

# **Level 3 Lead Examiner Report 1906**

Summer 2019

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

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### 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, at Distinction, Merit and 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 is 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 assessment, because then it would not take accessibility into account.

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Unit 6: DAW Production (31810H)

Grade	Unclassified	Level 3			
		N	P	M	D
<b>Boundary Mark</b>	0	16	28	40	52

## Introduction

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

As a mandatory unit, within many pathways within the specification, the external assessment takes place once a year in May, with the supplied musical material and scenario changing for each series.

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 practice.

## Introduction to the Overall Performance of the Unit

As the qualification's synoptic unit, this task demands a range of complementary production skills. Skills and techniques learnt in other units can also enhance the learner's response to the brief and are often featured in the stronger responses. It should be emphasised here that skills in composition, sound creation or sampling are not specifically creditworthy in the marking of the work, but they do allow learners to develop creatively in the use of production techniques to respond to the requirements of the brief.

Overall, learners produced an interesting variety of creative ideas in response to the brief. The responses incorporated skills and technical aptitude in the production of original ideas including varied and sometimes imaginative use of the provided source material. This year a MIDI file was included in the source material and learners generally responded well to this, undertaking more detailed MIDI work which was evident audibly as well as discussed in production notes.

Compared to the previous instance of this assessment, learners generally showed a clearer understanding of the requirements of the scenario and the brief, as expressed in their intentions in the production notes and heard in their responses to the brief. Many learners employed sufficient techniques with MIDI and audio material to develop a piece which, to differing degrees, realised the requirements of the brief as they expressed them.

The practical area which did show a significant amount of discrimination between strong and weaker submissions, was the creation of the mix. Consistency in tonal and dynamic control of the mix was often only partially achieved across the main track and the edits.

The scenario and brief had some specific requirements which learners often commented upon, with the musical style suggested by the brief as being different from their usual or preferred style. This indicated that the scenario was a valid neutral ground for learners and challenged them to work creatively without recourse to their preferred or prevalent musical responses.

Similarly, the source files represented a variety of challenges to learners. The material provided for assessment of this unit is never intended to work together without a range of editing and manipulation techniques being employed, which may not have been fully appreciated by some learners. Whilst learners could usually identify issues in the source files and propose techniques for their use, generally only the higher achieving learners saw creative opportunities as well as problems and gave relevant rationales for their approach to source material. Nevertheless, the assessment this year was largely as accessible to learners as previous assessments, as evidenced in the good range of marks and the comparable level of achievement by learners overall.

## Strong responses

The strongest submissions in this series featured source material used as an intrinsic part of the thematic development of the response or as significant musical motifs within it. Source material is clearly audible in the piece, or if heavily manipulated is identifiable from information in the production notes.

Audibly effective and creative use of the source material was combined with interesting and complementary sounds featuring variation and development in the coherent construction of the piece. The work featured feel, expression and dynamics in both rhythmic and melodic content that responded well to the brief.

The edits were similarly creatively developed rather than being simply cut out of the longer track, being effective responses to the brief and discrete pieces of music in their own right. Mixes had dynamic and tonal control indicating effective use of compression and equalisation, as well as life and space with good musicality.

Production notes included analysis of the requirements of the brief and the source files provided, with clear intentions and rationale given for the response to the brief and the use to be made of the source files. Intentions and rationale were often included for the choice of sounds and how they would be used in the piece.

## Lower level responses

At **Pass level**, learner submissions were generally satisfactory pieces of music, but taken collectively the main piece and the edits were not effective realisations of the requirements of the brief. They tended to feature some appropriate and even interesting sounds that were effectively written to be accurate in time and pitch, but with insufficient variation and development. There was often an over-reliance on a limited palette of sounds, leading to pieces being repetitive and on occasion mechanical.

MIDI sequencing would lack feel and expression in these pieces. The use of all source material was not intrinsic to the creation of the piece, or there was one heavily featured use of one source file, with the other sources having only incidental use, that did not fit with the overall tone of the piece. In some cases, pieces of source material were use once in the start or finish of the piece and played no part in the musical development of the piece.

Marking of such work would note the manipulation and editing involved as being creditworthy, but access to higher marks would not be possible without the piece showing the source material being used creatively to develop the musicality of the piece. There would often be the repetition of the same

techniques in the use of source material, which again restricts access to higher marks, where a variety of techniques is looked for.

Mixes would suffer from loss of control of dynamics and tone in the work. There were instances of a satisfactory atmospheric start becoming muffled and muddy in the dynamic section. There were also instances of work having too little dynamic range with levels consistently too low to be effective. It is possible that in these instances, learners working on headphones were adjusting the stereo output level on the DAW, rather than the headphone volume, resulting in a consequent low volume bounce of the work.

**Submissions that did not achieve Pass**, were usually not effective responses to the brief. At this level there were instances of learners seeking to impose their own preferred musical genre on the construction of the piece, sometimes including this as a stated intention in their production notes, but inevitably basing this on a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the requirements of the brief.

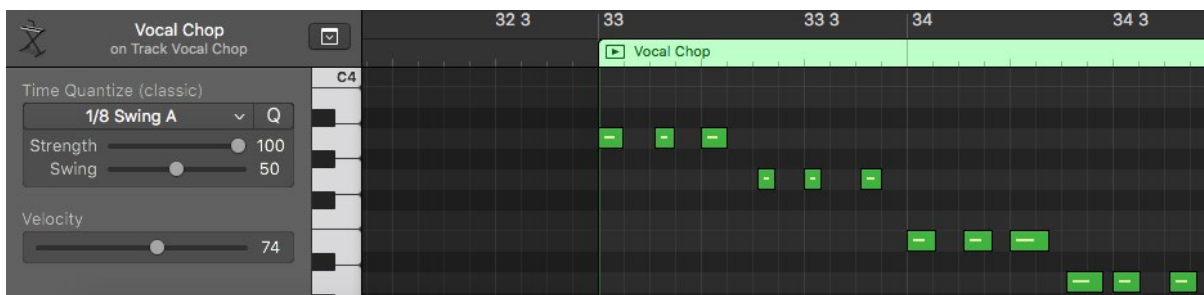
Source material tended to be only partially used, and the work was sometimes incoherent musically, with the piece comprising two or three different musical ideas put together, sometimes without consideration of rhythm or pitch. This work was also likely to include errors in timing and editing. Production notes at this level indicated learners had a limited understanding of the workings of the DAW, with only a limited number of techniques employed. It is possible that some learners at this level did not have sufficient time and experience in the use of the DAW software, to fully explore the techniques and possibilities available with the software.

## Set Task Areas of Focus

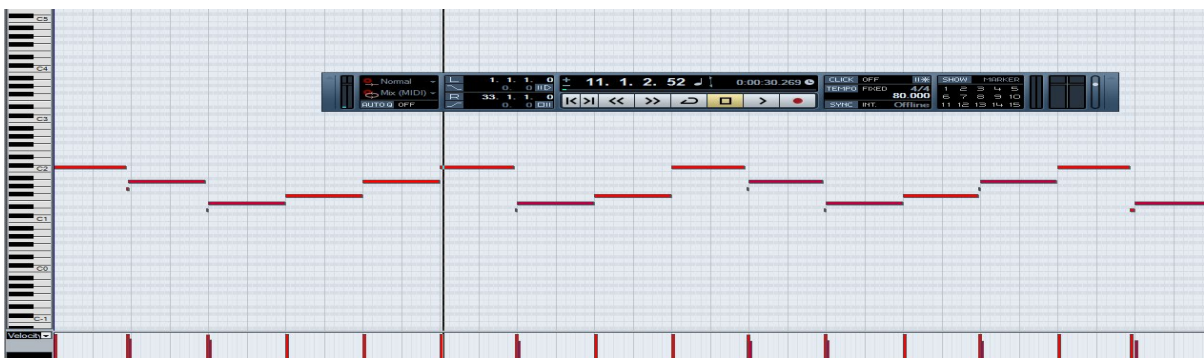
### Midi Skills & Techniques

In this series, a MIDI file was included in the source material, which promoted a clearer use of MIDI work in learners generally, but also indicated that some learners may not be familiar with importing MIDI files that come from sources other than their DAW library.

Almost all submissions could be heard to be accurate in their timing, though the lower achieving pieces were audibly using a default quantise setting, resulting in a more mechanical feel to the work. A significant number of pieces sought to give expression and feel to the work, and this could be heard in the finished pieces. Learners also emphasised their use of quantise values in their production notes as in the example below.



Along with the creative use of quantise learners showed an understanding of the editing of note velocity in stronger responses, and production notes would include a rationale for this with a screenshot of an example as seen below.



Stronger responses also separated the MIDI file into separate tracks for different drum sounds, and applied separate editing, quantise and FX to the different tracks. In the strongest work the drum tracks would be sent to a stereo drum bus rather than straight to the master stereo output, to allow overall control of the drum sounds. Below is an example of a learner's use of the Drum MIDI file with their rationale.





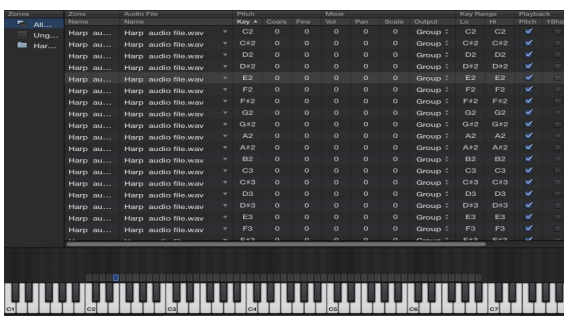
*Summing Stack. For efficiency I then separated each part of the kit into a summing stack, this allows me to edit and manipulate each part of the drum MIDI separately.*

All learners drew on sounds from the library with their DAW in selecting the musical components of their work. Many learners went further and edited the sounds to meet a specific need for their composition or used software instruments to effectively create an original sound to complement the source audio.

Editing software instruments is not a requirement of the unit, but it is creditworthy if the learner shows that there is a specific purpose to the editing in creating a complementary sound.

In the same context the use of software samplers was common at all levels, though not always with convincing or successful results.

The screenshots below were used by the learner to demonstrate both the effective use of the software sampler in working with slices of source audio, as well as detailed editing of controls to manipulate the sound, with an explanation of intentions provided.



*Sampler Instrument key zones  
Sampler instrument with glide,  
resonance, drive, ADSR altered*

In many cases learners selected sounds that were appropriate to the requirements of the brief and complemented, to some extent, their use of source material. A limiting factor for some learners in this section is that they relied on a limited range of sounds with insufficient instances of variation, development or transposition in their MIDI work to make the work more audibly interesting.

Overall there was less reliance on library loops in this assessment, and learners discussed choice of sounds and their MIDI work with more detail.

Some better responses detailed the use of MIDI functions, though the use of controllers seemed to be less common than in the previous series. In stronger responses, good drum programming skills were in evidence, with effective rolls and accents being used, along with a range of different drums from different drumkits.

## Audio Skills and Techniques

In the majority of submissions, source material had been accurately sliced and subjected to time/pitch manipulation. As the source audio files had sonic issues as well as different tempos and keys, this was a minimum requirement for learners in undertaking this assessment. In some instances, learners used screenshots of the audio wave to illustrate the editing they were doing.



Learners also included screenshots (example below) to illustrate how they used zooming in on a waveform, to identify a zero point for cutting the wave and editing of the wave.



A variety of techniques were used by learners to carry out time and pitch manipulation, and in stronger responses, learners would give reasons for choosing different techniques for different pieces of source audio, usually related to maintaining the integrity of the sound. Stronger responses also had learners using source audio in two or more different ways, and some occasions where non-musical elements were manipulated into percussive or atmospheric sounds.

Less successful responses relied on repetition of the same technique for all audio sources, and this was a limiting factor as additional marks will not be gained through the repetition of the same technique. Typical of this approach was the selection of one slice from an audio source for use in a software sampler being repeated with all audio sources. Whilst this technique was envisaged for making use of one of the source files provided, its application separately, to all source files, limits the credit available for the creative musical use of the source audio and doesn't respond well to the scenario if none of the source audio is recognisable in the piece.

Many learners demonstrated accurate editing of audio, manipulation of the audio to fit the piece, and its placement alongside the MIDI tracks to fit in time and in key.

Access to higher marks in this section required learners to show creative use of the audio with musicality in response to the brief. The brief also had clear requirements for the edits, and learners generally tried to respond to the brief in making the sixty second edit capable of being looped. Often this was done with long fades at the start and end of the edit, which resulted in some period of silence during the looping, so this was not a full response to the brief. The stronger responses had effective loops where the start and end of the loop joined seamlessly.

Some 30 second edits also looped, though this was not a requirement of the brief, and there were instances where a seemingly abrupt end would actually segue back into the start of the edit with no disruption to the beat or the pitch. The learners did not always make such intention clear in their production notes.

The edits can be used to demonstrate additional techniques that don't fit within the main piece and introduce further instrumentation or variation. The edits however, must work as pieces of music in their own right, as well as responding to the brief. The less successful edits tended to utilise a meandering section from the start of the main piece without any musical development within the 60 second edits, and a similar outcome was common for 30 second edits. In some cases, the edits did not match the requirements of the brief, and the 60 second edit was the dynamic section repeated.

The main piece was also sometimes overlong. The atmospheric start would not develop for the first minute or so until the dramatic section came in and that would go on without variation for another minute or so. Some instances of pieces that were three to four minutes long did not have enough musical ideas to last this length of time and would have been more successful if the ideas were condensed into around two and a half minutes.

NB: The bouncing of the tracks also seemed to raise issues this year, with a number of instances where the edit would last longer than the intended duration and up to six minutes on one occasion. In marking this it was noted the music stopped at the intended time, and the rest was silence, but it still shows a lack of mastery of bouncing completed projects.

There were also instances of only one track in a mix appearing in the bounce due to it being soloed, and the main piece coming to an abrupt end, halfway through a bar. This is a problem for marking if the piece is curtailed in this fashion at 1 minute forty-seven, but disastrous for the learner if it happens ten seconds into the piece.

In addition, some learners still bounce their work to mp3s rather than the required CD quality wave file. Learners should check their bounces as a matter

of course to ensure that the bounce is a true representation of the completed work, and in the correct format.

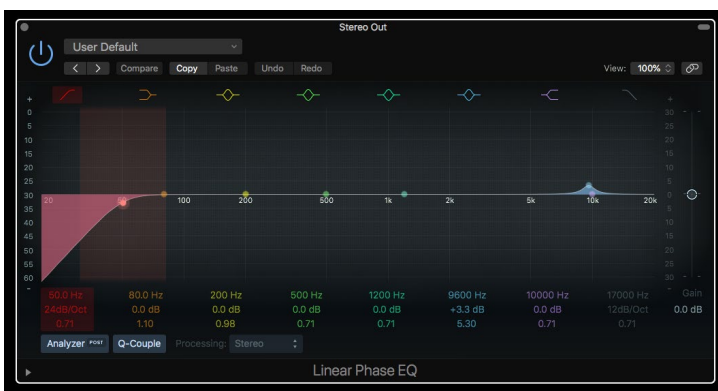
## FX/Mix

The quality of the mix was variable between the stronger responses and those near the Pass grade boundary. Details of mixing techniques also seemed to get less space in the production notes. At the upper end mixes were musical with good tonal and dynamic control, giving the sound some space and life, and with an effective stereo spread.

Problems heard with mixes included the overuse of compression resulting in a dull sound, excessive dynamic range from a quiet start to a dramatic section with significant clipping, and the use of saturated sounds being allowed to monopolise the mix. As noted already there were a number of instances where the mix was excessively quiet throughout.

Elements of the mixing section were often included throughout the production notes where they applied to particular sounds. The use of compression inserted on a sound was frequently mentioned and instances of bus compression and sidechain compression were quite common. Some good practice was seen in the use of an adaptive limiter being used on the stereo output, but too often hard compression was used instead.

Similarly, equalisation was addressed as part of the work on particular sounds, instances included in production notes indicate effective application of equalisation and remains a discriminating factor in achievement for this unit. This was also heard in mixes that lacked effective tonal separation. Below is an example of the use of equalisation to meet specific requirements for a sound.



Here is an example of an alternative approach to equalisation that was less successful.



On some occasions, learners would condense their use of equalisation, dynamics and FX into one screenshot as seen below.



This would not always be accompanied with a full explanation by the learner about what these processes were intended to achieve, or even what order they were applied in.

Stronger responses included details of how FX were edited and applied and for what reason, as can be seen in the next example:



Snare chamber reverb on Bus 1 which thickens transients with a short reverb time



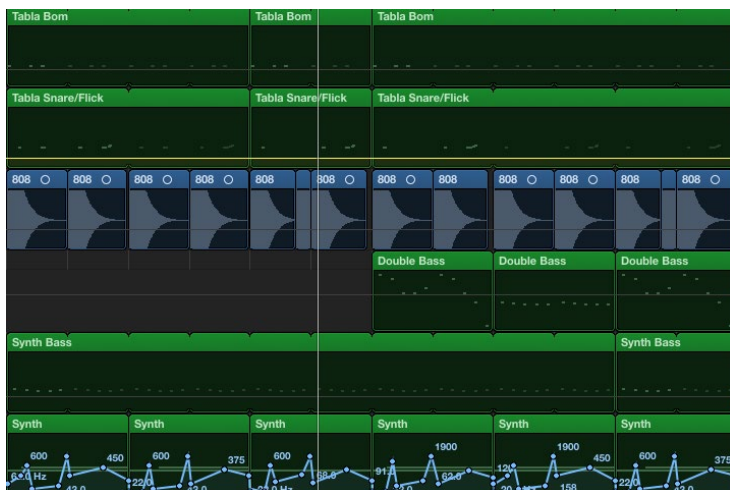
Whilst instances of the application of FX and dynamics were commonly mentioned in production notes, screenshots of the mixer page were used less frequently. This is useful evidence to determine the use of buses and the inserting of plugins to channels, which gives access to higher marks for this section. Stronger responses included this information with some explanation of why they were used. Examiners could also determine, to some extent, which plugins were part of the selected sound and which had been added. There were some occasions when additional FX were inserted on sounds despite similar FX already being in place. In some instances, the large number of plugins used on the separate tracks must surely have used up significant amounts of RAM and processing power.



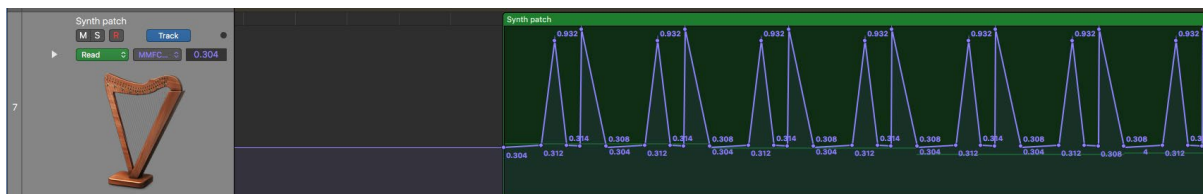
Automation of changes in volume levels of tracks was audibly apparent in many pieces, along with some automation of panning. The screenshot below was used by a learner to show how they used an instance of automation and was explained in the production notes.



There were also good examples of automation being applied to other parameters, with clear explanations of intentions. Two examples are shown below.



Automating the synth to fluctuate in time with the beat, I did not use automation curves since I wanted the changes to be abrupt and dramatic



Automating synths: I then automated the cut of the filter envelope of the synthesiser to create a rhythmic effect where the cut level rushes up and down to the beat.

NB: In this assessment, it is at the learners' discretion as to how to plan and use the time available. However, it is good practice to review the mixes with fresh ears and if possible, within the constraints of the assessment using alternative headphones or monitors.

## Production notes

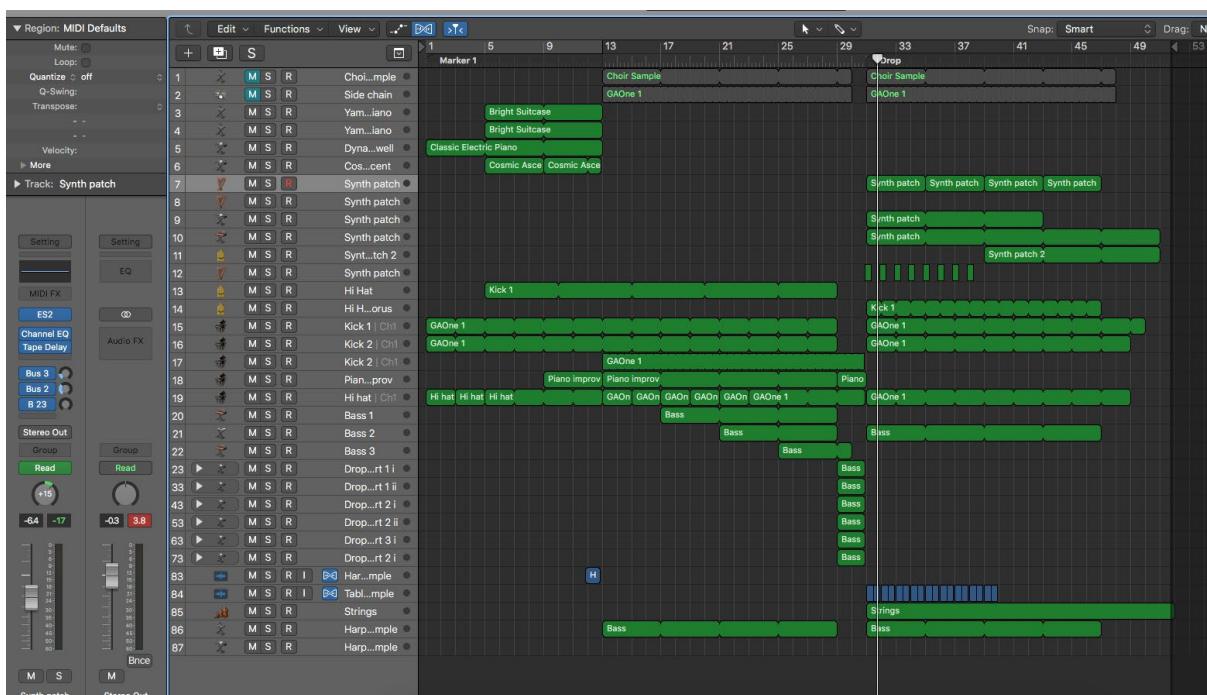
In this series, learners largely attempted to provide detailed production notes which were organised in sections. Typically, these would run to around ten pages. A common start would be some analysis of the source material, though this was often descriptive and, in many cases, did not explore more than one option for the use of a particular source file. Some consideration of the requirements of the brief and how the learner intended to respond to it often followed the work on the source material, but in a number of instances was put in at the end of the notes, giving the impression of an afterthought. Notes were often written in the past tense implying the task was undertaken once the practical work was well underway.

In stronger responses, the notes showed evidence of planning with clear intentions using the future tense, whilst evaluation of progress and techniques tended to be properly in the past tense. This gives the impression of the learner realising their ideas through selecting techniques, sounds and FX that



they believe will be effective and developing their planning through the project. There were a number of examples in which learners would detail the techniques used to manipulate a source file, and then give a timing where an instance of this manipulated sound could be heard.

Many learners used subtitles for sections that addressed the different elements required in the production notes, which was a useful approach. There were also some examples of learners describing the development of their piece section by section and sometimes bar by bar. Screenshots of the arrangement page would often be included to show the development of the project, which was again helpful to examiners.



In this series production notes generally contained more information on MIDI techniques as well as audio techniques, though rather less on mixing techniques. In the stronger responses there was a clear understanding of the requirements of the brief and the opportunities available with the source material. Clear intentions linked to explained rationales for the techniques employed, with clear stated outcomes being apparent, that matched the work heard.

## Summary

This series elicited many valid and interesting responses from learners that included creative and innovative use of the source material. There remained some instances of issues with submissions being incomplete or not accessible to examiners, and some occasions when work was submitted in the wrong file format.

Based on the responses seen in this series, the following should be noted:

- Centres are reminded to pay careful attention to submission procedures including registers and authentication documentation
- Ensure all of learners' work is accounted for and accessible to examiners
- DAW project folders should not be included in submissions
- Ensure learners label their work clearly with their name and candidate number
- Files submitted should also be clearly titled to indicate the intended use of the file.

All examiners expressed some concern that some learners seemed to be insufficiently prepared for assessment, and there were a few instances of learners using freeware DAWs for the assessment which limited the techniques and resources available to them.

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