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Examiners' Report/
Lead Examiner Feedback
Summer 2017

BTEC Level 3 Nationals in Music
Technology
Unit 6: DAW Production (31810H)



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Grade Boundaries

What is a grade boundary?

A grade boundary is where we set the level of achievement required to obtain a certain grade for the externally assessed unit. We set grade boundaries for each grade, Distinction, Merit, Pass and Near Pass.

Setting grade boundaries

When we set grade boundaries, we look at the performance of every learner who took the external assessment. When we can see the full picture of performance, our experts are then able to decide where best to place the grade boundaries – this means that they decide what the lowest possible mark should be for a particular grade.

When our experts set the grade boundaries, they make sure that learners receive grades which reflect their ability. Awarding grade boundaries is conducted to ensure learners achieve the grade they deserve to achieve, irrespective of variation in the external assessment.

Variations in external assessments

Each external assessment we set asks different questions and may assess different parts of the unit content outlined in the specification. It would be unfair to learners if we set the same grade boundaries for each test, because then it would not take into account that a test might be slightly easier or more difficult than any other.

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, are on the website via this link:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>

Unit 6: DAW Production (31810H)

Grade	Unclassified	Level 3			
		N	P	M	D
Boundary Mark	0	16	28	40	52

Introduction

This is the first session in which external assessment for the L3 Music Technology qualification had been presented following development of the new specification and the first instance of DAW Production being assessed in this format.

As a mandatory unit within the specification the external assessment is to take place once a year in May, with the supplied musical material and scenario changing in each session. Summer 2017 was the first time that external assessment for Unit 7 was undertaken by learners.

Learners were assessed on their understanding of how a digital audio workstation (DAW) can be used creatively to produce, arrange and mix music through the submission of pieces of music and production notes in response to a brief reflecting working practices.

Introduction to the Overall Performance of the Unit

As the qualification's synoptic unit, this task demands a range of complementary production skills. In general learners produced an excellent range of creative ideas in response to the brief supported by considerable technical aptitude in the production of original ideas and supplemented by the effective incorporation of the provided audio.

Learners were generally weaker in their production notes where they did not fully understand how to describe the processes they used to create their samples.

Strong responses

The most effective learner responses make comprehensive use of the features of the DAW to create a musical result which suits the brief, and demonstrate consistently secure understanding in the evaluation of how this has been achieved. Learners at distinction level have at least begun to understand the benefits and processes involved in the effective control of mixing and editing techniques, as well as successfully sequencing their production and analytically evidencing their work in their production notes.

The most common differentiator of higher level responses from those that achieved lower was evidence of technical skill and creative reasoning in the control and application of equalisation and dynamics processing in the mix aspect of production.

Lower level responses

Learner responses achieving pass grade tend to be fairly successful pieces of music, with minor gaps in evidence of understanding of the full production process, and a minor accumulation of technical mistakes which have not been declared as intentional and which clearly limit the musicality and technical depth of the produced outcomes.

Those responses which have not achieved pass most commonly demonstrate significant gaps in understanding the brief and the application of technical skills such as the avoidance of detrimental timing issues in their programming.

To meet pass level, learners are required to make use of the sequencer's grid and explore features of the software to expand the limits of their technical and creative ability beyond basic recording.

In order to improve their grade to pass level, some learners would have benefited from explaining how they intended to respond appropriately to the specific aspects of the brief and showing the methodology employed in creating the response, rather than leaving it to assumption, considering an examiner may not assume any of these things.

Areas of Focus

MIDI

Quantisation to the sequencer grid has been well executed by the majority of learners, with some providing clear evidence in their production notes.

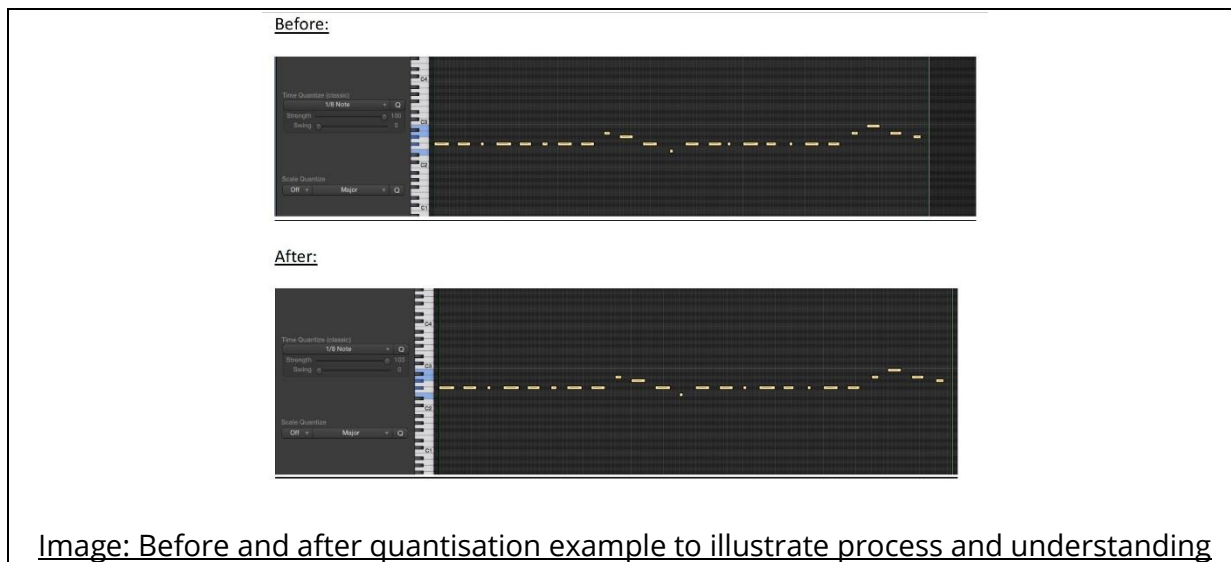


Image: Before and after quantisation example to illustrate process and understanding

Most learners who have not met the pass descriptor fall short in this aspect, leading to inconsistent or incohesive rhythmic communication of creative ideas.

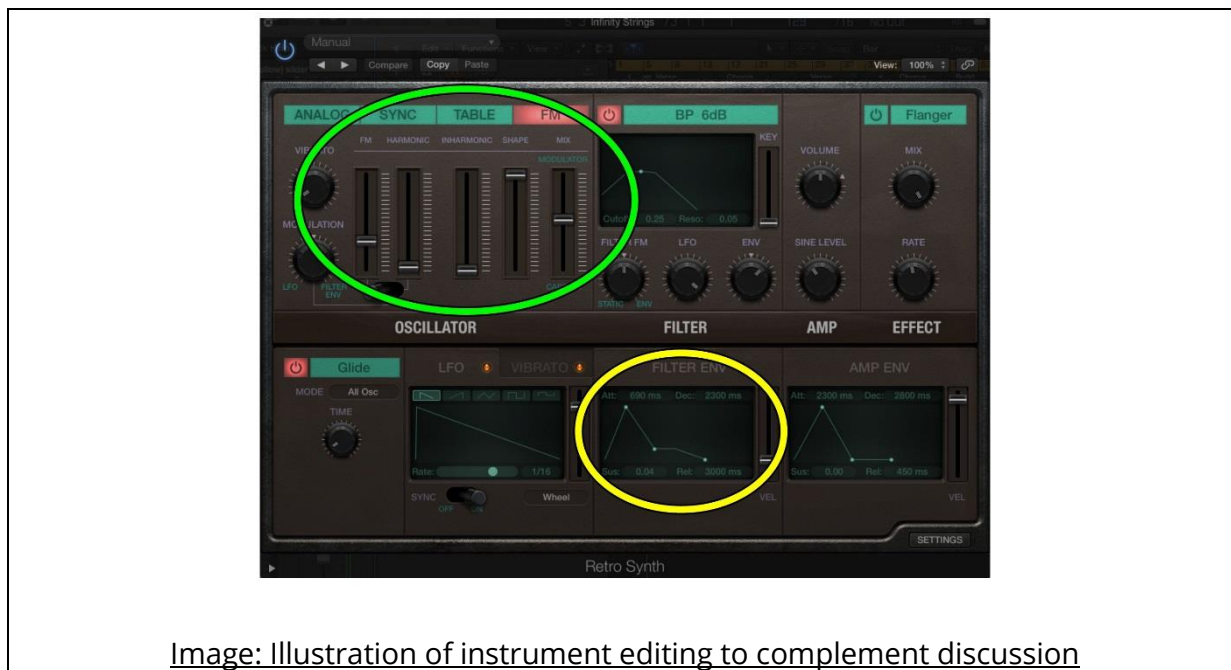
Many have varied their used of quantisation, providing a rationale related to making their music fit a certain sense of groove or have a more human feel.

Although few learners have made expressive and intricate use of velocity, it is not always clearly discernable from responses whether this is a purposeful intention – for example, a robotic approach in response to the theme of the brief. Such intentions can be acknowledged only when stated in production notes. Learners who have achieved well in the application of velocity and expression have recognised the importance of musical MIDI sequencing and applied expressive and intricate use of controllers and editing, explaining their choices in the context of the brief.

With regard to choice of instruments, many learners chose good combinations of sounds, although some responses have an over-reliance on pre-produced loops (audio and MIDI), particularly with drums. Whilst often being an appropriate approach to production, by choosing not to attempt original drum programming and processing, some learners have prevented themselves from demonstrating the full breadth of control of their DAW. Some learners have left examiners in doubt as to whether they programmed MIDI or used loops, due to lack of reference to process in their production notes.

Some learners would have benefited from demonstrating understanding of the value, effective use, implementation and control of bass instruments. A proportion of submissions lack a significant bass part, despite many expressing an appropriate aim to mimic EDM or other energetic musical styles.

Attempts to make use of detailed instrument editing to manipulate and control sounds are made evident in a minority of submissions.



Some learners have successfully developed their ideas through textural variation and been credited here accordingly. Those whose programming successfully acknowledged the differing roles of the 30 and 60 second edits and provided appropriate reasoning were also given credit here, as well as for their production notes.

Those who have provide examples of their approaches to inputting MIDI have enabled themselves to achieve better in this category.

Audio

Many learners demonstrate a good command of the various tools for audio manipulation and timing with the grid. Most trigger samples confidently, although less have made use of time stretch/flex to match tempo.

Another time I did this was when I turned the synth melody sample into a sampler instrument by cutting out one of the notes and then flexing it to last a crotchet. This was again so I could easily use it to create what I wanted, rather than exactly what was given.



I used it in a similar way when I used the percussion loop as a drum loop in my piece. I cut out what sounded like a bar of the percussion loop and then flexed it so it would last four bars of my piece and would be the same tempo as the rest of my piece and then looped it throughout my hook. An alternate method would have been to cut out each beat and move it into place but this took much longer and I already did that method with the beat and vocal audio. I used this in all of my hook sections.

Image: Appropriate explanation of the use of flex

Some learners' audio is over-processed and suffers as a result. Perhaps a trial and error approach to timestretching has degraded sound quality. Successful learners may have used undo and have made specific reference to snap, accurate editing using zoom and zero crossing points.

start and end of the audio to avoid a 'pop' sound caused by the sudden burst of audio. This is done by zooming in greatly and then by finding the first peak of the part of audio you want and cutting it just before it, where the wave meets the equilibrium line/ zero point. Then you do the same at the end of the audio, making sure to consider the tail of it and not cutting it off too early. Here are a few examples of when I did this.

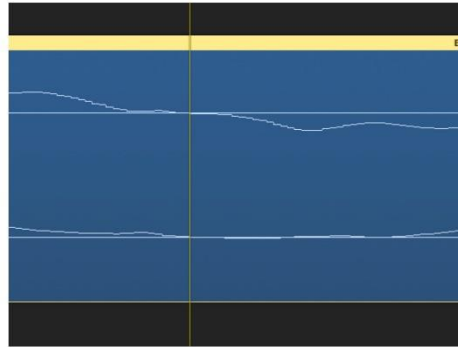


Image: Good exemplification of accurate audio editing

Many learners have successfully recognised the requirement to trim audio tracks in order to isolate chosen parts, remove noise and ready the material for musical timestretching, as well as making explicit reference to their approach in their production notes. The most successful examples have referred to the value of zooming in for accuracy and preventing unwanted clicks and glitches by recognising the value of editing to zero crossing points.

Many responses, including some of the strongest in other areas, have chopped the end of their 60 second and 30 second edits. An aurally astute, precise and professional approach to audio editing and topping and tailing is to be encouraged.

FX/Mix

A large proportion of learners have paid sufficient attention to balancing their tracks, often with the help of appropriate use of stereo width.

Marks have been dropped by some learners in both the equalisation and dynamics processing aspects of their mix. A minority have been able to confidently explain how they controlled these aspects in a way that would usefully enhance their productions, particularly in regard to dynamics processing. Basic equalisation technique is required in some submissions. For example, some learners have made use of significant additive equalisation in sub bass regions.



Image: Commonly applied inappropriate bass boost



Image: Inadvisable extreme boost of thin bandwidth



Image: Better practice of equalisation to enhance snare drum, remove rumble, improve clarity and brightness (backed up by written explanation)

A few learners have demonstrated understanding of the use of different bandwidths for effective additive and subtractive equalisation.

Some effective examples of sidechain compression are in evidence. Some demonstrate solid and sophisticated understanding of the use of inserts, routing and busses for a musically cohesive and effective result.

Responses vary between centres with regard to the effective use of automation. Its use is encouraged as a worthwhile and relevant tool to enhance musicality.

Automation

I used automation on the stereo output both at the start and the end of my piece. This was when I used the high cut filter to introduce my piece. I also used it at the very end of my piece to end it and to make it feel like it is closing of and is fully finished. I did this by automating the frequency after applying a single band EQ audio fx to the track.



I also used automation with the start of one of my melodies that I wanted to be introduced gradually rather than all at once. I automated the volume to gradually increase.



Automation was used when working with filter sweeps as you need to automate the cut off for it to actually work. I did this by selecting Cut off from the drop down menu and then drew a point from the very start of the filter sweep and one at the end and made it increase

Production notes

All learners can benefit from reading the brief and closely following the suggested headings in the presentation of their production notes.

Particularly careful responses make a reference to each and every audio file in the source material, not just technically and musically, but in responding to the context of the brief.

Learners who have been most successful in providing evidence of meeting the assessment criteria have provided overview screenshots of their arrangement, along with annotated screenshots showing their specific processes in using tools and functions within the DAW.

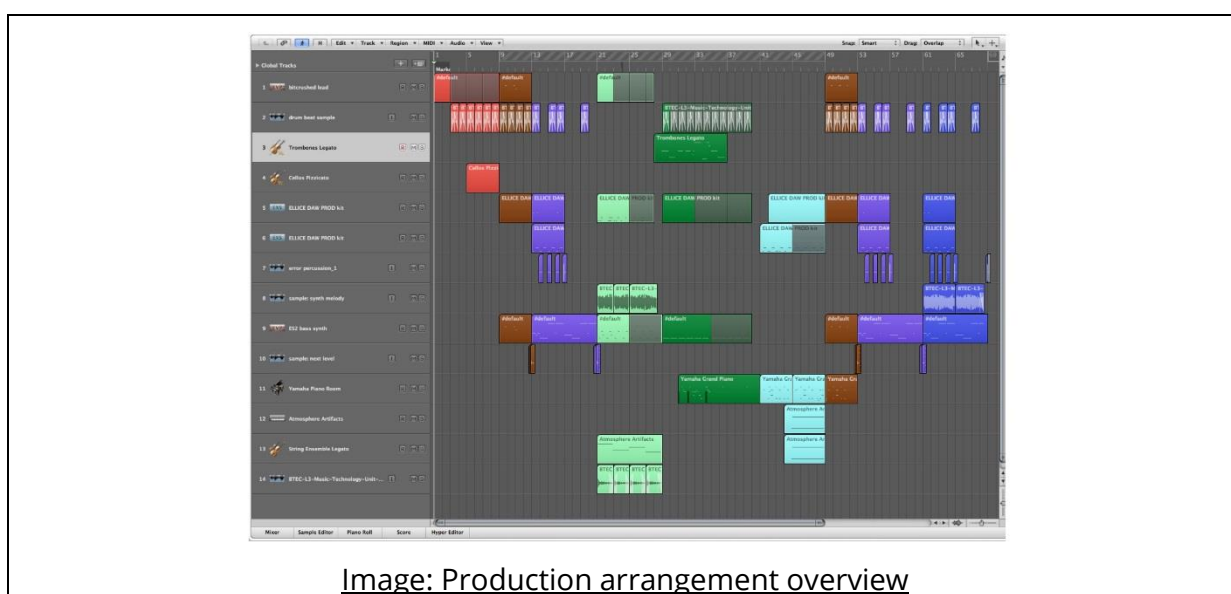


Image: Production arrangement overview

Some learners have produced extensive production notes, sometimes leading to a relatively thin spread of pertinent, creditable material. Learners sometimes repeat accounts of the same techniques used on different tracks, with limited expansion, attracting credit only in the first instance of their demonstration of understanding. Some learners' production notes discuss process at length, but the best responses back up explanation of process with purpose and rationale to produce a creative and effective response to the brief.

Summary

Centres are reminded to pay careful attention to submission procedures, including thorough completion of registers in order to ensure all of their learners' work is accounted for.

The vast majority of audio provided arrived intact, which helped the examiners' administrative process. Centres have evidently checked audio carefully before submission.

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