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Module Title: Foundation

(ADAD7003_LON)

Assignment Title: Foundation Assessment

Module Lecturer: Ciaran Robinson

Introduction

In the 1980's Run DMC and Aerosmith joined forces to create a remake of the latter's classic hit "Walk this Way". At the time, this collaboration was one of the first of its kind giving birth to a new sub-genre called rap-rock (Price, 2016). In the 21st century, collaborations have become an inherent part of music creation and as a result, artists and songs do not really belong to one specific genre anymore (IQ Live Music Intelligence, 2017).

In this essay, I will discuss the defining characteristics of the Pop, Soul and Indie-folk genres. I will explain how the three chosen reference tracks fall into these categories and explain some of the production techniques that have been used in each. I will then pinpoint the techniques that I have borrowed and incorporated in the tracks submitted for the portfolio assignment. In addition to that, I will describe additional musical decisions that were made to give my own tracks a unique and interesting sound and therefore stand out from its contemporaries.

Pop

Reference Track: *Attention* – Charlie Puth

Submitted Track: *Call Me Polly* – Minx

21st century's pop music is largely based on crossover genres; one has only to look at the credits of contemporary hit songs to understand that artists are collaborating more than ever before (Savage 2017). This could be one of the reasons why common borders between musical genres are slowly fading away (Robinson, 2016). However, hit songs in today's music industry still tend to follow characteristics specific to the modern pop genre.

First of all, most of modern pop hits follow a definite format listed as such:

- Verse
- Pre – Chorus
- Chorus
- Verse
- Pre – Chorus
- Chorus (sometimes doubled)
- Bridge
- Chorus (sometimes doubled)

It is common in modern pop for the same chord progression to be used throughout the whole track whilst a sense of development is achieved mostly through production techniques and top line variations. It is also current for a pop song to start with a chorus and/or for it to consist of merely a verse and a chorus section, which are being repeated throughout the entire song (Computer Music Specials, 2012).

Moreover, one of the most important characteristics of a pop track in today's industry is for the chorus to begin within less than 30 seconds into the song and imperatively within 1 minute. The overall length of a pop song usually sits between 3 and 4 minutes (McKinney, 2015).

In recent years, pop music has been influenced by the rise of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) in such a strong way that EDM stars have been increasingly asked to produce the biggest names in the pop music industry (EDM.com, 2018). As a consequence, every aspect of pop music has been affected; for example the traditional bridge has been replaced by what we call a “pop-drop”, which is the signature sound of EDM music (Hogan, 2017). In addition to the song structure, EDM's production style has been leaking into the genre with the use of techniques such as vocal chops, vocal

pitching or heavy side-chain compression to create a pumping effect. When it comes to mixing and sound design, pop tracks make heavy use of EQ sweeps, risers and auto-tune, giving an effect of inhuman vocals (Renegade Producer, 2019).

My reference track is called *Attention* by the pop superstar Charlie Puth. Arrangement wise, the main feature of this track is the use of what we call an “anti-drop”. The anti-drop concept is basically building a track up to its climax, which is supposed to be embodied by the drop, but replacing it with a part that brings the dynamic all the way down instead (Rolling Stone, 2017). The anti-drop is also the main particularity of my track “Call Me Polly”. It is worth noticing that both tracks feature a vocal on the “anti-drop”, which is quite uncommon since drops as well as anti-drops are usually fully instrumental. The instrumentation between the two tracks is similar, but not identical. The verse of both tracks is stripped down featuring only a few instruments while the pre-chorus opens up with wide pads and ambient sounds. Both tracks are building up to an anti-drop that features on one hand the bass, as the main instrument underpinning the vocal, and on the other hand a traditional “4 on the floor” pattern with a massive kick.

Apart from the “anti-drop”, *Attention* is not the best track to demonstrate the influence of EDM in the pop music genre. However, Charlie’s song *We Don’t Talk Anymore* is a good example since there is clear use of vocal chops and vocal pitching towards the end of the track (Aubit Sound, 2019). Moreover, throughout the track we can hear heavy side chain compression on the acoustic guitar to create the bounce effect (Studio D, 2016).

On my track *Call Me Polly*, I used most of the techniques mentioned above. The vocal chops in the first pre-chorus of my song are going through a “little alter boy” plugins, which has the capability to pitch vocals and the formant of vocals separately.

Charlie most probably used a similar plugin for his vocal chop. I also made heavy use of the side chain compression on the pads and BVs but only for the “anti-drop”. However, instead of using the kick as the trigger for the side chain, I am using the hi-hat. This is purely because I wanted to create the “pumping” effect on the offbeat instead. I am using the Ricky Romero plugin “Kick Start”, which was specifically designed to create this pumping side-chain effect without relying on any compressors.

Vocal-wise, both Charlie’s songs are perfectly pitched and accurate, with a strong emphasis on vocals layers, which is one of Charlie’s favourite production tricks to add texture (Genius, 2019). In *Call Me Polly*, I layered five different vocals during the chorus to firstly create a greater contrast with the verse and the Pre-Chorus and secondly, fill up the empty space created through the instruments’ drop out. As a final touch, I used the plugin Vocalign to graphically quantise the vocals to each other to make them sound like one big and unified lead vocal.

Indie Folk

Reference Track: *Backwards Head* – Kim Churchill

Submitted Track: *Fired Up* – Pat Burgener

Indie-folk is a music genre that arose in the 90’s when singer-songwriters began to cross influences with country and rock music. Indie-folk music is usually acoustic, melodic and story oriented, however some of the modern indie-folk artists from the 21st century started to experiment further by introducing electronic instrumentation into their music (Nate Maingard, 2014).

Indie-folk music is usually based around one singer-songwriter playing an acoustic guitar. The rest of the instruments serve as a support with the purpose of creating an atmosphere around the artist. The goal is to fill the space around the vocal

and guitar in order to create a fuller sound that adds impact to the music. However, it is important to note that this music genre does not have a specific set-up and each song can have a completely different instrumentation depending on the mood the artist is trying to create. Modern Indie-folk artists usually take advantage of technology by using synthesisers to create atmospheric sound as well as samples to enhance their drums and rhythm sections (Ruehl, 2019).

My reference track *Backwards Head* by the Australian singer-songwriter Kim Churchill is typical for the Indie-folk genre since the whole track is based mainly on guitar and vocals but has a few elements around it to create an atmosphere. The instrumentation is deliberately minimalistic in order to prevent the listener from losing focus of the essence of the track. However, it is worthwhile noticing that to compensate for that, the guitar sound is massive and has a lot of punch. The way Kim Churchill processes his guitar plays a big role in his production. I had the chance to see him live once and I have noticed that he has three different jack lines coming out of every guitar he uses. One of them goes through a DI and a big pedal board, where he can alter the sound as he wishes while the two others go into two different electric guitar amps. In other words, it is his guitar going through amplifiers that gives this metallic tone we hear in his song *Backwards Head*. To get this big guitar sound in the chorus, Kim Churchill most probably double tracked his guitars multiple times with different amps while playing around with clean and distorted sound (Universal Audio, 2019).

In my song *Fired Up*, I really wanted to get this aggressive and metallic tone for the acoustic guitar part. Consequently, I recorded an acoustic guitar through a Neumann U87 and “re-amped” it through a “ guitar CLA” from Waves. As an attempt to add thickness to the part, I doubled the part with the same guitar and tweaked the settings on my “CLA” to create a more interesting stereo image. However, since my song has a

very different instrumentation around it, I decided to record only one double track in order to leave some space to the other instruments. It is worth noting that one of Kim Churchill's signature sound lies in open tuning; it gives a certain character and sound to the music. This is the reason why I have chosen to record *Fired Up's* guitar part in open D.

In regards of the rhythm part, Kim Churchill uses the "percussive fingerstyle" technique during the two verses of the track. Since I am not familiar with this style of playing, I have originally decided to use samples from a Cajon to get closer to the sound of a guitar used as percussion. In the end, we recorded live drums in the studio in order to add some human feel to the track. Consequently, I have asked the drummer to adapt the part by playing hits on the snare hoop with drumsticks. In addition to that, I have doubled the kicks and snares with samples during the chorus and the bridge to give an additional punch and add new textures between sections. The final result ended up capturing the feel of Kim's track while sounding unique and big in its own way.

One of the vocal productions techniques I used to add some sparks and openness in my chorus is the one-octave-up double, which can be heard in the song *After the Sun* by Kim Churchill. In order to achieve the desired effect, it is really important to mix the low vocals at higher volume than the high ones.

Soul

Reference Track: *No Ordinary Life* – Matt Corby

Submitted Track: *Lean On* – Chiara Oldano

Soul music firstly appeared in the United States in the late 50's/early 60's evolving into many different genres such as funk, dance music, hip hop and modern

R&B. Soul music has its origins in gospel music, which emerged in African-American church during the racial segregation happening at the time (English Club, 2019).

In soul music the focus is on the vocal. Soul vocalists are generally very accomplished singers and have quite often been part of gospel choirs at an early age. Consequently, they tend to have access to a wide variety of vocal's textures fluctuating from smooth and gentle to raspy and harsh, which gives this unique character and emotion to their vocal performances (Hose, 2017). Soul music is heavily influenced by Blues and therefore uses extensively the flattened third, the flattened fifth and the flattened seventh, which are often referred to as the "blue notes". It is specifically the mix between the major and the minor sound that creates this bluesy sound and feel (Jazz Duets, 2017). In terms of instrumentation, soul music is quite traditional with the use of drums, bass, electric guitar, rhodes piano, acoustic piano, horns or strings. The bass plays a really important role in the genre since it has the ability to change the sound of any chord by playing a different note than the root note, creating what is commonly referred to as "slash chords" (Clay, 2016). Soul music often uses chords with extensions such as 7th and 9th in order to create colourful harmonies, giving the genre its characteristic sound (Nero, 2018).

My reference track *No Ordinary Life* by Matt Corby clearly conforms to the musical genre in terms of vocal style and arrangement due to its complex melody, research of textures and extensive use of Choir style backing vocals (Matt Corby, 2019). Matt said himself in an interview how Marvin Gaye was one of his main influences, having listened intensively to his music every day while going to the studio when making his most recent album (Triple J, 2018). In terms of instrumentation, we find the usual suspects such as drums, piano, bass and strings.

Even though most of soul music's characteristics are present in *No Ordinary Life*, the production was accomplished in a modern and contemporary manner. The choice of sound has been made carefully and is one of the biggest aspects of the production; every sound serves the purpose of creating a "magical" and "dreamy" mood, giving the song and the full album a really interesting and unique colour (Gray, 2018). For example, strings are present in the track but in the form of "sampled strings through a mellotron" (Triple J, 2018). Matt explains in a Triple J interview (2018) how the mellotron was a big part of the album's sound and was used multiple times on every track. Of course, the mellotron has been around since the 60's and is not a modern innovation, however as Lynda Arnold from Ask Audio explains (2015) "it is the instrument that laid the root for the digitally sampled music making the culture of today". Furthermore, the way Dann Hume – producer and mixing engineer on the album – is incorporating the mellotron in this song is refreshing and different, sounding far from the way other artists such as The Beatles or Genesis used to exploit the instrument. In regards of synthesiser, a couple of Junos and a Casio mini keyboard were used to create some texture and lead parts (Australian Musician, 2018).

In terms of rhythm section, Matt cited the album *Basement Seance* by the producer Dirty Art Club as a big influence. Dirty Art Club uses a lot Hip-Hop elements and old samples to create an interesting blend of low-fi and hi-fi sounds. All of this can clearly be heard in Matt's production. Mixing wise, the drums have a specific texture to them, which might have been achieved by using some bit crusher and harmonic distortion in order to create a low-fi sound (Carr, D, 2018).

In regards of my track *Lean On*, the instrumentation is similar to *No Ordinary Life*. My main goal was to capture the "dreamy" vibe that transpires from the reference track and incorporate this mood in my track. However, since I do not have access to a

mellotron, I am using the Retro-Machine MK2 to replicate the sound of sampled strings. I also took the idea of the harp Matt is using in the intro and second verse of his track and replaced it with an arpeggiated synth coming in in the pre-chorus. In order to make it more interesting, I used the Panman from Soundtoys to create a steady left and right movement similar to what is happening with the harp on Matt's song. I also used a Prophet to create the lead part just before the first chorus.

In terms of rhythm section, I decided to create a sampled based groove since recording a full drum kit would have been too time consuming. I tried to achieve a simple groove with a hip-hop feel that would drive across the whole track with elements coming in and out in each section. I have applied some harmonic distortion and parallel compression through the colourful Fairchild and Vulf compressor to alter the sound of the drums and bring a little more life to it.

Regarding vocal processing, I really wanted to come closer to the vocal sound of Matt's recording. Consequently, I used the microshift from Soundtoys in order to create an impression of a doubled lead vocal through the whole track. In addition to that, since I am not working on final takes, I used a little bit of auto-tune to create a polished vocal while paying attention to keep a natural sound.

Conclusion

The three chosen reference tracks are a good representation of their respective genre in terms of production and musical direction, relevant to our current decade. However, it is worth noting that the classification given to the reference as well as the personal tracks is rather general due to the fact that modern music is becoming a melting pot of different musical genres. Therefore, genres cannot be classified as clearly as they used to. However, the pop music genre can be inclined to follow a given formula

regarding the song structure, instrumentation and production to reach the mass audience.

Examining indie folk music, I found that the theory of a formula tends to be less relevant in their song structure and production. Indie artists can have very different overall sounds from one another whilst still falling in the same music category. The important elements to consider instead are the strong emphasis on acoustic guitars in instrumentation and the approach to songwriting.

When doing my research on soul music, I saw that the traditional sound of the genre is retained in the vocal delivery and some of the instrumentation. However, as reflected in my reference track, the production aspect of modern soul has been greatly affected by technology with a strong emphasis on synthesisers and non-traditional sounding instrumentation. In *No Ordinary Life*, it is apparent that the careful selection of sounds is the most important aspect of the production.

An interesting future study would be to analyse the music of indie artists such as Angus & Julia Stone who reached massive popularity and explore the possible factors that make an indie act commercially successful while analysing the similarities between indie music and its pop contemporaries.

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