



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2024

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (9MT0)
Paper 02

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Summer 2024

Publications Code 9MT0_02_2406_ER

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9MT0 02 Principal Examiner's Report to Centres 2024

This is the third occasion the paper has been sat as originally planned with external examination. The first was in 2019, then the subsequent two summers were affected by the pandemic, consequently with altered assessment arrangements. There were slight changes in 2022 to support students due to disruption from Covid.

The practical task for this paper is always a choice of 3 briefs: one is a moving image move file (supplied); one is a set text; and the other is a theme to use as a basis for sampling spoken media, wildlife, urban or other ambient noise, or other sound sources that represent the theme. As such the task has the same scope each year, though the particular stimuli vary to ensure unpredictability.

Candidates are able to choose any of the three briefs, depending what suits their interests or preferred musical styles.

An improvement in student performance was noted this year. One of the briefs (brief 3) last year attracted a lot of similar and quite unsuccessful responses, relying on large portions of unedited narration that did not fully reflect the theme, and consequently performing poorly in some areas.

The examiner's report to centres last summer highlighted this, and it appears that many centres heeded the advice and made efforts to include more variety in samples in brief 3, and to consider the theme in a more creative way.

Headlines

- Mark Boundaries: A - 45 E - 21

Unchanged from 2023

- Centres continue to show an effective approach to music technology compositions. Technology is exploited by most submitted pieces through the use of synthesis, sampling and creative effects to create sonic elements. It is notable how this has improved through the lifetime of this specification.
- The software is used to develop musical ideas in compositions using these sound design ideas and the wealth of approaches possible in DAWs. Students can use a variety of note entry methods, making the art of composition accessible without needed advanced music performance skills.
- Synthesis remains the strongest of the elements in many cases. Almost all students now take the time to develop their timbres at the editing stages, and many are incorporating some real time development and control.

Weaker work would display less control or less suitable use of manipulation, if used, and timbres that were not always complementary to each other and the other parts of the music.

Stronger work might only have a few synthesised timbres, but all would be well crafted, fit the music very well and have effective manipulation and integration with the piece as a whole.

- Sampling can often be limited in scope and techniques, with less skill in developing significant aspects of the composition. Good work used samples that were effectively chopped and sized to create effective rhythmic elements, or exploit the wide range of vocal manipulation techniques available through audio editing features of software including time stretch, pitching, spin down/up.
- Effects use was probably the most varied in success. Some were limited to basic mix FX and few feature delays or reverbs. The use of delay to add layers and rhythmic elements is becoming more commonplace, and other FX such as bit crushing and side chaining are being used more frequently. There is a big range in success in applying FX at the right time, at the right levels, and with a musical outcome. A common example would be inappropriate and dominating EQ sweeps, or the excessive use of wildly swinging panning. There are very few occasions where altering positions of parts in the stereo field produce a successful outcome.

Sometimes students would list a large number of functional mix effects in their log book, which is not the category that is marked here. Creative FX are those that develop timbres and create new sonic or musical elements, not a small EQ change or a bit of compression for dynamic control.

- Quality of mix tends to also show general improvements, with decent balance across the ensemble and suitable EQ. Boomy or excessively harsh mixes seem to be becoming more rare. Dynamic control can present problems. Weaker work would display technical problems such as distortion, clicks and glitches, cut endings. Where wild panning has been used it may detract from the marks in this component.
- The use of pre-programmed player instruments, commonly available in all software, to generate musical parts with the input of a few basic musical settings, is a valid approach in the same way sampling is. Candidates are able to use these as a starting point for development. Used creatively this can be a successful approach. Where there is limited development from the original material, there is limited credit to be gained.
- The same applied to AI generated performances. These are treated like samples, where editing is required to add originality.

The Three Briefs

The three briefs had similar focus to previous series. All three were equally popular, which is unusual as often one is favoured over the others.

Brief 1 – World Science Festival: We Will Be Martians by TRY Motion (edited)

The video had the theme of travel to mars and space exploration, with animated sections showing the skies, rocket launch and journey, mars lander probes, mars surface and finally a single astronaut staring at mars horizon.

The images and scenes provided plenty of opportunity to showcase a range of moods, action, hit points and the developing story. The best work was very effective at reflecting all these aspects, with plenty of opportunity for futuristic and electronic sound use alongside varied musical ideas that told the story and set the moods throughout.

Weaker work tended to emphasise sound design at the expense of musical ideas, and lack detail in reflecting all the scenes and hit points or effectively changing the mood. Transitions would either be ignored or poorly managed.

There was not much reliance on Foley, which the brief states specifically not to include, but some could not resist the temptation to include a countdown to rocket launch. In a few cases these were handled musically and worked fine as a sonic element, but many did little to enhance the over all piece.

Brief 2 – War Talk

This brief as usual attracted two distinct approaches – narration of the text, edited using sampling techniques; and development of the text or sections of it into a song, rap or combination.

The second approach relies on performers of a suitable standard, and the use of good recording technique. Sometimes the work fell short in these aspects, but the best work displayed considerable skill not only in song writing but in performances.

Where candidates require others to perform on their piece, the log book section about performances must be filled in. In some cases it is unclear how much input the candidate has had into writing melodies or rapped vocals; in these cases credit is limited.

A composition must be primarily the student's original ideas; if they rely on other to provide significant musical ideas, these are treated as samples.

The first approach had a wide range of success as well. Weaker work had poorly recorded narration, with little care apparently given to the delivery of the words, and then edited using sample techniques that were often unsuccessful. Good quality raw material is a pre-requisite for sampling.

Where this approach worked well, there was a high quality audio track to begin with, possibly sampled from online version, or a mixture, and a range of creative sampling methods were used to create interest to spoken word delivery.

Where the theme was developed through editing the text, or focusing on particular elements, it was quite easy to lose the overall messages in the original. Though titled war talk, the words do not really explore themes of war directly. It refers to a perceived struggle against orthodox thinking, the importance of challenging this through the arts and perceiving the world in different ways, and brings a positive message of change with a hint at feminism. Very few candidates managed to reflect this when exploring new wording.

With this brief, there were once again some 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.

Songs were often pop, indie, rock, electronica, or rap in style.

The best responses at the top end were very good indeed, often with a range of sung vocals and BVs, perhaps some rapping, and extensively technology use to develop interest.

Brief 3 – Deserts

Many avoided the temptation to produce soundscapes with desert-oriented samples placed unmusically over the top, such as David Attenborough documentaries.

Soundscape remains a difficult style to be successful with. Often musical ideas are sparse, and tech use may be present but obvious and not always suited to the rest of the piece.

A more common approach this year was to use electronic music styles, incorporating singing, instruments, percussion or wildlife sounds from desert regions. Many of these were done stylishly, with a good range of tech methods.

Creating drum and percussion samples by sampling desert sounds was evident, but is not necessary the most fruitful approach.

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

Summary of Approaches in the Assessment Component Grids (AGs)

AG1

Often the strongest element of tech use. All software now provides a range of synthesis types. Centres are clearly encouraging students to explore different types, and use parameters to develop their timbres and create the sonic palette, and then using automation or other real time control to create development of the timbres during the piece.

The best work shows musical judgement and control in when to apply automation to settings, and how to combine complementary timbres that suit the mood and style of the piece.

Weaker work had misjudged use of parameters such as uncontrolled filter sweeps, mistimed LFO use, or other poorly timed adjustment of parameters in the context of the whole piece.

Logbook notes

- screenshots do not provide much useful information unless annotated to describe key settings
- long lists of parameter settings do not provide valuable information
- explanation of how the important settings that most influence the sound have been used are more useful, and demonstrate understanding of the methods being assessed
- as an example, a short summary of oscillator types, octave and detune; filter type and filter envelope; LFO, modulation sources and other envelopes if relevant; indicating how they shape the desired sound and any automation or real-time control used
- give time references (not bars) to highlight important features.

Many students seem confused about what synthesis is, and talk about sampling and effects use in this section.

There may be some relevance, e.g. a particular effect could play an important role in shaping the sound, if so then a mention is appropriate in this section but refer to more detailed explanation in effects section.

AG2

Sampling continues to show a wide range of responses.

Basic work includes drag and drop sound FX, or spoken vocal, singing or instrumental parts, with little manipulation and little musical context. In weaker work, when manipulation is attempted it will often have an unsuccessful musical outcome.

Better quality compositions will use a variety of methods that could include the wide range of vocal manipulation tools available for spoken, rapped or sung parts to develop unique and interesting variations to the material; and musical editing and timing of chops and stutters as a rhythmic device.

As with previous reports, it seems necessary to mention that drum samples in the core drum kit do not constitute sampling in the context of creative manipulation of sounds. This is basic production, including to the point of adding FX and dynamic processing, and retuning drum samples and adjusting levels.

Similarly with loops, which sometimes can just be drag and drop with minimal editing.

Some more radical drum editing would be included, where the drums have been altered to the extent that a unique new element has been created.

The creation of original drum kits from samples of the brief 3 theme is adopted as an approach by some. This is often not very fruitful, as typical approaches of making footsteps on sand and hissing snakes into snares and hi hats often did not result in either a distinctive sound that aligned with the theme, or a very high quality outcome,

and had minimal effect on the overall palette. Time would be more useful exploring samples that make a bigger impact.

As with synthesis and creative FX use, musicality and context are crucial factors in successful use of samples.

Logbook notes

- *screenshots and big lists of parameter settings, as with synthesis, do not provide much useful information. Information on every drum sample is rarely necessary*
- *sample source information is useful, as are time references*
- *explanation of how the sound has been developed and adapted using sampling techniques, and how real time manipulation has been used*

AG3

There was significant variation in quality and musicality in this component.

Basic work often saw the use of a range of FX that lacked integration into the music and felt bolted on, or a limited use of genuine creative FX that perhaps included a few feature reverbs and timed delays, and then some bit crushing, distortion or vocoder, but not applied to achieve a suitable sonic quality.

Despite many mentions in previous reports, wild panning of multiple parts is still fairly common, often with a centre wide uptake. It is worth considering how often this method is used in commercial music before adopting this approach, and trying not to exceed the typical number of extreme panning shifts found in typical examples of the chosen style.

Higher quality work demonstrated control and achieved musical enhancement through a range of FX use, creating interest through developing timbres, spaces or rhythmic elements.

Logbook notes

- *again, consider what a screenshot actually communicates to the examiner*
- *focus on settings that are central to the sound, and have been adjusted to suit, plus real time control where used*
- *general mix settings are not really relevant here. Compression and EQ settings on every channel, general reverb and delay for ambience purposes is not really part of the creative FX process*
- *advanced dynamics use such as side chaining compression or triggered gating should be detailed where used.*

AG4

There was a good amount of pleasing work in this component, seemingly year on year there is more focus on attaining suitable balance and dynamic control, with a full frequency range and suitable stereo choices.

Less successful submissions had dynamics, balance and EQ issues, and there were some strange instances of high pass or low pass filters being used on the mix bus to remove significant amounts of important signal for no good reason.

Sparse pieces with few musical elements and a lack of variety make it difficult to deliver a convincing mix.

AG5

The response to brief marks require all aspects of the brief to be successfully addressed. This is not just about reflecting themes as a response to the stimulus, but also the task requirements including the required length, creative use of sound design and skilful composition.

AG6

At the top end, there were some very good examples that showed convincing command of stylistic elements. Most candidates managed to produce some quite convincing stylistic elements, perhaps with some uncertain sections that compromised the flow.

Work at the lower end displayed little sense of style with musical elements that were unvaried, or moved from one idea to another with little cohesion.

AG7 - 11

Musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, texture and structure are assessed in these components. Each element is marked, but only the highest three count towards the total to account for styles that may focus on some elements more than others. Timbre is not assessed as the first three assessment grids look at the development and suitability of timbres in the context of sound design.

A broad range of composition skill was displayed in these components. Some of the notable features are summarised below.

- Melodic ideas were often repetitive, and used simple phrasing and construction. Some pieces had almost no melodic material, other than a few short motifs, but this can be stylistically suitable if enough musical interest is present elsewhere
- Where melody was a strong feature, candidates displayed the ability to write and deliver interesting ideas which may depend on straightforward building blocks, but showed development and maintained interest throughout
- As with melody, harmony was quite often not very developed, with repetitive three or four chord patterns, perhaps with a bridge or variation section that in weaker work would not fit well
- Better approaches might also use a limited variation in chord structures, but add interest through varied voicing, inversions, and varied harmonic lines beneath melodies
- Rhythm is a key element of much popular music, and of course does only mean drums and percussion, the inter-relation of all parts is important here.

High end work had very impressive rhythm work, with strong grooves from drums & percussion, bass lines that enhanced the ideas, and other parts that were always coordinated and formed pleasing rhythmic layers

- Sample based grooves were commonly used, but as with other third party sources musical ideas, there must redevelopment by the candidate to gain credit
- Texture can be a very important element in electronic music and other popular music styles. Building up and breaking down layers in the music is an accessible way to add variety to a piece
- Many submissions fail to exploit this aspect successfully. Most will include some builds and break downs, but with a relatively unvaried textural presentation
- Structures can be dictated by the brief, for example the video requires the music to move with the storylines; songs or raps usually follow a verse-chorus structure. Where returning sections are used, good practice shows the ability to add or embellish each iteration of a chorus for example.

Logbooks and Administrative Matters

Logbooks with large volumes of screenshots often provide minimal useful detail. A few well worded descriptions with reference to key settings and edits is sufficient. See notes above for guidance on this.

Missing signatures seemed to be less prevalent this year. Work cannot be marked if it is not authenticated with student and teacher signatures.

Centres seem to have got to grips with the online portal in the majority of cases and issues seem fewer.

Many centres sent well organised submissions that arrived on time and according to administrative guidance document. This 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 some cases may lead to marks not being published on time, or even making it impossible to mark the work.

Some issues were around the DAW file submission, and additional time was taken attempting to resolve the problems.

Centres were generally cooperative when issues did arise, and responded quickly to assist in resolving matters.