



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2023

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology
8MT0/01

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AS Music Technology Component 1: 8MT0-01

Recording

The 2023 examination series saw a welcome return for the recording task. The last time this was sat in its intended format was 2019, with the component not being sat in 2020 or 2021 and a modified version of the task being used for the 2022 series. The mark scheme allows examiners to differentiate candidates, with more marks spread across capture and processing. The mark scheme also focused more on the way candidates had handled acoustic guitar and lead vocal. Those centres which had studied the mark scheme in detail showed a clear understanding of this and, in general, their candidates were more successful in the task.

This report should be used in conjunction with the published mark scheme.

The specification has a minimum number of instrumental parts, with acoustic guitar, lead vocal and bass/double bass being compulsory and there must be a minimum of two other different instrumental parts from a choice of acoustic melody instrument, electric guitar, keyboard or backing vocal. Untuned percussion not permitted at AS level. The recording must last between 2 and 2½ minutes. A candidate who does not meet these minimum requirements will not be able to access the full range of the mark scheme. Most candidates submitted work which fitted the requirement, which was encouraging. There were a lot of centres who had encouraged the candidates to take ownership of their work and produce their own arrangements of the song. The combination of the instrumental requirements and providing a list of artists led to most candidates making much more suitable choices for their work than in the previous specification. This meant that most of the work submitted was appropriate for AS level and all candidates were being assessed on a level playing field. There were a small number of candidates who attempted more complex mixes, which were generally less successful as they made the task too difficult for an AS level candidate who has been studying recording for less than a year. The intention of the new AS recording task is for an acoustic arrangement, with the mix focussed around the compulsory instruments. There were a lot of candidates this year who produced successful recordings based on simple musical arrangements. Some candidates attempted mixes which were too complex and the end result was less successful as they do not have the skills yet to manage a complex, dense mix.

The recordings this year showed a wide range of responses. Most centres and candidates had followed the 'spirit' of the task in their choice of song, instrumental arrangement, processing and mixing choices. Across the cohort, all the artists from the list of 10 were covered. Many centres displayed good practice, with each candidate recording a different song and having full control over their choice of mic and placement.

Logbooks were completed to a varying degree of success. Some were very detailed and included a good description of the candidates mix choices, either through well-chosen screen shots of plug in settings or through a description of the settings used (for example giving the frequency, boost/cut level and Q value for EQ settings). Contrary to this, there were also too many logbooks which were either incomplete, or had no useful information (for example simply writing 'Reverb' under FX). Centres are reminded that the purpose of the log is to help

the examiner to assess the work, and the way they are presented and the detail included should reflect this. If a log is not fully completed, the candidate may not be fully credited for the work they have done. It is also important that the photographs the candidate submits match the audio and assist the examiner in assessing the recording work (for example a photo of a mic set up, but with no instrument in the picture to be able to judge placement). Photographs are best taken at the time of recording. It is not appropriate to 'stage' photographs after the event as this is not an accurate record of the candidates' mic and placement choices. Candidates should be taking their own photograph of their own work; sharing photographs between candidates is not acceptable and is a form of malpractice like any other shared files. The log book forms part of the assessed work, and it is therefore not acceptable for the teacher to dictate the content, the log, just like the recording, must be the candidate's own unaided work.

Administration

Most centres submitted their work by the May 15th deadline. It is, of course, perfectly acceptable to upload your candidates' submissions before the deadline. LWT can be very busy around the deadline day.

All centres had clearly named the candidates' files, making it easy to identify who had completed the work. Not all centres had submitted work in the correct format; centres are urged to read the ASG before candidates bounce their work to ensure that the correct file type is used. Candidates should check their files before submission to make sure they are correct.

AG1-4 are split into 3 columns – acoustic guitar, lead vocal and other parts. Under 'Other Parts' examiners are considering how all the parts work together – such as distribution of frequencies across the whole mix or the consistency of how reverb has been applied.

AG1: Capture

Examiners consider choice and positioning of microphones or other capture method used. For some sound sources there are a range of appropriate and acceptable capture methods, for example a bass could be DI'd or the bass amp could be mic'd (or both and then the two signals blended in the final mix); keyboard parts can be mic'd, DI'd or MIDI sequenced. The examiner will assess how successfully the instruments have been recorded and the clarity of the capture.

Most centres have a range of microphones, giving the candidates the opportunity to select the mic of their choice for capture. Most candidates selected appropriate mics for vocals and electronic instruments – with some on electric guitars using a combination of a close dynamic mic and a condenser capturing from a little further away. Most candidates used a pair of mics (sometimes a pair of small diaphragm condenser, occasionally a condenser and a dynamic) for acoustic guitar, which results a successful capture. Some candidates used DI for acoustic guitar, and although this capture method isn't technically 'wrong' the results were harsh and tinny and made the processing and mixing more difficult for the candidate. DI for acoustic guitar is best avoided. This year very few candidates chose to double track their acoustic

guitar. This technique helps to give the acoustic guitar part more interest and more 'body' in the mix and also gives a good opportunity for use of stereo.

Overall, capture was varied this series. Few candidates achieved really great capture, but also very few were really bad. Common errors were acoustic guitars mic'd very close resulting in a lot of pick scrape and scratch, and singers moving on and off mic.

DI's were appropriately used for keyboard parts and occasionally for electric guitar (usually successfully, making use of amp simulators in the mix to good effect). It was quite common this year for candidates to capture bass using both DI and a mic on the cab and blending the two. There were also this year a lot more keyboard parts recorded using MIDI/soft synths. This would seem to be generally a good choice for keyboard parts as most DAWs now have very good instruments included and using them helps to simplify the mix process.

Other instruments commonly recorded with varying success were string quartets (which were quite common this year), double bass (for the first time since the spec started a handful of centres used double bass rather than electric bass) and some sax/horns.

Sometimes good capture was hindered by poor or inconsistent playing. Whilst it is appreciated that centres do not always have a wide pool of musicians to call upon for their recordings, this should be taken into consideration when deciding on the additional instruments that are recorded. A poorly played instrument can result in a lot of extra work needed in the mixing process.

As part of the capture process, candidates are expected to ensure that the instrument parts are in time and in tune.

AG2: Processing of EQ

The most successful candidates demonstrated a real understanding of the purpose of EQ within the context of the whole mix, and how it was used to help with balance and blend. The intention was for processing which followed modern practice. Most candidates were aiming for this.

This year EQ was less varied than in previous series. Most candidates were successful in creating a general EQ profile that covered the full spectrum but also allowed each part to have its own space.

Common errors were: hi-mid biased or harsh vocals, in particular not really dealing with unpleasant sibilants; acoustic guitars that were thin and tinny or with a pronounced low-mid bias; muddy basses with little definition; and strings that were very harsh to listen to. In the case of strings in particular, the skill of the player sometimes had a big effect on the EQ of the raw material and maybe some candidate/centres should have chosen to record different instruments.

In contrast, those candidates who were successful had considered the song as a whole as well as each individual track to craft their EQ. When marking, the examiners are considering the

EQ of each instrument and also the range of EQ across the whole mix and how the instruments sit together. Candidates should be guided to consider this when mixing their recordings.

Some candidates had made use of some creative EQ and/or automation, which they had described well in their log, making clear their intentions and how they had achieved them.

Whilst it is often necessary for logistical purposes for candidates to work on headphones in the classroom, centres are strongly encouraged to invest in studio reference headphones with a flatter frequency response and that all recordings should be monitored on your studio speakers before submitting the work to your examiner.

AG3: Dynamic Processing

Again here, the most successful candidates were those who understood the purpose of compression in the wider context of the overall mix.

Dynamic processing always differentiates well at AS level.

Most candidates compressed the vocals at the very least, although many seemed to just insert a compression plug-in and leave it on its default settings. The most common errors were under compression, over compression and attack times too long meaning transients (particularly on acoustic guitar) were quite pokey in some recordings. There was evidence in some recordings and their supporting log books that some candidates knew they had to insert a compression plug in, but didn't really understand what it did or how to edit the settings.

The candidates who understood dynamics processing had attempted the high compression sound common in modern recordings, putting some compression on all parts and also, sometimes, some compression (sometimes multiband) on the stereo out to 'glue' the song together.

The most successful candidates had achieved good even results that still had some life and mixed well together. Like with EQ, the examiners are considering how the use of compression has affected the whole mix as well as each individual instrument. Well crafted compression will have an effect on the balance and on the mastering level.

Some candidates chose not to compress anything, resulting in very 'lumpy' uneven recordings.

Log books were helpful here, as the information provided helped to confirm what could be heard in the audio and helped the examiner to determine whether, for example, lack of dynamic control was because the candidate had not used compression, or because they had not edited the settings appropriately.

AG4: Use of Effects

Consistency across parts was the key here, with a reminder of the instruction to apply modern standards of processing. For fear of repetition, the most successful candidates here were those who took a holistic view of effects processing and understood the use of reverb in the context of the overall mix.

Most candidates used some kind of reverb across their tracks.

The most successful made good use of reverb busses to make their recordings coherent and give the impression of all the musicians playing in the same place. These successful candidates had analysed modern recording/mixing practice and produced a tight, but not too dry sound.

On the other hand, some candidates did not put any reverb on anything, scoring 0 for effects. Some candidates had captured some natural room reverb with their acoustic guitar, and where this was well controlled and appropriately balanced, the examiners were able to give credit for this.

One area of good practice that was heard in many recordings was making good use of reverb (coupled with balance) to make backing vocals sound like they were 'behind' the lead singer.

In addition to reverb, many candidates experimented with other effects – usually successfully. In particular, there was a lot of good use of electric guitar effects, overdrive and distortion and some good creative use of delays, mostly on vocals.

General note:

The capture and processing of the recording, under the mark scheme, accounts for 80% of the marks for this task; therefore, centres are encouraged to guide their students to spend an appropriate proportion of their time working on these. It was disappointing to see some logs where the candidate had simply written 'None' across EQ, FX and Dynamic Processing – effectively ruling out 60% of the marks available.

When an instrumental part was too quiet in the mix to be able to fully assess processing, this limited the marks a candidate could be awarded in AG1-4 (and affects the balance and blend mark in AG5).

AG5: Balance and Blend

Most candidates understood the process and intention of mixing. Most mixes were sensible with all parts audible, with only minor slips.

A common mistake was to have one part too high in the mix, not masking, but just overpowering the other parts. Another frequent slip was to have one of the 'other parts' too low and difficult to hear. Many candidates seem to have taken the approach of making sure the three compulsory parts (lead vocal, acoustic guitar and bass) were clear and obvious in the mix. There were not many recordings this year where one of these three parts was inaudible or buried behind other parts.

Some very good practice was heard this year in the balancing and blending of lead vocals and backing vocals. Backing vocals were blended well to sit just under the lead vocal and support the overall arrangement. Many candidates made good use of reverb and stereo field on their backing vocals.

The most successful candidates had considered balance in conjunction with EQ, dynamic processing and panning to produce a well-crafted recording. This holistic approach is a good way to approach the mixing of the AS recording task.

If any of the instrument parts was under the required length, no higher than level 2 can be awarded in AG5. This was rare, however, with most candidates ensuring their musical arrangements met the minimum requirements.

Unsuccessful mixes were muddy and untidy, or had one part over dominant and masking other important parts.

AG6: Use of Stereo

Success here was mixed and partly dependent on choice of musical arrangement.

Examiners wanted to hear the full stereo field being used, without bias or exaggeration. Whilst there are no 'rules' to the use of panning, the expectation is that candidates follow modern practice. Therefore, it is expected that bass and lead vocal will be panned to the centre and that other parts, if panned, should be balanced across the stereo field.

This year, many candidates, through their choice of instrumentation, left themselves few options for much use of stereo. As mentioned in AG 1, most did not double track acoustic guitars, meaning three of their five instruments had to be panned centre. Some compensated for this by using stereo keyboard parts, which filled out the stereo field quite well (as did stereo reverbs) or had 2 or 3 backing vocals or guitar parts which were spread out across the stereo field. In particular, some very good work on backing vocals was heard, with parts spread evenly across the stereo field to surround the lead vocal.

In general however, this year the stereo field was quite narrow on most recordings, although not mono.

As with EQ, there were some candidates that attempted some creative use of stereo and panning automation. This was usually very successful and log books were well used in these cases to outline what the candidate had done in their recording work.

Candidates are encouraged to think about their final mix, especially how they might use the stereo field, when creating their musical arrangement and planning their recording.

AG7: Management of noise, distortion, master level and audio editing

This year, many candidates did not achieve full marks in AG7.

Common errors were either noisy start/end where individual tracks had not been trimmed correctly, or start/end cut where bounce range had not been set correctly.

Mastering levels were often quite low this year. When mixing and bouncing, candidates should be checking the output level and adjusting their settings to achieve a good mastering level. Some good candidates made use of compression and/or limiting on their stereo out channel to help with this.

Another disappointing thing to hear this year was fade outs which although technically well programmed and controlled were unmusical (such as half way through a verse). Candidates are encouraged to consider the musical effect of their fade out. At the planning stage of the recording, some consideration should be made in the arrangement of the song. Most candidates were able to create a recording lasting between 2 and 2½ minutes which was musically satisfying.

There were a small number of recordings that were too long, and one or two that were mastered too hot and were distorting.

Candidates are reminded of the importance of checking their files after they have been bounced to ensure that the work is ready for submission.