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Reflective Commentary

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Introduction

In this essay my aim is to write my personal reflection during this project. I will be looking into the research I have undertaken which have helped me develop my actions and analyse those that were taken. I will be discussing new skills that I have acquired and the setbacks/ difficulties on completing this project. Being able to use critical reflection I will be able to examine what went well, what I could've done better or differently and finally to create a plan of how I approach future projects and learn from previous projects like this one. Critical reflection is about stepping back and challenges us to examine our thinking by asking ourselves probing questions. ("Reflective Practice" CD ROM © 2007). A model that fits how I approached the project well is called the "ERA cycle" (Jasper, 2013), I found this model which has three stages to help breakdown my reflective thoughts on this project. See Appendix A for this model. I will refer to this model throughout this essay by talking about my experience, my reflection of my feelings of the experience and the action that I have taken upon my findings.

The Project

My plan for this project was to create a 6-8 track EP which included some of my own productions as well as collaborating with up-and-coming producers or already established producers from the area of Liverpool. The EP would be produced to a professional standard which included the tracks being mixed and mastered. Within this EP I wanted to explore different sub genres of electronic music, ranging from 'Tech house', 'Melodic Techno' and 'Techno'. My aim was to incorporate my skills as a 'Melodic Techno' producer and use elements from other genres to create new interesting concepts, ultimately pushing the boundaries of these genres and sub-genres.

My first task was to reach out to artists that I wanted to collaborate with and discuss my plans previously mentioned. The first artist that I reached out to who has also taught me a lot of production skills – 'Kinnerman'. I spoke to him regarding my interesting in collaborating in the studio. Kinnerman is known for producing Tech House and has released on very respectable labels such as 'Elrow', 'Sola', 'Toolroom' and many more. We came up with the idea that we would take elements of his Tech House productions and make it more melodic venturing into the Melodic House/Techno sub genres. Due to having schedules that didn't overlap we were able to produce two tracks together – 'I'm Sorry' and 'Rave Culture'. In these productions we were able to use a contrast of House elements, tech house elements and Melodic Techno elements that use interesting production techniques. With access to a lot of different analog equipment including compressors, drum machines and synthesizers, we wanted to take full advantage of this in our productions. In 'I'm Sorry' we used the Behringer MonoPoly for the lead sound. A production technique that's now commonly used in Melodic House/Techno is modulating the synths with an LFO (Low Frequency Oscillators). The LFO is used to manipulate the cut-off frequency which creates interesting, automated filter effects which you can hear being used in the breakdown of the track around 4:50. The LFO uses a sine wave as this gives out the most fluid continuous motion. As this is a dance track, movement within the sounds is key as this creates groove and a rhythm so that an audience can dance to. We capitalise on this by creating a sidechain between the kick and the bass allowing the bass to duck in-between the kicks giving a pulsating effect. I wanted to create different effects with the vocals which would help enhance the track and make it more interesting for the listener, so I used a gating effect (Trance Gate) on the voice which creates a stutter in the audio. This technique is from the early 1990's There are several ways to create a gating effect, in this instance I used a plugin

called 'Glitch 2'. I find this plugin creates the best gated effects as it has a 'Smoothing' modulation pan pot attached to the Gate. This softens the attack of the Gating effect which makes the sound less harsh and easier to listen to. See Appendix B.

The second track we made 'Rave Culture'. We followed on with the same style as the last, combining Tech House, with Melodic House/ Techno. Previously talking about groove, we wanted to follow on from the 'I'm Sorry' and use more production tricks that allow a groove to be established. With the hats in this track, we used variant velocities to allow movement in the hi hats to give it a more natural feel. Within Ableton you can do this by putting the sample in a Midi channel and changing the velocities on the piano roll. See Appendix C. Before starting this track, we spoke about what currently is popular within these genres and how we want to implement said inspiration to this production. In this case we looked at Bicep. These are known for melodic and euphoric melodies, breakbeats and ethereal vocals. If we had more time to create this production, we would've set aside a day to bring in a female vocalist to add some phrasal vocals or harmonies to the track, however we found a sample folder online which had female ethereal vocals which fit perfectly. The same production technique 'Trance Gating' was used in this track to give a 'signature sound' to the two tracks that we were making. This is important as it will make our tracks unique and for the purpose of sending to labels, the two productions would fit together in an EP which would entice a label to sign the two tracks. On the other hand, if you had two completely different sounding tracks each track may suit a different label and it would also lose the identity of the collaboration between myself and Kinnerman.

My next collaboration is with an up-and-coming artist from Liverpool called 'TMoran'. I had made a connection with this producer through social network. I got in touch with him explaining my final project, outlining that I was working on an EP with local artists to the area of Liverpool. We scheduled in a studio session where we booked 'Pirate Studios' in Liverpool. There were difficulties scheduling this as there is only one production studio on site there. As me and Tom 'TMoran' both have working commitments this became increasingly difficult to slot in a space, however we managed to sort out a slot which worked for both of us. We were able to book the studio for a slot of 7 hours which instantly put us under a time constraint and loaded pressure onto the two of us. Luckily, we got straight into the project and were able to create a solid structure and arrangement for the track 'Re-Enter Babylon'. We both discussed what style we were going to look at producing which was Melodic Techno and searched for some references in which we wanted to implement into our track. A mutual agreement was made on making a track like some of our favourite producers such as 'Mind Against', 'Fideles' and 'Innellea'. We created a track which would tell a story which in most melodic techno tracks you can follow. The main lead in this track is an arpeggiated saw which we notice is used a lot in the track. We then created a dark atmosphere using ethereal sounding pads which complimented our lead. The rolling bass that we used in this track would help drive the track and give it movement and energy. After the structure and arrangement of the track was laid down, we both agreed that I would be able to take the project back and mix and master the track in my own time. In the future given there was more time to work on this project, I would have booked another two sessions to really sculpt the track and add more interesting features such as FX and ear candies that keeps the listener engaged. I personally feel that this track lacks the total engagement of the listener due to not having many of these fx's or ear candies included. To have gone a step further I would've homed in on the sound design and added some production techniques such as LFO modulation and added an ethereal vocal to fill out some of the empty gaps in arrangement. Tom is working towards a self-release in the near future to build on his repertoire of having signed to a few local labels of Liverpool and hopes to branch out to labels such as 'Atlant' and 'Afterlife'. I would certainly in the future look to collaborate again with him and push aside more time so that we can really get the best out of one of other.

Another collaboration in my EP is with an emerging artist from Liverpool called 'Jordavo'. Within the last year huge success has been delivered from Jordavo after having a track signed to one of the biggest labels in the electronic music industry at this time called 'Trick'. Trick is a label owned by a pioneer of tech house called Patrick Topping. Trick is a fantastic label platformed by Patrick Topping which showcases artists at the forefront of House and Techno. He uses this label to really push through emerging artists such as Jordavo which helps gives them exposure to the scene and to build their repertoire upon that. Patrick Topping released an EP on his label called 'Tasty Techno' to which Jordavo got his release on with his track 'Fun Tonight'. This was a slightly different release on this label as Trick is usually known to release only House and Tech house productions. This caught my attention to Jordavo as I hadn't heard of him before. I reached out to Jordavo through social media once again explaining my final project and asked whether he would be interested in collaborating with myself. We then discussed this further over a zoom call to express our interests in our productions and to see what Jordavo's direction was going in since releasing on Trick. I was told that from him that he wanted to explore more of the Techno scene and produce a lot darker tracks that was also more minimal, straying away from the commercial side of House and Techno genres. We booked in a studio session in his studio to which we created the track 'Dragonite'. As always I asked what producers inspire Jordavo and what style he wanted to create in this track. In Dragonite we took inspiration from Techno Pioneers 'Jeff Mills', 'Alan Fitzpatrick' and 'Layton Giordani'. This was a venturing into a slightly new ballpark for me as this production is a lot more minimal and bass focused. We investigated current releases on labels such as 'Codex' and 'Drumcode' to select the type of sounds that we wanted to use in this production. With both having an interest in a track from Jeff Mills called 'The Bells' we wanted to use a lead like this to be the focus of the track. As the melodies are mostly straight and wanted to keep the listeners interest in the track, we took full advantage of using ear candies and different types of percussion to help change up the track directing focus onto these elements in the track whilst creating this hypnotic style of techno that sets you into a trance. After creating the arrangement and structure of the track, we set aside another day of booking in the studio with each other to do a mixdown and a master on the track. We wanted to capture a certain style of mixing during this process as looking from similar tracks in this genre of Techno, heavy compression is used on the bass and drums that give the track a fuller and defining body to the production. Usually for sending tracks to a label we have both taken the same stance where we would mix the track down to around -6db to -8Db for a label to then use a mastering engineer to master the production. In this case due to time constraints, we used an AI mastering service online called 'Landr'. Given that we had more time and were looking to send this to labels, another two tracks would have been produced in the same style for a smaller EP. We would've got in touch with a mastering engineer to really bring out each element in this track. Another advantage to using a different mastering engineer is that they can listen to the track with fresh ears and bring out the mix from a different perspective.

Another track that I created in this EP is a self-production in the genre called 'Melodic House/Techno'. This track is called 'I don't belong'. In this track I wanted to create a melodic story with the use of emotional melodies supported with a phrasal vocal. The use of breakdowns to capture the emotion in this track was an important decision to set the listener into a trance. The changes of bass from a bouncing bass to a long-sustained bass in the breakdowns helps slow down the track so that the emotional melodies can take over and heighten the effect of creating emotion and suspense. I created atmospheres from the vocals with the use of reverbs to glue the track together through different transitions. A recent investment of mine was from my production teacher to which he has created a piece of software within 'TouchOsc' which links a tablet/phone to the laptop allowing you to create automations on channel sends such as reverbs and delays. This sped up the process in creating these transitions as I could jam on the keyboard whilst using a tablet to add reverb builds and delays whilst recording melodies into the DAW. This helped me massively with my creative flow as I had everything at my fingertips and having to do each separate thing one at a

time. Usually, I would create a melody first and then after it's been recorded in, I will draw in automation into the DAW which sometimes does stunt my creative flow. This allowed me to fill out the arrangement of the track a lot faster so I could focus on ear candies such as the LFO on the vocals and the reversed reverb vocals to use as transition FX. After I finished the arrangement, I then mixed the track down to -6Db and used the online AI mastering service 'Landr'. From this production I believe that I have implemented too many house/ tech house production techniques and sounds which has hindered me gaining the true melodic house/techno style from that I wanted to get out of this production.

I said in my proposal that I would be sending some of these tracks off to labels in hope that they would get signed. Due to timeframes and schedules of myself, Kinnerman and labels, by the time we finished these two tracks, we sent them to a label called 'Sola'. Sola is a record label based in Manchester and ran by two of one of the biggest Tech House DJ's in the industry – 'Solardo'. As Kinnerman has previously released on their label we already had established contacts with one another meaning that there was a higher chance that our two tracks would be more likely to be listened to than if there wasn't a contact established there.

A self production delving into the melodic techno genre, thinking outside of the box and taking inspiration from other genres and incorporating it into the track. 'Keep Movin' was based around the vocal that was found from a splice sound pack. From following the melodic techno scene and engaging into the direction of where it is heading, the genre is using more vocals to create cinematic effects to really engage the listener and giving them a hook to catch onto which makes the tracks more interesting and consequently more commercial. The human voice has that connection with the audience as the spoken word is very natural which gets its point across very directly. A track between 2-3 minutes it's a lot easier to use vocals that will convey emotions. Whereas within this genre a track can be from 5-8 minutes long which would make it harder to convey these emotions through vocals. Top labels within this genre including: 'Afterlife', 'Atlant', 'Running clouds' and more are pushing the genre into a more commercial field with the use of more spoken words, dialogue and original vocals. The reason that melodic techno hasn't always used vocals from its early stages is because of where the origin of the sub genre comes from; techno. Techno first emerged out of Detroit, U.S and then quickly became a hotspot for the genre in Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s. These tracks would be very industrial using lots of percussive elements to create different grooves and rhythms that the audience could dance to in the clubs. An epos formed around techno as it was an underground genre that had no rules and was all about doing things differently juxtaposed to commercial and mainstream music otherwise known as 'Pop' and 'Rock'. These mainstream genres are heavily dominated by vocal performances. With the instant impact and increase in popularity of this underground genre, at the same time within the market of studio equipment such as drum machines and synthesisers, they became much more affordable and accessible. It was no longer necessary to have to book a studio and be in a studio space to create electronic music. As a result of this more electronic music would be created and as the same time of this, to be able to have a vocalist on the track you would either have the voice for it or the financials to get a singer to sing on their tracks. After thirty to forty years since this genre emerged and also blossomed into several other sub genres including melodic techno, it had become the normality to not have vocals in tracks. The evolution of DAW's has once again changed how we now can produce as it's become more accessible to different ways of processing having access to compressors and limiters built into the DAW. Progressing into the year 2000's to the current day it became easier to sample and take harmonic vocals and use them in productions. Within melodic techno after 2015, the first glimpses of vocals we would hear was Ethereal voices as well as spoken word vocals such as speeches and dialogue from films or interviews. One of the first artists to implement vocals into melodic techno

was 'Monolink' who is known for his ethereal and melancholic vocals. Having it becoming more common for the use of vocals in this sun genre, the harmonic vocals would be chopped up and shorter to create more phrased vocals and speech. With speech and dialogue now heavily implanted into melodic techno the popular use of vocals is now minimal and futuristic vocals which are a lot shorter allowing the vocals to stand out and not take over the track. Within the breakdowns of the tracks a mixture of spoken word and harmonic futuristic vocals can be used to enhance the story of the track.

The overall sound of the genre has now become futuristic, aggressive yet also emotional. I tried to take some of these aspects into this production with having a trance like breakdown and building up an atmosphere which then leads into a fast and aggressive drop with creating the bass stabs to play on the aggressive effect. A production trick that I recently learnt which was to layer this sound with three different elements allowing them to really push through the mix with a big impact. One layer being the tonal sound of the stab which is in a low register giving a full-bodied pluck for the drive of the stab. Another layer being the white noise of the stab so that it cuts through the mix and adds to the aggressiveness of the stab.

As this was the first track, I made for the EP I had the most time to plan what I was going to do with it. Earlier on this year I reached out to a label called 'Running Clouds' to which I had created a track that I thought would suit them. I got a reply from them saying that they were interested in signing an EP from myself. Unfortunately, I hadn't enough tracks produced and set at a high standard to send them to go forward with this. After making this track, I thought that this would definitely suit their label too. From learning from my previous mistake of rushing this process of being signed to a label, I wanted to ensure that I was going to do it right this time. I reached out to a friend of mine who runs a label and is part of a very successive duo in the Melodic Techno industry. I explained to him my plan of getting this track mastered so that I could get back in touch with 'Running Clouds' to see if they would like to release this track along with the previous track that I had produced this year. He offered to sell me a mastering service of this track for £150. Meti from 'Mia Mendi' sent back three revisions of different mastering types on this track to which I would choose the one I liked the best. I was very pleased with the result of the master as I feel that each element was brought out in the mix properly and gave a solid definition to the production that I had made. Upon sending me the track back, I only received the .MP3 file rather than the .WAV. Unfortunately, due to schedules, Meti has been touring around India and couldn't re-export this track to a .WAV in time for my submission. I was told by him that he masters all of his tracks in MP3 as there is a demo submission service called 'Inflyte' which is widely used from clients of his own and explained that when sending to labels usually only a premaster would be sufficient as the labels would use their own in-house mastering engineer to master the EP. Learning from this I believe it was a communication error as I had told him that I wanted to send this track to a label and hadn't discussed that I was also using this track for a submission for my final project.

In conclusion to creating this 6 track EP, looking back at the ERA Cycle model. My experience overall was very positive as I have been able to network the city of Liverpool to which is where I am from and met some fantastic talent that I will be sure to collaborate and work with in the future. I have learnt more production techniques and learnt further on understanding and organising scheduling with other producers as this seems to be the biggest issue whilst collaborating. From being able to produce in different styles throughout this EP it has also taught me to think outside of the box and take inspiration from different genres or take inspiration from other producers and learn to make it my own to make my own productions sound unique that stands out to the audience. What I would do for future projects would be to further organise myself and learn to communicate better with other producers to really outline what each session should involve. For example, the first studio session will be to create the arrangement, the second studio session to work on elaborating on the production and adding more production techniques along with ear candy and fxs, then the final

session to work on the mixdown and the master of the track. Regarding labels, I have learnt that each label is different to one another but the biggest lesson I have learnt is not to rush into getting the track signed. It is important that you are ready as a producer to have a catalogue of tracks that are ready to be sent to them and to make sure that the tracks are of a similar style which fit that specific label. Growing as an artist in the future, I will be creating a catalogue of tracks within my desired genre of Melodic Techno. I will continue to network within the industry to gain more insight into how it is evolving and how I can keep up with current trends in production so that I will be able to one day release a strong EP on a label that I can use as a foundation to grow off. Once I will have a strong release on a respectable label, I will then be able to collaborate with more established producers which may result in me becoming part of a booking agency to allow me to travel around the world playing DJ sets and showcasing my productions to the world. With already having a connection established with 'Running Clouds' I will be able to re contact them in the future with more tracks from my catalogue which would gain a release on the label, creating more exposure for myself to become more widely recognised in the Melodic Techno industry.

Reference List:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxyQNgNKUf8&t=62s>

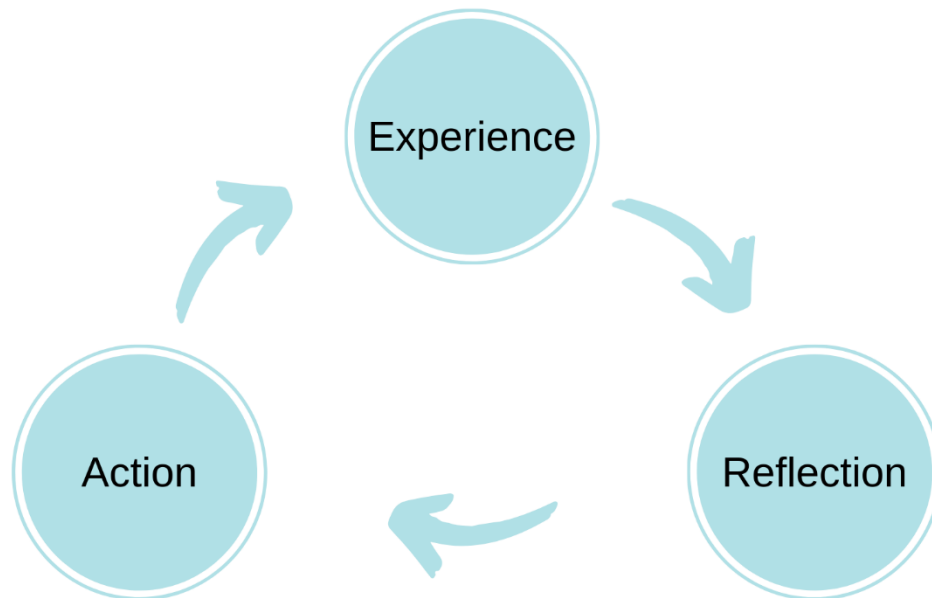
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxGswH6XLto&t=18s>

<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/models>

<https://www.izotope.com/en/learn/5-popular-music-production-techniques-and-how-to-create-them.html>

Appendix

Appendix A –



This diagram shows the ERA Cycle model (Jasper, 2013).

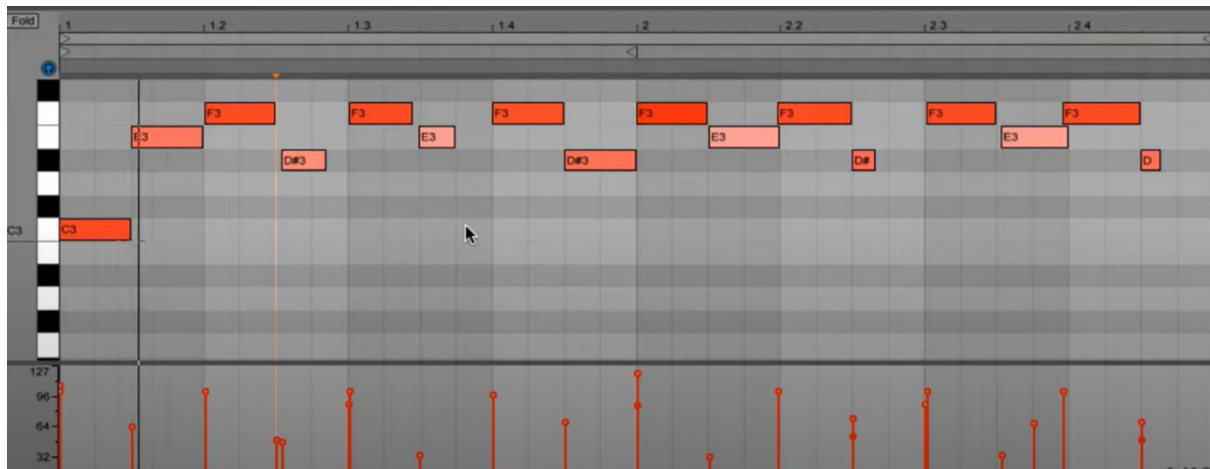
This is a simple model of reflection which only contains the three stages which are: Experience, Reflection and Action. In my final project I have written about my experience of creating this 6 track EP, I have then spoken about what went well and what didn't go well and then finally I have touched on the final stage of this model which is my future actions going into future projects and what I would do differently.

Appendix B-



Here is a screenshot of a plugin I used called 'Glitch 2'. This is demonstrating the trance gate production effect that I have used over several tracks in this EP to get a stutter like effect on vocal samples. The Step Time dial is the rate of what the plugin will be gating on the audio, for most of the examples of this I have used a 1/16th step time with the 'Even' setting enabled. Sometimes I thought that the attack of this gate was too harsh, therefore I used the dial next to it called 'Smoothing' to soften the attack of the gate in result the effect was less harsh on the ears.

Appendix C –



This is a screenshot of a midi clip which shows the effect of velocity changes. I used this effect widely on almost all my projects to create rhythm and groove on drums such as Hi-hats. I have even used this feature on basslines that help the tracks give a more human and natural feel to the productions.