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Principal Examiner Feedback

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General Introduction

The new AS recording task produced a wide range of responses. The new mark scheme helped examiners to differentiate students, with more marks spread across capture and processing. The new mark scheme also focused more on the way students had handled acoustic guitar and lead vocal. Those centres which had studied the mark scheme in detail showed a clear understanding of this and, in general, their students were more successful in the task.

The new specification has shifted from a minimum number of tracks to a minimum number of instrumental parts, with three instruments – acoustic guitar, lead vocal and bass/double bass – being compulsory and untuned percussion not permitted at AS level. Most students submitted work which fitted this requirement, which was encouraging. There were a lot of centres who had encouraged the students to take ownership of their work and produce their own arrangements of the song. The combination of the instrumental requirements and providing a list of artists led to most students making much more suitable choices for their work than on the previous specification. This meant that most of the work submitted was appropriate for AS level and all students were being assessed on a level playing field. There were a small number of students who attempted more complex mixes, which were generally less successful as they made the task too difficult for an AS level student who has been studying recording for less than a year. The intention of the new AS recording task is for an acoustic arrangement, with the mix focussed around the compulsory instruments. Many students submitted work which wasn't mixed with this in mind; a particularly common approach was to mix the acoustic guitar very low in the mix, often masked by piano or electric guitar. This made it impossible for the examiner to accurately assess the processing of the acoustic guitar, affecting the student's marks. Centres are strongly encouraged to guide their students to focus their mix more on the acoustic guitar/lead vocal/bass mix. Overall, most centres and students entered into the 'spirit' of the task in terms of musical arrangements and approaches to processing and mixing.

However, there was some evidence of some centres taking a 'production line' approach to recording, with the microphone(s) being set up once and then all students work being recorded one after the other. Examiners saw many centres where all students had pasted the exact same photographs into their logs, which doesn't help with the assessment process. AG1 awards the students up to 12 marks (20%) for capture. Sharing the same photographs between all students from a centre is a form of malpractice. Collusion between students in any way is not permitted in this assessment; each student must be in sole control of microphone choice, placement, mixer settings and recording for their own work. The student's log book is used in conjunction with the audio to assess this – it does not help the examiner to fully appreciate the work the student has done if logs are not completed individually and in detail.

Administration

Most centres submitted their work by the May 15th deadline. On the whole, the work was well packaged and damaged/lost disks were rare. Some centres, however, need to ensure that they read the Administrative Support

Guide (ASG) available on the Edexcel website in the months leading up to the submission date. The requirement for sending proprietary files on a separate 'data disk' lead to some confusion from some centres. Examiners require an audio CD with the final mix on, as per the legacy specification, and a separate data disk containing the project file. It is vital to ensure that the data disk contains the proprietary DAW files and all audio files associated with the recording. Both disks should be clearly labelled with the student details as outlined in the ASG – written on the disk, not on the CD envelope. Centres are reminded of the importance of checking all disks before sending them to the examiner. Data and audio disks should be finalised and audio disks should play in a standard CD player. Every year examiners have to spend a significant amount of time contacting centres to request replacement disks.

There was mixed success in completion of log books. Most centres followed the instruction on the front cover not to submit additional pages of information (such as multiple screen shots). There is ample space within the log to include all the information the examiner requires to assess the student's work. Many students put a lot of detail into their logs, for example labelling photographs of recording setups with mic model, type, distance, focus, pickup pattern, or providing specific settings for EQ and compression plugins. At the other end of the scale were logs which were mostly blank with unlabelled stick-man drawings of mic positions which tell the examiner nothing to assist with assessment. Students are strongly advised to use photographs and to take these photographs at the time of making their recording. Also, where screen shots are used, it should be considered how useful they are – some were excellent, showing detail of plugin settings, others were less helpful, such as an image of a channel strip showing which plugins has been inserted, but not how they had been edited. Centres are reminded that the purpose of the log is to help the examiner to assess the work, and the way they are presented and the detail included should reflect this. It is also important that the photographs the student submits match the audio (for example some students had recorded a male vocalist and submitted a photograph of a female in their log.) The log should be used to show the examiner how the student has made their recording.

AG1-4 are split into 3 columns – acoustic guitar, lead vocal and other parts. Under 'Other Parts' examiners are considering how all the parts work together – such as distribution of frequencies across the whole mix or consistency of how reverb has been applied.

AG1: Capture

Examiners consider choice and positioning of microphones as well as how successfully the instruments have been recorded and the clarity of the capture.

Overall, most students were successful here. Even students who were less successful at mixing and processing were able to make a clean recording. Most students made appropriate choices of recording methods – condenser microphones for acoustic guitar and vocals and DI for bass and keyboard parts. A lead electric guitar was a popular choice, with most students using a good dynamic mic such as an SM57 for this.

Common errors were poor positioning on acoustic guitar, capturing lots of pick and strumming noise and poor mixer settings for bass capture resulting in a lack of clarity. Some students chose to DI their acoustic guitar, which in general was not as successful as using a microphone.

AG2: Processing of EQ

The most successful students demonstrated a real understanding of the purpose of EQ within the context of the whole mix, and how it was used to help with balance and blend. The intention was for processing which followed modern practice. Most students were aiming for this.

Less successful students did not consider the impact of EQ on the whole mix. Often mixes were very muddy in the low/low mid area as too many parts were taking up this area of the spectrum. It was also quite common for the acoustic guitar to be very thin and lead vocals to be quite harsh with unnecessary exaggeration in the high mid band.

Examiners also heard quite a lot of recordings which lacked any Low Frequency. It is likely that this is a result of students mixing using DJ style headphones, which exaggerate the bass frequencies. Whilst it is often necessary for logistical purposes for students to work on headphones in the classroom, centres are strongly encouraged to invest in studio reference headphones with a flatter frequency response and that all recordings should be monitored on your studio speakers before submitting the work to your examiner.

AG3: Dynamic Processing

Again here, the most successful students were those who understood the purpose of compression in the wider context of the overall mix.

On the whole, the submissions the examiners heard this year were under-compressed, with peaks (especially in vocal parts) being uncontrolled and bass parts being very uneven.

There were many students who had inserted a compression plugin, but had the threshold level set too high, meaning that it had no effect.

Log books were often helpful here, as the information provided helped to confirm what could be heard in the audio and helped the examiner to determine whether, for example, lack of dynamic control was because the student had not used compression, or because they had not adjusted the settings appropriately.

Contrary to this, some students submitted work with very musical compression, which controlled the vocal and bass without making it unnatural, and applied compression across all parts in a way that helped the mix to sit together well.

AG4: Use of Effects

Consistency across parts was the key here, with a reminder of the instruction to apply modern standards of processing. For fear of repetition, the most successful students here were those who took a holistic view of effects processing and understood the use of reverb in the context of the overall mix. The most successful students made use of a single reverb bus, and routed all parts (with the exception of the bass) to it, which ensured consistency across

all parts – this approach is to be encouraged as the most appropriate at AS level. Modern reverb practice is for quite a tight sound, and most students understood this and attempted to create this kind of sound in their work.

The least successful work showed a very inconsistent approach, often with the lead vocal over washed with a very long reverb and other parts, especially the acoustic guitar very tight or even in some cases totally dry. Again, the log books often confirmed this and showed that the student hadn't put any thought into the application of effects.

Some students applied delay to the lead vocal or some overdrive or distortion to an electric guitar. When this was applied with sensitivity to the rest of the mix it was successful. The spirit and intention of the AS recording is that distortion effects and/or amp simulation should not be applied to an acoustic guitar.

General note:

The capture and processing of the recording, under the new mark scheme, now accounts for 80% of the marks for this task; therefore, centres are encouraged to guide their students to spend an appropriate proportion of their time working on these. It was disappointing to see some logs where the student had simply written 'None' across EQ, FX and Dynamic Processing – effectively ruling out 60% of the marks.

Where an instrumental part (acoustic guitar most commonly, this year) is too quiet in the mix to be able to fully assess processing, the student was only able to achieve a maximum of level 2 in AG1-4.

AG5: Balance and Blend

Some well-crafted mixes were heard this year. The most successful mixes were those which focused on the acoustic guitar as the core, ensured that all the instrumental parts could be clearly heard (which was also helped by careful use of EQ, dynamic processing and panning) and sat the lead vocal on top, but without exaggeration. The change in requirements of the task have helped here, as the musical arrangements were more appropriate for students at AS level to handle.

If any of the instrument parts was under the required length, no higher than level 2 can be awarded in AG5. This was rare, however, with most students ensuring their musical arrangements met the minimum requirements.

Unsuccessful mixes were muddy and untidy, or had one part over dominant and masking other important parts.

AG6: Use of Stereo

Success here was mixed and partly dependent on choice of musical arrangement.

Examiners wanted to hear the full stereo field being used, without bias or exaggeration. Whilst there are no 'rules' to the use of panning, the expectation is that students follow modern practice. Therefore, it is expected that bass and lead vocal will be panned to the centre and that other parts, if panned, should be balanced across the stereo field.

The most successful students had thought about this when creating their musical arrangement – for example, recording 2 or 3 backing vocals gave

good scope for panning these across the stereo field, or making use of a stereo piano part.

A common approach was to place two microphones on an acoustic guitar and then pan them left and right. This is not successful in creating use of stereo field as the source material from the two microphones is too similar to create an effective stereo image. It would be far more successful to double track the acoustic guitar.

Students are encouraged to think about their final mix, especially how they might use the stereo field, when creating their musical arrangement and planning their recording.

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

Most students scored full marks in AG7. In particular, audio editing was better handled than has been heard in the previous specification. Most students set their bounce start and end points so that the music was not cut at the start and end, and that there was not a silent lead in or out.

A common problem was poorly controlled fade out automation, where the track faded to silent and then briefly returned to full volume at the very end of the track giving an audible 'blip' at the end of the recording. Also, some students bounced with the metronome audible. Students are reminded of the importance of checking their CDs after they have been finalised to ensure that the work is ready for submission.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/results-certification/grade-boundaries.html>