

Examiners' Report/
Lead Examiner Feedback
Summer 2017

BTEC Level 3 Nationals in Music
Technology
Unit 5: Music Technology in Context
(31811H)



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June 2017

Publications Code 31811H_1706_ER

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A grade boundary is where we set the level of achievement required to obtain a certain grade for the externally assessed unit. We set grade boundaries for each grade, Distinction, Merit, Pass and Near Pass.

Setting grade boundaries

When we set grade boundaries, we look at the performance of every learner who took the external assessment. When we can see the full picture of performance, our experts are then able to decide where best to place the grade boundaries – this means that they decide what the lowest possible mark should be for a particular grade.

When our experts set the grade boundaries, they make sure that learners receive grades which reflect their ability. Awarding grade boundaries is conducted to ensure learners achieve the grade they deserve to achieve, irrespective of variation in the external assessment.

Variations in external assessments

Each external assessment we set asks different questions and may assess different parts of the unit content outlined in the specification. It would be unfair to learners if we set the same grade boundaries for each test, because then it would not take into account that a test might be slightly easier or more difficult than any other.

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31811H – Unit 5: Music Technology in Context

Grade	Unclassified	Level 3			
		N	P	M	D
Boundary Mark	0	10	20	34	48

Introduction

This is the first session in which external assessment for the L3 Music Technology qualification had been presented following development of the new specification and the first instance of contextual knowledge of music technology being assessed in this format.

Summer 2017 was the first time that external assessment for Unit 5 was undertaken by learners. The unit allows learners to develop the skills to analyse music contextually, by recognising the development and use of technology and how this has informed the development of music over time.

The external assessment requires learners to apply this knowledge and skillset, placing music technology in context to produce a written piece responding to a scenario and given musical material.

As a mandatory unit within the specification, the external assessment takes place twice a year, in May and January. The supplied musical material and scenario changing in each session.

The external assessment is presented in two parts, Part A and Part B. In Part A learners are presented with musical material, a set task brief which contextualises the assessment and set task information which provides areas of research specific to the given material.

Learners are expected to undertake Part A over approximately 3 hours. The learners should use this time to conduct research and study the given musical material. The learners should produce notes which will assist them in producing their response in Part B. In this preparatory period teachers/tutors cannot give any support to learners during the production of the notes and the work must be completed independently by the learner.

Learners may take in up to 4 sides of A4 notes to the supervised assessment period (Part B). These must be hard copies and can be either handwritten or word processed. If word processed, the font size must be 10 point minimum. If handwritten, the words must be visible to the naked eye.

In Part B learners are presented with a set task which encompasses four sections aligned to the areas of research presented in Part A. Each section asks the learner to respond making use of their research, knowledge and aural skills. Learners have 3 hours in which to complete the set task.

The learner's notes should not be submitted as part of the external assessment and do not form part of the assessable material.

It is important to note that in scheduling the external assessment, centres should be aware of the instructions in Part A, Part B and the Instructions for Conducting External Assessments (ICEA) document to ensure that the assessment is supervised correctly.

Centres should note particularly that during the supervised assessment period:

- Learners will not be able to research further during the completion of the set task.
- Learners can only access their work under supervision.
- Learners are not permitted to have access to the internet or other resources.

Failure to observe the task instructions may result in investigation of suspected malpractice /maladministration.

Introduction to the Overall Performance of the Unit

The Part B set task asked learners to produce a detailed word processed article written in four sections. The article was based on the recording of the song 'Kiss' by Prince and The Revolution released on the album 'Parade' in 1986.

Examiners were pleased to note that the majority of learners had engaged with the assessment and produced creditable responses in each of the four sections.

It was noted that not all learners produced sectionalised responses. Whilst responses were marked holistically by examiners, those learners who did not respond section by section tended to provide less focussed evidence. This did not always allow them to explore each area with a balanced or consistent approach. It is therefore suggested that learners should make use of the task to focus their responses and sectionalise their submissions in order to convey ideas appropriately within the given scenario.

In many cases there was evidence of useful research having been undertaken in response to Part A and applied in responses to Part B. Learners who produced balanced responses across sections tended to have produced evidence which showed that a variety of research sources had been accessed and information drawn from each to inform the response.

Learners who produced convincing written work tended to be able to make use of well selected and referenced quotes to back up key points. Learners are reminded that material drawn from research must be referenced appropriately as in any other submission.

Some learners wrote clearly, accurately and concisely to communicate their ideas. There was evidence of planning in responses and consideration of underpinning knowledge was in evidence. Learners who wrote in a less focussed manner tended to lack balance in terms of depth of response across sections and in some cases appeared to have run out of time before completing their response in all areas.

Learners who had produced less successful responses did not always support their points with research or had made use of a limited variety of research materials. In particular it was noted that some learners quoted research material, and did not seek to engage with the information to inform their own response.

Responses are unlikely to be explanative, critical or analytical if found written information is simply restated. Learners are therefore reminded that research material should be used to inform a response, rather than be reproduced to make up the body of the submission.

Using a very limited range of research to inform responses may allow factual inaccuracies to occur, which is likely to limit the viability of the learners response in

some areas. Learners should use discernment in sources and if possible cross check information from sources.

There is potentially a danger of learners exceeding the allowable 4 sides of notes available to them during Part B by not discerning useful information during the preparatory period.

Learners who made use of supporting examples, both in terms of wider musical and written sources tended to be able to produce a more informed and balanced viewpoint.

In some responses, learners had clearly engaged with the musical material during the preparatory period to inform their work. It was noted that learners who produced more detailed responses had applied aural skills to study the use of music technology and musical features of 'Kiss'. Learners who had discerned the use of production techniques, sounds and musical ideas tended to be able provide greater depth of analysis and communicate ideas in their own voice more successfully. Learners who had listened in detail were generally more able to link the given material to additional musical examples to reinforce their points.

Learners who relied solely upon written commentary and secondary sources of information in regard to the sonic aspects of production, sounds and style tended to achieve a less consistent and balanced approach.

Learners should apply aural skills to the material in order to inform their response. It is noted that aural discernment is a key part of music technology work, and that the ability to express findings based on listening is an extremely valuable skill.

It is therefore suggested that learners should make efficient use of the preparatory period to undertake research which considers the supplied material, available information, wider concepts and examples to provide material for their response.

Learners are reminded that the notes produced in Part A do not form part of the assessment and should not be included in the submission.

Individual Questions

Section 1

How specific developments in music technology and instrument technology influenced the recording and how the recording may have been undertaken differently if it was recorded today.

The majority of learners had accessed available sources, including published interviews and critical commentary, to provide a research basis for their responses in this section.

Responses that gained high marks in this section tended to make use of a variety of research sources to support their response. Responses that achieved less marks tended to rely solely on a single source and had in some cases, information was not referenced or information found was simply restated with limited attempts to construct an independent response.

Based on research, some learners were able to identify instrument technology and music technology used in the recording of 'Kiss', comment on the historical context of equipment used and relate this to current practice.

There was an over-reliance in the work of many learners on referring only to sources of information rather than listening to the material to enhance their explanations. Responses that achieved high marks tended to have applied aural skills to discern production features within the musical material and used these conclusions to extend their commentary.

Responses that gained high marks in this section were likely to be able to provide a detailed explanation of how a range of specific technologies influenced the recording. Learners were able to relate how the use of multitrack recording, dynamic processing, effect processing, microphone choice and instrument technology influenced the recorded outcome, with a systematic explanation of how emergent technology (for example, Linn Drum, 16 track, digital effects) was applied. Learners were then able to compare and contrast available equipment with present day resources and compare with current practice.

For example:

"The Linn drum was one of the most popular drum machines of the decade, it was revolutionary because it used samples of acoustic drum sounds...and at the time sounded so much more fresh and alternative to the analog drum sounds of other 80's drum machines...this new sampling technology had given David Z inspiration to try out new techniques and by doing so with the Linn drum was able to create a new very funky rhythm and sound. Nowadays perhaps a more modern (standalone) digital drum synth would have been used, or perhaps programmed in a DAW using a plug in or a sample pack....this is an effective way of getting the same sounds without having to spend a large sum of money on an actual drum machine... "

"The AMS RX16 reverb was one of the first digital reverb units...at the time of recording studios were still using mechanical reverb effects like plates or springs...digital processing allowed effects processors to produce effects that were not possible with mechanical devices...the AMS was used to apply a reverse reverb preset effect...this gave the kick a very unique sound which filled up the low end allowing Prince to remove the bass guitar part from the track, with the kick acting as a bass...if it was recorded today you could still access the AMS as a physical unit...but in this day and age there are affordable, available and even free reverb plugins, for example Space Designer in Logic, which have the same features as the RMS 16"

Responses that did not score highly in this section had often included a limited explanation of some element used in the recording. There was little expansion beyond information quoted from sources or had restated features of equipment without fully relating them to the recording.

In some responses it was noted that learners appeared to have some difficulty in understanding the function of music technology hardware and relating this to their own experience of music technology. Examiners noted that some learners produced limited specific commentary in regards to current practice, which whilst being correct, was quite general and therefore limited in terms of detail.

Some learners had undertaken research but not fully absorbed the information, or misread the sources, sometimes leading to contradictory comments which did not support their responses convincingly. For example, stating that nine tracks were used in the recording and then going on to suggest that Prince overdubbed 46 tracks of vocals.

Section 2

How wider technological developments of the 1980s, such as Music TV, may have influenced this song.

Responses that gained high marks in this section tended to relate developments in wider technology to music production via discussion upon the accessibility of technology with perceptive time bound commentary regarding both equipment used in the specific production and wider creative changes linked to developments.

“Greater processing power and availability of memory allowed sampling technology and synthesis to develop, with more ‘modern’ sounds (such as the Linn Drum and Yamaha DX7 used in Kiss) – along with accessibility to effects which would have proved impossible to create in the 1970s...this allowed musicians such as Prince to experiment more freely and creatively with sounds and effects...”

Responses that gained fewer marks showed limited understanding of historical developments and on occasion were not completely factual. Examiners noted that in attempting to relate to this section some learners had fundamentally misunderstood music technology, for example confusing MIDI with digital recording or sampling. Some learners, as elsewhere, had restated research material with limited focus upon the response, which tended to limit the level of explanation offered.

Responses that gained high marks tended to recognise that wider technology provides a driver for changes in production values. For example, some learners related the development wider technologies to production decisions to wider changes in production values and processes.

“...having access to technology which could retain patterns and sounds allowed Prince to work as an individual in the studio to get his ideas onto tape without having to rely so much on other people. This idea of the artist as producer which is commonplace today came about directly as a result...”

The example of Music TV was drawn from the specification and was provided as an area for learners to explore to engage with the section. Not all learners commented on this area, and this tended to reflect a more limited level of understanding and ability to critically appreciate wider technological developments.

Some learners were able to apply perceptive and critical appreciation in relation to the given material and had made use of research to inform their responses, with reference to the era of the material and accessibility.

"Prince may have been influenced by Music Television in writing Kiss as he would be aware videos in the 1980's had come to play a big part in the way people listened to music – for example, Prince created the short 'non bass' version of the track and insisted that it was released as a single as well as using a clip from an extended version in his film 'Under A Cherry Moon'..."

"(Music TV) allowed Prince to develop a wider crossover audience and in producing the song he would have been conscious that the distinctive sound of Kiss provided a more funky alternative to the mostly white rock acts..."

"... (Music TV) revolutionised the way in which people listened to music, as you didn't need to be in a music venue or even at home to hear it...with this in mind the artist no longer had to conform to make their songs playable for a crowd or for a home listening session, and could connect with people in a way they never had before..."

Some learners had applied aural skills successfully in this section in relation to commentary.

"...developments in electronics technology led to a distinctive '80's' sound – with a detailed, but some would say colder tone to recordings. This can be heard within Kiss through the drum sounds, keyboard riff and quite 'bright' overall sound..."

A minority of learners chose to discuss the content of the video for Kiss but did not always successfully relate this back to technology. It was apparent that some learners had chosen to analyse the visual content of the video, but that this analysis was often at the expense of demonstrating knowledge of technology or considering the audio element of the material.

Learners are encouraged to undertake a wider critical approach but should be careful to relate their responses back to technology and audio material to gain credit in this section.

Section 3

How the availability of music through file sharing has affected the consumption of music since 1986 and how artists such as Prince reacted to these changes.

Responses that gained high marks in this section were able to differentiate between file sharing and steaming / download services to explore the effects of file sharing upon the audience and artist to produce a balanced response.

Some responses in this section were not balanced or detailed, with some learners not fully exploring the implications of file sharing or historical background. It was interesting to note that a minority of learners did not appear to appreciate the financial implications of an artist not being paid for their work.

A minority of learners did not fully understand file sharing as a term and as such did not differentiate between file sharing, paid services and audio formats. Some learners attempted to relate file sharing to technology available in 1986, but did not fully appreciate the term. For example, stating that file sharing related to the copying of cassettes or to the process of Prince writing a song for another artist.

However, some learners were able to incorporate discussion of similar connections in a more evaluative manner:

"...similarities can be drawn between the consumption of music in the 1980s and today, for example. Ripping and downloading a song...can be compared to recording songs off shows like 'Top Of The Pops' via the means of tape for use in a Walkman..."

In some responses learners were able to provide an overview of audio formats contemporary to the production of the piece and relate historical developments in audio formats to changes in practice. For example, learners made reference to cassette, vinyl and CD in comparison to MP3 with regard to consumer accessibility.

Some learners had been able to use research to evaluate how Prince viewed file sharing, and particularly how the artist interacted with the distribution of his music through the internet, with references to the various models used. Examples of the relationship between file sharing and other artists to reinforce key points through historical background were also useful.

"...Lars Ulrich campaigned against the site Napster and the impact it was having on the sales of Metallica records. He presented them with a lawsuit for using their music without permission...this led to a change in the way that artists viewed the distribution of music on the internet..."

This approach allowed learners to demonstrate a consideration of copyright as related to the practice of file sharing and relate this to wider issues of consumption in the music industry to draw conclusions.

"...in many ways this loss (of physical product sales) is irreversible, and an artist will have to focus more on touring and sales from other items such as merchandise..."

As elsewhere learners who were able to incorporate ideas drawn from research into their submission, rather than restating information found in sources, tended to produce more perceptive and evaluative responses.

Section 4

How this version of 'Kiss' could be defined in terms of sound/style and how the use of music technology influences this.

Responses that gained high marks in this section provide a coherent analysis of Kiss in terms of musical features, music technology and sounds, often with reference to other musical examples to reinforce key points.

"Princes earlier material featured R&B and Funk roots combined with new technology, and this is a continued theme in the song 'Kiss'. The gated guitar is very similar to the funk chops used in a lot of Funk and RnB in the late 70s and early 80s, and gave the recording a very unique rhythm...David Z who produced the recording actually mentions in a Sound On Sound interview that "We got rid of the bass part and a James Brown guitar lick'. Therefore the producer himself was inspired by James Brown and Funk music, which is perhaps why this influence can be heard..."

Some learners were able to discern musical examples to support their response, relating examples both the track itself and other works in terms of showing common stylistic traits.

"...Prince was a master of crossing genres...in this recording he managed to create a Funk rhythm between the guitar and drum machine inspired by James Brown...the vocals are articulated like a pop song but the falsetto gave it soulfulness..."

In terms of analysis of the music, learners had primarily referenced instrumentation and structure, with some learners making reference to harmonic and melodic features which assisted in stylistic referencing. Some learners had worked methodically through the technology identified in Section 1 of their response to consider the sonic effect.

Some learners showed an able grasp of music technology and aural skills in relating production ideas (for example the application of reverse reverb on the kick drum, the application of gating, choice of microphone) to their response.

"...the use of the reverse reverb from the AMS gave the kick a very unique sound which filled up the low end allowing Prince to remove the bass guitar part from the track, with the kick acting as a bass..."

Learners who were able to analyse the sounds used in the song in detail had applied their own aural analysis and made more refined references to the use of technology. Responses that gained lower marks tended to rely solely on information found in written sources, often hinging their response on a single quote (for example, the reference to James Brown) to comment upon the music.

Summary

Based on submissions seen in this session learners should:

- Analyse how specific music technology equipment was used in production of the given song.
- Understand music technology equipment in terms of historical development.
- Consider current music technology equipment and make relevant comparisons.
- Explain wider technology in direct relation to the production of music in context.
- Evaluate the consumption of music in context, with reference to specific knowledge of file sharing and audio formats.
- Provide perceptive discussion of copyright issues in relation to file sharing.
- Use methodical aural analysis of the given musical material to draw conclusions about sound and style.

It is suggested that the following areas should be considered in future sessions:

- Learners should make efficient use of the given preparatory period to undertake research which considers the supplied material, available sources of information and wider concepts.
- Learners should make use of the preparatory period in applying aural skills to discern features within the given material, rather than relying solely on written sources of information.
- Learners should use research as a basis for commentary, explanation and evaluation rather than simply restating found information.
- Learners should reference information found through research appropriately within their submission.
- Learners should plan their time in Part B to avoid overly extended responses in some sections and limited responses in others.
- Learners should consider the skills of written communication in producing their response.
- Centres should ensure that the assessment is completed in line with the ICEA document.

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