

MA Commercial Music Producer (Online Blended)

Foundation Assignment – F2 Essay

**Defining characteristics of three musical genres and the  
incorporation of studied concepts into own productions**

Word Count: 3204

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## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will discuss the stylistic characteristics of three musical recordings, each from a different genre, and I will discuss how they have influenced musical productions of my own. The pieces of music I have chosen are:

- “Sharpness” by Jamie Woon (Dromgoole, Hannibal and Woon, 2015) - R&B/soul genre. I will discuss how this track has influenced my production work on Charlie Scoble’s “You’re On My Mind” (appendix 1).
- “A Little Love” by Celeste (Crocker, Hartman and Waite, 2020) - TV/Film music genre. I will discuss how this track has influenced my production work on a cover of Al Green’s “Together Again” (appendix 2).
- “Fantasia” by Monsta X (Bastiansen et al., 2020) - South Korean (“K-pop”) hip-hop genre. I will discuss how this track has influenced my production work on “Crush”, a song written to pitch to W Ei (appendix 3).

## TRACK ONE

Singer-songwriter Charlie Scoble wanted the production of his song “You’re On My Mind” to fit into the soul/R&B genre. He asked me to utilise synthesisers, sampled elements and “spacey” effects, but he also wanted to preserve an “organic” sound, through the use of live instruments.

We decided upon Jamie Woon’s “Sharpness” as a main reference track. I admire how the track (and the entirety of Woon’s *Making Time* album) is tightly produced modern R&B that contains synthesisers, ambient effects and punchy drum production, but still retains an aesthetic quality of being “loose and organic” (Julious, 2015).

Like many tracks in the neo soul/R&B genre, Jamie Woon's "Sharpness" is driven by a rhythm section groove, with a simple, repetitive drum beat and a bassline featuring syncopated rhythms for a danceable, feel-good effect. Woon recorded a live drummer and bassist for this track (Britton, 2015). He was heavily inspired by D'Angelo's seminal *Voodoo* album (2000), which has become a benchmark for many R&B artists who advocate the importance of the human touch that live musicians provide, in a current R&B landscape where programmed instruments are the norm (Britton, 2015).

I did not have access to a bass guitar or drums myself. I was initially indecisive as to whether we should get some external session players involved in the track, or whether it would be possible for me to digitally programme the bass and drums and still achieve the "live" feeling that Scoble desired.

Though many musicians might argue that live players are vital for creating music that has "soul" and "feeling", many other musicians might disagree. For example, programmed drumbeats by J Dilla are renowned for their soulful humanised quality, which the producer was able to achieve by deliberately programming the drums in an imperfect unquantized manner (Russonello, 2013). On a similar note, Bjork said in an interview for ITV's *The South Bank Show* (1997):

"I find it so amazing when people tell me that electronic music has no soul ... you can't blame the computer, if there's no soul in the music, it's because nobody put it there".

With this in mind, I decided that I could still create an effective rhythm section with programmed bass and drums, if I made a conscientious effort to hone the programming so that it mimicked live musicians. I drew in MIDI parts that deliberately stayed off the quantize grid and I meticulously tweaked the velocities and note lengths of the parts, until they felt "right" to me.

"Sharpness" uses sidestick snares for its main groove. Multiple samples seem to be layered together, with a slight delay between them. This creates a slightly "sloppy" effect which is common across the neo soul genre; for example heard in D'Angelo's "Spanish Joint" (Archer, Hargrove and Stone, 2000). The sidesticks in "Sharpness" also sound quite wide – likely due to the multiple samples being panned in opposite directions. I attempted to recreate a similar sound for Scoble's song - layering two different sidestick samples in a similar fashion. I also layered in a clap sample that had a pleasing stereo width and a slightly "sloppy" sound, which furthered the loose, organic quality I was aiming for.

Woon's "Sharpness" and Scoble's "You're On My Mind" are built upon different chord patterns, however they both contain harmonic techniques which are typical of the R&B/soul genre, such as chord

extensions beyond the triad (such as sevenths and ninths) and use of modal interchange in the chord progressions.

“Sharpness” is largely tethered to the key centre of B natural minor, but the main chord sequence uses E7 and F#7 chords, which are borrowed from the parallel melodic minor scale, B melodic minor (Dromgoole, Hannibal and Woon, 2015).

In Scoble’s song, to create a similar sensation of harmonic “shifting”, we used modal interchange on the final chord of the main looping chord sequence. The song’s melodies and instrumental parts are largely tethered to the tonal centre of C# natural minor, but we used a C#7 here, which shifts the song temporarily into the C # Mixolydian b13 mode.

I liked how “Sharpness” uses a synthesised brass sound that blends coherently with the live instruments and doesn’t sound noticeably “electronic”. I studied the sound and aimed to create a similar sounding patch in Xfer Serum (heard during the choruses and middle 8 of “You’re On My Mind”). The synthesiser in “Sharpness” sounds analogue-esque, so I mimicked this by adding imperfections to my digital synth patch, such as slight detuning, pitch warping and some white noise. Influenced by the reference track, I filtered off the high frequencies of the synthesiser – this helped it to melt into the arrangement more naturally and blend with the live instruments more seamlessly.

“Sharpness” has quite a dry sound, with little noticeable reverberation. This helps create a direct, punchy effect, but also creates an intimate character; to me, it gives the effect of the band playing together in a small room, with the listener sitting there with them. I aimed to create a similar effect in Scoble’s track. A short “studio B” style convolution reverb was used across most of the instruments. This technique doesn’t create a noticeable reverberation tail, but it does give the effect of “gluing” the instruments together, giving the impression that the instruments are playing together in the same space (Rakei, 2021).

## **TRACK TWO**

I and vocalist Javeon McCarthy (known professionally as Javeon) were asked to create a cover of Al Green’s “Together Again” for a sync licensing company. They specifically wanted to pitch the track to Christmas themed advertisements, so asked us to reimagine the song’s arrangement in a way that was

especially suited to this context. It was requested that the arrangement and production should be inspired by “A Little Love” by Celeste (Crocker, Hartman and Waite, 2020), which was used in the John Lewis and Waitrose 2020 Christmas advert.

It has become common for Christmas themed TV advertisements to feature cover versions of songs that wouldn’t normally be associated with Christmas, with their arrangements and production being re-imagined with a sound that is considered “Christmassy”. John Lewis is perhaps the most notable brand to have developed a reputation for such use of music in their advertisements (Purves, 2021).

Before starting production work on “Together Again”, I wanted to gain an understanding of techniques I could employ to create a Christmas-evocative sound. Alongside the given reference track, I also listened to tracks from previous John Lewis Christmas adverts.

“A Little Love” is largely based on piano and strings, so I decided to also do this for our cover of “Together Again”.

Given that my production would feature prominent piano, I also listened to the Spotify editorial playlist “Christmas Peaceful Piano”, to gain further ideas of how I could play the piano with a sound that listeners might associate with Christmas.

I usually use a grand piano virtual instrument in my productions, but I noticed that many of the reference tracks sounded as if they were perhaps played on upright pianos. Compared to grands, upright pianos can have a less vibrant sound (Yamaha, 2021), but they are sometimes favoured by producers who wish to bring a more characterful, intimate, and homely aesthetic quality to productions (which is what I desired for this track). Inspired by Stephan Moccio’s recording of “The Christmas Song” (Moccio, Torme and Wells, 2020), I wanted to achieve similarly warm, muted sound, so I opted for a felted upright piano plugin (Spitfire Audio LABS Soft Piano) in my production.

Celeste’s “A Little Love” features a metallic sounding instrument occasionally layered with the piano; which I believe is either a music box, glockenspiel or celesta. I felt that it created quite a dreamy, wonderous sound, which worked well with the Christmas theme, so I added a music box to some moments in “Together Again” (for example 1:09).

The strings in “A Little Love” begin as a subtle background layer and gradually become prominent as the song progresses. They play very simple parts; following the song’s chord progression with sustained notes. I took inspiration from this when writing the string arrangement for “Together Again”. I made the string parts similarly sustained and slow moving; subtle in the first half of the song, though becoming more prominent as the song progresses, through crescendos heard at moments such as 1:15. I noticed that the reference track seems to have a lo-fi effect on the strings (possibly vinyl or tape emulation). I considered using a similar effect in “Together Again”, but eventually opted for a more natural strings sound.

The strings in Celeste’s track have a warm, muted quality, so I aimed to achieve a similar sound by utilising con sordino strings sounds for many of the parts in my production. Though Celeste’s track doesn’t use tremolo strings, it felt natural to use tremolo strings in “Together Again”. They seemed to add a slightly more interesting texture to moments of the track, which I felt was needed, largely because there is more space in between the vocal lines of “Together Again”, compared to “A Little Love”. I was also inspired to use tremolo strings after hearing how they are used in Lily Allen’s cover of “Somewhere Only We Know” (Allen et al., 2013), which was featured in John Lewis’ 2013 Christmas advert.

I initially created the track to a fixed-tempo metronome, though I then decided that this made the track sound less emotive than I wanted it to. I noticed that “A Little Love” had a rubato approach to tempo, which is known for giving musical performances a more expressive, emotive quality (Wright, 2020). I incorporated a rubato feel by using the tempo mapping function of my DAW to create tempo variations throughout the track – attempting to mimic how an ensemble of real players might play with each other. It seemed especially effective to occasionally slow down on the final few beats of a bar, and then return to a faster tempo on the first beat of the next bar; this created a “push-pull” effect that I have heard throughout music of this genre. Inspired by “A Little Love”, I also created a ritardando feel as the song comes to an end, by gradually slowing down for the final few bars.

### **TRACK THREE**

“Crush” (written at a songwriting camp in collaboration with two topliners) has been my first attempt at producing and co-writing a track to pitch to a K-pop act.

The song brief we were working on asked us to create a “hip-hop based strong dance song” for the boy group WEi. We were given a selection of reference tracks in this genre and I decided to focus on “Fantasia” by Monsta X (Bastiansen et al., 2020) as a main reference.

I began with some general research into the South Korean popular music landscape and listened to a large amount of popular K-pop tracks from the past few years.

Through this listening, I realised there are some general characteristics across K-pop music that somewhat differentiates it from much of Western popular music. K-pop generally has a heavier emphasis on visual aspects accompanying the music; especially choreographed dance performances (Wang, 2018), which means music productions are largely crafted with the core aim of being danceable. K-pop also tends to have a more maximalist approach in its production and songwriting techniques, compared to much of Western pop music. K-pop provides listeners with “constant stimulation”, with productions that often sound thicker and fuller, with more drastic variations between song sections and more melodic hooks crammed into each song (Sherman, 2020).

Like most tracks in this genre, the instrumental of “Fantasia” is driven by the drum production. Reflecting the “maximalist” approach common in K-pop, the drum programming is busy and combines many different sounds. A variety of different snares and claps are woven together with 808 style kick drums and hi-hats. The hi-hat programming features fast rhythm “rolls”; a characteristic derived from trap (a subgenre of hip-hop). When producing “Crush”, I attempted to use similar techniques in my drum programming.

Low brass stabs on downbeats can be heard throughout “Fantasia”, and they are used extremely commonly throughout many current K-pop hip hop tracks. I added similar brass stabs to “Crush”; using a bass trombone patch, played at its highest possible velocity, to create an aggressive growl-like sound in the mid-range frequencies.

Like many K-pop hip hop tracks, “Fantasia” utilises noise-based sound effects to build tension when leading up to section transitions. For example, in the beats before the chorus hits, white noise is heard, with a high-cut filter sweeping upwards to create a “whoosh” sound – a common production technique that I have heard across lots of wider pop and EDM music. I decided to add a similar sound to “Crush”. With the idea in mind that K-pop production needs to remain highly interesting throughout (Wang, 2018),

I attempted to add more character to the noise by automating it to pan left and right with increasing intensity and speed during the filter sweep.

Vocal chants can be heard in “Fantasia”, so we added some similar chants to “Crush”. The vocalist recorded several “hey” chants, at various pitches and larynx positions; when layered together, this created the effect of multiple people chanting together, which is similar to what is heard in the vocal chants of the reference track.

Like much of the K-pop hip hop I have heard, “Fantasia” is generally quite harmonically sparse throughout most song sections, with the focus being on the drum production, sound effects, vocals and monophonic instrumental parts (for example synthesizer basses and leads).

Chromaticism in the basslines or melodies (instrumental and vocal) is common across this genre. This often creates a dark sound, perhaps bringing a sense of “swagger” or “attitude”. The chromaticism can also create more sense of interest and unpredictability, which Korean pop music often strives for (Lee, 2020). The vocal melody of “Fantasia” uses chromaticism during the second half of the chorus. The song is based in A minor, but the vocal melody here touches on C#, a major third above A (on the “oh” lyric), creating a sound reminiscent of the Phrygian dominant mode.

Inspired by this, I decided to also use some chromaticism in “Crush”. My main bassline (as well as a synth melody in the post-choruses) features a minor 2<sup>nd</sup> interval, which is known to create a sense of darkness and tension, which I believe added a sense of “toughness” to the song.

Across this genre, it is common for these harmonically sparse, aggressive sounding sections to be contrasted with softer sounding song sections, which are more chordal and featuring more melodic vocals (whereas vocals may be rapped in other song sections). “Fantasia” uses this technique in the pre-chorus. I strived for a similar effect for the pre-chorus of “Crush”, by introducing softer sounding chordal instrument parts (rhodes, piano and synthesizer pad) and making the drum production more minimal. This also helped to create more sense of impact when the heavier chorus section arrives.

When comparing my production to the reference tracks, I felt that “Crush” didn’t have the same sense of impact, because it didn’t sound as full and thick as I wanted it to. I discovered a YouTube tutorial video by K-pop producer Joony (Jun Lee), in which he breaks down one of his boy group hip-hop productions

(Lee, 2020). This proved useful in giving ideas to make my production sound thicker, stronger and more aggressive.

Inspired by Lee's videos, I utilized saturation and distortion effects on many instruments, which made the production sound louder and "fatter", more akin to the reference track. I also used layering techniques, such as layering distorted and reverberated drum samples with shorter, punchier drum samples (the tail end of the reverberated drums made the track sound less sparse).

The K-pop industry likes songs that contain memorable concepts (koreaboo.com, 2018) so I thought it might be good idea to add some production elements that alluded to the song's title and lyrical hook. One way I did this was through the use of "crushed" sounding vocals (heavy use of distortion and limiting). I also alluded to the song's title more overtly, by creating a sound effect that enters just before the final chorus section. I recorded myself crushing a piece of paper, in close proximity to my condenser microphone for a bass-heavy sound. I layered multiple takes together, applied some saturation, and was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed the result (heard at 2:58 in the track).

## **CONCLUSION**

I have found the process of studying these reference tracks (and applying similar techniques to my own work) to be immensely valuable in developing my versatility as a composer and producer. I am not yet fully satisfied with the sound of my three original productions, but I have some ideas for how they may be improved in the future.

I believe that "You're On My Mind" has effectively blended modern R&B programming and synthesiser elements with an "organic" sound. I do however feel that the core essence of the song needs some more work, especially to achieve more sense of variation throughout the track. I am generally pleased with the programmed bass and drums, though I feel that the programmed hi-hat sounds too "fake". This is where I believe the "human touch" is most obviously lacking, so I would like to add some live hi-hat playing to this track.

I believe that "Together Again" has achieved a somewhat similar aesthetic quality to the reference track, though I feel that the quality of the mix could be improved. The strings currently sound a little "thin" to me, compared to the reference track, so I would perhaps add a slight EQ boost or some saturation in the low midrange frequencies. I also believe that my strings sound too "fake" (they were MIDI programmed),

so I would like to continue refining my programming technique and would ideally even incorporate some live strings layers in the track.

When I compare “Crush” to the reference track, I still feel that it does not sound as “thick” and “full” as I would like. I believe that my track sounds too sparse at times, and would perhaps benefit from busier drum production, more synthesiser lead melodies and more sound effects. I think that mixing techniques to “fatten” the sound - such as more compression and saturation - might also be useful here.

## **Appendices**

1. Charlie Scoble - “You’re On My Mind” (Demo)

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m\\_Ee87uuCNW8EGw3A5ZUFCh-H-ACk3YN/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m_Ee87uuCNW8EGw3A5ZUFCh-H-ACk3YN/view?usp=sharing)

2. Javeon and Ethan Floyd - “Together Again” (Al Green Cover)

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Zd4rWFM\\_9YaU8-bSseMCK5WvT4dqdFHR/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Zd4rWFM_9YaU8-bSseMCK5WvT4dqdFHR/view?usp=sharing)

3. “Crush” (Demo)

[https://soundcloud.com/user-639112856-737134577/crush-27\\_09\\_21/s-8ipRARzwkqy?si=f9466995a7de431abd6c0404d1399b99](https://soundcloud.com/user-639112856-737134577/crush-27_09_21/s-8ipRARzwkqy?si=f9466995a7de431abd6c0404d1399b99)

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