete musical parts
- convincing timbres with evidence of editing and sound shaping using synthesis
- shaping of MIDI performances using velocity, pitch bends, note length editing where appropriate
- processing and effects use to match the original including the creative use of effects present in both pieces
- clean, clear vocal capture, suitable dynamic processing and careful use of EQ which had challenges for both pieces
- balance and pan that reflects the original; placement of vocals in particular can be challenging

The choices:

Heartbeats – The Knife

Brick England – Jean Michel Jarre

Most students chose Heartbeats. About 20 to 30% chose brick England.

Both pieces expected that students recreate a range of production features, including detailed reverb use, delays, vocoder, pitch shift, modulation FX, and auto tune.

In both pieces, the main musical parts were uncomplicated but with detail in the form of subtle variations and additional supporting instrumental and percussion/drum elements that added depth. The vocals had challenges but were achievable singers at this level.

### Heartbeats

#### Pitch

The tricky bass variations were usually handled quite well, though wrong octaves were quite common. Polysynth chords, changing pitches in the steel pan opening section, synth melody lines also had frequent errors.

The biggest problems came from parts omitted or copied into incorrect sections. Incorrect chords were also common. Vocoder pitching often omitted. Chorus doubling BVs often omitted completely or partially, bridge BVs usually present.

#### Rhythm

Hi hat variations in the different sections were often omitted. Percussion parts were challenging but often fairly accurate and complete. Sometimes the kick drum rhythm was incorrect, omitting the hit on 2 and 4 with the clap. The rhythm of the bass part was usually correct; problems often occurred with the syncopated pushes in the bridge section, and sometimes with students reading from a score who don't understand tied notes.

#### Timbre

Bass timbre was an important feature and given attention by many students, with a reasonable attempt in many cases. The modulation/filter envelope was often included. Drums also showed some decent attention, some success with the clap and toms. The range of percussion, and different pitches, many found challenging. Synth parts were often reasonably convincing. Some polysynths were more trance-like than 80s. The vocal treatments were addressed under style and creativity.

#### Balance & Pan

The vocal balance is always a challenging area. Good practice in other areas such as EQ, FX use and dynamic control are essential in achieving a good outcome here. There were not too many submissions with extreme errors in balance, but it is still common to see one or two elements dominating a mix to the detriment of others. Careful referencing of finished mixes on a variety of listening set-ups is always recommended.

#### Dynamics

The lifts and drops in this piece presented many opportunities to demonstrate control of global dynamics. Often there was restricted success in recreating the changing dynamics in line with the original, though some detailed submissions handled this aspect very well.

#### Articulation

The bass note lengths caused some problems, though a lot of submissions reflected the need for careful attention to the correct shaping to achieve the right feel. Percussion and cabasa also needed shaping and often this was attempted at least in part. The bends in the bass part were usually attempted with a wide range of responses. Lead synth pitch bends were usually successful.

#### Style and Creativity

Synth modulation and delay, steel pan reverb and delay, often included and in some cases done very well. Vocal reverb often misjudged. Clap reverb attempted, often with some success. It is clear that many students use reverb and delay by inserting it into a track rather than using send and return. This can make balance between dry and effected level awkward – a change in one produced a perhaps unwanted change in the other – and also results in mono effects in some software. Understand these techniques is important for other areas of work such as the producing and analysing written papers.

### **Brick England**

#### Pitch/Rhythm

Often a lot of correct to nearly correct work, but missing parts such as BVs was quite common. The bass line was sometimes interpreted incorrectly, and the ARPs caused some problems particularly the additional higher ones at the end.

The drum parts including the different tom and hi hat patterns were usually attempted, but inaccuracies were common.

#### Timbre

Some good work on timbres for synths, drums, bass, showing that students had clearly spent some time on addressing the challenges presented.

#### Dynamics

With quite a few builds and drops in the piece there was plenty of opportunity to make the most of this component. The correct combination of parts is essential, and missing elements make effective shifts in dynamics difficult to achieve.

#### Articulation & Phrasing

The synth lines with their long pitch bends/slides were often handled with some care and success. Bass note lengths are important as well. Some drum programming lacked shaping, as were arp parts.

#### Style & Creativity

A lot of opportunity to get involved with synthesis, filtering and effects on Vocals and Drums (reverb in particular). Some good attempts were made, but it is common for a few parts to be misjudged – both reverb size and amount. Filtering and delays/re-triggering of the vocal parts was very good in some cases which is encouraging to see.

### SEQUENCING IN THE NEW SPEC

There is no specific sequencing coursework task in the new spec, but these are still core skills that are relevant to all practical tasks. Extensive shaping and editing of musical performances, timbres and production features will still be required to complete work in paper 1 recording, which now allows sequenced keyboard parts, paper 2 technology-based composition, and the analysing and producing paper 4.

### **Task 3B - Multi-track Recording**

Suitable facilities for recording are provided by the majority of centres, and a range of microphones, a recording space and mixing environment are clearly available to students in all but a very few cases. Understanding of the importance of room treatment seems to be increasing.

It is evident that many centres develop close critical listening skills on their courses and pay attention to creating the right listening and work environment.

Choice of material continues to play a big part in the success of the final piece. Students who make suitable choices usually have a more realistic goal to work to. Pieces chosen need to be:

- Played to a good standard with control and accuracy
- Use straightforward recording and production techniques

At this level, there is enough to do in managing a recording of a simple, basic production; pieces with complex music or production are usually beyond the capability of students and are not necessary to demonstrate the assessed capabilities and outcomes.

Some centres clearly offer a lot of support in helping students to choose a piece to record, even to the extent of all students recording the same piece of music, or one, two or three choices. Whilst this is clearly an option to ensure suitable material is recorded, there are a number of disadvantages:

- Students do not have complete ownership of the project
- Can lead to a 'production line' approach to recording with very similar sounding finished products
- It can be argued that the learning experience is devalued; students do not have to make decisions about what makes a piece suitable and realistic as a recording project, then manage the performers of that particular piece, consider the unique challenges of how to produce the recording and do the final mix

The best work in this category did show some very high quality recordings that would not have been out of place on a band demo. In these cases, all aspects assessed showed considerable good practice in the assessed components.

Strengths and weaknesses demonstrated in this task are listed below:

- Capture if often handled quite well for most instruments
- Difficulties arise with drum overheads; balance and tone of cymbals and hi hats sometimes need more careful consideration. This might be a case of room treatment/positioning of kit in room as well as microphone type, polar pattern and placement
- Vocal parts sometimes lack focus or suffer from drifting on/off mic. The role of producer is quality control, and close listening is needed during recording to ensure consistent delivery
- Piano, strings and percussion often lack clarity
- Brass, sax, acoustic guitars are usually handled quite better than other acoustic instruments
- EQ can often suffer from problems in the bass end, either lack of bass or uncontrolled and indistinct frequency distribution. This is an area where monitors are essential for making decisions
- Mid-range can be congested; log books often indicate large boosts of 10 or 15 dB. It is usually better to remove unwanted frequencies than boost desired areas
- Dynamic processing had huge variations, from almost none to extreme squashing and pumping. Compression always depends on the material being processed, and is not a substitute for uncontrolled dynamics in performance. The best work showed up in clear, snappy drum mixes, present vocals, even bass delivery and general cohesion across the mix
- The fashion for extreme compression use appears to be receding slightly, or maybe centres realise this is a difficult technique to do well. More moderate use of compression generally yields better results
- Some students and centres still feel the need to use multiband compression, which almost always has a poor outcome. At this level students are not expected to be able to use a tool that generally requires many years' experience
- Effects use in the best work showed use of perhaps two well-selected and contrasting reverbs, used as send and return on a number of parts in the mix to ensure cohesion. There might also be some subtle delay on some lead parts. In the majority of work, there was little consistent use of reverb across the whole mix, and many students choose an alarmingly high number of individual reverbs on inserts. This has the disadvantage of making balance unpredictable, as changing the wet/dry mix on an insert changes the balance of the dry signal as well as the amount of reverb so the two aspects can never be handled independently
- Balance of instruments and vocals depends a lot on successful capture and processing. Again it is fairly evident where monitors have not been used and headphones have been relied on instead. Listening to finished mixes on a variety of systems, and making adjustments through several mix stages is standard practice and should be planned for in carrying out the task
- Stereo placement is often handled well; extreme width can be problematic especially for stereo placements such as drum overheads. Poor balance can lead to pan problems on loud parts. Some mixes still get submitted as mono except for use of stereo reverb.

**Acoustic instrument requirements not met:**

There are still a surprising number of pieces that do not meet this requirement, including entire centres in some cases. An adjustment is applied to the marks if less than four acoustic instruments are present, reducing the total mark by 1/12<sup>th</sup> for each missing part.

## **RECORDING IN THE NEW SPEC**

Paper 1 at AS and A level will clearly use very similar skills to the current spec. The focus on instrumental requirements has changed, so the acoustic guitar is the central instrument in the AS recording, and a full band including drums is the focus in A level. Vocals will now be required on all pieces. Percussion has been removed because the current requirements which often involve percussion has shown how difficult it is to effectively record, balance and mix percussion for students at this level.

The same considerations and skills will be required to complete the task. The selection of a song from a list of artists will be published in June each year to give teachers a chance to begin preparation before September, something that has long been requested.

Including sequenced keyboard parts is now permitted, in line with modern production methods. Centres must study the assessment criteria and grids to make sure the focus of the work is in the correct areas - for example, a keyboard heavy piece might detract from the focus on production of drums and vocals at A level.

Many of the processing and mixing skills are also assessed in the new paper 4, analysing and producing.

## **Task 3C – Composing Using Technology**

It is encouraging to see further increases in centres exploiting sound design as an integral part of the compositional process. As the new spec arrives, centres who ensure students are successfully using a range of techniques will benefit as the new marks schemes contain a higher proportion of marks for sound design.

Some centres still fundamentally misunderstand the approaches to composing using technology, and submit recordings or sequenced songs with adding filters or a timed delays in a few places. The approach expected is to use a wide range of techniques to create an original and convincing sound palette. A range of synthesis, sample and audio manipulation, and creative effects techniques need to be included to fulfil the requirement of the task.

Musical elements as in previous years showed stronger control of structure, texture and in some cases rhythm – where there was some excellent work in the best submissions – than of harmony and melody. This is understandable considering the styles generally chosen, which are most appropriate to the task, but there is always an opportunity to include variety and development in all aspects of the musical construction.

### **Brief 1**

This was a popular choice. Often the work showed a broad reflection of the scenes and moods, but without a great deal of contrast. Musical ideas of technology based features can be used to great effect to punctuate, accentuate and drive the narrative. Key changes/different chords patterns/changes in rhythm and time signature/breakdowns and interludes could have been used much more. Often these elements were repetitive. Some submissions managed to include some use of themes for the characters/intro and outro idents but this was rare.

### **Brief 2**

It was quite common for students to misinterpret the requirement to use the text and reflect its meaning. There is nothing wrong with using self-written lyrics in this task, but it needs to be considered whether these are better than a professional author, or if they are entirely relevant. Often these focused on a different interpretation and missed the central message of the text.

As with previous years, it is often the case with this set text brief that a fairly dull narration is used over a bed of washy synths with a few effects; this approach can be successful but only with extensive editing of vocal part, varied sound design and development of musical ideas to avoid stagnation.

### Brief 3

Some submissions embraced the possibilities by using the samples to create melodic, rhythmic, timbral and textural elements with a wide range of manipulation techniques. While comparatively rare, it was encouraging to see this level of creativity. There were a lot of creative approaches to this choice, though this was also balanced by some unimaginative use of samples which were repetitive and not well integrated into the musical ideas.

### COMPOSITION IN THE NEW SPEC

The new Technology-based Composition task at AS and A level requires a similar approach to that which has been encouraged in Music Tech A level. The main difference is in the mark scheme, which has the use of technology marks expanded into three sections for each of the sound manipulation techniques of synthesis, sampling and creative effects use. These techniques distinguish composition using technology from traditional methods. It is expected that centres will encourage students to explore these techniques and develop skills in suitable production styles to take advantage of the possibilities.

The AS task is scaffolded by supplying two samples for use in the composition. Students are still expected to develop new original compositional ideas, not simply create a remix from the supplied samples. The A level will ahem three briefs to choose from, similar to the current task.

### **Log Books**

Many centres now produce an electronic pro forma for students to use, which helps make a well presented log book in most cases. Sometimes the questions get muddled up, or sections omitted, which then need to be resubmitted.

There seems to be an increase in centres sending large amounts of additional material, including excessive numbers of screenshots and large sections of written text describing student's projects in minute detail.

This is unnecessary. Many excellent log books use less than the space provided.

It is good practice to work with students so they can describe the processes used as succinctly as possible. This will also benefit their responses in the written exams. Being able to use correct terminology and concise descriptions to outline procedures will serve students well in professional life, whether in this field or another. Many screenshots provide no useful information at all.

In some cases centres were asked to resubmit their log books because the essential information such as the actual tracks recording and capture method was impossible to discern.

Where centres are using their own electronic document, it is important to remember to include the full information on front and rear pages for each student, and to make sure the log book is submitted as a single document rather than a series of loose sheets.

## **General Admin**

Some problems here, though issues seem to be less frequent.

Signatures of student and teacher are a requirement to authenticate the submission of every student, and have to be supplied if omitted from the original.

If methods used are unclear from the log book then requests for further details are sometimes necessary.

CDs are generally managed well, with fewer instances of data CDs, use of unplayable CD-RWs or DVDs. Some centres obviously bounce the final mix to mp3 before burning an audio CD. There is no good reason for this, and the quality will be affected.

## **Grade Boundaries**

In line with the ResultsPlus Examiners' Reports which are produced on ERA, grade boundaries are no longer included at the end of the report. Instead, the below generic paragraph must be inserted at the end of your reports:

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