



Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2022

Pearson Edexcel International GCE
Music Technology (9MT0) Paper 1

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Principal Examiner's Report

A level Musi9c Technology Component 1 – Recording

9MT0 01

General Introduction

As a consequence of the restrictions that many centres were still working under due to the ongoing effects of the Covid pandemic, it was decided that in order for all centres to be working to as level a playing field as possible, the recording element of paper 9MT0 01 would, as in the 2021 paper, be removed from this task for the May 2022 submission. I believe that we came up with a very innovative solution that allowed candidates to demonstrate their ability to use a DAW in a very comprehensive and creative way. What is also very clear is that an excellent teaching resource has, quite coincidentally, been produced, this can be used in future years to enhance learners' listening and practical skills which will benefit all units in the specification.

Understandably, there were some questions and queries about this task, and questions directed at Jeffery Hole and Ask the Expert were consistently responded to by the senior team. However, it is noted that there were also numerous discussions on online forums and groups where questions such as 'Are my candidates allowed to do...' etc... were responded to in a very knowledgeable manner by other members of the group who were not examiners for the unit, and as such were expressing a personal opinion rather than an established fact. This could easily lead to candidates being disadvantaged by working upon inaccurate information. Any questions should always be directed to the official channels.

The task itself, was to recreate as accurately as possible, the Wolf Alice track, 'Mona Lisa Smile', using only the unprocessed stems provided on the Pearson website. The stems themselves, were designed to be representative of the quality of recording and performance that an average candidate might produce in a school environment, but would, when processed and mixed, allow a final bounce that was able to come close to the feel of the stimulus track. Some teachers had a tendency to focus on the minutiae rather than the overall track, and there were several questions regarding the perceived accuracy of some tracks. When attempting to recreate stems from a recording, there are always going to be different interpretations, but those provided worked extremely well giving candidates the opportunity to edit and comp as well as layer up multiple takes where needed.

With a task such as this, there is a danger that centres adopt a 'paint by numbers' approach resulting in all candidates producing work of a similar standard. However, it was extremely pleasing to see that, for the great majority of centres, work was very clearly differentiated as candidates had produced a mix based upon their own personal understanding of the track.

The track set, Moaning Lisa Smile by Wolf Alice, provided some interesting challenges, all of which were solvable with some creative use of available technology to shape and process the stems provided. To produce a comparable final mix, candidates had to be extremely bold in their approach to such areas as compression, EQ, reverb and layering, pushing many of these elements to their limits (as the stimulus track does) to create the huge sound and texture needed.

Administration

This session saw the introduction of a new online process for the submission of coursework, and although it is acknowledged that some centres experienced problems in uploading files, most centres successfully submitted candidates' work using the new system. This unit probably sees the largest file sizes required to be up-loaded for any qualification, and a secondary system using SharePoint solved most issues. However, this was a learning experience for both centres and the exam board, and the lessons learnt will be invaluable in planning for submission processes in 2023.

From an examiner's perspective, having all work digitally uploaded made a huge difference to the ease in which work could be processed and monitored, and this can only be a good thing.

Most centres submitted work in the format requested. However, a significant number of candidates' work was submitted in an incorrect file format – .MP3 as opposed to the stated .WAV format.

Candidates were also asked to name their files in a very specific way – (*9MT001_your centre number_your candidate number*) but many candidates did not adhere to this format. Please can teachers ensure that all candidates submit work as requested in the Administrative Support Guide as published on the website as this can cause confusion when marking.

Examiners are required to mark what is submitted. It is the responsibility of the candidate to check that what they are submitting is correct and there were several examples where candidates had clearly not listened through to their final bounce before submitting, resulting in such candidates being awarded a lower mark that they might have expected.

Logbooks

The majority of logbooks were filled in digitally, and this is to be encouraged. However, information needs to be presented in an easily readable manner, and a brief description of how a plug in has been applied is often more useful than a long list of figures or a very small screenshot. Many logs were well presented, concise and informative.

Marking Criteria

Whilst it is recognised that the published mark scheme has been designed for a slightly different task, when applied to the submissions for 2022, it allowed for excellent work to be suitably credited as well as differentiation between candidates. The track, 'Moaning Lisa Smile' by Wolf Alice provided candidates with an excellent opportunity to put in practice the theory that would have been taught, and the highest scoring candidates used DAW technology to a very high level.

AG1: Capture

This was not assessed this year due to the temporary changes to this unit. Consequently, this unit was marked out of 48.

AG2: Editing – processing EQ

The stimulus track has a very distinct and clearly defined low frequency range which drives the mix. There is also a very highly detailed upper frequency range which provides a crisp clarity to both individual tracks and the overall mix. Working with the stems provided, it was quite possible to achieve a very similar range, but many candidates found this hard and submitted work with much muddy mid-range EQ and limited attention paid to the upper and lower ends. There were also some clearly defined differences in vocal tracks that were often overlooked as were subtleties in individual tracks. The best submissions had an excellent range of frequencies controlled across the entire spectrum.

AG3: Editing – dynamic processing

Getting the compression and control of the dynamic elements of the track managed was one of the fundamental tasks to ensure success. The stimulus track not only has extremely carefully managed dynamics on the individual tracks but also on the final mix, which was not only highly compressed but also set with a limiter just preventing peaking throughout. Many candidates struggled with this – it needed a very bold approach, stretching the boundaries of what might have been taught as good practice. Quite often, individual tracks were over-compressed at the expense of post-production dynamic control.

AG4: Editing – Use of effects

Again, the stimulus track provided candidates with significant challenges to solve, but the most successful managed this extremely well. It was disappointing how many candidates failed to hear some of the most important features such as the double tracked vocals, which were dealt with in AG4 and features such as the creative use of delay on the vocals. Candidates needed to be very bold and imaginative with their use of reverb, especially on the vocals, and many candidates found this a struggle. There are different reverbs on the different vocal tracks which top end candidates observed. Most candidates applied suitable distortion to the electric guitars, and this was one of the most successful elements in many mixes.

AG5: Production - balance and blend

To match the stimulus track, candidates needed to layer up parts to create the thick texture as well as match reverb, compression, and stereo field. A surprising number of candidates struggled to match the textural feel of the original track, failing to double track the vocals (using different takes), and not layering electric guitars and spreading them across the stereo field. Drums were often over mixed – in the stimulus track they are almost lost in the texture by the end, and many candidates clearly felt that they needed to boost the drums so they could be heard, which was not a suitable response. The most surprising problem was that of the acoustic guitar in the verses, which was inaudible in the vast majority of mixes compared to the stimulus track. Vocal balance created some issues as there is much detail in the different tracks. Quite often, vocal balance in the outro was not well controlled as more layers were added.

AG6: Production – use of stereo

The stimulus track has a very wide stereo field, created by layering up of tracks, basic panning and the use of stereo reverbs returns. This is quite complex, and the high-end candidates achieved this very successfully. However, many candidates either failed to hear the stereo field or were not bold enough to stretch the available technology to the limits required resulting in many submissions that were far too narrow.

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

Most candidates managed noise and suitable distortion well. Some had low mastering levels, which, when compared to the stimulus track, was not appropriate. Editing of the amp noise was somewhat inconsistent and needed careful thought to avoid some of the extraneous noise present in the sample. Some badly controlled amp noise was evident before electric guitar entries in the choruses. Some candidates attempted to comp various tracks (especially the opening acoustic guitar at the start) which was not often convincingly controlled.