

MA Commercial Music Producer

ADAD7004_LON - Creation

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Introduction

Not long after my proposal was handed in I decided to change my project. This came about after the success within the first week of organising multiple sessions. Already I had co-written and produced four tracks in separate styles, so I wanted to carry on with solely just doing that. Depicting producing other people's music instead of half of that and half of my solo material I thought would help me to concentrate more so on the production skills in which I need to address and heighten. Creating a body of work that was made up of contrasting styles of productions from separate artists was always my idea for this assignment, I just wanted to do more.

I wrote the personal development plan right at the start of the project and later reference back to it in pages 5-16.

Personal Development Plan

[a] For this project I want to write to new styles and challenge myself to produce for writers and singers rather than just rappers. By the start of July I will have at least six songs which are written and ready for mixing and mastering that are of different genres and styles. Threats include matters such as covid, which could potentially have an effect on sessions if the country was to go into another lockdown. This could put proper, in-house writing sessions in jeopardy, however they can be resolved with Zoom calls and productive communication on message apps like WhatsApp. Issues with this target could be that I am depending on other people for their input (vocals) and to manage that, I need to make them aware of my deadline - as well as organising myself - whilst keeping on top of the work so that everything is completed in an orderly and timely fashion. Understanding the needs of singers in terms of recording and mixing will be a challenge that I'll face, however with effective communication skills and references from resources that I read and watch will guide me in the right path of having an

appropriate vocal production to meet the needs of each singer, as well as my own. Setting this goal will adapt my writing and production technique for scenarios such as sessions with artists or other musicians where I need to have a wider understanding of genres.

[b] Another thing in which I want to develop myself in is the knowledge of certain plugins and mixing proficiency to enhance my engineering skills. This also includes utilising any new plugins in order for me to save time, or just to create a better sounding mix. Throughout July until the deadline I want to study and learn from different tutorials and even peers to obtain a better comprehension of this art. Difficulties with this development will be facing personal fears and spending many hours taking in detailed information that I'm sure I will find awkward at times. Even though I will struggle to focus at some stages I already have come to terms with that what I will learn will benefit me and my music, particularly sonically. Once again this skill set will prepare me for the future when, for example, there may not be enough time to send a track to a proper engineer, so I will have to mix the song to an industry standard level on my own.

[c] Creating new synth sounds that cover a wider range of styles is a way in which I can further to develop my skills. For too long have I been sticking to the same pre-sets in Serum and now I've finally decided that this term I'm going to create sounds of my own. Similarly to the previous target, I aim to strengthen my comprehension of certain plugins, but this is regarding synths rather than effects and mixing plugins. Another reason for this goal is simply in order for me to feel as though that I truly have created songs from scratch and to demonstrate that I can complete decent songs without help from pre-sets. This aim will be completed throughout both June and July because I will take time in sessions to create abstract and odd synths as well as tweak said made sounds in post-production. Issues with this target could be that I may not necessarily need to spend X amount of time on my sound design -

considering the amount of work that I have - however I do still believe that the knowledge I can gain from, for example; watching tutorials on how a synthesiser works, can benefit me in terms of how certain VSTs operate and so on.

[d] Connecting separate brackets of music was something that I wanted to achieve in order to generate new flavours to my songs. This could variate from instrumentation choice (such as uncommon drum kit sounds or synthesisers) to rhythm section choices (such as a pushed or pulled beats) to create distinctive music. Corresponding to my first target, this will be done throughout June in parallel with the writing sessions and will be finished for the 1st of July. Troubles this could cause in terms of release would be that potentially the songs are unwarranted to the public as commercially as I'd hoped, then again it could have the complete opposite outcome and prove to be a unique style; and is a success once the songs are released. Another way in which this goal may be deplored could be when, in the writing process, the artist does not approve of the sounds/ideas that I chose due to them being too dissimilar for the style that they after. This of course could happen for anyone that I work with and being as that I am producing for them, I will try to communicate and edit sounds whilst still keeping the unique ideas in there and hope that they are okay with the changes. If not then I will happily continue writing what they wish for.

[e] Finally I wanted to concentrate on vocal production in this assignment. This is one of my biggest weaknesses when producing, so I wanted to take extra care along with pushing myself to improve my skill. Throughout most, if not all of popular music today there has to be some element of vocals at the front of any song. This means that I need to have a full understanding of processing and treating vocals in order for my songs to generate clients to work with (and for listeners to enjoy the songs). I don't see any down sides to this target, besides the similar issue as with [b] where I

may have to take a long time in concentrating on this area of production, however it will be worth my while both for the project and for my future career.

Developed Writing and Post-Production Processes in the Project

There were lots of techniques applied in the making of all of these songs. Due to there being a limited amount of words, I have stuck to focusing on topics which cover and coincide with the development of my skills and knowledge. At times processes were also done to the majority of all the tracks, so I felt as though only mentioning these techniques once was sufficient.

Cyanide

As planned the entirety of June was purely dedicated to sessions with other artists, writers and producers. Firstly I organised a get away with some old friends, whom are both writers and artists, from the 31st of May until the 2nd of June. Originally both of these artists were into the Soft Trap scene with artists such as Sam Tompkins, however soon after we had arrived I realised that they had changed up their style into 'R&Drill'. This is a UK based sub-genre mixing the rhythm of Drill and melodic qualities of modern R&B. Other stylistic elements include heavily distorted 808s and Trap-styled drum kits. Being as I wanted to challenge myself in terms of producing songs in different styles for this project [a][d], I welcomed this new hybrid because trying something new always tends to bring fresh ideas to the table. Despite me coming up with the progression on the guitar, I didn't feel the need to record a live one for the song, I used MIDI instead to reflect on the genre of Trap and Drill (YouTube, 2020) music. Watching this video influenced my process because it demonstrated how simplistic the genre of Drill is in regards to harmony. Leaving as much space as possible for the vocals, drums

and 808 meant that the guitar had to be unsophisticated, which really helped when bringing the rest of the instrumentation into the DAW project. Another way in which this tutorial assisted me was with using reversed instrumentation. Implicating this idea really succoured me to fill the gaps in the song and to glue certain parts together. Adding in drums is, in my opinion, the hardest part of Drill. There are subtle differences with each hat and shake used and every extra percussion needs to provide depth into the production - as well as to variate rhythm, whilst maintaining the style. After watching another tutorial (YouTube, 2020) on beat placement and accents of percussion, I was able to emit the genre of Drill whilst preserving new flavour to the song. Certain rhythmic parts were stimulated from this video which fuelled my composition and production throughout the writing process. Listening to different producers (YouTube, 2021) in this genre underlined my understanding as well. After watching Fumez the Engineer and hearing his beats, I noticed that Drill is quite repetitive. Normally this is okay because vocally Drill predominantly has a rapper, however because this beat has only singers on it, I decided to shift the main rim at points to provide disparity in the rhythm. Rappers tend to shift their vocal pattern in and out of a beat to keep the listener enticed, so I thought why not do that but with the instrumental instead.

Referencing the song 'Know You' (Spotify, 2021) proved useful when writing the 808. Hearing the placement and accents in which the bass came in on proved most useful when making the beat. Once the skeleton of the instrumental was done, I knew already from certain melodies that I'd heard both the lads sing in the writing process, that dreamy pads and slight variations of the guitar had to be added for ear candy. This kind of soundscape I've not heard before in the scene. The pads in particular offer an atmospheric, Shoegaze-type of feel and the piano in the final pre-chorus also

gives character and maturity to the song; making it something more than a typical R&Drill track [d].

Despite me never using Melodyne before [b], I thought it was a good time to sharpen and familiarise myself with the plugin due to one of the singer's voice being difficult to correct - even with my normal autotune. After watching this tutorial (Tileyard Education, 2021) I applied the skills used on here obtain a much more accurate and smooth melody from the vocal takes, with ease. This saved me much more time than if I were to have done the same process with FlexPitch in Logic.

These Walls

These Walls was a track that was completely out of my comfort zone in terms of genre [a]. Ellie came to me in a session that we had organised on the 4th of June prepared with something that she had made involving the chords, backing vocals, lead synth and drums for. She wanted me to recreate her synths with the same progression and style, to generate a new rhythm section entirely and to structure/finish the song. She explained that she wanted the track to be mainly revolved around the chorus and fronted by the vocals.

When reproducing These Walls I started with finding and creating a lot of sounds through Xfer Records' Serum and using appropriate synths from Native Instrument's Analog Dreams. Specifically in this song I deepened my knowledge and skill in creating and designing synthesisers. Studying the video from Oversampled (YouTube, 2020) showed me how to utilise oscillators and envelopes [c] as well as many other features. This video was exactly what I needed in order to learn more about sound design whilst making the song resonate with the singer. The soundscape was imperative so I spent a good few hours alongside Ellie, calculating the right synths suited to her taste. Due to the genre of this track being moderately alternative, it gave

me freedom to add, sometimes extreme, and sometimes subtle amount of certain effects like the tremolo (in the second main synth chords) and chorus in the drums. Alternatively to Serum, for this track I also used a few synths from Analog Dreams. Tim Cant (YouTube, 2018) indicated innovative ways in which to tweak sounds in this plugin to develop unique and interesting tones [c]. After watching this video I understood this particular VST whilst developing the skills which I had wished to for this project.

I'd listened to Ellie's other songs that she wanted to release alongside this track and understood that she liked to have organic and real sounding drums predominantly in her music, but also enjoyed to dabble in the electronic world. Being as I was producing the song she must've wanted some sort of Trap-styled theme because across the university, this genre is what I'm commonly known for creating. I decided to morph the style [d] - drum pattern wise - whilst sticking to a more soft, pop feel. Real hats, shakers and percussion were taken from samples that I had found in Splice, which permitted the overall beat to have a modern, industry standard production.

Very much different to Cyanide, this song has many melodic layers. When coming to mix the track it was difficult due to me having so much thickness in the same frequency range. This was done from filtering certain instruments, as well as using different types of EQ to give extra clarity. Jason Moss (YouTube, 2018) pointed out certain things in my mix which could also be a factor as to why mixes sound muddy. When following some of his steps, suprisingly, the advice provided helped me to achieve an all-round better mix - especially when I revisited my panning in both the instrument and the drums.

In terms of vocals, I used EQ to cut the low-end and parts of the high end due to her recording on the NT1A. The sections were recorded in we made different summing stacks of different sections, because Ellie insisted on not having buses for some unknown reason.

Tamagotchi

Tamagotchi is the only rap song in my project. As made clear already, the whole point of this body of work is to challenge myself and I feel as though having lots of songs with rappers wouldn't push my skills very far due to me making a lot of tracks in that style already. This freestyle surprisingly was one of the longest processes in mixing due to the requests of the rapper being peculiar. In terms of the beat there isn't anything that's not been done before in terms of rhythm, however there are quite a few interesting and abstract sounds which I added to make the song unique. My personal favourite is the lead from the breathy flutes. I added a range of effects to make the flute sound unique already but once I got a sound that I was happy with, I wanted to have a slight eerie and almost Middle-Eastern element to the song, so I used the pitch-bend on my MIDI keyboard for that sound. As for as Trap goes there are possibly a few more melodic elements in the song than normal, the reasoning behind this was due to how constant the song was going to sound. Mally (rapper) said that he wanted a freestyle but for the song to not sound empty. Keeping with that brief, I made sure that there were enough things happening in the song for the listener to enjoy, whilst there being not a lot of range from the rapper, nor from repeated lyrics/hooks.

This song was a struggle because Mally refused to do anymore vocal takes after just one attempt of the lead and adlibs. Not surprisingly this made mixing and treating his vocals painfully time consuming. To start with when processing his parts, I applied gate on the vocals tracks so that there was no noise from any unwanted sounds at the start or end of the tracks. Then I used EQ with a low filter and cut the vocals to 150Hz. Normally I would cut around 120/130Hz however due to his voice being so low and muddy I had to cut more off in order to free space for the mix. The low mids were also cut because the lows were so prominent that they were overpowered the rest of

the vocals. Pete from Mix Better Now demonstrated an effective way to use subtractive EQ in order for me to remove the “boxy-ness” (YouTube, 2016) in vocals. After messing around with Mally’s vocals I eventually utilised Pete’s method [b][e] with the FabFilter Pro-Q 3 EQ and cut around 300Hz. This heightened the entirety of the vocals and improved the overall sound drastically. Adding a compressor allowed the vocals to be more constant level-wise because the volume was so capricious due to him moving away from the mic when recording. A DeEsser was used to cut the harsh sounds. Once I had used this Waves plugin however, I noticed that it had cut some high frequencies in the vox. This resulted in me boosting the frequencies at around 15k by 3.5 decibels to make up for the loss from the DeEsser [e]. Another reason why only having one take for the vocals was frustrating was, on account of the proximity effect, I had to use a lo-shelf dynamic EQ and multi band compression (Fies, 2014) in order to regulate Mally’s voice [e]. This provided a much cleaner and overall professional sounding mix to the vocals. After learning this method in depth, I will now always take the time to go through the process, when necessary, due to its immense refinement of the vocals.

Twenty Five and Like You

I revisited the whole of Celine’s EP because after last trimester, we still didn’t feel as though it was anywhere near what it could be. For Twenty Five not only did I add an extra synth in the pre-chorus, an impactful yet not overpowering bass and worked on harmonies with Celine, but I also remixed and mastered the song. I’ve mentioned this track because production wise there is a lot happening, whether that being from the percussion, vocals or instrumentation.

In regards to the vocals, I did the normal amount of processing in which I always do, however when it came to the harmonies and doubles I tried a few

other things. Carving more into the frequencies with an EQ allowed me to give space for each vocal track so that every separate take could be heard [e]. Usually on a vocal track I would use the DeEsser only slightly for the 's' sounds, for the harmonies however I set this plugin so that it cut out a lot of the 's' sounds with the aim that the plosives were not too harsh on the ear. On account of Celine having over 40 vocal tracks, I downloaded the plugin Vocalign (YouTube, 2020) in order for the backing vocals to remain perfectly in sync with the lead vocal [c]. Unexpectedly this software was very easy to use and extremely effective once I had watched the video with MusicTechHelpGuy [b]. This plugin saved me so much time so I can definitely say that I will be using it in probably all of my songs from now on.

When coming to processing the drums, I used quite a bit of distortion. Decapitator was first used to saturate and strengthen the kick as well as DIRT from Native Instruments to give character to the percussive samples. When it came to mixing and mastering, one thing which I learned when working on this song was effectively using the Ozone 9 Spectral Analyser (YouTube, 2018) [b]. Applying this plugin within the song allowed the process of adding presence to my samples. The informative video from Splice opened my world to a whole new way of approaching mixing and mastering, particularly when I needed to reveal frequencies in the mid-range to make assets of the vocals more prominent.

Writing wise there wasn't much done to Like You. Celine requested to have more odd effects and sounds in the instrumentation, which allowed me to add extra flavour and textures. An example of this is at 52seconds where I sampled and reversed a hat, then pitched the sample different times and automated the volume of each sample. Besides that processing was the main importance of the revisit. The FabFilter Pro-C was a compressor I used for the bass in order to make the notes the same level. A limiter furthered this

process in greater detail with an L3 UltraMaximiser. For this software I studied Andrew Schepps' (YouTube, 2013) tutorial and found it extremely helpful to precisely even each note in the bass [b]. Being as the bass has such a huge impact and overall part to the song, I wanted the levels to be perfect throughout to underline its necessity.

Lovesong, NaSenM, Tesla, ESKA and Appitizer

Marcelina is a writer/artist who I had the pleasure of working with several times for this project. She and I both share common interests musically and I've always found it useful working with foreign musicians because it helps me to focus on solely melodic and sonic elements rather than lyrical parts too. To an extent with some of these songs there was freedom for me to write a beat and she would just freestyle ideas, then we would go into the studio and work out the rest. Other times she would give me song references and I would go away and produce something for her and then send different ideas through E-mail. Regrettably Marcelina wasn't always in the UK and was travelling a lot which made it difficult to communicate at times. Due to her lack of transmission of vocal stems I was very short in space of time to finish everything. Only having one week to mix five tracks was a handful but nevertheless I did the best that I could within the short space of time that I had. On account of the songs being relatively rushed, admittedly they are not the best of my work for obvious reasons. In terms of evaluating the process of it all I would say that to change for another time I would have to be more harsh on the people that I work with. This project was very serious and I made that apparent to all of the people that I worked with, obviously some were just not as understanding as others. Even though it was out of my hands, I still feel as though that I can take responsibility in relation to not organising this artist to a more stern degree. As a consequence of the

pressed time for mixing and mastering, I've decided not to talk too in depth production wise simply because I know I could have done better.

Lovesong, NaSenM and Tesla were beats that I had made and sent to Marcelina. Production beat-wise there isn't anything too interesting or new happening in these songs, there is a mix of R&B and Trap loops that I created with every so often pauses in the rhythm sections to define pre-choruses and breaks. Due to the instrumentals being quite repetitive, I wanted the vocals to stand out the most, which was done with my production. Thankfully, I looked back on the work that I had completed with Celine's remixed songs and incorporated the methods in her vocals into Marcelina's songs.

Miami Vice is my least favourite song out of all of the tracks. Having said that though, I did manage to try a new musical style in which I had never attempted before. This fast, Reggaeton [a] track, personally sounds very monotone and boring, but I could not change any aspect to the song because this is exactly what Marcelina wanted.

Appitizer was a brief that I had been given by Marcelina. This, in my opinion, is the most complex, compelling and fun song out of all of the ones we worked on together. There are many layers from instrumentation, vocals and lots were done in the mix for things to sound interesting. She wanted a song that was similar to 'Kiss Me More' by Doja Cat and SZA. In this number one hit there's an apparent Disco feel with a simplistic beat over a typical, repeated Pop, R&B chord progression. I decided to copy the same sort of idea by starting with a chord progression on a synth and then repeating the same thing on guitar, at times having it arpeggiated which helped to fill gaps. With the reference there is more rhythm from the guitar and drums, especially at the end of each reacted phrase. Instead of doing the same I thought I'd keep the chords very straight and have other percussive components from toms and a vocal chop - which I sampled one of my friends singing a simple melody. The point of keeping the track straight was to allow

the singer (Marcelina) to roam free lyrically and melodically. If I'm honest once the loop was sorted there wasn't much to do until mixing. There's certain parts where the beat cuts out and comes back in for emphasis, strings were added at times for ear candy as well as a lead guitar just to highlight the classic funk/disco [d] feel. Besides from that, there wasn't much else.

Over My Head

Over My Head differs from the rest of the songs for many reasons. Stylistically it is in the House field [a] unlike the others but I also produced and recorded this track in a separate DAW than what I normally use - there was no reasoning for this other than that I didn't have access to my equipment on that given night. Kaytranada was the main influence for this song, the singer referenced some of his work and wanted something "swung and easy to get people dancing to." To match this style I involved swung hats, a funky bass line going throughout the majority of the beat and lots of side-chain on the instruments. The Korg M1 offered an old-school twist to the track and emanated a more common House tone to capture the audiences ear when listening. The short bell synth stabs were given a side chain on it so that the sound wasn't too harsh and just so it grabbed the tail of the audio. In the pre-chorus and chorus certain instruments and drums were added for extra effect and to provide energy such as the piano and extra percussion/shakers. To keep with modern times whilst coinciding with my personal development plan [d], I added my own element of trap with the hat rolls. After listening to some of Kaytranada's songs I noticed that his kicks are 'chesty', so with an EQ I made a low cut on my kick drum just so that it matched the same sort of approach. For the first time ever I attempted vocal chopping and vocal stretches [b][e] on the melodies that the singer had recorded. This was done by pitching certain phrases or words and utilising

them as more of an instrument than a vocal, with added reverb and side chain to keep the momentum of the beat. Despite the video from LANDR (YouTube, 2020) being extremely basic, I still took inspiration from what to do with cutting phrases and implicated Isabelle's methods into my own.

Effects added to the vocals were a compressor, autotune, EQs, a multiband compressor, side-chain, chorus, two separate reverbs and a delay. The compressor ratio was 15.6:1, threshold was -22.2 and gain was 4.94 [b] due to there being certain parts that were much louder in the singer's vocals; so I had to turn down the louder parts for an overall, consistent volume [d]. At times the autotune throat length was turned down on Antares [b] to give a subtle and wider/lower sound to the vocals in the call and response, adlib parts. Being as the vox is from a woman singing, I wanted to make it sound more unique than simply her original sound. I used an EQ and reverb in the intro and automated the output gain of both plugins until bars 8/9 to give the listener indication of when the verse comes in. This filter was done on the EQ from around the low mid, to high mid frequencies, which gives it that radio/telephone effect. The vocals on the intro also have another filter but this one is a low pass filter which I then adjusted. So basically I have a low-pass filter on the sound from the vocals, and I am automating the cut off frequency of the low pass filter to act as a riser for the song. Implicating this technique from MusicTechHelpGuy (YouTube, 2016) [b] provided a real difference and variation in the production whilst making the track have more of a professional feel; matching the House style that I was going for.

One decision I made was to have the side-chain going on the vocal throughout the whole song. Initially that wasn't the plan but it made sense to do it in the end to match the feel. The chorus effect which was added not only duplicated the signal but it also widened and gave it a more synthetic sound to the vox [b]. This effect I feel works and adds a strange but unique

sound to the mix. The low frequencies of the reverb were cut at 1458hz so that there were no muddy sounds clashing with the rest of the mix.

Another way I experimented with a low-cut EQ was with mixing the multiple bases in the chorus. The classic Korg M1 had this cut to make room for the sub bass, yet still I wanted the sound of the higher frequencies from it. Implicating the EQ helped me to succeed with this method and all of the other bases that I used. The piano had a similar cut in the chorus but it was nowhere near as high of a cut as the bases. This principle was still utilised to stop clutter from the low and mid frequencies. The sub bass was side-chained to the kick so that there was no rumble between them both, giving space for the kick to push through.

Conclusion

Despite me having issues along the way in this project, I will still say that it was a success. I gained a vast amount of knowledge regarding my targets, whether that was in regards to vocal production, mixing techniques and understanding of plugins. Putting in new methods and learning more about my craft didn't just help me to achieve my goals for the project, but also it has benefitted me enormously in regards to my quality of production. Certain matters such as organisation are yet to be improved, yet part of me feels as though the problems, such as the one with Marcelina, will always prop up. Something in which I will want to learn more about as a result of this project will be recording vocals. Due to Covid-19 and other reasons I haven't been able to record every artist. This may or may not have had a knock on effect in the post-mixing process, regardless to that I feel as though it was a skill in which I didn't get a chance to improve on as much as the others. This relates into also my biggest letdown, which was the was the miscommunication and organisation of other singers. Originally there were at least five more songs that were going to be finished for this project, however due to the lack of

effort and seriousness the vocals were never completed. I wish that there was something in my power which I could have done to speed up this process and now evaluate myself over, yet unfortunately this error is completely out of my hands. Surprisingly, one of my first PDP potential issues - which I never thought would be a problem in the first place - ended up becoming the most difficult and time wasted factor to this whole project.

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