Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (9MT0)
Paper 02: Technology-based Composition

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This is the first year of this paper. It is similar in design to composition using technology task in the old A2 paper 6MT03, but the mark scheme has been re-designed to reflect a greater emphasis on the impact of technology-based sound design processes – synthesis, sampling and creative effects use.

Most of the papers were in the 20-50 range. It was rare to see a mark less than 20.

The work submitted generally showed that centres had taken the requirements of the new mark scheme into consideration, with more emphasis being placed on sound design approaches than was seen in the previous spec. It has always been the intention that this approach is taken to composition in music technology A level. The additional marks now available for sound design appear to have been excellent motivation for centres to ensure this element of the work is given due attention.

The mark scheme is published in the specification and includes details of adjustments applied in the case of over and under length submissions. These were rare this year.

The Three Briefs

The three briefs all proved popular with the cohort. The third brief was probably attempted by slightly fewer than the other two which were roughly equal.

Brief 1 – Transmission Glitch

Glitchy electronic stylings were used in many of the submissions. Some students successfully used pastiche of news broadcast type ident music blended with electronic and soundscape approaches.

This brief gives lots of scope for all elements of sound-design, particularly at the more experimental end to produce ambient or sound scape elements.

Many students had clearly spent time considering how to approach the music and studying the content of the film. They displayed a good amount of success in creating suitable moods and reflecting hit points. Sometimes this was not sustained throughout the whole piece; many started well hitting significant sync points and then later tail off, relying on repetition of musical material and increasingly ignoring key elements in the film. Many students reflected scenes such as the 8-bit game sequence, or the horizontal lines moving/expanding, some of the news broadcast scenes, but the key one so many missed was the rocket explosion fired from the helicopter.

A film such as this will clearly encourage approaches that may make use of non-conventional approaches to the musical elements. It is important that students are guided towards the mark scheme and make use of musical elements in such a way as to demonstrate effective control and development. It can be difficult to award marks for work that is sparse and atonal unless there is clear direction and connectedness via use of themes.

Brief 2 – Health Fanatic

This text provided some excellent responses. There was a lot of opportunity to work with sampled ideas, particularly vocal elements which have to be included, and many suitable styles would also incorporate significant amounts of synthesis and creative effects use.

The best work included original songs created by artfully adapting areas from the stimulus text, using melodic ideas that were convincing and well supported by suitable music and production elements. The best submissions actually married the musical content to the meaning of the text, e.g. creating a rhythm kit of sampled gym sounds such as dumbbells being dropped and trainers squeaking on floors, or sounds of human excursion, breathing and running. The better work was stylistically strong, using contemporary approaches to production methods with a great degree of skill. Some submissions sounded like they would not be out of place on the radio or in a club.

Many submissions incorporated rapping or spoken elements of the text, sometimes combined with sung elements. There was a range of success with this; while the rapping was usually accomplished quite well, including adapting and developing the text, sometimes the lyrics were accompanied with a thin texture of musical ideas having little variation. Some had clearly struggled with the meter of the text and not really managed to achieve a successful synergy between the musical content and the scanning of the lyrics.

Other approaches included using a recording of John Cooper Clarke himself reciting his poem to good effect; some tracks used a laid-back, cool jazz musical style instead of a more up-beat, energetic style that the nature of the poem suggested.

Some failed to reflect the meaning of the lyrics, almost entirely ignoring the text of the poem. It is clearly stated in the brief that the meaning must be reflected, even when lyrics are adapted and developed.

Brief 3 – Idioms

This was least popular and least successful. Sampling would naturally be a major use of tech in this brief, and many students explored synthesis and creative effects use alongside this.

Some students did well to select and group sayings or idioms together to make a coherent narrative and produced successful music to reflect them. This took the form of songs, raps, or collages of samples that in the best work were combined musically and with attention to the sonic contribution to the whole piece.

In weaker submissions, the music would be spare, simplistic, repetitive and the samples of sayings/idioms were repeated semi-randomly with little coherence. Often in these cases the samples had little treatment or manipulation and struggled to blend effectively with the musical ideas or give the impression of being produced.

A small number of students turned a string of idioms into a song, and there were some pleasing and successful attempts using this approach.

The sampled sayings, whether created by students themselves or collected from third party sources, were often not clear. There is room for lo-fi approaches, but this must be balanced by legibility to convey meaning in a task like this.

Summary of Approaches in the Assessment Component Grids (AGs)

AG1. Synthesis that uses elements of real-time development by filtering, LFOs, enveloping. Small tweaks to these settings are important to creating an effective palette but on their own do not access the highest marks.

AG2. Sampling that uses a range of manipulation methods such as pitching, stretching, gapping, stuttering, rather than simple drag n drop, set and forget approaches often seen. Samples play an integral part in the music, sonically, rhythmically and structurally appropriate.

AG3. Creative effects that go beyond basic production effects of reverb and delay; 'washy' reverbs are common and can be effective; timed delay, multi tap delay, high feedback/tape saturation emulation; pitch shifted elements, adventurous use of modulation effects; advanced dynamic processing including side-chaining; distortion, bit-crushing; combination of effects such as delay and flanger.

AG4. Detailed approach to production; balance, pan and mix effects, dynamic processing and EQ all given attention and managed successfully.

AG5. Overall approaches:
Good melodic song writing and a suitable approach to style that allows exploitation of sound design elements across the three area of synthesis, sampling and creative effects use.

Use of rapping where there is skilled, confident delivery and capture, combined with development of rhythmic ideas rather than highly repetitive phrasing.

Instrumental styles that combine a creative sonic palette with a strong grasp of style; reflecting elements of the brief with carefully chosen sounds and musical ideas.

AG6. Candidates scoring highly in this area were those that had managed to write with a consistent style, embracing their chosen genre with some sense of development and progression. Many submissions had started out well but failed to create any development producing work which was far too repetitive, whilst others, towards the lower end, had struggled to settle in a particular style producing compositions that lacked identity or became quite disjointed. This was perhaps more common in responses to brief 1, where candidates had tried to follow the visual cues too closely resulting in a piece which was lacking flow and consistency.

AG7. Some candidates crafted well rounded, fluent, melodic lines with a sense of development and direction, well integrated with other elements; others resorted to shorter repetitive ideas, riffs and motifs. A small number of candidates included very little melodic material.

AG8. There is a huge variety in success in this element. The best work showed high level of skill, with interesting development including varied voicings, vocal or instrumental harmony lines alongside melodies, clever combinations of chords. It was more common to see 2 or 3 chord loops, little chordal movement, and no voicing inversions/extensions.

AG9. At the lower end, some submissions had simply established rhythmic content and repeated, although work of this nature was not too common. At the higher end candidates had not only used a range of drum and percussion ideas, and also used sampling to create additional and interesting rhythmic layers. Where candidates had resorted to drum or percussion loops, the better candidates had sliced and manipulated those loops, and demonstrated a coherent ability to successfully layer numerous loops to create positive rhythmic textures which supported their chosen style.

AG10. The best work in this area came from candidates who had managed to create contrast between the different sections of their compositions, and also managed to craft a sense of light and shade within sections, perhaps some subtle layering of synth pads or percussion to lift sections, or removing lines to create space in others.
Many submissions failed to develop their texture other than in simplistic ways.

AG11. Some of the better work showed a very musical approach to structure; pieces that constantly moved forward with development of ideas, and even though repeated sections would be used there was variety in each appearance of a verse, chorus or other section. It was common to have unvaried structure based on repetition of the basic patterns, perhaps been led by the changes in a vocal part or samples. With brief 1, the structure is dictated to a degree by the film scenes and moods, but there is still ample scope to use musical structures within sections and revisit those ideas at different sections of the piece.

Logbooks

There were very few instances of missing signatures or candidate details. Fewer than previous years.

Students largely resisted adding huge amounts of extra paper to their logbooks. Printing vast amounts of screen shots does nothing to help demonstrate working methods. In many cases it provides little useful information.
A few well worded descriptions with reference to key settings/edits is sufficient, and it is encouraging to see that many students are able to complete the logbooks like this.

Word processed documents are of course fine, but centres must take care to include the full document including the assessment grids and not re-format or alter the layout.

Administrative Matters

Many centres sent well organised submissions that arrived in a timely fashion and clearly followed all the requirements laid out in the administrative guidance document.

A few centres had clearly not read the guide or had not understood it which gave rise to issues that had to be resolved. This can be a time-consuming process and in extreme circumstances may lead to marks not being published on time.

- A number of complete centres did not supply any of the required DATA discs to accompany audio CDs.

- Some centres are still supplying final mixes as .wav or .mp3 files rather than the required audio CD. Mp3 is a compressed audio format and could lead to lower marks for students.

- Each candidate's work needs to be in a separate envelope containing audio CD, Data CD/DVD and log book. The work is archived for access to scripts, awarding, EAR and other queries. Submitted a whole centre on one CD/DVD can not be accepted.

- Each CD/DVD must be labelled clearly as outlined in the guidance.