Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel GCE
in Music Technology
6MT03 Portfolio 2

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General Introduction

The practical portfolio in A2 GCE followed the same format as previous years. Most students and centres approach the tasks in the manner in which it is intended, and students demonstrate a range of responses dependent of the skill levels they have developed in critical listening, musical awareness and music production techniques. Much of the work shows a pleasing level of achievement in what is a difficult and demanding discipline. At the top end, students submit some truly outstanding work, showing remarkable ability for their age. Centres clearly embrace the course as a valued part of music and arts provision in the curriculum, and students are responding positively to the unique opportunities it provides as an A level subject.

This report highlights trends in this year's submissions, and reflects on successful approaches and areas of difficulty within each of the three tasks.

3A Integrated Sequence

Many students displayed a good understanding of the requirements of this task. Approaches to musicality and timbre editing seem to be improving slightly with the majority of submissions.

This year's set pieces were fairly straightforward to sequence in terms of musical complexity, which shifted the focus more onto production elements. Overall it was good to see that many students embraced the challenges of reproducing a range of production features; these were mostly obvious from the recording and clearly necessary to achieve a successful rendition of the songs. Missing parts still play a significant role in lower scoring submissions, as well as unsuccessful handling of live audio.

Some students did not fulfill the requirements of the task. Often this was due to recording too many audio tracks, though in some rare cases not recording the main vocal part. Anything longer than a couple of seconds has to be regarded as a separate audio track, not as a sample, for the purposes of this task.

Madness

• Drums usually quite good up to the lift at the end, decent rhythm and timbre plus FX. Tom roll usually OK but few got the reverse envelope correct. Changes in timbre, addition of cabasa often incorrect/missing

• Missing parts such as backing vocals, jangly guitar; errors in mute guitar and keyboard parts especially towards the end

•	Many students who recorded backing vocals made a good job of using pitch shift to generate the stacked vocal harmonies, and the washy backing vocal reverb at the end was often represented quite well

•	Bass timbre, envelope setting and octave gave problems, but also was addressed by most and handled well by many students

•	Solo often handled well, whether recorded audio or sequenced. Midi sequencing was sometimes a bit unsophisticated but performance features such as bends, dive bomb and vibrato were usually attempted, and timbre achieved using host software's amp-simulation/guitar rig/VST amp rack or similar

•	Reverse piano present in the vast majority of pieces, with varying levels of success but often decent

•	Students often lost marks where there is a gear change into the last section, and a previously good balance was not reset to accommodate the change in focus of the instruments

•	There were lots of dynamics changes in this piece, with builds through the verses and into choruses and drops into link sections, plus the jangly guitar entry on the bridge; finally the big lift at the end. Most pieces reflected this with some success, though really good control was rare, sometimes due to missing parts or unsuitable timbre changes which all have an influence

•	Phrasing indicators included velocity shaping of Mute guitar, Jangly guitar, Cabasa at end section; note lengths in bass were generally handled well.

Small Town

•	Drum feel with the slight swing was often attempted and handled fairly well. It was not uncommon for the ensemble rhythm to be too loose, perhaps interpreting the commonly-held notion that reggae is 'laid-back' to mean 'sloppy timing'. This is not the case.

•	Drum timbres varied from some very good attempts to severe misjudgements of the dirty lo-fi production

•	Other percussive parts such as tambourine and ride were often omitted altogether

•	Rhythm Guitar leak in the verse was often omitted although the top end candidates worked hard to include each of the different guitar timbres and behaviours, settling them in appropriate fashion within the mix

•	Organ solo often handled very well in terms of pitch accuracy and grace notes/glisses, though some of the subtlety of Leslie Spin and Volume pedal were often missed

- Wah Guitar lines usually handled very well, the majority recorded these but some were sequenced and this was still successful

- Sax swells usually attempted, though sax harmonies often omitted or incorrect

- Most production features were attempted, particularly the Dub Delay which was usually reasonably good. The drum filtering, reverb and flanger were usually less successful, particularly the filtering

- Bass lines gave problems for a lot of students; incorrect notes or rhythmic patterns, repeated throughout, and while many attempted the slides not many did a convincing job. Bass timbre was often fairly successful

- Backing vocals often omitted completely or in part. Some decent attempts at the bigger reverb were made where present.

General

- Both pieces required a fadeout as specified in the paper. Most students performed successful fadeouts although there were a significant proportion who just stopped and a smaller proportion who programmed the complete song. Some fades were too quick, too long or uneven. Sometimes a piece of unwanted audio started after the fade where the volume envelope had been returned to the original value. This is assessed under dynamics, as are long lead in or lead out

- Audio issues continue to revolve around issues with EQ and dynamics, rather than mic choice and placement. Often a vocalist will stray off mic during the performance, or address some parts of the singing with timidity. Sometimes these problems can arise because the vocalist is singing along with the original recording, so is not focused on their own performance, or simply have not learnt the part well enough. The ability re-take and compile vocals is in the hands of the student, and quality control is vital in this task in order to have a consistent vocal recording to mix

- Balance and blend issues often occur as a result of unsuccessful handling of audio. Pan often shows some careful attention and successful settings.

3B Multitrack Recording

Many students achieved their best mark in this this task. Work at the high end of the competent and into the good holistic descriptor is common.

Choices of material that worked well were Folk or Rock influenced songs featuring acoustic guitar, or songs featuring horn sections. Less suitable choices were songs where percussion was added to fulfil the brief, particularly choices such as djembe and cajon. If they are not in the original, it can be difficult to integrate these instruments successfully. Big band recordings seem to be less frequent, to the benefit of students as these are invariably difficult to produce to a decent standard.

Centres are usually well-equipped with choices of microphones, and attention to acoustic treatment is also frequently evident, but it is clear in some instances that there is no separate control room and that no other provision has been made for a suitable mixing environment with studio monitor speakers. Headphones do not give the required clarity for mixing, unless they are expensive studio quality ones designed for that job, and even then it is probably a tougher job than using studio monitors.

Too many students did not meet the requirements of the Task and did not record enough acoustic instruments, or in a few cases not even the minimum track count of 12 was reached.

• Capture tends to be handled quite well, often better than the processing and mix elements of this task. Students seem to get good guidance about mic choice in most cases. Roomy drums and unfocused percussion are frequent problems; strings if used are rarely well captured, and similar for piano

• Noise issues are usually avoided, with suitable gain structure and attention to potential problems. Clipping of the master bus is still too common, as are poorly managed, scrappy endings. Clipping vocals and hum from distorted guitars, plus off-mic noise/chat that has not been edited or gated out are also typical problems

• EQ is often a problem area – sibilance, dull or harsh instruments, weak or wooly bass, and uneven distribution of frequencies. Evaluation of mixes on a variety of different systems can help to eliminate EQ problems

• It's still common to find over-compressed masters. This is an extremely difficult technique to get right, and if the initial mix is not successful then mistakes are going to be compounded by this approach. It is pleasing to see some students taking a more considered approach to compression of individual parts and busses like drums, backing vocals and horn sections, using settings that assist the dynamics rather than destroy it

• FX is often poorly considered. Default reverbs are often clearly chosen, and the amounts used are rarely suitable across the whole ensemble. This can be hampered by roomy capture where this has occurred, which makes establishing a suitable FX field very difficult

• Balance and blend had varied responses. Some very good work was done on placing parts at suitable levels, and blending complimentary instruments such as BVs, horn sections, kick drum & bass. Where problems occurred there was usually one or two important parts over or under balanced, and from there further problems occur trying to fit other parts in the picture. Issues often occurred when trying to blend in percussion instruments that weren't part of the stimulus song e.g. shakers and tambourine

• Stereo image is often completed to a decent standard, with appropriate drum panning and a complementary spread of instruments across the image. Mono or near-mono submissions to still crop up fairly often.

3C Composing using Technology

This task perhaps produces the biggest range of responses, though with more work in the competent and adequate holistics than the other two tasks. There is some fantastic work being done, with strong command of musical and stylistic ideas, excellent exploitation of a wide range of technology to manipulate sounds into an imaginative and unique sonic palette, and a considered and thorough approach to reflecting the various aspects of the brief.

Where technology is used successfully, this usually incorporates a wide range of techniques including synthesis, creative use of effects such as delay, reverb, modulation fx, editing audio samples using pitch-shift, time-stretch, and imaginative rhythmic manipulation of speech and percussion samples

Students were less successful when there was a lack of variety and development in their musical ideas, resulting in repetitive pieces. Sometimes poor command of basic stylistic features hampered the work. In many submissions there was a lack of sound manipulation, or misjudged attempts in this area. Students who take a song-writing approach for rock band/other ensemble quite often neglect the technology use. Students cannot access the higher mark ranges if they do not exploit the technology for sound design and manipulation. It is a requirement of the task and aspects of it are assessed in a number of areas of the mark scheme.

While some students took the time to ensure a well-balanced, clean and clear final mix was produced, for too many this task showed a level of production skills well below the other two submissions.

Music Video

•	This is the second year a video has been supplied for one of the composition briefs

•	Usually decent attempt at spotting, though excellent tight response to the scenes and hit points was rare

•	There were some quite good interpretations of the walkie-talkie man's vocals

•	Opportunities to reflect the synth use in the video were rarely taken

•	Most students picked up the correct tempo

•	There was often a lack of musical development with this brief

•	This was the least popular of the three choices, around 20% of submissions.

Poem

•　　　Huge variations in approach to vocal delivery. Some spoken deliveries were misjudged, or attempts at manipulation unsuccessful, leading to unsatisfactory delivery of the most important part of the work. There was also some excellent thoughtful spoken delivery, using different/contrasting voices, solo and group, and a range of well-handled processing and manipulation

•　　　Sung vocals were sometimes done very well, with strong stylistic and melodic control

•　　　A decent amount of students included sound design and manipulation in this choice of brief, though a few did not

•　　　Occasionally students omitted any recording of the text. Sometimes only a tiny proportion of it was used

•　　　Around 50% of students attempted this choice, the most popular.

Food

•　　　There were a lot of instances of kitchen percussion samples coupled with Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey. Some students told interesting kitchen based stories from ordering through preparation to delivery etc. Some of the submissions were cleverly humorous in their re-ordering of speech

•　　　Some embraced the idea of creating their composition entirely out of kitchen related samples, manipulating these into everything from percussion to melodic lines to produce successful submissions based entirely from their own sampling endeavours, though this approach was also misjudged in many cases

•　　　When done well, this brief showed some of the most imaginative and diverse uses of technology and often featured adventurous rhythmic approaches

•　　　About 30% chose this brief.

Log Book and Organisation of Submissions

The log book is there to allow the student to present their approaches and intentions with the tasks. It does not attract any marks, but can assist the examiner in awarding marks where techniques used might be unclear. There is plenty of space in the log book to present enough suitable information about the work. Large collections of printed screen shots are not necessary, though there is no problem in printing the log book or parts of it if the presentation is kept succinct.

Where there is little or no information in the log book, examiners will usually approach the centre to provide them with at least some basic outlines of the techniques used.

There seemed to be very few cases of omitted signatures this year, which is welcome, whilst there are inevitably always a few issues with CDs that need replacing. Examiners greatly appreciate the cooperation of centres in resolving these matters when they do occur.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:
http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx