

## ***Freedom to versus Freedom from: Frameworks and Flexibility in Assessment on an Edexcel BTEC Level 3 Diploma Popular Music Performance Program***

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### **Abstract**

*Assessment in music education is a perennial problem; while assessment is generally regarded as necessary, practices are widely accepted as imperfect. This philosophical study reports on research tackling axiological questions stemming from the author's perception of flaws in the application of grading rubrics to the assessment of students' work on a popular music performance program at a U.K. college. The author is a musician, a kit drummer, and administrator of this program. The study explains the context of the program and of the award to which it leads. The assessment system used is presented and discussed with reference to relevant literature. The qualitative judgments required for assessment in music may conflict with the constraints imposed by assessment rubrics. Music educators are often also musicians, whose depth of understanding could be more effectively deployed in more holistic systems of assessment. The question facing the music education community is how best to ensure consistency and rigor in appraising students' achievements. This paper concludes by calling for music educators to continue evaluating assessment procedures, and to ensure that assessments are designed and conducted in ways that are relevant and sensitive to learning contexts and practices.*

### **Introduction**

In their article on assessment and performance, Papageorgi and Hallam (2010) highlighted the pervasive perception of assessment of creative endeavors, such as musical performance, as less than ideal. As a part of this wider debate, the present paper reports on a piece of philosophical research from a “teacher research perspective” (Rex, Steadman, Sharilyn, & Graciano, 2006, p. 755), reflecting my positionality, working “in spaces where research is value relevant” (Hartas, 2010, p. 21). The study arose from my growing sense that the methods of assessment on the Edexcel BTEC Diploma program that I administer may in some ways be imperfect, and from a subsequent desire to understand them better, reflecting Hartas’ observation that “research ideas emerge from our biographies and relate to our emotions and identities”

(p. 20). I have investigated the assessment procedures, and discuss them below with reference to relevant literature. The framework for this study is primarily philosophical, since it explores axiological questions (Jorgensen, 2006, p. 186), concerning how teachers judge the value of students’ work through assessment. Since it is also rooted in an exploration of real educational practice, this study also follows in the vein of studies by Green (2008), who investigated the validity and applicability of a particular pedagogical approach in the music classroom, and Lebler (2007) who explored learning and assessment practices at a music conservatory. However, this paper remains primarily philosophical in that it does not interrogate the practices in question so much as the rationale by which they are supported.

### **Background**

In 2007 the U.K. government announced its intention that by 2013 it would be compulsory for all U.K. residents between the ages of 16 and 18 to be in education or training. This *de facto* shift in the school leaving age from 16 (as it had been since 1975) to 18 meant that colleges and employers across the U.K., funded by national government, began to expand their provision for people of this age group. Traditionally, education provision for people between the (previous) school leaving age of 16 and 18 has been called “further education” and it has retained this label. “Higher education” in the U.K. refers to university and college education, usually from the age of 18 onwards when students become eligible for the government subsidy of university and college places. Further education is frequently viewed as a route into higher education. As such the sector has provided largely (although by no means exclusively) academic pathways leading to continued academic study at a university or college. The commonest route to higher education has traditionally been to study for G.C.E. (General Certificate of Education), more widely known as “A Level” (Advanced Level), qualifications (Edexcel, 2010a, Papageorgi & Hallam 2010, p. 151).

The sudden and rapid expansion of the further education sector saw the introduction of many more programs of study of a vocational nature such

as Edexcel BTECs, which offer students “highly specialist work-related qualifications” that “give learners the knowledge, understanding and skills that they need to prepare for employment” (Edexcel, 2009a, p. 2). “BTEC” was once an acronym for qualifications awarded by the U.K. Business and Technology Education Council, but, following the amalgamation and re-branding of various bodies, is now the name given to the suite of vocational qualifications offered by accrediting body, Edexcel. Edexcel explains that the Level Three Diploma “is broadly equivalent to 2 GCE A Levels” (Edexcel, 2009a, p. 4), perhaps highlighting a need to discuss—almost to justify—vocational qualifications in terms of the academic fare traditional to further education. Through their counter-position to the mainstream of academic qualifications, Edexcel may be helping to perpetuate a notion of BTECs as “other than” and, by implication, “not as good as” the better-established GCE A Level pathway. Papageorgi and Hallam (2010) suggest that this is the case when they write that Level Three BTEC Diplomas are “designed to complement ... A levels” (p. 151).

In mid-2009, I took up the post of Program Leader on the one-year full-time further education Diploma program at the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (“the Institute”) in London, England. The Institute is a college that offers a range of programs of study in popular music to around 750 students who choose to specialize in guitar, bass guitar, drums, vocals, or songwriting. Students in the Diploma program study a range of courses called “units” relating to music performance in a range of contemporary popular styles. The units are taught across a range of one- and two-hour classes including Creative Ensemble, Live Performance Workshop, Styles, Techniques, Harmony and Theory, Aural and Transcribing, Music Business, and Music and Society. Students’ time is split roughly 50/50 between theoretical and practical (performance) classes, although there is inevitably considerable overlap between these aspects. The Diploma program is validated by Edexcel and leads to the BTEC Level Three Diploma in Music qualification (Edexcel, 2009a, p. 19).

The U.K. is home to numerous awarding bodies collectively offering 530 qualifications in music up to Master’s Degree level (Conlon & Rogers 2010, p. 248), from which an institution may select those best suited to its ethos, environment and needs. The Institute, for instance, allows students to study for qualifications at Levels Three to Six, awarded by the University of East London, RockschooL, Middlesex University, and Edexcel. The Institute chose Edexcel to validate its Level Three program

because the fairly wide range of prescribed units (courses) on offer made it possible to choose study areas that fit with the student demographic, teaching expertise, philosophy, and facilities of the college. Edexcel does not prescribe course content or curricula. Rather, Edexcel’s accreditation of the program is based on how well teachers adhere to the pre-set grading criteria of the BTEC assessment system. The rubric exists so that assessments can be consistent across time and space. The strict guidelines, however, may pose a threat to teachers’ own judgment and autonomy, for while on the one hand this approach may be regarded as a legitimate means of quality control, on the other hand it may appear to occlude the possibility of properly engaging with the job of meaningful assessment. Sadler (2009) explains that:

Determining the quality of complex works requires skilled, qualitative judgments. A qualitative judgment is one made directly by the appraiser, the person’s brain being both the source and the instrument for the appraisal. The judgment is not reducible to a set of measures or formal procedures that a non-expert could apply to arrive at the “correct” appraisal. (p. 160)

This study briefly explores the issue of how suitable BTEC marking rubrics may be in this popular music education context at Level Three.

### **The Qualification Framework**

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), England’s main accrediting body for qualifications and awards, states that “in England qualifications have traditionally been defined by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which included all general and vocational qualifications accredited from 1997” (Ofqual, 2010a). In early 2010 Ofqual introduced the (also nationwide) Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) to sit alongside the NQF, principally to accommodate and contextualize qualifications of a more vocational nature (Directgov, 2010a). The QCF “uses a credit based system to recognize qualification size and gives a more flexible approach to learners’ needs” (Ofqual, 2010a). In the QCF, equivalence of training and education in different sectors and subjects is recognized in order that credits earned on one program or course may be transferred to others.

Each unit in a Level Three BTEC Diploma program is worth 10 credits on the QCF (Edexcel

2009a, pp. 19-20); for each of these credits students are awarded seven, eight, or nine points depending on whether they have earned, respectively, a “pass,” “merit,” or “distinction” for that unit. The Diploma contains 12 units, allowing students to earn a maximum of 120 credits. Students who successfully complete a BTEC Level Three Diploma will be awarded a combination of “pass,” “merit,” “distinction,” and “distinction\*” (“distinction star”), depending on how many points they have scored throughout the program; a pass requires a minimum of 840 points (Edexcel, 2009a, p. 26). Perhaps partly because of its stated equivalence to two A Levels, grades are expressed in pairs (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Points and Corresponding Grade*

Points range above pass grade	Grade
880-919	MP
920-959	MM
960-999	DM
1000-1029	DD
1030-1059	DD*
1060 and above	D*D*

Note: MP = merit/pass, MM = merit/merit, DM = distinction/merit, D = distinction, D\* = distinction star (Edexcel, 2009a, p. 26)

The NQF and the QCF incorporate the same nine Levels at which qualifications and credits may be earned (Ofqual, 2010a). The levels reflect “how difficult” each qualification is to obtain (Directgov, 2010b). The levels range from Entry Level to Level Eight. The insertion of a Level prior to the first numbered stage perhaps reflects a preoccupation in the U.K. where compulsory education begins with Reception year, Year One actually being the second year. Similarly, one must climb the stairs to reach the “first” floor of a building in the U.K., as in other European countries. Compulsory education in the U.K. is divided into five stages: Early Years Foundation Stage, and Key Stages 1, 2, 3, and 4. Achievement at Key Stage 4, at the school leaving age of 16, earns students qualifications and credits at Levels One and Two. It is worth noting here that Edexcel offers a GCSE, BTEC Level Two First Certificate and BTEC Level Two Diploma in music at Key Stage 4 (Edexcel, 2011) in addition to the

Level Three qualification under discussion. Achievement in further education provides students with awards at Level Three. Undergraduate degree programs earn students credits at Level Four in the first year; the second year, Level Five, and the final year, Level Six. Master’s degrees are Level Seven qualifications, and doctoral degrees are at Level Eight. Only six months after the introduction of the QCF, it is too early to ascertain to what extent the education community has accepted the comparability of qualifications from QCF and NQF. To this author it seems likely that placing vocational qualifications in a separate, additional framework will highlight and even help to perpetuate traditionally perceived differences in standards between academic and vocational qualifications.

**Methodology**

As mentioned above, this is a philosophical study with an axiological focus (Jorgensen, 2006, p.186). Assessment procedures in the Diploma program at the Institute are of particular interest to me, for as well as administering that program, I teach six courses in it and assess students’ work in those courses. I consider my closeness to the subject matter to be a strength of the study, for “in music education, we have a need for ... experiential understandings of particular situations” (Bresler & Stake, 2006, p. 278). The emic understanding that I have (Feleppa, 1986, p. 244; Harris, 1976, p. 334; Merriam & Simpson 1995, p. 98), and indeed the notion of conducting this study, would not have arisen without my close connection to the situation. As well as being a teacher and administrator I am a musician (a kit drummer); this is an important aspect of who I am as an educator. I suggest ways in which being a musician may affect music teachers’ engagement with assessment. Silverman (2005) warns that:

[W]hen we are studying an organization [or aspects thereof], we are dependent on the whims of gatekeepers. Such people will usually seek to limit what we can study, assuring us that, if we need to know more, they can tell us about it. (p. 125)

Fortunately with the present study, such whims have not proved in the least deleterious, in part because of my position in the research; as the leader of the Diploma program, I am one of the principal gatekeepers. The other gatekeepers for the Diploma program are the Operations Director at the Institute and the Head of Arts at the Institute’s partner institution, the College of North West London. Both were entirely agreeable to the undertaking of this

study, and expressed interest in learning the outcomes. In compliance with the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2004), permission from these individuals was sought and obtained. This study complied throughout with the BERA guidelines.

Examples of Edexcel BTEC learning outcomes and grading criteria are included below. BTEC rubrics used in the program were selected for inclusion in the study because they proved problematic for me whilst conducting assessments. I have not included each challenging rubric or assessment criterion, as to do so would have taken up too much space. The two BTEC Units whose grading criteria are examined below were chosen because they both concern assessment of musical performance and therefore both raise similar issues—to include them in the same paper seemed logical. The rubrics were analyzed according to my perception of a mismatch between observed qualities in students' work and the rubrics' capacity to acknowledge these. The examples included below are, in my experience, indicative of issues arising more widely in relation to Edexcel BTEC rubrics. Thus, the issues raised here may be generalized to include other Edexcel BTEC Level Three rubrics for the Diploma in music.

For this study, no data were collected, *per se*, since the rubrics discussed below existed already as published documents. The analysis of data in this study, then, is the discussion of which the rest of the paper is comprised. While the paper's methodological approach does not conform directly to a single, formalized paradigm (including, as it does, some crossover between philosophical and more practice-based research, as acknowledged in the Introduction), it nonetheless examines and interrogates current issues, and from this derives and poses interesting, relevant questions based on a real-world scenario familiar to the increasing number of music educators facing the dual freedoms of working with Edexcel grading rubrics.

Jorgensen (2009, p. 417) supports the synthesis or hybridization of approaches to research when she identifies a need for "new methods that fit the exigencies of the questions or situations under investigation." Jorgensen's endorsement stems from her justifiable concern that established, reified research *methods*—rather than current, emerging and pressing *issues* in music education—might continue to dictate the direction and shape of research. The methodological approach used in this study has its aim the ends rather than the means of the approach (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 340). It was driven by the educational imperative to analyze critically the

appropriateness of assessment on a music program. BTEC qualifications are used widely and increasingly across the U.K. and internationally, from secondary education through higher education (Lamont & Maton, 2008); and with Edexcel being the largest awarding body in the U.K. and operating in over 85 countries (Edexcel, 2011), I felt it to be incumbent upon me to question what I perceived to be flaws in the BTEC grading rubrics. In light of the quickening pace of change in the music education profession (Kratus, 2007, p. 46), I undertook to complete a study "conceived in terms that are especially compatible with [a] practical and lived situation," which "need[ed] to be more phenomenological, naturalistic, existential, action-oriented, narrative, and descriptive than has been the fashion especially in North American empirical research" (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 340). If orthodoxy and normativity derive from necessity and repetition, then I call upon music educators to conduct more studies of a similar style, while such an approach remains useful and relevant to practice in the field.

This paper was written in June 2010, following a change in the U.K. government on May 11. Citations are taken from websites of various departments of the U.K. government. While the websites reflect government policy as far as it has been possible to ascertain, the websites each bore a warning stating:

[A] new UK government took office on 11 May. As a result the content on this site may not reflect current government policy. All statutory guidance and legislation published on this site continue to reflect the current legal position unless indicated otherwise. (U.K. Government, 2010)

This perhaps reflects nothing unusual, as governments the world over perpetually rethink educational policies. It is worth noting, however, that the climate in which this paper was written may be especially likely to have changed since it was written. It is important also to underline a point about the location of the Institute. It is in London, the capital city of the United Kingdom, but it is also bound by legislation that applies only in England. Reference to national educational policies addresses only how these policies affect education in England, unless otherwise stated. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have some independent education legislation.

### Assessment

Modern societies are meritocratic, at least notionally (Gladwell, 2008, p. 18). There is a tacit

understanding that somehow or other success and achievement will be, or at least ought to be acknowledged. Generally it is accepted that people's achievements should be suitably rewarded, be this with a salary or bonus, a round of applause, or an appropriate grade for an exam. In music education, as in other areas, we expect to recognize quality, and for quality to be recognized. We routinely award a percentage, grades A to F, pass/merit/distinction, or equivalent. However, we need reference points against which to judge what we see and hear; Comte-Sponville (1996, p. 67) asks "who and what should be rewarded?" and "what criteria should be applied?" These are important questions, for, as Jorgensen (1997, p. 35) reminds music educators, "many rules govern particular musics. Each must be understood in its own terms." Colwell (2006) describes how assessment has become a major preoccupation in the U.S.A., observing recently that "assessment has become one of the more important issues in education, and now education outweighs almost all other domestic social issues" (p. 199).

It is important for educators to feel that the grading of students' work is "right," and while there can be no absolutely true grade, it is important that all stakeholders have confidence in the meaningfulness and consistency of marks being awarded. As Sadler acknowledges, grades "have a permanency about them" and "represent high stakes for learners;" they also have "a substantial affective impact on learners and their learning, influencing both students' sense of achievement, and their motivation and level of engagement in future courses" (Sadler, 2009, p. 159). It is disconcerting then that Brown (2010) reports finding that teachers and students across the U.K. are often unsatisfied with assessment and feedback procedures and outcomes.

Assessment in music has long been considered problematic. Bentley (1966) finds that "attempts to apply ... measurements in the aesthetic sphere are particularly open to challenge, and this is even more so in music" (p. 17). Elliot (1987) similarly notes that "there has been considerable argument over appropriate methods of assessment. At the centre of these arguments is whether or not it is possible to assess work in the arts in an objective way" (p. 157). Green (2000) asserts that "many musical qualities will always escape any system of either evaluation or assessment" (p. 103). Swanwick (1999) implies that assessments might even counteract effects of good teaching, asserting that "unlike the richer conversations that characterize teaching, the ultimately formal assessment statement is likely to be cryptic: perhaps a brief statement, a number, a grade or degree classification. It is here

that judgments can be most hotly disputed" (p. 73). It seems unlikely that most teachers would ever replace rich interpersonal dialogue with a brief summative grade; Swanwick's point, though, resonates with Sadler's—summative grades carry with them a tangibility, a permanence, and a legacy in ways that formative remarks and discussion, while profoundly helpful, do not.

The issue of assessment becomes perhaps especially contentious when considering the use of prescribed criteria for quantifying the standard of students' work, as is the case with the BTEC Diploma program at the Institute. Swanwick finds the use of rubrics (Tractenberg, Umans, & McCarter, 2010) to be thoroughly antithetical to assessing achievement in music, writing that "it seems to defy the holistic nature of any aesthetic activity to identify several different dimensions and then to give separate marks for each" (Swanwick, 1999, p. 73). Use of assessment rubrics has been described as "*analytic* grading" in which "the teacher makes separate qualitative judgments on each of the preset criteria" (Sadler, 2009, p. 161). In the system used for BTEC qualifications students are made aware of precisely how they are to be and have been assessed (Edexcel 2009a, p. 25). Sadler explains that "this sort of codification aims to ensure that markers not only award appropriate grades but also, in the course of marking them, automatically reveal the grounds for them to students" (Sadler, 2009, p. 161). As Colwell (2006) affirms, "rubrics can clarify performance objectives, as the student is able to understand in rather precise terms what is expected" (p. 220). This type of approach to assessing students' work is presented in contrast to what Sadler calls "*holistic* (also called *global*) grading," in which "the assessor progressively builds up a complex mental response to a student work" and "the appraiser then makes a qualitative judgment as to its overall quality, and maps that judgment directly to the appropriate point on the grading scale" (Sadler, 2009, p. 161). Viewing analytic and holistic grading as opposites obfuscates an important issue, however, for as Sadler (2009) astutely observes, "both are based on qualitative judgments, differing primarily in their granularity" (p. 161).

### Conducting Assessments Using a BTEC Rubric

BTEC units are divided into several learning outcomes (see Table 2), for each of which students are awarded a "pass," "merit," or "distinction." The grading criteria (Table 3) are designed to inform assessors as to what grade to award, and to advise students as described above. The overall grade awarded for a unit is the lowest given for any of the

learning outcomes. For instance, if in the Music Project unit below a student achieves “distinctions” on three learning outcomes but a “merit” on the fourth, the overall grade for that unit will be a “merit”

(Edexcel, 2009a, p. 25). This rule seems questionable, even in the context of the rubric, for three quarters of the work has been calculated to be considerably better than the grade being awarded.

Table 2  
*Learning Outcomes: Music project*

Learning Outcome number	On completion of this unit a learner should:
1	Be able to prepare and work as a member of a team towards a successful live event.
2	Be able to prepare individually for the delivery of a successful live music
3	Be able to contribute to a performance to a technically acceptable level appropriate to context.
4	Understand the complete process in preparing for and delivering a live music event.

(Edexcel, 2009b, p. 2)

Table 3  
*Unit 24: Music project*

Learning outcome no.	Assessment and grading criteria		
	<i>To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:</i>	<i>To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:</i>	<i>To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:</i>
1	As part of a team, contribute competently to the planning and preparation for a live music event.	As part of a team, contribute competently and positively to the planning and preparation for a live music event.	As part of a team, contribute competently, confidently and with interpretation and artistic flair to the planning and preparation for a live music event.
2	As an individual, carry out appropriate responsibilities, with sufficient input to support the delivery of a live music event.	As an individual, carry out appropriate responsibilities positively, in preparation for a live music event.	As an individual, carry out appropriate responsibilities effectively, in preparation for a live music event.
3	As a performer, or through another creative role, contribute to a live event competently with minor errors that do not detract from the overall performance.	As a performer, or through another creative role, contribute to a live event competently and confidently.	As a performer, or through another creative role, contribute to a live event competently, confidently with interpretation and artistic flair.
4	Evaluate the live event, describing the process and final product.	Evaluate the live event, analysing the process and final product.	Evaluate the live event, analysing and evaluating the process and final product.

(Ecexcel, 2009b, p. 4)

It is apparent from the assessment and grading criteria that, despite being compartmentalized, assessment of learning outcomes still requires distinctly qualitative judgments on the part of the assessor, as noted above by Sadler (2009, p. 161). Lamont and Maton (2008, pp. 274-275) draw attention to this issue when they explore Edexcel GCSE (Level Two, QCF) music provision in the U.K. A degree of creativity is necessary to decide (Table 3) what counts as “artistic flair” in “the planning and preparation of a music event,” as these characteristics are inevitably subjectively displayed and appraised. It could also be awkward to arbitrate between where students “competently and positively” or merely “competently” contribute to the planning of an event (Edexcel, 2010c, p. 4), despite guidance provided by Edexcel for each BTEC learning outcome (Edexcel, 2010c, p. 7). To earn a distinction on the fourth learning outcome above, learners must “evaluate” by “analysing and evaluating.” This latter term seems somewhat superfluous, rendering little difference from the requirements for earning a merit where learners must simply “evaluate” by “analyzing.” After all, how could a student not “evaluate” by “evaluating”?

Since a degree of interpretation and artistry on the part of an assessor is inevitably required for him or her to engage meaningfully with BTEC assessment rubrics, Edexcel seems to succeed in reducing the ways in which assessors may acknowledge achievement. We are left with something akin to what Green (1990) describes as “a fragmentary set of ill-fitting criteria which teachers across the country are supposed to apply” (p. 191) somewhat inadequately, to the task of assessing students’ work. It might be easier for assessors, and produce broadly similar reactions and results, if assessors were simply to mark according to their scholarly instincts and reactions. It is as though the rubric provides merely an illusion of rigorous quantification. Sadler (2009) highlights this major weakness in the application of rubrics to the assessment process, pointing out that “clearly, working with a manageable number of criteria has to involve selection, but at least for written works, any sample of reasonable size leaves out the majority” (p. 169). Colwell (2006) agrees with Sadler’s critique, observing that “rubrics ... lead to standardization of responses rather than to divergent and original thought” (p. 220). He goes on rather scathingly to suggest that “rubrics are highly effective in focusing student effort (narrowing it)” and concludes that “it is difficult to imagine a rubric providing feedback that would be helpful” (Colwell, 2006, pp. 220-221). Colwell also suggests that rubrics’ “misuse is potentially damaging to the assessment profession.

They are most useful on items about which there is general consensus as to what constitutes excellence” (p. 208) which might exclude any “item” in the aesthetic or musical sphere.

Edexcel (2009a, p. 28) points out that its rubrics help to provide “a consistency of delivery and assessment,” which is an undeniable benefit in favor of the rubric system, and makes it easier to place BTEC qualifications on the QCF and NQF. Edexcel also employs highly rigorous validation procedures for all centers delivering BTEC qualifications, whereby assessment practices in each institution are verified annually internally and externally, comprising part of Edexcel’s quality assurance process (Edexcel, 2009a, pp. 28-29). There is certainly consistency in a set of qualifications whose candidates are assessed using rubrics, which are verified according to assessors’ use of and adherence to these, and which are then compared to other qualifications using nationwide frameworks. Is such consistency enough? While unquestionably rigorous and well intentioned, it seems that something may be missing.

#### **The Perspective of a Musician/Teacher**

As a drummer I am most comfortable playing jazz, rock, and other popular styles that require very little reading of sheet-music, unlike the musicals that I play from time to time or the wind band music with which I grew up. The key attribute of a successful drummer is his or her “feel”—the artistry, rather than the craftsmanship—that a performer brings to the music (Hart 1990, p. 230; Keil & Feld 1994, p. 66; Smith, 2012, p. 4). Empathy, creativity, and “soul” are paramount. The BTEC grading criteria fill me with a similar sort of nervousness to that which I often feel when presented with sheet music. The problem with notation is that it is restrictive: by telling musicians what to do, it also tells us explicitly what we may *not* do. This requisite obedience to a printed score grates against the aesthetic sensibilities that I have developed over my career. Assessment rubrics strike a similar discord. I find them almost an affront to my experience as a musician and teacher. Music educators are usually, for better or for worse, musicians, whom Hallam (1998, p. 65) acknowledges “tend to live at the ‘feeling’ level.” Of course this is not sufficient—to assess any student’s hard work based on a gut reaction would be wholly inadequate. Nonetheless, if I see merit where BTEC does not permit me to acknowledge it, I feel frustration.

A considerable degree of frustration can emerge from assessing the breadth of performances that may be awarded “distinction” on learning outcome 4 of unit 40 (see Table 4), “Working and

Developing as a Musical Ensemble” (Edexcel, 2009c). Students are assessed against these grading criteria in a class called Creative Ensemble in which they write and perform music in bands whose membership changes every few weeks. The distinction criterion requires that students “perform as (part of) a musical ensemble with flair and interpretation” (Edexcel, 2009c). Fulfilling this criterion assumes that students also achieve the Merit criterion—that they “perform as (part of) a music ensemble competently” (Edexcel 2009c). Here the rubric is limiting in two ways. Firstly, the grading criteria make it possible to award performances from a broad spectrum of difficulty levels (from simpler punk or folk tunes to multi-metric and tonally complex jazz or heavy metal) the same “distinction” grade; I am not permitted by the rubric for this unit to award higher grades for performances of technically more difficult repertoire. Secondly, the grading criteria prevent me from distinguishing between levels of “flair and interpretation”; evidence of just a little of these qualities must be acknowledged by awarding the same grade as I give to students delivering the most electrifying and charismatic

performances. I am faced with this challenging and frustrating situation every five weeks when I grade the students’ work in Creative Ensemble class. Such a straitjacket limits my creativity and autonomy, and challenges my integrity as a musician and educator. It leaves under-performing students surprised that their performances have effectively been “upgraded” to a level that they know is not as high as that of their peers or as high as they might have achieved in the past; this can also leave better-performing students confused. The situation creates a mismatch between my verbal feedback, the students’ own feedback and that of their peers, and the grade in the box on their report card. There must be a more effective way to utilize the skills and experience of musician/educators in conducting assessments. Where a student’s work or a teacher’s assessment of it falls beyond the confines of the boxes and lines of the rubric, it seems unfair to all parties to have to ignore this. For Comte-Sponville (1996), fairness is an integral part of justice, which he describes as “the precondition of all value, the requirement for any kind of virtue” (p. 62).

Table 4  
*Unit 40: Working and Developing as a Musical Ensemble*

Learning outcome no.	Assessment and grading criteria		
	<i>To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:</i>	<i>To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:</i>	<i>To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:</i>
1	Explain the elements of musical ensembles.	Illustrate the elements of musical ensembles.	Analyse the elements of musical ensembles.
2	Plan as a musical ensemble competently with limited tutor support.	Plan as a musical ensemble confidently with total independence.	Plan as a musical ensemble demonstrating mastery of the processes involved.
3	Develop as a musical ensemble competently with limited tutor support.	Develop as a musical ensemble confidently with total independence.	Develop as a musical ensemble demonstrating mastery of the processes involved.
4	Perform as a musical ensemble with minor errors that do not detract from the overall performance.	Perform as a musical ensemble competently.	Perform as a musical ensemble with flair and interpretation.

(Edexcel, 2009c, p. 3)

### A Way Forward?

The key to good assessment cannot be simply to avoid the use of rubrics altogether and revert to a norm of holistic, global grading. Sadler warns that “if a way forward is to be found by focusing again on holistic methods, traditional approaches are not up to the task.” He finds that “studies specifically into the reliability of holistic judgments show a variety of inadequacies” and identifies therein “irregularities attributable to boredom, carelessness or capriciousness” on the part of the assessor (Sadler, 2009, p. 174). Such assessment practices, then, will not do. Is it not true, however, that as music educators we each feel a certain sense of connoisseurship, however specialized? Is it perhaps possible or acceptable for teachers to be qualitatively consistent if not quantitatively so? Sadler suggests that “difference in the ‘standards’ different assessors adopt may be defended as an academic right” (Sadler, 2009, p. 174). Overall, though, surely we can tell how good something is? Dewey (1910) describes how educated persons develop an ability to assess, to judge. He writes that “a man of good judgment in a given set of affairs is a man in so far educated, trained, whatever may be his literacy” (p. 101). He explains that:

It all comes back, as we say, to the good judgment, the good sense, of the one judging. To be a good judge is to have a sense of the relative indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation [or, for instance, submitted essay]. ... This power in ordinary matters we call *knack, tact, cleverness*; in more important affairs, *insight, discernment*. In part it is instinctive or in born; but it also represents the funded outcome of long familiarity with like operations in the past. Possession of this ability to seize what is evidential or significant and to let the rest go is the mark of the expert, the connoisseur, the *judge*, in any matter. (Dewey, 1910, p. 104)

BTEC assessment rubrics do not account for the depth and breadth of judgment that Dewey implies, and which we must assume is possessed by the vast majority of educators in popular music and music education more generally. It seems churlish and a little insulting to ignore such a goldmine of wisdom and insight; there must surely be a way to harness this in a clear, meaningful, and rigorous way.

### Conclusions

As stated above, philosophical inquiry of this kind is an important and useful way to explore

part of a perennial issue in music education: assessment. This paper has not attempted to address all difficulties with assessment, but has focused on one specific context. According to Smith and others (2009), this type of study “does not eschew generalizations, but ... locates them in the particular, and hence develops them more cautiously” (p. 29). I see this paper as contributing to a “substantive theory” that falls “between the ‘minor working hypotheses’ of everyday life and the ‘all-inclusive’ grand theories” (Glaser & Strauss, 1968, p. 79).

Colwell perceives a power struggle in contemporary education that “centers on whether assessment resources are to be used to improve instruction or to make educators and education institutions more accountable” (Colwell, 2006, p. 199). It is possible that in the U.K. the education establishment emphasizes the latter course, for parity is viewed as an integral part of the shape of the education system in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Ofqual states that “examination standards are what our country’s education system—and those who work within it—are judged against. For the system to be fair to all, examinations need to be comparable between different versions, different awarding organisations, different years and different subjects” (Ofqual, 2010b). I disagree with Ofqual. Work of a particular kind in a particular field would ideally be judged on its own merits, and not subjected to awkward comparisons. Gracyk (2007) makes a compelling case in favor of this view, arguing that “evaluation demands local standards of merit” (p. 4). If parity is to be accepted as such an important element in the discernment of quality, however, it might be more easily achieved with a single national (or even international) framework for qualifications and the re-branding of both BTECs and A Levels as just “Level Threes.”

Swanwick (1997) asserts that “learning is the residue of experience” (p. 207). Incumbent upon educators, administrators, and academics is to devise means that are manageable and appropriate for appraising that experiential residue among students. Rubric rigor produces a smokescreen, bluffing and obscuring the complexities of comparison while deflecting attention from quality inhering in students’ work. Examination boards and awarding bodies could also do well to look for new ways in which to take advantage of the learning among teachers. Sadler (2009) sees new approaches to holistic appraisal as a “way forward” and recommends that “such approaches should emphasize the creation of environments in which the critical discernment of quality becomes a key aspect of learning” (p. 176)—presumably for both teachers and students.

Comparing various qualifications in

different subjects and skill-sets is rather like asking whether Miles Davis was as good a musician as Wagner, or Frank Zappa. All three produced highly complex music to great critical acclaim, but their output is so very different *qualitatively* that comparing it *quantitatively* is completely and utterly meaningless. Stevie Wonder (1977) once sang “just because a record has a groove/don’t make it in the groove.” He makes a good point, which for education could be translated thus: “meeting the grading criteria/don’t mean the criteria meet the grade.” Duke Ellington is alleged to have said of music that “if it sounds good and it feels good, then it *is* good” (Horne, 2010; Mullenweg, 2010). For the purposes of assessment by trained musician/educators, this may be almost enough, so long as we can answer the questions: “How good is it?” and “How is it good?” In order to do this, we must have the *freedom* to assess music properly. This requires us to have *freedom from* the unhelpful restrictions of grading rubrics.

### Implications and Further Research

While this study stemmed from a personal reaction to a perceived problem in a specific local context, it discusses issues that are pertinent to music educators internationally, in the popular music sphere and beyond. The two main axiological issues raised both require fairly urgent further examination in order for educators, students, and society at large to continue to have faith in the aims and achievements of the music education sector. How music is assessed is a perennial concern, which means that it should

continue to be addressed in order that best practice (albeit perhaps necessarily imperfect) may be adopted and adapted to suit circumstances. Rubrics offer imperfect means of assessment in and of popular music. However, since assessment is a vital and inevitable part of any education in music, it is imperative for scholars and educators continually to interrogate our daily practices and the systems that inform, construct, and underpin them. I hope that this study may encourage other music educators to reflect on their assessment practices—especially those who face problems of shoehorning ill-fitting assessment criteria into otherwise sound teaching and learning environments—for music teachers are, on the whole, conspicuously inactive in research (Jorgensen, 2009, p. 411).

Whether, how, and to what extent different qualifications can or should be regarded as equivalent may also be an eternal question, and one that is of equal importance. While comparability may from a commonsense perspective be regarded as meaningless, it is used as a means of recognizing achievement (for example, when considering a candidate’s suitability for employment or further study). The imperative remains for music educators and academics to look for and to use ways of promoting, acknowledging, rewarding, and maintaining quality, in carrying out effective assessments. The assessment procedures used must aim to address as far as possible the nuances of particular musical contexts, and should afford expert musician/teachers autonomy to make meaningful assessments of students’ work.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

### 中文摘要

自由與解放: Edexcel BTEC第三級流行音樂表演課程評審標準的框架與使用的靈活性

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教學評價是音樂教育中長期令人困擾的問題。人們一方面認為有必要進行評價，另一方面又認為目前的評價方式不完美。本人從哲學的角度來探討自己所感受到的評定大學生們在一門流行音樂課程成績的標準中的缺陷。本人是鼓手，也是這門課的負責人。本文將揭示設置這門課的背景和它的價值所在，闡述所使用的評價體系并對這些評價方式進行討論。音樂所需要的那種質化評價可能會與那些現行僵硬的評價標準所束縛。音樂教師通常都是音樂家，他們對音樂的深刻理解可能會提供更全面的評價。現在我們的問題是怎樣最大程度的實現評價的一致性與嚴肅性。本文最後呼籲音樂教師們繼續探討教學評價過程，以保證這些評價標準在設計與實施過程中能夠關注評價標準與學習環境和實踐的聯繫。