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An analysis of the genres Dream Pop, Alternative Rock and Contemporary Folk

The rise of technology has had a huge impact on the way we experience recorded music in the current day and age. The access to Digital Streaming Platforms (DSPs) and the Internet has made music more accessible than ever before and also opened doors for young creatives to start sharing their music from an early stage and also independently. "The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry Engaging With Music (IFPI) report, suggested time spent listening to music through subscription-based streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music grew 51% ... between 2019 and 2021."(independent, n.d.). Respondents in the research taken by the IFPI stated multiple reasons for their usage of DSP's, amongst which the "access to millions of songs" being a leading factor for their use of the streaming platforms. This suggests more music is being listened to and proves that listeners are interested in an array of genres of music. This increase in interest makes music sit at the forefront of commercial importance in the consumption industries. For this assignment, I will be analysing the characteristics of Dreampop, Contemporary Folk and Alternative Rock. In this analysis, I will dive into the traditional meaning and specifics that form the foundation of the genres. I'll do this by looking at the arrangement and composition techniques typical for each genre, the rhythmic choices made, harmonic and melodic importance or simplicity and if applicable also at the instrumentation in the genres. After defining the genres I will explain how I took these foundations and crafted my own musical productions based on the historical context of the genres and the research I have done.

Alternative Rock is a subgenre of rock music. The term 'alternative rock' became popular in the 1990s, even though the alt-rock scene was a direct continuation of 1980s movements like college rock and new wave." (Masterclass, 2021) The music is often guitar-led, inspired by "1970's Led Zeppelin sound or 1980's the Smith's sound" (Masterclass, 2021), "driven by poppy, diatonic melodies" and "has a DIY approach" to the artistry and creation of the sound and visuals (Masterclass, 2021). The track I chose as a reference is 'Nude' by Radiohead. 'Nude' fits in the experimental side of alternative rock music (Masterclass, 2021). In particular, the mixing choices are what spark my interest in all Radiohead productions. The vocals, reverb, adlibs and guitars are often panned

and placed heavily to a side, this is clearly hearable in the mix of 'Nude'. The lead vocal is popularly positioned in the frontal centre of the mix, like most contemporary productions (Tileyard Education and Robinson, 2022). The specific placement of the instruments and buses creates a certain stereo image. Before I started creating the track, I made sure I kept this in mind. By now I already knew I was going to be working with an acoustic guitar, bass guitar, drums, vocals and a piano.

The track started with the arpeggiated piano structure. However, I wanted the focus to be on the guitars in this production. The bass and acoustic guitar parts are therefore very distinguishable. I started adding the acoustic guitar layers shortly after to create extra depth to the sound. I also did this because on most Radiohead tracks, the guitar is the leading instrument in the arrangement next to the lead vocal. I panned the two different acoustic guitar parts separately to the far left and far right sides. This creates a certain type of movement as the parts are not similar and accompany each other where necessary, rather than simply doubling the parts(fig. 3).

I then dived into the drumbeat. I spent a lot of time on this as I was looking for a bit of a broken/beaten-up sound. I therefore chose to edit a drum stem which was sent to me by my drummer. I played with the rhythm by chopping the stem up a little bit. I then went further into editing the stem by adjusting it with rhythmical flex timing. (fig. 1 & 2). This gave the drumbeat an interesting touch and a shocky feel. The drums play a main part in rock music productions and therefore I wanted them to stand out but also drive the song in general. (Kallen, 2012) After the editing I bounced out the stem with all processing to keep the CPU low and workflow simpler, I knew I wasn't going to change the drums again. The tempo stayed pretty low, which is common for most Radiohead tracks on 'Rainbow'. After this, I recorded the bass parts with my bassist. The bass guitar is layered and stacked differently throughout the track. The main bassline is controlled by Fab Filter Pro Q. I brought down the 50 Hz to calm down the busier depth a bit. I brought up everything below 30Hz to bring up the sub-feel of the bass guitar. The other bass parts aren't really played like a traditional bass guitar part but more like an electric guitar. I added a tremolo to these added parts and panned the sounds from left to right for extra movement and Radiohead feel.

The third bass layer functions as a percussive element to the track as it's dotted around the lead bass line and drumbeat. I decided to leave the drop until the final part of the song. I initially wanted it to repeat twice, but I decided not to go for a standard structure, as Radiohead songs are often not following a traditional verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus structure (Baxter, 2022). I think leaving the drop until the end, really builds on the atmosphere and cinematic feel I've been wanting to create with this track.

Traditional Folk music started as protest songs, written anonymously, by the people for the people. It was a way to support the community in times of uncertainty and war (Folk music, n.d.). It consists of "traditional, acoustic instruments." where the guitar and voice play the leading figure. "As the genre expanded away from traditional folk music, the music came to be known more for its storytelling, regardless of instrumentation and musicality." (Study.com, 2022) this opened the door for more contemporary folk music. The track I used for reference is 'still feel it all' by Maro. The instrumentation for this track is very simple and the music is centred around the guitar and vocals, just like the traditional folk songs. Added to this is a droney synth sound for extra atmosphere and depth.

In my track 'I Waited' I incorporated the single synth note as well. It is constantly present throughout the track from start to finish. I wanted to add this element into my production as I love how it creates an ambience for the simple arrangement to live in from the start of the song until the end. A very distinguishable mixing choice in this song is the stereo-recorded lead vocal. This is not something traditional to folk music and is more of a contemporary, experimental choice as this indicates the track has been edited in post-production. The stereo channels are heavily panned to the far right and far left in the production. This moves away from the frontal, central positioning of the vocal which is how most vocals are nowadays placed in a mix (Tileyard Education and Robinson, 2022). I found that this stereo placement of the vocal creates a different kind of intimacy as it feels like the vocal hugs around you when listening to the track. This is something I would have never naturally tried out but I like the effect it has. I recorded the vocals in two separate takes to have two stems to create the stereo effect. In the future, I would try setting up

two condenser microphones in one room and recording in stereo straight away. I think this would speed up the recording process a lot and also clean up the takes a bit, leaving the vocal sounding more fresh and crisp. The only issues that may arise are phase issues, which is why I'd need to calculate the positioning of both microphones. I created two different vocal buses for the stereo vocal channels in the chorus (fig. 5 & 6). I added a plate reverb to both of the buses using Valhalla Vintage Verb, decreasing the predelay to 0 ms and the decay to 4 seconds, not too long of a decay to stay away from an overwhelming vocal stack. This leaves the vocal recordings to live in their own created space on either side of the stereo image. I then panned these buses to the far right and left, to make the vocal feel even wider and to not let the reverbs cluster up together in the mix (fig. 5 & 6). I wanted the chorus to hit extra hard and I, therefore, decided to add an unpanned, centrally positioned lead vocal take as a layer to the chorus only, this layer dips out again in the second verse. I wrote this song in a commercial pop structure (Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus) (Baxter, 2022) and the lyrical meaning of this track is not derived from any type of protest. This moves the track away from traditional folk music and drives it more towards pop/contemporary music. For the guitar recording I set up a stereo bar (fig. 7) and used a stereo pair of the Neumann 184's (fig. 8). I focussed on positioning a lot whilst setting up for recording the guitar part. "When recording in stereo, it is necessary to measure the exact distance and positioning of the microphones from the source of the sound. They need to be pointing in the exact same direction and positioned at the same distance away from the source of the sound. If this isn't the case, you will encounter phase issues" (Englund, 2022) This was the first time I used a stereo-bar and I am happy to say there were no phase issues with my recordings.

Then on to my final track. The main characteristics of the genre Dreampop are the "mixture of synthesisers and guitars", the "emphasis on atmosphere and depth" and "ethereal vocals" being "buried in the mix" (Masterclass, 2021). I started this track by recording some picked guitar chords and the vocal melody. I wanted the song to feel ethereal and wide, which aligned well with the dream pop sound. I decided to use the track 'Floating' by Raveena as a reference for my song. I wanted to use some characterising dream pop elements to create a real "atmosphere and depth" to the production. I did this through synths, pianos,

guitar layers and loads of stacked harmonies. The song follows an alternative structure, just like the reference track. I gave the song a fairly long, lofi-inspired but captivating intro, which then moved into an irregular structure: intro - A - B - C - D - B - C - D (Baxter, 2022). I wrote the entire song but I was missing the punch and accentuation of things, the track felt too mellow. I started playing with my voice and adding adlibs and harmonies. This was something that I hadn't tried before as it never came naturally to me but after some playing around I got more comfortable and the track started sounding a lot fuller and exciting.

Dreampop is described as living in "reverb-drenched atmospheres" (Masterclass, 2021). Therefore I played with a lot of different types of reverb, short and long decay, fully mixed in, partly mixed in but also varying the pre-delay options. I started with the ad-libs and backing vocals. I decided on a short, 1.97-second decay with it only being mixed in 24%. I did this because I found that a longer decay and higher percentage mix, resulted in the backing vocals sounding muddy and getting in each other's way (fig. 9) I recorded all harmonies and BV's doubled and panned them to opposite sides to create a wider stereo image. I also played with different reverbs on the synthesisers and guitars in this track. I doubled the guitars in the verses and added a slight reverb on the second layer of the guitar part (fig. 10) I recorded some MIDI Rhodes and wide organ pads. I found this used up a lot of CPU when I was running the project. To lower my CPU usage, I bounced the MIDI files, including the added Valhalla reverb but always kept the midi files as a backup. This made opening and editing the project so much quicker. I also added a lot of wide broken piano chords to create tension between the sections of the track. I added a slight reverb and delay to these to create some more movement and warmth to the sound. The organic, 6/8 drum pattern lays smoothly in the background, this is just to drive the song a little bit. The 6/8 time signature gives the song a more free and swingy feel. I manipulated some samples of wooden shakers with Soundtoys' alterboy, this allowed the track to retain the organic feel but allowed me to still adjust the tonality of the track in the percussion in the necessary way.

Mixing this track was a lot harder than the other songs. I couldn't find the right place for the vocals to sit when combined with all the synthesisers and piano

sounds as they all sit around the same frequency. I ended up panning all the vocals very far to the side and eliminating some frequencies that got in the way of the piano, out of the vocal tracks. The piano sounds are panned more freely and jump around the stereo image a bit.

For all three pieces of music, I used the V76 UAD Pre-amp plug-in with my UAD Apollo Twin Interface to record my vocals. I then used my standard vocal processing chain which contains Fabfilter Pro Q3, Teletronix LA-2A Legacy Compressor and Vintage Tube EQ. Often paired with a bus to a small Valhalla Vintageverb Plate reverb and Soundtoys dotted Echo Boy $\frac{1}{8}$ delay. I used a Neumann U87 condenser microphone to record my vocal for 'Hold Me' and I used an SE Electronics 2200 with my pop shield and an Aston Halo Shadow Reflection Filter at home to record all the vocals in 'Take My Time' and 'I Waited' (Barlett, 2008)

After completing the task to create three different songs from a starting point of specific genres, I learnt that making choices can be a lot quicker when you are working with a set genre. If you understand what the core of the genre is, there's always a place to start from and stick to. I also realised that the further into the creative process you go, the more important it is that you check you're still in sync with the genre you are briefed to create. I believe that sometimes narrowing down the options in the creative process, enables you to be more experimental with the instruments and sounds you have to work with, rather than just deciding from an endless library of samples and effects in your DAW. The main thing I'll take away as a learning curve from this assignment is the new recording techniques I tried out. Using a stereo bar, top-quality microphones and a completely soundproof studio for some of the recordings really sped up the process and resulted in the recordings sounding super clean. I learnt a lot of new mixing techniques including heavy panning and specific stereo placement whilst creating these tracks. All of these are things I will take into the continuation of my music production career as I truly feel it created a new depth to my music. Aside from this, I feel I could still educate myself better on vocal production and read into more compressors and preamps that would support my vocal better. I will also invest in a microphone that fits my low, breathy voice better to make my vocal sound more real and truthful to its natural timbre. I

look forward to taking all these new skills into my palette as a producer and also continue training myself and challenging myself in other new genres in the new year.

Appendix

Fig. 1

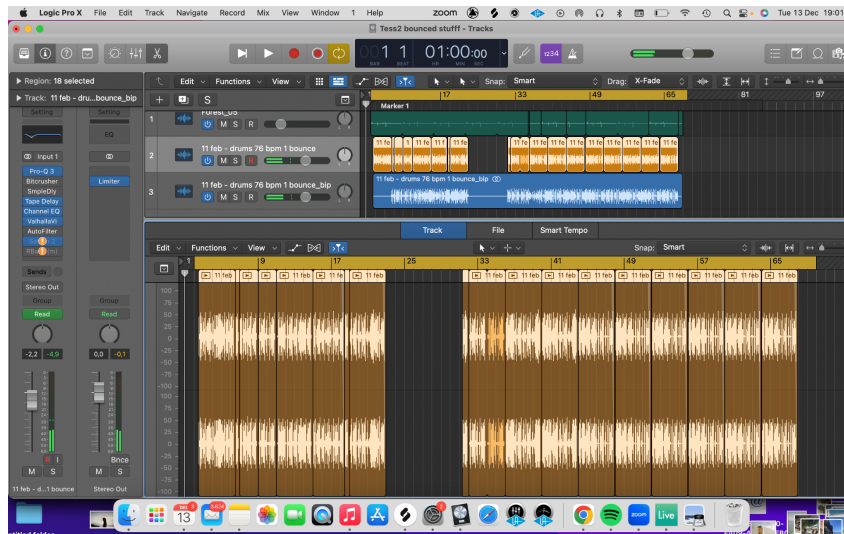


Fig. 2

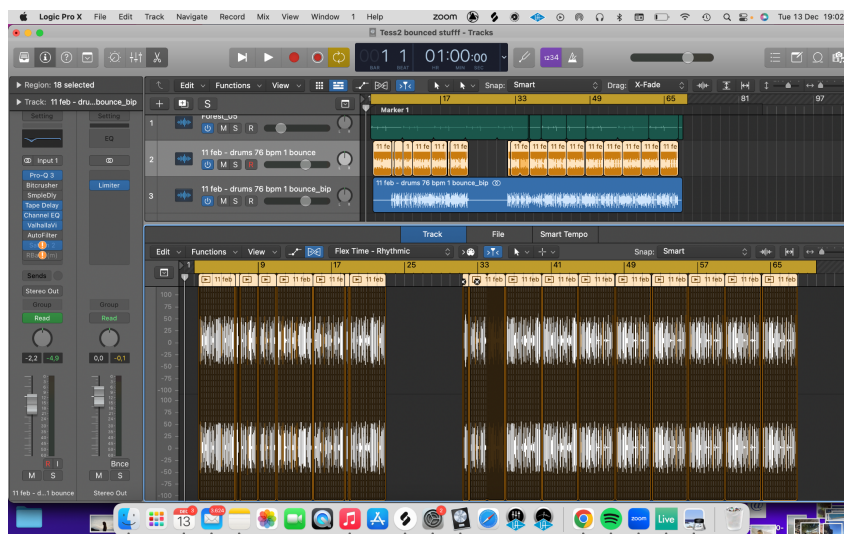


Fig. 3

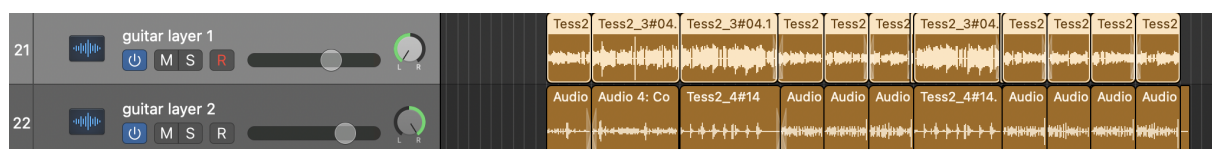


Fig. 4

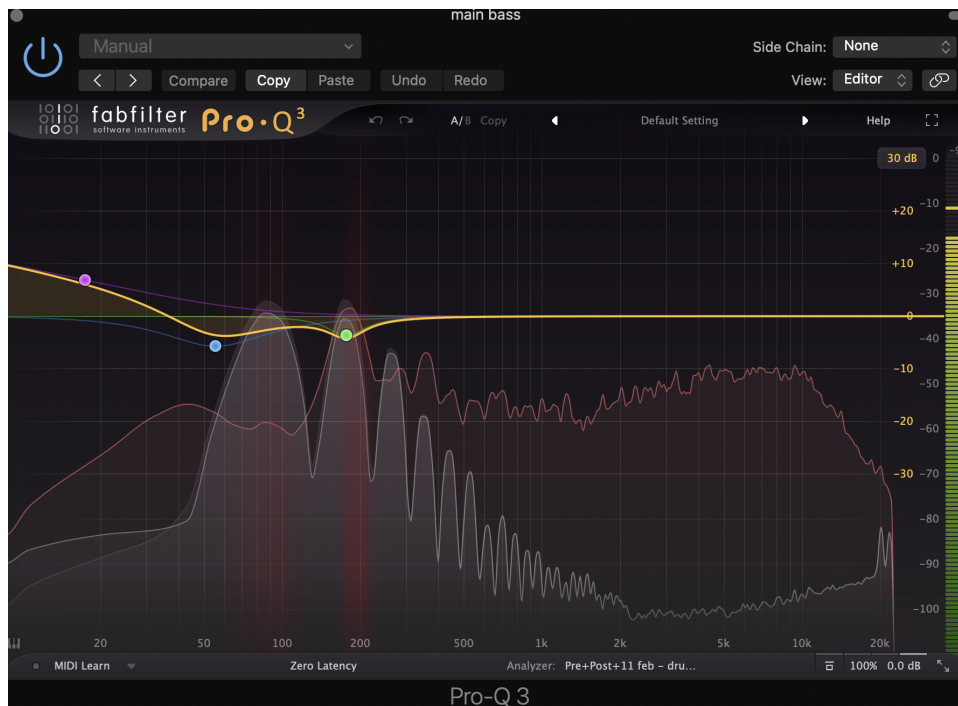


Fig. 5 & 6



Fig. 7 Stereo Bar



Fig. 8 Neumann 184



Fig. 9 Reverb on all BV channels.



Fig. 10 Reverb on doubled guitar



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