

Creative Investigation Project

Commercial Music Production

Reflective Essay Submission

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Areas of Interest and Benchmarks for Success

My area of choice within music production is usually soft or acoustic pop. However, with this project I wanted to expand on this genre and enter into other areas of pop music that I would not normally produce. Exploring music production in general is also an aim of this project, as I only started my music production journey at the beginning of my degree, two and a half years ago. My career goal within music is to be able to produce my own songs to a standard that is professional enough to be sent to pitch. Coming from primarily a songwriting background, opening up my music to publishers and pitch is a key step towards where I want to be; therefore, a benchmark for this project includes being capable of producing my own songs to a standard where they can be pitched to artists and publishers. To quantify this standard, I aim to submit a minimum of two songs from the project for pitch through either 23rd Precinct Music, Tileyard or DWB. Another benchmark for success includes creating a portfolio that showcases me as both a songwriter and a producer, hopefully creating further opportunities within the industry. I aim to experiment with musical genres within pop, while utilising production and recording techniques which I have not previously used. This will expand my knowledge of general production and open up alternative production techniques, providing me with a broader view of music production in context.

Issues and Approaches

A primary issue that arose was my production not sounding full enough, with there being too much empty space within songs. This was initially due to a lot of the songs I was working on being very acoustic, with certain elements that would usually build up songs not fitting in context. A lot of this came down to the nature of the song and realising that the way the song is written often dictates how it is going to sound as a finished product; similarly it can be better to let the song stay in a more acoustic state. This is something I am still working on, having created about 6 alternate versions of the song 'friends like this' which I ended up removing from the project as in my head it sounded like a more produced song rather than an acoustic demo.

When building textures in my songs, particularly with pads, I could never seem to find the right sound to fit the project. After some experimenting I created my own pads using samples such as drone sounds, by warping them out and adding space provoking effects. An example of this is in 'Paper Planes' where there are three layers of pads built using samples which gave the song a nice background ambience.

An area for improvement found while completing this project is my music theory skills and more specifically my knowledge on time signatures. This is something I intend to improve on to ensure I am capable of producing specific time signatures. I very unsure of time signatures and learning that would be extremely helpful, particularly for more piano based production projects such as 'Love to Lose' where the time signature changed from 3/4 to 4/4 between the verse and the pre chorus, which definitely threw me off as I feel it is audible within the song. The piano was recorded with Molly Roberts who is a very talented pianist; however, my lack of knowledge of the time signatures she had used impacted the direction of the project. Being capable of blending these together professionally would benefit me when working with more acoustically based artists who may have these changes throughout their songs.

Another issue was my vocal production. Before this project I had only used a few microphones and never experimented too much regarding achieving different sounds; however, with this project I experimented with a lot of different microphones, giving me a great insight into various microphone types and how to read frequency charts for example. A drawback of my experimentation was that it made my vocals sound less constant throughout the project, and I spent a lot more time on specific aspects of each microphone than I needed to. I found my Rode NT-USB condenser microphone to be very sensitive to the surrounding noise, with it picking up a lot of unwanted noise which needed filtered out. Even though this microphone was the cheapest I used to record, due to its high sensitivity and my quiet voice, it worked well to pick up the details. It is possible this sensitivity lead to a slight decrease in quality in the low end due to background rumbling.

The Aston Origin Condenser Microphone seemed extremely similar to the Rode NT-USB in terms of sound, I could not tell a notable difference. This may been due to the frequency response charts being nearly identical, with the Rode having a broad boost at ~2-10kHz (Rode, 2022) and the Aston Origin at ~3-13kHz (Aston, 2022). I thought that this microphone being put through the pre-amp may have made a difference to the quality of the sound, but I personally could not tell. I also used the SM7B dynamic microphone which was very good for not highlighting excess air in the vocals and effective in my untreated room. Due to it being a dynamic microphone, my quieter voice often required a lot more gain to bring it up to line level in comparison to the other condenser microphones. I personally feel this microphone is good for singers with good range control, as it does pick up louder sounds very well but struggles with quieter ones without any input gain changes. Hence if there are both louder and quieter sounds present within the same recording, a lot of compression is needed to compensate.

The Neumann TLM 102 large diaphragm condenser microphone was also used within my projects. This was effective for close vocals due to the crisp high frequencies; however, when using this microphone in a bedroom studio setup, I do not feel it was as

effective due to it picking up a lot of air and noise. This microphone was definitely more of a 'coloured' microphone in terms of frequency response which I never thought I would notice, but after comparing vocal takes done on different microphones, there were minor differences. Notably, the environment between these recordings was also different, hence it may be an inaccurate assumption based on my changing surroundings that there were minor differences between microphones. For an accurate microphone comparison, the surroundings would need to be controlled such as experimenting with various microphones in a commercial studio setting rather than changing the microphones and the surroundings with each recording. Often different settings can also be used to create different effects, such as Finneas claiming that the bedroom recording setup used within Billie Eilish songs such as 'When the Party's Over' creates a more personal dynamic between them and the listener, giving a close and intimate performance (Harvey, 2020).

Another issue which arose with vocals was that during the three sessions I had booked, two of which were unsuccessful due to my hay fever inducing a blocked nose, making my voice sound muted and dull. There was not an opportunity to re-recorded all of the vocals; therefore, a lot of the vocal production has had to be manipulated to the point where it is more obvious than I would have liked. It has taught me you need a good vocal take in the first place as effects and corrections can not compensate for a bad set of vocals due to them being so prominent in the song and sitting where they do at the front of the mix. Personally, my vocal production is still something I feel needs improvement because I feel it creates a clear lack of professionalism. This is not solely in terms of production, but also in terms of vocal technique, as this is also something that I feel is lacking throughout my project.

Conclusions and Result Findings

Overall I am happy with the project in terms of how much I have learnt during the process. My production skills have developed significantly, although I am still not in a place where I am happy with how professional my music sounds. In terms of meeting my set objectives, one of which being to submit at least two songs from the project for pitch, I only submitted one, 'Paper Planes'. Submitting a single song was a shortfall; however, I believe with some extra work and the right brief, another song from the project could be pitched. Another objective was to explore other sub-genres within pop, which I feel I completed successfully. Some of the songs on the project lean more towards funk pop, synth pop or a more drum and bass influence; however, working on the project lead me to start nearly 30 songs, with the songs that made it to the project being the full length songs. Other genres which were explored were drum and bass,

electro pop, folk and a more latin style of pop, all of which were only partially completed, consisting of a verse or a chorus and subsequently being excluded from the project. The aim of creating a portfolio of music capable of being showcased was also achieved; however, I do not think I am at the point in my production where my songs are consistently at a professional standard. I believe some songs would benefit from certain aspects such as the vocals or some production elements being changed before it would be of a pitch or showcasing standard, hence I think I have moved a step closer to this goal but would like to continue working towards it.

Another objective for the project was to experiment with different production techniques. I am confident I have achieved this, especially considering before this project I had not utilised a lot of common production techniques. I used techniques such as parallel compression and tape slap delay on vocals, while using a multi-band compressor on guitar. These were all aspects which I had not previously explored in any projects.

Using a multi band compressor on guitar was something I had not considered, especially when being used with acoustic guitars as I always felt I had to avoid any compression due to it taking away some of the natural flow, particularly when plucking the strings. However, I found that using a multi band compressor (FabFilter Pro MB) actually weighted certain frequencies at the correct points without needing to overcompensate through an EQ alone. This technique has been used in a lot of mellow pop songs by artists such as Jeremy Zucker and Chelsea Cutler; however, it was initially normalised through heavy metal music and generally used for drums over guitars, as referenced in the journal article 'Sonic Signatures in Metal Music Production' (Herbst, 2020). This does not appear much throughout my project, but was used in the verse and chorus of a partially finished song I completed during this project.

Adding a tape slap delay to the vocals was also a new technique I utilised for this project. This gave the vocals slightly more width without using reverb, allowing for a sound that could sit further forward in the mix while still sounding similar. I used this on the vocals in 'Paper Planes' and 'Favourite'. Utilising tape delay on vocals is not a new idea, but rather one that has come back around with the increased production on pop music relative to live performances. Dating back to the 1950s it has noticeably changed "music presentation away from a live documentation towards an imposed and enhanced aesthetic in pop music." (Klepko, 2003). I utilised this effect this by sending a logic tape delay of around 85ms to a bus, while cutting the highs and lows to make sure it did not overpower the vocals.

Parallel compression was also used on the vocals throughout songs, such as 'Felt This Good', to make them both more present and powerful in the mix. It is described as being used to "provide a more consistent volume while preserving aspects of the natural dynamic range of a sound." (Jared, 2021). This is a technique I feel I could still

understand more, as I am capable of using it, however it does take me longer than normal to implement due to a slightly blurry understanding of the extent of use. Sometimes I felt I over compressed the vocals using this technique, eventually, feeling as though I got it right when it was used in the chorus of 'Felt This Good'. Overall, this production technique is something I have utilised but would like to expand upon.

The final aim of this project was to utilise new recording techniques, which I achieved through microphone experimentation and guitar recording. A spaced pair stereo microphone setup was used to record guitars for a song that was ultimately not included in the project; nevertheless, the recorded guitar did sound far better than any previous guitar recordings I had done. Two Lauten LA120 small diaphragm condenser microphones were used either side of the body and neck of the guitar to get a good stereo audio. This gave a really nice tone to the guitar rather than just recording directly through the DI or through the front of the guitar. When researching microphone techniques, various papers talked about both studio set-ups while also touching on interactive and immersive audio setups (Mikkonen, 2022). Recording music for a more immersive experience is new to me in terms of instrumental sounds such as guitar, however it did give me a fresh perspective on how to open up a different set of sounds solely by microphone placement. I did find a few issues with phase while trying this technique out initially, although after repositioning the guitar it sounded a lot cleaner. I used these pencil condenser microphones with the high pass filter turned on on both to cut out some of the boom in the lows and room noise. I did try using a large diaphragm condenser microphone to record at the front of the body of the guitar; nevertheless, due to the high pass filter on the small diaphragm condensers, they gave a better overall sound in this instance.

In conclusion, I am happy with the project in context of my aims. I am now more aware of certain production issues I face, which I can actively work on to create a better understanding of music production and industry standard techniques while simultaneously improving upon my own music.

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