Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (9MT0)
Paper 01: Recording

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General Introduction

The first year of the new A level recording task produced a wide variety of responses. The task sets some challenges for candidates, and in the majority of submissions, these were dealt with in a well thought out and creative way. However, some candidates struggled with these demands and produced work that did not fit the published criteria for the task.

The choice of 10 artists worked well, and all ten were used by candidates with Bruno Mars, Kaiser Chiefs, Alanis Morissette and Katy Perry proving the most popular. Most candidates produced work that was a close stylistic match to the original song, but a few candidates chose to record their song in a completely new style. Both approaches were made to work extremely well by the more able candidates.

With regard to song choice, many centres had clearly encouraged candidates to make independent song choices, and this approach is to be applauded. It is highly recommended that centres insist that all candidates record a different song, which negates any possibility of file sharing malpractice, either deliberate or inadvertent, and also stops the 'production line' approach that some centres seem to favour where all candidates record the same song with often identical microphone set ups in group recording sessions. Teachers should look carefully at the guidelines set out on pages 13-14 of the specification document in relation to this practice.

One of the main changes is the instrument requirement, which has superseded the required track count from the previous specification. Candidates are required to record a minimum of two minutes for each of 5 compulsory instruments (drum kit, bass guitar/double bass, electric guitar, lead vocal and backing vocal) and also a minimum of one minute for two out of three additional instruments chosen from acoustic melody instrument, acoustic guitar and keyboard. Of the compulsory instruments, there were few issues with decisions made about recording of drums, bass, electric guitar and lead vocal. Occasionally candidates recorded a drum that just comprised kick and snare, which was not acceptable (see page 13 of the published specification) and this has been further clarified on the 2020 paper. In these cases, as the whole kit had not been recorded, it was impossible to fully assess drum capture and mix in AG1-4 and was marked accordingly.

The use of backing vocals caused candidates some of the greatest problems. During the year, numerous questions had been posted on 'Ask the Expert' pointing out that 2 minutes of backing vocals in a 3 to 3 ½ minute song was not usual and that it would be hard to find suitable songs. It is vital that teachers understand that this is not purely a recording task, but the examination also poses issues with regard to production that will need to be solved and simply attempting to replicate a song would not necessarily satisfy the demands of the task without some re-arrangement. A good example of this was the Kaiser Chief's song 'Ruby Ruby Ruby' which was a fairly popular choice of song. Candidates who simply replicate the backing vocals as on the original would not have had 2 minutes of backing vocal and therefore would have scored a maximum of 2 in AG5. There are plenty of opportunities for additional backing vocals to be added successfully.

Some candidates attempted to circumnavigate the issue of backing vocals by simply double tracking the lead vocal. This is not acceptable and does not qualify as a backing vocal, although it is possible to double the lead vocal with a different singer at a different octave as these can easily be assessed independently.

The additional audio instruments also caused a certain amount of confusion and misinterpretation, much of which surrounded the acoustic melody instrument. It was not uncommon for the log to be extremely vague as to what exactly the candidate intended to be assessed as an acoustic melody instrument which made marking this very difficult at times. It was not uncommon for candidates to decide that any acoustic instrument qualified as a melody instrument, even if this instrument were not playing melodically – so a number of candidates recorded two keyboard parts – a synth and an acoustic piano, both of which were playing chord patterns. The same with acoustic guitars, where numerous candidates recorded two (often very similar) acoustic rhythm guitar parts and passed one off as an acoustic melody instrument. It was very clear that a relatively small number of candidates used this approach as a way of making the task less complex and it is important that this area is clarified so that all candidates are working from a level playing field. Therefore, next year, any acoustic guitar tracks will only be assessed as an acoustic guitar, and any keyboard tracks will only be assessed as a keyboard.

Administration

Most centres submitted their work by the May 15th deadline. On the whole the work was well packaged and damaged/missing 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 to avoid any problems. Centres were provided with disks to submit work on. It is accepted that providing a CD for the proprietary files was inadequate this year, and next year DVDs will be provided. Centres should use these disks for both audio and data rather than submit their own. CDs and DVDs provided by the centres were often poorly labelled – both Centre and Candidate details as well as whether it is the audio or data disk must be clearly written on the CD or DVD. Centres are also reminded of the importance of ensuring that candidates check audio disks before sending them to the examiner as there were numerous examples of tracks with chopped starts and ends which are easily avoided.

Log Books

Although they are not marked, log books provide examiners with vital evidence when marking the recording. The best logs (and there were many excellent examples) provided clear and concise information completed on the pages provided. Most centres followed the instruction on the front cover not to attach additional material as there is ample space within the published log to include all information that an examiner requires to assess the work. As this is the first year of the specification, it would be useful to make some comments on how individual pages were completed.

Page 2 – mostly well completed. If using a, acoustic melody instrument, please add the name of the instrument as this was not always clear from the log or the recording.

Page 3 – There were some extremely creative approaches to the concept of playing time in numerous logs, which were often clearly attempting to mask where instruments were not meeting the minimum time requirements. A common approach was to start a timeline at the first entrance of, for example, the backing vocal, and block this out until the last recorded phrase, ignoring any gaps where the instrument in question was not present. There was also a noticeable tendency to round timings to the nearest 30 seconds, so an acoustic guitar starting at 0:45 would be blocked out from 0:30. Examiners do not sit marking with a stopwatch looking to penalise anything that misses by a few seconds.

However it is important that candidates time their tracks accurately and do not provide inaccurate and misleading information. The best logs provided time locators as well as blocks on this page.

Page 4 – Next year, there will be a requirement for only photographs to be submitted – drawings will no longer be acceptable. The expectation is that candidates provide a photograph taken at the time of the recording, of every instrument recorded. This provides examiners with valuable information about the capture of instruments. There are still a number of centres that allow candidates to submit identical photographs. This practice is clearly unacceptable as it obviously is not a true reflection of how a candidate has approached the task. Any instances of photo sharing are regarded as malpractice and action would be taken.

Pages 5-8 – The boxes on these pages are totally adequate to provide examiners with the information required. The majority of candidates completed these pages in the published format. Some candidates printed a screen shot of the Logic/Cubase mix window. Please do not allow your candidates to do this – they are generally extremely hard to read as they attempt to cram four pages of the log onto one page and do not provide the information in the required format. Please allow candidates adequate time for completing the logs. A candidate who leaves boxes blank may lead an examiner to assume that no processing has been attempted in the mix process and this could lead to fewer marks being awarded in some areas. Whilst examiners base their mark mainly on what they hear, a well filled in and complete log helps them credit work fully.

Many centres completed the logs on a computer and then printed them, which is totally acceptable. However, if this is the case, the whole 16 page booklet must be printed, not just the first nine pages. It would also be useful if this could be printed on A3 paper in booklet form as it was not uncommon for computer completed logs to arrive as a pile of unattached single sheets.

Marking Criteria

The new mark scheme is more detailed and allows for more specific evaluation of the individual elements of a recording. AG1-4 are split into 3 columns – drum kit, vocals and other parts. Working vertically down the mark-book, there are 16 marks available for the assessment of the drum kit, 16 for vocals (including backing vocals) and 16 for other parts (electric guitar, bass and two additional audio instruments).

It follows that as 48 out of the 60 marks are for capture and processing of individual instruments, much care must be taken to ensure that the evidence presented to the examiner is able to be assessed. For many candidates, this proved one of the hardest aspects of the task. It was not uncommon for some instruments to be balanced so low in the mix as to render them virtually inaudible. In these cases, not only would this affect the mark for overall balance in AG5, but also make it impossible for the examiner to credit for that instrument in AG1-4. The most common issue was that of acoustic guitars, which were often recorded alongside an electric guitar that was far more dominant in the mix, with the result that the acoustic guitar simply could not be heard.

'Ruby, Ruby, Ruby' is again a good example of where many candidates made poor choices of instruments, as almost without exception, any candidate adding an acoustic guitar to this track failed to find any suitable space in the mix for this and lost several marks as the examiner was unable to hear sufficient evidence to credit this instrument. Candidates must be encouraged to think about how they can create a submission that not only answers the question on paper, but also in the audio evidence that is submitted. Even if a log states that something is present, an examiner is going to award marks on what can be heard. A song that happened to work well in a fairly original arrangement was Alanis Morissette's 'Ironic' which starts with an clear acoustic guitar before the electric guitar enters for the chorus making it far easier to assess both.

Backing vocals was the other area where either audibility was a problem with BVs mixed very low, or far more attention had been paid to capture and mixing of the lead vocal over the backing vocal thus pulling down the vocal marks in AG 1-4. Centres will very often see when they get access to the mark books that there is often a 'best-fit' approach when awarding marks for different parameters.

It is worth mentioning that although performance in itself is not marked, it is invariably true that a sub-standard performance will almost always result in a sub-standard recording that is extremely difficult to mix successfully. The vast majority of candidates recorded high quality performances on all instruments that provided an excellent basis from which to produce a final mix. However, for some of the less successful candidates, their problems stemmed from their original choice of performer.

AG1: Capture

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

The majority of students were successful in their capture of instruments. Students who struggled with processing and mixing were generally capable of making a clean recording. Microphone choice was generally appropriate.

Capture of drums was the most difficult. Most common problems were capturing too much room ambience from poorly positioned overheads, or, conversely, overheads that were mixed so low that their impact on the drum kit was negligible resulting in a kit that was very kick and snare heavy. Microphone placement for acoustic melody instruments also needs to be carefully monitored as in some cases these instruments also captured far too much room ambience which made it almost impossible to mix these tracks successfully.

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. Vocals were sometimes extremely harsh compared to other instruments, and drums were often lacking clear definition.

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 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 drum kit and bass parts being 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 all instruments 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. 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 drums very tight or even in some cases totally dry. Again, the log books often confirmed this and showed that the student had not put any thought into the application of effects. Where an additional acoustic melody instrument has been recorded, recorded room ambience often created problems when attempting to balance reverb across a mix, something that also affected drums for some students.

AG5: Balance and Blend

The complexity of this task at A level was reflected by marks for balance and blend. Comparatively few students achieved a mix that was well balanced across all seven instruments and this is one area that centres should look at in some detail, as a poorly balanced mix will have consequences for how marks are awarded in AG1-4.

It was not uncommon for instruments (often acoustic guitars) mentioned in log books to be inaudible in the final mix, in which case AG5 would be 'best-fitted' from a 0 as in the level descriptors. A minority of candidates either presented unfinished work or misunderstood

the requirement of additional instruments and submitted work with only 1 additional instrument, which again limited this mark.

A small but significant number of candidates fell foul of the minimum playing times (often due to a liberal interpretation of what constitutes a backing vocal) and had this mark capped at 2. Pleasingly, there were very few examples of unpitched percussion, although it should be noted that recording handclaps does qualify as unpitched percussion, and a few candidates were awarded 0 for both AG5 and AG7 as a consequence.

There were some examples of extremely well balanced mixes that would not have been out of place had they been heard on the radio alongside professionally produced tracks.

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.

Suitable panning helped some candidates to differentiate between acoustic and electric guitar parts – one of the key problem areas identified. Drum panning was variable, with some kits panned extremely tightly, and in some cases almost in mono, and others with overheads panned extremely widely. There was great scope for backing vocals to enhance the stereo field, but a disappointing number of students chose to pan backing vocals centrally which meant there was no sense of separation between lead and backing vocal tracks.

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. There were some instances of poorly managed fades. The vast majority of students successfully achieved the required length (3 -3 ½ minutes) and few candidates had their marks capped because of this. Students are reminded of the importance of checking their CDs after they have been finalised to ensure that the work is ready for submission.