



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (8MT0)
Paper 01: Recording

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Once again, the AS recording task has produced a range of responses. Most recordings scored between 30 and 50, with some very successful submissions scoring higher. It was encouraging to see that most centres and candidates had entered into the 'spirit' of the task in terms of musical arrangements and approach to processing and mixing.

The specification requires candidates to record a minimum instrumental arrangement of 5 parts, with three of these being compulsory: acoustic guitar, bass/double bass and lead vocal. Candidates must record a further two *different* instrumental parts; untuned percussion of any kind (including hand claps and finger clicks) are not permitted at AS level. Candidates are supplied with a list of 10 artists from a range of styles and musical eras. They must select one song by one of these artists to record. Those centres which were most successful were those where each candidate recorded a different song. This approach is highly encouraged as the candidates take ownership of their work. There were a small number of candidates who attempted more complex mixes, which were generally less successful as they made the task too difficult for an AS level candidate 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. Most candidates took this approach; the result was work which clearly demonstrated the candidate's understanding of the key underpinning tools of recording – microphones and DI, corrective EQ, reverb, compression and balance. Centres are strongly advised to continue to guide their candidates to focus on these fundamental tools.

Logbooks were variable once again. Centres are reminded that, although the logbook does not carry its own mark, it is used by the examiner alongside the audio to assess the candidates' work. A detailed and accurate log supports the marks awarded. Conversely a log which is incomplete or lacking in detail can mean that the candidate's work is not fully credited.

Administration

Most centres submitted their work by the May 15th deadline and on the whole, work was well packaged to ensure disks were not damaged in transit. This component requires two disks to be submitted per candidate – an audio format CD with the final mix and a data disk containing the proprietary DAW files. All centres supplied the two disks as required, with many using the disks supplied by Pearson. However, centres are reminded to label the disks clearly and carefully as detailed in the ASG. Centres should be instructing their candidates to check all disks thoroughly before submission to ensure the correct mix of the work has been sent and that the audio disks are playable in a standard CD player.

As technology progresses, examiners are as keen as the centres to discontinue the use of CDs for submission. However, because there is a paper copy of the logbook there needs to be a hard copy of the audio to accompany it. Also the large file size of uncompressed audio presents challenges of upload/download time. CDs also have advantages over USB sticks: they are cheaper and are ROM so can't be altered. Pearson cannot accept one USB stick per centre because every candidate needs to be self-contained for the various processes during the examining season: pre-standardisation, standardisation, marking, sampling of marking, awarding grade boundaries, Enquiries About Results.

AG1-4 are split into 3 columns – acoustic guitar, lead vocal and other parts. Examiners use this to assess the success of the work both as individual parts and in terms of how 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. Good detail in the log and clear photographs are essential to the assessment of capture. Note that, in future examination series, diagrams of capture will no longer be accepted.

Most candidates were successful in selecting appropriate mics and positioning them to capture their choice of instrumentation. There was a range of methods used, especially for acoustic guitar and bass – some candidates used microphones, some DI. The examiners assess the audio for the success of the chosen method. Some candidates chose to attempt a quite complex mic setup for their acoustic guitar, with 3 or 4 mics positioned around the instrument and the recording space. In most cases, the audio showed no advantage to having this many mics. Candidates at this level would not be expected to be competent at handling multiple mics on a sound source like this. It is perfectly acceptable to record an acoustic guitar with one condenser mic positioned to capture the full range of the instrument. Candidates can learn a lot from experimenting with positioning a single mic and the difference it makes to the captured sound. Some candidates used 2 mics (either neck/body or mid/side technique). Where the candidate understood the technique they were using, this was also very successful.

Many candidates this series used a DI for electric guitar and then used an amp simulator plug in, which was also successful in most cases.

The most common error in capture was poor positioning on acoustic guitar resulting in a lot of pick/strum noise.

AG2: Processing of EQ

At AS level, the expectation is for the use of corrective EQ with the intention of helping the final mix to blend successfully. Some candidate also used some creative EQ, which was also mostly successful – however it is not a requirement to do this for Component 1. The task requires candidates to use EQ which follows modern practice and to create a 'well-rounded' sound. There is no requirement to try to copy the EQ processing of the original song.

The most successful candidates demonstrated an understanding of EQ and its function in the context of the overall mix.

Examiners heard a lot of recordings with quite harsh hi-mids – especially lead vocal and acoustic guitar. This was often on more than one part and had a compound effect on the overall success of the mix. Examiners heard quite a lot of recordings which lacked any Low Frequency. It is likely that this is a result of candidates mixing using 'DJ' style headphones, which exaggerate the bass frequencies. Whilst it is often necessary for logistical purposes for candidates to work on headphones in the classroom, centres are strongly encouraged to invest in studio reference headphones with a flatter frequency response. Candidate should listen to the overall mix on a number of set ups (eg studio monitors, headphones, domestic 'hi-fi' speakers) to critically assess their work and adjust the EQ to produce a well-rounded sound which covers the full frequency range. Examiners assess all candidates' work on speakers.

AG3: Dynamic Processing

Success in dynamic processing was much more varied this year. This was another area where the information in the log book was invaluable to the examiner in understanding the candidate's intentions and understanding.

As with EQ, the most successful candidates showed clear understanding of the function of dynamic processing in the context of the whole mix.

Many candidates did not seem to fully understand all the controls on a compressor. For example, some candidates inserted a compression plug in, sometimes with a very high compression ratio, but with the threshold set so high that the compressor had no effect on the track. There were many examples of vocal tracks which were undercompressed, with high peaks not controlled at all. Log books often supported this, either by confirming that no dynamic processing had been used, or by detailing the inappropriate settings used.

On the other hand, successful candidates used compression musically to control all the parts and help to hold the mix together.

Whilst it is not expected that candidates at this level will be competent at advanced compression techniques, they should be familiar at least with threshold, ratio, attack and release and their effect on the audio.

Some successful candidates also applied simple limiting on the output channel for overload protection.

AG4: Use of Effects

Most candidates successfully applied some reverb to their mix. The key to success here is consistency; the most successful candidates used an effects bus and routed all parts (except bass) to this – an approach which is strongly recommended. As with EQ, the expectation is for work that follows modern standards of processing with no requirement to copy the processing of the original track. However, creative use of effects or reproduction of a key effect in the source track was credited when it was successful. As with other processing, the most successful candidates were those who took an holistic view of the effects and understood their use in the context of the whole mix.

A small number of candidates submitted very dry mixes (or mixes where a key element such as acoustic guitar or lead vocal was dry). This does not meet the requirements of the task, and would be reflected in the mark awarded in AG4.

Many candidates successfully made use of amp simulator plug ins on bass and electric guitar. Where these have been used appropriately, with control and in a way that the parts fit well in the context of the whole mix, then this creativity was credited in the marks awarded.

A small number of well controlled effects, was generally more successful than a large range of effects which detracted from the clarity of the mix.

General note:

The capture and processing of the recording 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 candidate had simply written 'None' across EQ, FX and Dynamic Processing – effectively ruling out 60% of the marks.

Where an instrumental part is too quiet in the mix to be able to fully assess processing, the candidate was only able to achieve a maximum of level 2 in AG1-4 (and this would also affect the mark in AG5).

AG5: Balance and Blend

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.

Most candidates were able to produce a reasonable mix. Unwanted exaggeration or masking was much less common this year, with most work following the guidelines of an acoustic guitar centred mix. Where mixes were less successful, this was often more as a result of poor processing which didn't consider the holistic impact of the EQ, dynamics or effects processing of an individual part.

It is worth noting that choice of instrumentation can play a big role in the success of the mix. Many candidates chose to have synth strings/pad. This choice really helps to fill out the mix and hold everything together. Whilst the choice of instruments in itself is not assessed, a viable musical arrangement will always result in a more successful mix, and those centres/candidates who had put some thought into this were generally more successful.

Again, candidates should be encouraged to listen to their final mixes on a range of set ups to analyse the success of their mix before submission.

It was encouraging that almost all candidates submitted work which met the requirements for the minimum playing time for each part. If any of the instrument parts is under the required length (as detailed in the specification and task brief), no higher than level 2 can be awarded in AG5.

AG6: Use of Stereo

The use of the stereo field was disappointing this year. Many candidates produced mixes which were very narrow. Sometimes the choice of instrument left little scope for appropriate use of the stereo field. For fear of repetition, consideration of the choice of instruments before starting the recording is important to the success of the work.

Candidates who were successful in their use of stereo field used one or more of the following: double tracked or mid/side recording technique on the acoustic guitar, 2 or 3 backing vocals spread across the stereo field, 2 or 3 horns spread across the stereo field, stereo keyboard/synth parts such as piano or synth strings/pad. The expectation is for a good spread over the whole stereo field, but exaggeration should be avoided; bass and lead vocal should always be panned centre. Some candidates made use of pan automation; although this is not a requirement, where it was well controlled credit was given for this work.

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

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

Centres and candidates are reminded of the expectation to produce work with a viable musical arrangement. Some candidates reached 2½ minutes and then applied a quick fade in the middle of a verse, which was not successful. Thought should be given to the musical arrangement to fit the requirements of the task before recording starts.

Candidates are reminded of the importance of checking their CDs after they have been finalised to ensure that the work is ready for submission.

Logbooks

References have already been made above to the ways in which a well completed log can support the awarding of marks in this component. The most successful candidates gave detail and some explanation of their processing choices in their logs, which helped the examiner to award marks.

It is vital that the log is completed accurately and that it reflects the candidate's work. Some of the lesser successful work had photos or references to instruments which weren't in the candidate's recording. Some made reference to mics used which were different to in the photos. Some either gave detail of processing which couldn't be heard in the audio, or conversely had written 'none' in the track sheet, but processing could be clearly heard.

A final note about photographs: In future examination series, all candidates must supply photographs of their mic positioning. Diagrams will no longer be accepted. Candidates should consider what the photograph is communicating to the examiner. Good practice is to take the photo with the instrumentalist/singer in position so that the examiner can assess distance, angle, mic type etc. If more than one mic has been used for capture, try to take a photograph that shows them all. The candidate should take the photo at the time of recording (not 'stage' a photo on a later date) and the photo must be of their own work. Sharing of photos between candidates is a form of malpractice – all work submitted must be the candidate's own work.