

Foundation Element 2 - Essay

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Course - MA Commercial Music Producer

Module - CPO Foundation P1D ADAD7003

Track One – Shooting Star

Song Title: Bad Habits

Artist: Ed Sheeran

Songwriters: Ed Sheeran, Fred Gibson, Jonny McDaid

Producers: Ed Sheeran, FRED, Jonny McDaid

Released: 25th June 2021 – Asylum Records

Tempo

Bad Habits (BH) tempo is 128 BPM. Shooting Star (SH) tempo is 128 BPM. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) as a genre is not restricted by specific tempo range. 128 BPM is a great tempo for mid-energy dancing and some DJs call this the “magic number”, because it can be easily mixed with other dance tracks which have the same BPM. Furthermore, this BPM equates to 32 bars every minute, which can be useful if the DJ is looking for a major change in the track.

Key

It is very common for EDM to start and progress in the minor scale. According to Mixedinkey.com; “In our analysis, 90% of EDM tracks use the minor chord.”

<https://mixedinkey.com/captain-plugins/wiki/best-chords-for-edm/>

BH is in the key of B minor in the Dorian Mode with time signature 4/4. The track follows the same chord progression for the introduction, verse, bridge and: B minor, D major, G major, G major, A major. The chorus chord progression is B minor, D major, G major, G major, A major, B minor, E minor, G major, G major, A major, B minor, D major, E minor, G major.

SH is in the key of E minor in the Dorian Mode with time signature 4/4. I use a different key because my voice sounds better in this key with a lower range and deeper tone than Ed Sheeran’s. To keep the feel of BH the track follows the same chord progression for the introduction, verse, bridge and outro – E minor, G major, D major, A major. The end of the verse A major is also held to create tension before the drop into the chorus. The chorus chord progression, however, is the same as introduction, verse, bridge and outro.

Composition

Both BH and SH have the same basic composition: Intro, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus, Outro. The introduction is only 10 seconds and serves to tease the listener into the songs.

Melody

BH has a simple pattern to the melody. The Verse goes up a third after 4 bars. The Chorus is predominantly one phrase repeated after 8 bars. With SH I also want to keep a simple pattern which I think is essential in EDM. This allows the listener to quickly learn the tune to

sing along with and to provide that all important “hook” that keeps the listener humming the tune after the song has finished, ultimately creating the desire for them to listen again.

Motif

In music, a **motif** (also sometimes written as **motive**) is the smallest unit of a piece of music that contains some kind of thematic or structural identity.

<https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/motifs/>

EDM often use motifs to hook the listener and BH is no different. BH’s short introduction uses background noise of people talking and Sheeran counting in “1,2,3,4” and it includes the motif of the track - the piano based synth sound second melody.



This is very important to the feel of the track. When it is mixed back in midway through chorus 1 it really defines the mood and character of the production. From that point it is pretty much evident throughout.

SH has also a short introduction that includes the “motif” of the track - the synth organ sound second melody.



To emulate the feel of BH, I also mix this melody back in halfway through the chorus. For the third chorus I use the motif for the whole of the chorus to add extra flavour, power, and so the sound builds as the song progresses.

Drums

"EDM" is an umbrella term for any type of electronic music that has these three basic elements (a four-beat measure kick or bass drum, and then a downbeat). That downbeat is created using both the high hat and clap sounds.

<https://www.wlrn.org/culture/2014-03-27/waiting-for-the-drop-the-anatomy-of-an-edm-song>

The most important defining sonic moment of BH is the way the Verse drops into the chorus. The chorus mix is very clean and simple with bass, drums and vocals.

BH has a classic EDM drum beat. It only starts in the first chorus beginning with kick and snare only. When the melody phrase is repeated the high hat is added. High hat and snare play for the first 4 bars of the second verse. Kick is added to the next 8 bars, then dropped out for 4 bars before the second chorus begins. The kick and snare drop back out for the final 4 bars of the chorus. This pattern continues to the end of the song. A rim shot effect is added double time to the bridge to add to the excitement before the final drop into the third chorus, which begins with guitar and vocals only. This adds tension and anticipation for the drums and synthesisers to kick back in and the final pump to the end of the track.

SH also uses kick, snare and high hat beginning in the first chorus. There are also claps added to the downbeat. SH drops out the kick and high hat for the verse opting for snare only in 8 bars build up to drop for the second chorus. This is to provide the defining contrast between verse and chorus and emulate the BH impact for the chorus too. The drums are taken out for the bridge too to provide similar tension and anticipation for the final chorus when drums and synthesisers return.

Vocals

"What I loved about it is Fred's (producer) approach to the vocals. It's barely a whisper. No, Fred's approach is basically just a whisper on the mic. He just said like, you have this massive bassy chugging and you have this tiny vocal that you make huge." – Ed Sheeran in interview with Zane Lowe

<https://edm.com/music-releases/ed-sheeran-bad-habits-most-dance-driven-track-yet>

In SH I attempt to copy this technique and sing softly into the microphone. I try not to use too much reverb mixed with parallel compression to try and achieve a clean vocal too that sits nicely with the drums and synthesisers.

Ed Sheeran uses a lot of background vocals to enhance and add depth to the track. In the introduction he "wohs" a harmony to the motif. At 1 minute 50 before the chorus hits, his vocal is doubled up. There are also background "whispers" and vocal stabs throughout to add to the dreamy atmosphere of the track. At 1 minute 40 there is a stutter effect added and at 1 minute 50 a muffled delayed echo of the melody, before harmony added to the lead vocal and a final "weee" before the second chorus.

In SH there is more subtle background vocals in the introduction to provide some dreamy atmosphere. Before the second chorus to contrast with the drop into the first chorus there is a stutter effect added to the lead vocal. This is repeated with a slightly different stutter effect for the drop into the second chorus and again for the third chorus. To provide a crescendo for the third chorus there are backing vocals of "hey, hey, hey, hey" and "woh" added, plus a repeat of the stutter previous effects.

Final thoughts and Improvements

Overall, I feel that I have captured the production style of BH. I managed to build the verses by subtracting percussion and adding synth and vocal effects. The biggest challenge was the

drop into the chorus and even though my drop is not as clean as BH the effect is there with a definite shift in mood. I believe a different vocalist would improve the production. My vocals are too deep to create the EDM vibe I was searching for. Ideally, I would have liked to have recorded a female vocal. This would have also enabled me to keep the track in the original A minor key of BH.

Track 2 – Going Under

Song Title: Blinding Lights

Artist: The Weeknd

Songwriters: The Weeknd, Ahmad Balshe, Jason Quenneville, Max Martin, Oscar Holter

Producers: Max Martin, Oscar Holter, The Weeknd

Released: 29th November 2019 – Republic Records

Production Analysis

Synthwave is a distinctly modern music genre begun in the mid 2000s as an homage to the pop culture sounds and imagery of the 1980s and early 1990s. The second core conceptual element of Synthwave involves the '80s ubiquitous love affair with science and technology....Musically, Synthwave's origins are tied to dance genres of the mid '00s, specifically house and nu disco. Early Synthwave artists put a retro-synth spin on these sounds while borrowing inspiration from '80s Euro disco, funk, and electro, as well as soundtracks for movies, television, and video games. Smaller elements like '80s jingles for television commercials, VHS production companies, and nightly news programs also played a role in the genre's genesis.

<https://electrozombies.com/magazine/article/what-is-synthwave/>

Tempo

Blinding Lights (BL) has a fast tempo of 171 BPM. Going Under (GU) is slower at 155 BPM. Synthwave and R&B, tend to be slower at around 60 to 80 BPM, however, BL uses the high tempo to drive the track from start to finish. In GU I go for a slightly lower tempo. The melody and vocals are easier to mix with this tempo and I don't feel that the characteristic drive from BL is lost in dropping 16 BPM. It still has impact. Both tracks have time signature of 4/4.

Key

Similar to EDM, Synthwave music more often than not stays in the minor scale. BL stays in the key of F minor. GU in the key of C minor. This provides a moody atmosphere, ideal for synthesiser based music.

Chord Progression

BL has a simple chord progression from start to finish: F minor, C minor, Eb major, Bb major. GU also follows a simple progression from start to finish: C minor, G minor, Ab major, Bb major. There is one small change, that is to switch the last two chords so there is a rise at the end from Ab to Bb, rather than fall from Eb to Bb.

Composition

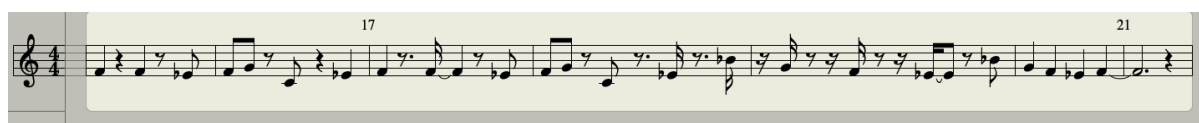
Both BL and GU have the same basic composition: Intro, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus, Outro.

Melody

BL uses repetition in both the verse and chorus. The verse is made up of two melodies, repeated after 4 bars. The second melody rises a third to add extra drive and excitement to the track before the chorus kicks in. The chorus melody is also repeated after 4 bars, before leading to an instrumental. It is interesting to note that the second verse is only half the length. This prevents the song form feeling tedious. GU also replicates this style with the Verse melody repeating after 4 bars, the final phrase however with a slightly different rhythm to help break it up. The melody rises to the “D4” on the word “World” to add some excitement and to provide suspense and anticipation for the chorus. The chorus is a melody of 8 bars which is then repeated, leading to an instrumental.

Motif

The introduction to BL is 28 seconds. A moody dark synth sound begins the track and even though we never hear that synth again it is vital for setting up the vibe of the song and establishing it within the genre of Synthwave. Similar to Ed Sheeran’s Bad Habits, BL uses a motif to hook the listener. At 17 seconds the motif of the track begins. It really is the little tune that sticks in your head once you have listened to the track. It is actually the second part of the chorus melody; the vocals are accompanied by the synth in all three choruses. This motif also returns during the instrumentals following each chorus and ends the track with the unification of both synth and vocals.



In GU I opt for a slightly shorter introduction of 17 seconds, however, to capture the Synthwave vibe I also start the track with a dark synth sound. At 6 seconds the synth plays the chorus melody. I use this to provide the motif which I divide into two parts. I use them throughout the track to hook the listener in. This motif leads the listener into each verse and the first and second choruses. I also end the track with it too.



Drums

The drums follow a simple kick and snare pattern which is very EDM based. The beat doesn't really change throughout the track. It really pumps the song and very rarely drops out. This is essential for providing that toe tapping dance vibe to the track. To add character a hi-hat plays eighth notes which is changed to a tambourine during the bridge and after the third chorus. The subtle transitions are key to keeping the track interesting and fresh. For example, at 39 seconds a cowbell type sound is introduced and at 1 min 13 a simple cymbal crash adds an extra dimension to the chorus. At 1 min 55 the drums are dropped as are most of the instruments, some claps are added too.

To keep within the Synthwave genre the drum sound is very 80s. In GU I use Roland TR808 to capture this sonic character with kick and snare playing on the beat as in BL. I add high hat to the chorus to give extra momentum too. Between chorus and verse, I leave out the drums to provide a rest for the listener. This is also to create anticipation for the verse and chorus. The drums are also dropped from the bridge to allow more space for the vocals and so when they come back in there is a final boost for the last chorus.

Vocals

Max Martin uses vocal effects throughout the track to give flavour, mood and atmosphere. These small details, as with the simple changes with the drums, make the song unique. At 13 seconds there is a small ad-lib which helps to break up the long introduction and tell the listener that there is a vocalist warming up to sing. One quick "Oh" keeps the energy flowing at 53 seconds and in particular the "Hey, hey, hey" at 1 minute 22 before the second verse begins and at 2 min 40 before the outro. During the bridge the vocals adopt the feel of a call-and-response, which adds to the Synthwave 80s atmospheric, spaced-out vibe.

In GU I use a simple vocal motif to keep the song interesting and unique. During the introduction at 26 seconds I mix in the phrase "Going under" taken from the chorus melody. I also repeat this at 1 minute 28 seconds before the second verse and in the outro at 3 minutes 20 seconds. To add energy and character to the chorus I harmonise the vocals. I drop the harmony for the final line, "Take a little breath and carry on" to give this moment clarity and provide a climax for the chorus before the instrumental break.

Final Thoughts and Improvements

The hardest aspect I found within the genre of Synthwave was to produce a contemporary vibe with a heavy 80s influence. I feel that I have achieved this with the synthesiser and 80s drum sounds. I am also happy with the simple melody and the use of a synth and vocal motif to keep the listener interested and hooked. I feel that my track would be improved with more vocal effects during the verses and I am not satisfied that the final chorus really has the big impact that I was looking for and building up to. It was a challenge to follow a simple chord progression throughout and yet make the track fresh and not allow it to become monotonous.

Track 3 – The Journey

Song Title: The Scientist

Songwriters: Coldplay – Chris Martin, Jonny Buckland, Guy Berryman, Will Champion

Released: 11th November 2002 – Parlophone

Production Analysis

There is some controversy about what defines a rock song:

In 1990 British legislators defined pop music as “all kinds of music characterized by a strong rhythmic element and a reliance on electronic amplification for their performance.” This led to strong objections from the music industry that such a definition failed to appreciate the clear sociological difference between pop (“instant singles-based music aimed at teenagers”) and rock (“album-based music for adults”).

<https://www.britannica.com/art/rock-music>

Lead Vocalist Chris Martin wrote "The Scientist" after listening to George Harrison's "All Things Must Pass". In an interview with Rolling Stone, Martin revealed that while working on the band's second album, *A Little Rush of Blood To The Head* he knew that the album was missing something. One night, during a stay in Liverpool, Martin found an old piano that was out of tune. He wanted to work on Harrison's song, "Isn't It a Pity," but he could not manage to do so. When the song came to Martin, he asked that the recorder be turned on. He concluded by saying that he came across this chord sequence and noted that the chord was "lovely."

https://coldplay.fandom.com/wiki/The_Scientist

Tempo

The Scientist (TS) has the time signature 4/4 and the heavy beats are on beats 2 and 4. This fits the track comfortably within the genre of rock, furthermore, Coldplay have a traditional rock band set up with piano, guitar, bass guitar and drums. The tempo is not an important factor for a song to be considered rock. At 71 BPM the song sits within the tempo marking “adagio” which is slow and enables great expression. To adopt the feel of TS I also retained a tempo of 71 BPM.

Key

TS is in the key of D minor. This helps create the moody feel of the track and the slightly out of tune piano also adds to the sense of mystery and dreaminess. In TJ I use the key of C major, however, to create the same atmosphere I start with D minor and also use C major 7 to give that feeling of dischord which is so prominent in TS.

Chord Progression

TS builds slowly and powerfully repeating the same progression for the verse, bridge, and then with a slight variation for the chorus. The verse flows D minor, Bb major, F major, F major 7, then the chorus Bb major, F major, Bb major, F major, C major, F major, returning to D minor. In TJ I also replicate this technique with the chord progression repeating for the verse; D minor, F major, C major, C major 7. To create suspense before the chorus I also drop the chord progression for a bar and hold the D minor. The chord progression for the chorus is C major, G major, F major (repeat), A minor, G major, C major, F major, C major, G major, F major. Rising to the A minor from the G major helps to keep the track in the target moody, emotive vibe.

Melody

TS repeats the same melody four times in the opening verse. This hooks the listener and focusses the ear not only on the tune but also the lyrics. In TJ I repeat the same melody twice to achieve the same effect. For the chorus TS rises an octave to F2 and this shift provides a subtle change in mood; the song becomes more passionate, the feeling more painful. In TJ the melody rises by just a note, from D to E, however, it is the shift from D minor to C major that enables the mood to shift and become more emotive.

Composition

Both BL and GU have the same basic composition: Intro, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus, Outro. There are certain elements to the production which are key to creating the atmosphere of the track and the crescendo of not only noise but also emotion. When the chorus begins a simple string/ synth pad is added to the vocal and piano. The guitar is added for 8 bars before the second verse kicks in with the bass and drums. At 3 minutes 44 the acoustic guitar is replaced with an electric guitar for the instrumental section. In TJ I also add instruments following this pattern.

Vocals

In TS the vocal line is very clean and the singing style is embellished with reverb to create faint echoes. There are backing vocals "Ooos" that come in at 2 minutes 46. They change to "Ahhs" at 3 minutes 12 seconds and at this point the lead vocal is also harmonised. In TJ I decided that backing vocals and effects would distract from the lead vocal. Even though one could argue that they are fundamental to the sonic atmosphere of TS, I had to sacrifice them for fear of the track becoming too much like a copy of Coldplay.

Final thoughts and Improvements

I feel in general that I was successful in recreating the mood of the track. Through recording performers playing live I was able to retain the rock vibe. Furthermore, when I had to use midi-instruments I did not use quantisation. I felt this would impact negatively on the production and the notion that there was a band playing. I was happy with the way TJ builds as layers of instruments and melodies are added. Unfortunately, I was not able to recreate

the out of tune piano sound which, apart from the vocal, is the fundamental character of TS. I am also not entirely happy with the shift from verse to chorus and possibly exploring more a melody starting an octave higher as in TS or experimenting with a fifth higher would have achieved better results. Finally, I don't feel I managed to get the clarity of vocals within the mix, plus the right reverb on the overall track.