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Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2023

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (9MT0)
Paper 02

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9MT0 02 Principal Examiner's Report to Centres 2023

This is the second time the paper has been sat as originally planned with external examination. The first was in 2019 and the subsequent two summers have had disruption due to Covid, leading to altered assessment arrangements.

There were slight changes in 2022 to support students due to disruption from Covid. A change in the total length required from 3 minutes to 2 was imposed as a suitable adjustment. Whether this made the task easier is debatable.

Headlines

- Centres continue to show a generally suitable approach to music technology compositions. Technology use in the form of synthesis, sampling and creative effects is explored to create a palette of sounds and musical, structural and sonic elements only available through this approach.
- Synthesis often the strongest of the tech elements, sampling often minimal or misjudged, effects use limited to basic mix FX and few feature delays or reverbs.
- However, only a few exploit the capacity for real time control beyond filtering, ARPs and basic automation – LFO, envelope.
- There often seemed to be a centre-wide approach to technology use. This was most true of Brief 3, chosen by the majority, and the choice of soundscape plus David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg samples was often met with limited success. Soundscape is a hard style to make interesting.
- Musical compositional ideas varied widely. Some excellent work was seen with a range of well-structured complimentary ideas. Many submissions were quite basic and repetitive, with limited control and ideas that are not beyond GCSE standard.
- Some entries did not answer the brief at all. No material was included that could identify it as being one of the three briefs. In this case they scored 0 marks for the whole entry as it is an Ofqual requirement that students answer the brief set in the year of examination and no others.
- A common error with Brief 3 was to use samples on the theme of climate change, which is not the same thing as Polar Ice Caps. There is a link to what is happening at the Polar regions, but often it was not expressed in the chosen samples.
- Most centres seemed to manage with the digital upload systems, with well organised, correctly named submissions consisting of a stereo wav or aiff file, log book and a zipped folder containing the project files. A small number seemed to have difficulty understanding what was required, and needed to be asked a number of times before they managed to upload the correct materials.

The Three Briefs

The three briefs had similar focus to previous series. Brief 3 was most popular, with around 2/3rd of submissions choosing this. 20% or so chose brief 2, while less than 10% chose brief 1.

Brief 1 – Manen produced by ArtFX

This style of animation, with a strong narrative underpinning, was different to films in other years. There probably was more of a challenge to scoring this film and integrating technology, though there were many opportunities to react to frequent hit points, story lines and mood changes.

There were some excellent responses, that acknowledged the almost expected approach – using some natural instruments, including orchestral sections, or plucked string instruments or mallet-struck tuned percussion – and blending this with stylish, well-shaped synthesis and FX use to create an interesting and original approach.

Weaker work would generally do a fair job of reflecting scene changes and moods but could miss the chance to mark many hit points and action cues.

A few candidates ignored the requirement of the brief to avoid Foley, but these submissions were usually ones that struggled to come up with suitable ideas across the whole piece.

Brief 2 – Beat! Beat! Drums!

This brief saw some very good responses at the top end. Students more often chose to develop a song from the text, probably more than in previous years. Some very good work was submitted, with imaginative, skilled arrangement of the words into melodies, which was quite demanding with the scan of the poem in places.

Many students developed the words to suit their approach, which is acceptable as long as the meaning of the text is reflected in the whole piece.

Some took an approach that hardly used any of the text, and ignored much the original meaning. This would result in a low mark in response to brief.

It is clearly stated in the brief that the meaning must be reflected, even when lyrics are adapted and developed.

There were still some submissions that used narration, but not as many were successful as other years.

With this brief, there was a relatively high incidence of submissions with no inclusion of the text in any form, which means the whole piece scored 0 marks as the work has to be a response to one of the set briefs.

Brief 3 – Polar Ice Caps

This was most popular, and generated a high number of quite unimaginative, dull soundscape-based efforts with sampled narration, generally David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg. Many had limited manipulation of the samples, or clumsy attempts at stuttering pitching and FX use, that did not integrate well with the music.

Soundscape is a really difficult style to make interesting, and a few washy reverbs and evolving pads with some badly stuttered samples will fail to gather many marks – it does not allow students to access many areas of the mark scheme unless it is done really well.

Another approach involved creating percussion and drums from breaking ice, though in many cases they became unrecognisable so failed to reflect the brief fully.

Better work included imaginative use of animal calls, well integrated and manipulation with sample editing and FX to sit well in the piece, or in some cases made into original pitched instruments with some skill and imagination.

This brief was often misinterpreted with a huge range of narration used that related to climate change rather than the polar regions. There is a link, but unless clearly made, climate change does not equal Ice Caps. Candidates who had followed this approach often failed to attract significant marks in response to brief.

This brief also requires the use of a minimum of 6 samples relating to the subject, and many candidates failed to use enough relevant material.

Summary of Approaches in the Assessment Component Grids (AGs)

AG1

Synthesis was used by the majority of students. Sometimes the approaches were quite limited, and the timbres chosen and edited not always complementary to each other.

Best work had a very effective choice and combination of sounds, with plenty of variety and some development of timbres during the performances.

Weaker entries had limited real time control, a few basic techniques employed, and often a real lack of variety.

All software now has very capable instruments that can produce a range of synthesis styles, but it benefits a piece to focus on a few very well chosen and well-shaped patches.

AG2

In the better submissions, there was notable success: samples contribute a significant amount to the sonic palette and musical ideas, and are well integrated with the other parts. At the lower end, and some mid-level submissions (brief 3 in particular) the samples often feel separate from the music, can lack ambition and interest, and display poor quality control.

Drum sampling, even if detuned, does not equate to sampling as a creative part of the compositional process. It is important, but drums always are, along with the general sonic palette.

Drum, vocal or instrumental loops that have been deposited without editing do not gain credit as they lack manipulation.

AG3. There was a lot of room for improvement here. The best work had a variety of FX that were well chosen and integrated into the music, proving additional layers to timbre, texture or rhythm. There would be multiple instances of delays with different functions, either contributing ambience or rhythm through timed repeats; variety of well-chosen and edited reverbs suitable for different parts and to change the atmosphere, including highlighting big changes in the piece; side-chained dynamic processing; creative gating to make new rhythms; modulation FX to provide movement and contrast.

More basic work saw only a few feature FX such as washy reverbs and timed delays, but used somewhat clumsily and not well integrated.

AG4. Top end work sounded quite accomplished, good balance, controlled dynamics, a sense of space, weight and punch where appropriate.

Less successful work displayed issues in balance, pan, dynamics and general FX use. Overall these sounded weak and at times uncomfortable.

Pieces using few musical elements with little variety were often hard to get a convincing mix from.

AG5. The best submissions used the brief in clear ways, often extending the ideas or maximising the potential e.g. with brief 2, adapting the words to suit the melodic ideas; brief 3 creating icy sounding timbres and imaginative use of vocal samples; brief 1 reflecting the action with synthesised timbres that follow the plot lines.

Less successful work showed less consideration of the brief, even to the point of it being hard to sense any relation to the ideas of the brief. An example is the soundscape approach to brief 3 where large sections of narration would just be placed on top of a soundscape bed, with little integration into the music or refinement of the voice.

AG6. Better work had a clear sense of style and direction, consistently used throughout with development of ideas and convincing delivery.

Some submissions lacked a clearly defined style, with repetitive or contradictory elements.

AG7. A mixed approach where the best candidates were able to write melodies which had shape and direction, possibly most common in Brief 2. There were some interesting motifs composed in response to the characters in Brief 1 also, although this was perhaps less successful than the song writing of Brief 2. Brief 3 was frequently the most neglected in this area where melodic content was often replaced by GT/DA speeches or news articles. In these cases, melodic ideas were often reduced to short repetitive ideas, or even not present at all, resulting in the composition often feeling more akin to a backing track.

AG8. Seemingly an improvement upon previous years. Most candidates demonstrated the ability to write reasonable harmonic progressions with generally related melodic lines. However, with most candidates situated in the middle band, issues of development are still prevalent. Many candidates, having written a reasonable progression simply repeated it throughout the composition, possibly a reflection of the writing from some of today's mainstream popular artists. Brief 3 tended to produce the most abstract harmonic content where some candidates had tried to recreate the inhospitable environment with equally disparate harmonic ideas. The success of this approach, as in previous years was quite mixed.

AG9. In some instances there seemed to be an increased reliance on sample loops - Apple loops, and pre-programmed parts such as Logic's 'Drummer' track. The stronger candidates stated in their logbooks how they had cut, reordered, and arranged the content of these items to form new rhythmic structures, whereas many weaker candidates simply included them at the correct tempo without additional editing and variation. It was good to see some candidates taking brief-related samples (some Brief 2 but mainly Brief 3) and using them to form percussive timbres, or even new rhythmic loops which they then went on to develop within their compositions.

AG10. Some candidates struggled to create contrast in their submissions. The initial patterns and groove would be largely unvaried and repetitive. In these cases although some contrast may have been present, it was often too narrow to be particularly effective. The more successful submissions managed to create contrast between sections utilising compositional techniques to create light and shade, either by instrumentation and voicing changes, or by arrangement of musical ideas.

It can be a very accessible way of creating contrast in a composition, as long as students are helped in knowing how and when to build or break down the layers.

AG11. Depended on which brief was attempted to some extent. Possibly the weakest work was seen in attempting Brief 1 where submissions were often so episodic that stable form and structure were almost non-existent. The strongest work was where candidates had stuck to recognised formats and demonstrated

thought as to the overall structure. Intro/outro, verse/chorus, etc. With suitable development and variety.

Logbooks and Administrative Matters

There were too many excessively long log books containing hundreds of screenshots but very little useful information. A few well worded descriptions with reference to key settings and edits is sufficient.

Missing signatures seemed to be on the increase compared to other years.

Submissions cannot be marked without the teacher and candidate signature as this validates the examination entry.

Many centres sent well organised submissions that arrived in a timely fashion and clearly followed all the requirements laid out in the administrative guidance document, and this is appreciated as it simplifies the access to work for marking.

A few centres had clearly not read the guide or had not understood it which gave rise to issues that had to be resolved. This can be a time-consuming process and in extreme circumstances may lead to marks not being published on time or even not being able to mark the work.

Particular issues seemed to arise around the DAW file submission, which a small number of centres that struggled to accomplish this, and a great deal of time was spent attempting to resolve the problems.

A list follows of general submission issues seen this year:

- No DAW files supplied. Resulted in work being returned to centre, and in some cases long communication trails to resolve.
- DAW files supplied but not as a zip, in some cases a massive upload of individual files from the DAW folder. Results in candidate work including the final mix being hard to identify, impossible in some cases.
- Incorrect naming of files, not following the format laid out on the front of the brief and in the administrative support guide.

The examining team will always make the effort to resolve these matters, but some centres seemed uncooperative, or perhaps disorganised.

It is good practice to support students in understanding the need to supply material for examination in the correct formats and in timely fashion. Once they get to university there is minimal leeway for administrative errors.

