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Module - Foundation

Element 2 - Essay

Introduction

Upon receiving this assignment which requires me to analyse three contemporary commercial music tracks in three different musical genres/styles and then produce my own in accordance with the production techniques observed, I have aimed to choose three genres that I personally enjoy. I've also chosen tracks that I feel will both challenge my current skill level whilst also showcasing my strengths and current level of production and compositional skills.

Genre 1

Tropical house, Dance

Reference Track - Matoma - Round The World

My Production - VNRBL - Till I Die

EDM - electronic dance music tends to rely on some significant and defining features. Most typically the genre makes use of non classical, synthesised sounds which were mostly produced in the 80's at the initial emergence of what was to be EDM's overwhelming entrance into the world of commercial pop music. "It is typified by deliberately inorganic sounds and timbres, frequently produced by cheap early-1980s gear—such as the 303 bass synthesizer and the 808 drum machine, both made by Japanese electronics firm Roland—or built from samples of previous recordings..." **(Matos, 2016)**

Initially the genre was mostly based around fast paced beats and ambient, reverbed, synthesized sounds with vocals being more of a secondary element or, used as a repetitive hook rather than lengthy lyrics as one might find in a traditional songwriting format. From a social perspective the music was and it still created for DJ's to be able to keep a crowd dancing all through the night and many song lyrics are based around this notion. However, as pop music has progressed since the 80's, EDM has merged much more into the mainstream as people tend to go out to clubs more than to pubs than bars and has merged with other genres's such as singer songwriter, folk and, as per my reference track for this genre, tropical house. As a reference track for my portfolio I have chosen Matoma - Around The World. Matoma's music is defined as; Electronic dance music, Contemporary R&B, Pop music, Dancehall and Tropical house.

Production Techniques

The reference track begins with a pitched up, formanted vocal hook, before dropping into a simple house piano chord progression. I liked this idea and found a vocal sample that I felt worked well with the song to use in a similar way. At this point I am not making my own vocal samples but this is something I am aiming to do in the future.

The kick being the driving force of this track begins with a low pass filter and I also chose to apply the same BPM which is 116. As I mentioned, one of the key features of the track is the classic house piano used. I wanted to get this technique as close to Matoma's as I could. His piano had a very high attack however and I found it a little too distracting so I lessened the attack on my own piano sound and spent a lot of time tweaking the sound with EQ, low pass and high pass filters and compression techniques. It was a lot of trial and error and I trialled many plugins but ended up using Logic's stock Yamaha piano in the end. I also spent a lot of time using channel automation which muddled up the project so much I had to delete it all and started again at least three times until I felt that I was getting the desired result but I was relatively happy with the piano dynamics in the end and felt that the rest of the production was quite easy to implement once this foundational element was locked down. I gained some advice from Tileyard's in house engineer, Alessandro Favero. He showed me how to lift the threshold and add some amplification whilst lifting up the higher frequencies via EQ to make sound brighter.

In terms of the vocals I had asked Joel Winterflood to sing on this track with a song we had written together for the songwriting camp at the beginning of the term and I engineered his vocals in one of the Arturia writing rooms at Tileyard. I had typically recorded a lead vocal dry with a slight touch of reverb and compression to make Joel feel comfortable and confident whilst recording. I was intending to do a lot of further work on the vocal editing for this track in terms of pitch correction, quantisation of the vocal to ensure perfect syllable placement as is common in the EDM genre and I intended to layer up the vocals with extra takes we recorded for the chorus to widen the sound and make the vocal more impacting and up front. However, as this was the final track for me to finish, I had left it until the last minute to look closely at the vocal I had recorded from Joel. It turned out that I would have had to spend hours on pitch correction and I realised that I just wouldn't have time so at this point, decided to record my own simple, repetitive vocal hook to put in simply as a placeholder with the intention of at least having a vocal to meet the requirements of this project and genre. I decided that although simple, most vocal parts in this genre are hook lines. I used some low pass and hi pass filters

throughout the duration of the song on the vocal itself to give the hook some more interest and help with the song dynamics.

Genre 2

Alternative/Dark r@b

Reference Track - The Weeknd - The Hills

My Production - VNRBL feat Chloe Dunbar - SFYL

Dark, alternative or contemporary r@b is a newish genre formed from other musical genres such as blues soul, funk, hip hop, rap and edm ranging back from some of the fathers of blues and soul in the fifties. Over the past five years there has been a new form of r@b, made famous by artists such as urban artists like The Weeknd and Stormzy who have taken these early genres and made them into something new with the addition of dark ambient pads, trap influenced hi hats and overly synthesized, re-pitched and or amplified vocal hooks containing simple, repetitive and syncopated lyrics and melodies. The main reference track I had for this genre was The Hills by The Weeknd but I listened to a lot of trap music and tried not to stick to the reference track too much. The Hills is in C minor and sits at 113 beats per minute where as I produced my track in D# minor which was mostly because I was inspired by a vocal sample initially and decided I liked the feel of the key so I decided to leave it.

I haven't produced anything in this genre before I was conscious of my constant need to 'put the kitchen sink in it,' as I've been told in the past. I tried to keep things quite simple and repetitive and make the additional elements almost undetectable to the average listener with the subtle addition of a layered clap or additional kick drum at the chorus. I used a one shot sample from Splice for the bass which I then dragged into Kontakt. The trap hi hats I also cut up from a sample and then played from Kontakt, panning them left and right in places, with the addition of some fast placed tremolo to create a bit more interest.

Initially I had produced this track without much thought of a song or vocalist for it but as it happened I had by chance played the track to Tileyard's Chloe Dunbar and she immediately loved it and offered to topline the track. I agreed and sent her track. She wrote the song and recorded and edited the lead vocals herself. I had already included

some vocal samples in the instrumental which she blended with perfectly. I liked what she did so much that I have not done any further editing at this point and she intends to release the song this year.

I felt happy with what I achieved on this track on some levels but at the same time felt a bit disappointed with it at some points and think I could probably have added some more interesting elements but for the sake of handing this in on time I've left it for now.

In terms of composition this track is very simple. It's mainly about the sub bass and the vocal formant that gives the instrumental the melodic interest. I have used some very subtle noise sweeps and kept the transitions very empty for the vocal. I didn't really use any fills because I wanted to make use of space in this track instead. Obviously the hi hats change to sixteenth notes for the chorus for which I used another sample.

I layered with some alchemy pads and implemented some claps on the off beat in the second chorus. I felt that I could have built the final chorus and also that if the vocal were to be re-done it would need some adlibs and harmonies because it feels a little flat to me and felt like a bit of an anti-climax. Overall I find this genre a bit boring but thought it would be current and also somewhat easy to produce or at least what I did with it anyway. I really liked the application of the chorus vocal in the reference track I used and actually, I've used that technique in my singer/songwriter track for which this track was also a sub-influence. I'm very into these vocal techniques used and it's an element I very much like to use in my own production but to this point I am relying on samples but am looking into making my own and finding my own unique sound with this. I've put more work into that in the next track which was the most recent one I have produced and written, 'What I Can't Have.'

Genre 3

Afro beat, singer/songwriter, pop

Reference Track - Justin Bieber - Sorry

My Production - VNRBL - What I Can't Have

Once again this genre is a recently emerging genre which has been born out of original early genre's such as reggae, acoustic singer songwriter and r@b. Music in 2020 seems to be a meshing of multiple genre's and world influences. Anything goes really and the use of world instruments layered with modern synthesizers is also becoming a strong trend, in particularly with the layering of a re-pitched and or, largley processed vocal hook. With urban beats and influences coming more to the forefront of commercial pop music in the last ten years, genre's like tropical house, afro, latin and trap have made their way into the singer, songwriter pop genre with the meshing of the influence of electronic dance music resulting in an interesting to the ear, combination of world instruments combined with a strong song behind the groove and typical EDM builds and drops that enable the singer, songwriter to access the DJ led, dance floor, club music evolution.

"When you're sitting at home and you have a laptop, and an infinite number of creative possibilities, you're gonna get bored really quickly with doing things that have been done before. There's an explosion of new genres based on things merging together."...

(Gudstadt, 2011)

With the club scene becoming so strong and music becoming much more digital, live music venues are becoming less reliant on bands and DJ's are popping up everywhere even at festivals. Our ears have adapted to perfectly quantised rhythms, even velocity across the board and perfectly pitched vocals. Even vocals that seem to be unedited have been massively edited none the less and even live acts are now also performed with live auto tune and backing tracks as opposed to a live band.

In terms of the production on the reference track, Sorry, by Justin Bieber and produced by Skrillex and Blood Pop and is really where Skrillex made his entry into the mainstream pop sector for the first time with his signature stype, pitched and synthesized vocal layering. It has always been a popular tecnique in dance music originating from disco back in the 70's, but his tecnique has become recognizable in recent years and is now used in many chart hit songs including songs by the Chainsmokers, DJ Snake, DJ Lazer

and one of my main influences, Zedd. The vocal hook is what really makes this song, despite the law suit put forward by pop artist White Hinterland, claiming that they stole her vocal sample for the song for which she was not credited.

Despite all this, I think the vocal hook is what really makes the song and this was something that I added to my own production at the very end because I felt my song also needed something unique to make it stand out and be more recognizable. “Björn and Benny of Abba said you should have at least five hooks in a track.” **(The Guardian, 2011)**

I’d like to say I made my own vocal hook but I searched Splice for a vocal sample in the same key and bpm of my song and found the one I felt fit and placed it accordingly.

In terms of the beat, I did my best to re-create it as similarly as I could and also found some similar tropical drum sounds to use as some sparse fills in places.

For me this song was really ‘the one’ in terms of it being the first song I’ve written for my new artist project VNRBL. I wanted the song to really reflect me and my truest feelings and initially I had a laid back r@b beat on the song. I felt that with the sadness and dark energy of the song, that it could actually be really interesting to make it up tempo and at that point I decided to experiment with some alternative rhythmic ideas. With afro and trap being so at the forefront of commercial music at the moment I decided I would find a song with a similar bpm and lyrical concept and that was how I stumbled across using ‘Sorry’ as a reference track. I tried it and felt that it worked and the rest is history. I also kept the layout and structure of the song the same but have used a different chord progression with a different key signature where as the tempo is the same.

I used about three different drum kits from Native Instruments Battery and actually used a standard Logic piano which I EQ’d and added reverb and delay too as well as using some layers from Serum and Alchemy. The bass is from Serum.

In terms of my vocal on this, I had already written the song itself and started production with the chords on the piano and built the song from there. As mentioned above I also took influences from The Weeknd’s vocal techniques in this song and have used an amplifier on the chorus vocal for which I achieved by using Sound Toy’s Little Alter Boy plug-in. I also used this plug-in to layer some pitched vocals in some sections, under key words in the verses and other parts of the song. There is a low formant, pitched down, two octaves under the chorus vocal and I’ve used auto tune to give this song the processed, digital effect I was looking for but only in certain parts that I automated with

the use of channel automation in Logic. I recorded it at home with my SM58 Shure Microphone and probably should have used a pop filter. I spent a lot of time editing out breaths and made some pitch correction using Logic's in built flex pitch. I also tried some rhythmic editing for the first time using flex rhythm but may have made things worse. I'll need to practice with this a lot more but I was also rushing due to time constraints on the project. I wasn't too worried though because of the simple fact that pop vocals are so processed today. "Pop vocals don't need to be performed by exceptional vocalists. In fact, the vocal performance no longer needs to be impressive in the traditional sense - but it does still need to be impressive generally. Producers are always looking for new ways to process and treat vocals in order to add interest to the listening experience, so make a habit of experimenting with your recordings." **(Music Radar, 2020)**

I would have liked to take more time to practice my song and record the vocals properly adding more doubles, harmonies and ad-libs. I plan to re-record this song for my final project and to use for my own artist EP and will be using this track for the single proposal element of this assignment.

Conclusion

I found this project quite a challenge to finish due to the ankle fracture at the end of last term. Working creatively was quite an effort and I found it hard to focus for long periods of time. It was also quite an isolating experience as my ability to come into the studio and work with other people was also limited and it's been hard to remain positive. In some ways this was a good thing however, because I had to stop and stand still and really assess where I was at with my production level. Usually I'm really excited and produce with a lot of enthusiasm but don't get quite as technical as this project has forced me to do. It was really beneficial to look at some different genre's although I also wanted to keep my own style and flavour within the different genre's so I also chose genre's that whilst being different, could work alongside each other. It has highlighted to me my areas of weakness which I think I already knew basically, but this task has really clarified it for me. I want to get to the point where I am creating my own vocal samples and chops and find my own unique style with that in some way. Also, I need to spend more time editing vocals. Up until now I have left that to a vocal engineer so this was the first time I've both recorded and edited my own. I can hear all the problems but wasn't quite sure how to make them any better than I have although I'm sure if I knew more about EQ'ing I would, which leads me to the next point. In terms of my mixing. I was somewhat happy with the

levels but obviously there's a lot of room for improvement and need for some more technical learning in terms of techniques like EQ'ing, compression and general mixing and mastering. I'm really looking forward to the lessons coming up and will hopefully learn about a lot more of this and it will be great when I am off these crutches and can get back to the lessons and into the studio easily again.

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