Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

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Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (9MT0)
Paper 01

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Principal Examiner's Report

A level Music Technology Component 1 – Recording

9MT0/01

General Introduction

This year was just the second time that this paper was set as in the specification due to the disruptions and alterations caused by the pandemic, the first time having been in 2019, meaning the recording element of the task and choice of ten artists or bands was restored. It was pleasing to see a wide range of songs chosen across all ten artists.

This unit, like many practical papers in different subjects, is about problem solving. How do candidates present a recording to the examiner clearly demonstrating that all requirements have been successfully fulfilled. This basic understanding of the task is something that many candidates struggled with.

It must be made clear that this is not a task to replicate the original production of a song by an artist on the list, because this very often leads to aspects of the requirements not being satisfactorily fulfilled or presented to an examiner. For most, if not all, songs, some form of creative arranging and production is required above and beyond simple replication in order to provide a finished mix that an examiner will be able to fully apply the published mark scheme to. Unfortunately, many candidates attempted to shoehorn all the required elements into a mix in such a way that made it impossible for some of these elements to be assessed. Different songs from different artists threw up different problems, but all were equally solvable.

Whilst many candidates presented work that was well managed and easy for an examiner to apply the mark scheme, there were also a significant number that made it very hard for the examiner to give credit for some aspects. Some of the most common issues were:

- Doubling electric and acoustic guitar tracks. This was mainly an issue in Foo Fighters songs, but not exclusively. In such cases, the acoustic guitar was often completely inaudible in the mix, simply doubling the electric guitar part. The acoustic guitar was often swamped by the electric guitar and was therefore impossible to credit. The task requires a minimum of 2 minutes of electric guitar within a 3 ½ recording and a minimum of 1 minute of an additional instrument such as acoustic guitar. The solution to this would be to completely change the texture for one minute of the song and have a very acoustic section which allows the acoustic guitar to be properly assessed. Some candidates found pleasingly creative ways to present their work, for example a flamenco style acoustic guitar and keyboard opening to 'Call Me' by Blondie with interestingly layered vocals which seamlessly segued into a more familiar new wave arrangement after about a minute at a completely different tempo allowed for all the required compulsory and additional tracks to be clearly heard and credited.

- The same applied to keyboard parts which also often got swamped by electric guitars and other parts and was clearly regarded as an unwanted afterthought.

- The other major issue was that of backing vocals, which is a compulsory component and as such needs to be clearly present for a minimum of two minutes in such a way that makes it easy for an examiner to credit. Candidates found all sorts of ways of attempting to avoid recording two minutes of BVs by double tracking them or claiming that timing from the first BV phrase to the final BV phrase was over 2 minutes despite there being sizeable gaps between sections – logs were often wildly inaccurate here. Additionally, BVs were often poorly thought through and badly performed then submerged as far back in the mix as possible, presumably in the hope that an examiner wouldn't notice them. This is part of the problem solving. Almost all songs can easily have harmonies added to both verses and choruses at thirds and sixths. Doubling at an octave was permissible, but often poorly managed. There were plenty of submissions that had 2 minutes of well managed and clear BVs across all artists, most of which had benefitted from some creative thought by candidates.

The above issues were common topics on social media, with teachers often discussing how far the rules could be interpreted creatively. Examiners do not participate in these forums. Therefore any questions regarding how the task should be interpreted will only ever be answered on such platforms by people who do not necessarily know the correct answer. If you have any questions regarding interpretation of the task, these should be sent direct to the Subject Advisor or Ask The Expert who will respond appropriately. There will be teachers reading this report whose students will have been negatively impacted by having acted upon incorrect advice offered on social media.

It is pleasing to see that the majority of centres treat this task with integrity ensuring that all students and submissions are closely monitored and managed according to published guidelines. There are still, however, some area of malpractice that are clearly evident in a minority of submissions. With ten artists' entire catalogues to choose from, it is not hard to insist that all students in a centre record a different song, and we highly recommend this practice to be encouraged. Indeed, some of the larger centres clearly did just that and this is to be applauded. Choosing different songs eliminates both the possibility of file sharing between candidates as well as a 'paint by numbers' approach to both recording and mixing, which is still evident in some centres. The task should allow candidates to independently demonstrate the learning that they have gained during lessons in their practical work.

There is also evidence that candidates are not always fully in control of setting up recording sessions. It is not acceptable for several candidates to collaborate in setting up to record, for example, a drum track and then having to do nothing more than press record. There were examples found when record times on drum tracks for different candidates were no more than 5 minutes apart – obviously with no time to completely re-set the recording environment (as required by the published task) for each individual candidate. To record a drum track a student should expect to spend a couple of hours getting positioning and levels etc. to their satisfaction. Getting a drummer in for a morning to record an entire centre's

drum tracks is not likely to be within the published guidance and is certainly not within the spirit of the task.

Administration

The online submission process worked well this year, and the majority of teething problems that were encountered last year had been sorted out. Most centres followed the instructions in the Administration Support Guide and this was appreciated by examiners. However, a minority of centres did not quite get it right and there were examples of:
- Centres submitting one ZIP file with all three elements – final mix, logbook and DAW file. These should be submitted separately – the final mix as a .WAV, logbook, and a ZIP file of the DAW
- File naming was also mostly very accurate and adhered to the format requested. It is really useful for examiners when everything is named as required, so please ensure that all candidates name all files and folders as set out in the ASG.
- There were a few examples of .MP3 files rather than the higher quality .WAV files being submitted.
- Once the logs had been e-signed by teacher and student and files uploaded, the examiner is bound to mark what has been submitted. There were examples of files that were quite probably incorrect – missing vocals, 30 second files, badly distorted masters etc. It cannot be stressed how vital it is for candidates to check their final submission by listening all the way through – an examiner will not return work because it sounds wrong. They are required to mark what has been submitted.

Logbooks

Almost all logbooks are now completed on a computer and there were some outstanding examples that were well presented and provided excellent evidence to support the submitted final mix. Some were clearly very last-minute jobs and provided little useful information. Examiners will refer to the logbooks to see if the information supports what has been submitted on the final mix. Generally, the two complement each other, but there were some logs where a candidate had very obviously been fairly economical with the facts (such as lengths of BVs or how EQ of FX had been applied). Examiners will always mark what they hear, not what they read, so embellishing the facts in the log dies not achieve anything.

Some students printed a screen shot of the whole mix arrange window on the DAW as the track diagram and these, when tracks were properly named, were very useful and more accurate than the block diagram. This is perfectly acceptable and indeed encouraged.

One change is that we now require photographic evidence for all tracks to be included and not hand drawn diagrams. These photographs must be taken at the time of the recording and show a complete set up. For example, a photograph of a set up for a lead vocal should include the singer, not just a picture of a microphone with a pop shield (which was not uncommon) or a photo of a guitar set up with no guitarist in sight is incomplete. Time and date stamps on the photos would be useful.

Photographs should never be shared between candidates – this is clear malpractice and also triggers further investigation into file sharing or recording set up inconsistencies.

Marking criteria

AG1: Capture

Most candidates scored well in AG1. Examiners will listen for whether the track can be heard, if is it clear, are if there any technical issues that present themselves. Where elements were inaudible then marks in that category were best fitted as will be stated on Examiner Mark Booklets. This will also be the case in AG 2-4.

AG2 Editing – processing EQ

Most common issues with EQ were poor upper end frequency response on either individual tracks or the mix as a whole, poor lower end frequency response, and swamping around the lower mid frequencies.

AG3 – Processing – dynamic processing

Problems with dynamic control were often caused by low gain control on the recording not allowing compression to even out dynamic variation. Poor microphone technique by singers also caused some issues. Occasional over compression (mainly of drums and electric guitars) was observed, but most candidates controlled the dynamics reasonably well.

AG4: Processing – use of effects

This was the one aspect where the mix was often at variance to the log. Many candidates could have been a little bolder in their use of effects with some very dry brittle mixes. Bear in mind that an examiner needs something to assess, so a little more can go a long way – this is not a task to replicate a mix but present evidence to the examiner that candidates can apply effects to help create a balanced mix. There were a few examples of over reverberant mixes.

AG5: Production – Balance and blend

Whilst there were many excellent examples of well-balanced mixes where all tracks could clearly be heard, there were also a significant number that suffered from masked and inaudible tracks. A few candidates scored 0 in AG5 and AG7 for incorporating unpitched percussion such as handclaps or using a drum machine to emulate the start of 'Heart of Glass'. As mentioned before – this is not a replication task.

AG6: Production – use of stereo

Examiners were looking for tracks with a stereo field that provided good, but not extreme, separation. Most candidate presented a well-managed stereo field, often a little narrow

with, for example, BVs and lead vocals fighting for the same space. There was occasionally some very inappropriately wide and over separated use of stereo.

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

Most candidates scored 4. Those that didn't mostly had low mastering levels, some unedited noise or a cut start/end – all errors that could easily have been rectified with a little more care and attention in the final bounce process.