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Module: Foundation
Module Code: ADAD7003

F2 – Essay

Word count: 2898

An Analysis of Reggaeton, Mariachi and Synth Pop

At the end of every year music streaming platforms release a list of the most streamed artists of that year such as Spotify Wrapped (Bowenbank, 2021). I have used this data to choose the three genres I will be analysing in this essay which are mariachi, reggaeton, and disco/synth pop. This analysis aims to look at the different characteristics of each genre from arrangement to the mix of the tracks. I will also be discussing how I have implemented these approaches and techniques into my final project. Each genre I have chosen has had an artist in the Top 10 list of most globally streamed in 2022 on Spotify or Vevo.

Genre: Mariachi

Mariachi music is a traditional folk genre that derives from Mexico. It became popular in the 1950s through the Mexican film industry and many artists such as Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante went from performing in opera to mariachi to gain national recognition (Pedelty, 1999). Today mariachi music is still having commercial appeal with artists such as Christian Nodal whose song 'Adios Amor' alone has amassed over 1.2 billion views on YouTube. Christian Nodal was also in the top 10 most streamed artists globally on Vevo in 2022 (Vevo, 2022).

Mariachi is characterised by two instruments that gives its signature sound that is the:

- Mexican Vihuela which is a 5-string nylon guitar tuned to ADGBE – with the ADG strings tuned one octave higher than that of a classical guitar (Blattman, 2022). This gives the vihuela a brighter sound compared to a classical guitar.
- Guitarron which is a 6-string acoustic bass guitar that has a deep and bassy tone (Sweetwater, 2006).
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These two instruments are followed by a musical ensemble that usually consists of six violins, three trumpets, and the classical guitar (Nieto and Phillips, 2005). Bigger established bands such as Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan will include a harp and solo artists such as Luis Miguel and Juan Gabriel will have an orchestra to accompany them.

I did not have access to a full mariachi band or orchestra when recording, so I used samples to record the guitarron, violin, and woodwind sections. I recorded guitar and trumpet which balanced out the whole song to make it sound more real. I also did not have a vihuela so to try and compensate for this I tripled-tracked the guitar: panning it left, right and centre, doing this added more energy to the song. I did play open chords on the three guitars and to improve the sound of the guitars next time I should have used barre chords to differentiate the guitars and even better a capo to get a brighter sound to try and emulate the vihuela. There are vihuela samples available online however none had the strumming pattern I needed for this song. Other instrumentation used was percussion as these can be heard in No Discutamos by Luis Miguel and Por Que Me Haces Llorar by Juan Gabriel. I've also added an electric piano to give a more airy and vintage sound.

There are many styles and rhythms of mariachis including cumbias, sones, polkas, and waltzes. I recorded in the bolero ranchero style which is a hybrid of Cuban Bolero music

appropriated by Mexican composers in the 1940s using mariachi instruments (vihuela, violins, trumpet, guitarron) to create a new Mexican style called 'Bolero Ranchero' (Hart and Young, 2003). The style is characterised by its straightforward love lyrics and the preference for a major mode (Horn, D. et al. 2014) which I followed writing in the key of G Major (I, VI, II, V). I wrote my track in a tempo of 110 and in 4/4 time which is the normal time signature for a bolero ranchero (PopeJoy, no date), this is also a similar tempo to two of the reference tracks.

The guitar in my song is playing rhythm throughout the whole song playing 8th notes with the chords throughout the song being G, Em, Am, D whilst the bass is playing a half note followed by three-quarter notes. This essentially gives the bolero feel to the track with the percussion emphasising this further. I did not record vocals on this song but opted for an instrumental version, which is common in the mariachi genre as you can hear in the reference track La Bikina by Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan. Instrumental songs are more common in other mariachi styles such as corridos and pasos dobles however it is not exclusive to these only. To add more dynamics to the songs rather than just trumpets and strings playing, I added an accordion. If I were to record a bolero ranchero next time, I would record vocals, however, it will have to be a trained singer in the style of mariachi.

Throughout the song I did add trumpet fills, these can also be heard in the reference tracks with the violins, I opted to use trumpet instead of the violin as it was recorded live rather than samples adding more realism. In mariachi music, sound effects are rarely used as it is acoustic folk music however, I did add a sweeping sound effect in the intro of the song as a transition from strings and woodwinds to the mariachi band as this made the track sound bigger.

Once I had the whole song recorded, I mixed the whole track down starting with the levels of the guitar, guitarron, and percussion as these are the foundation and rhythm of the whole track. I also felt this is what carries the whole song forward and holds the weight of the entire song so getting the balance right was essential. As mariachi is live instruments and getting the essence of each instrument is what makes a good mix, there is not much processing done on each instrument. Each instrument had EQ, compression, tube saturation, and reverb, there wasn't much room for experimentation as you do not want to change the sound of a live instrument too much. For the pad section of the songs (strings and woodwinds) I did not add any processing at all as I already liked the sound of the samples as they were and did not want to change it, so I just sorted out levels of these to sit well in the mix. In the reference track Por Que Me Haces Llorar you can hear the strings take centre stage and then also sit back during the verse which is what I tried to do using volume automation. The trumpet in the track was the most challenging part to mix especially the muted trumpet, I recorded the trumpet using an AKG C414 microphone. I then added EQ ensuring it brightened the sound but didn't make it sound too squeaky and annoying to the ears. The normal trumpet also followed the same pattern however I tried to EQ the trumpet, so it had more presence rather than sounding bland or dull. Overall, I believe the mix stuck well together, with this genre of mariachi doing too much can damage the sound of the track so keeping it simple is the best option going forward.

Creating a mariachi song (bolero ranchero) was very interesting, especially in trying to emulate a live band using mostly samples. Mariachi music also has a lot going on the back of the lead if it's not a violin doing melodies in the background then it's a trumpet doing fills which is something I should have done more in my track as it makes it more interesting. I also could have done more experimentation with microphone positions when recording as when I recorded the guitars because I was just recording chords, I just positioned the mic close to the sound hole, maybe putting a second mic further away in the room would have got a different sound which enhanced the track.

Genre: Reggaeton

Reggaeton is a genre originating from Latin America especially Panama and Puerto Rico influenced by reggae and rap (Efe, 2012). The genre has blown up in recent years with artists such as Daddy Yankee and Bad Bunny: the song Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee is the longest-running number one in the UK chart history in a foreign language (Blake, 2017). Bad Bunny was also for the third year running the most streamed artist globally on Spotify (Spotify, 2022).

The Reggaeton trademark sound is the drum and how it's programmed or sampled with the steady kick drum on every beat and the syncopated snare (Rivera, Marshall, Hernandez 2009). This drum pattern is known as Dembow and it is practically used in every reggaeton song, it originates from a two-bar loop of the song Poco Man Jam by Gregory Peck but was popularised by Shabba Ranks with his song Dem Bow in the 90s (Marshall, 2013). In my production I used the dembow drum pattern using a loop however I did change the overall tone and feel to the dembow drum loop so that the chorus and verse were complete opposite to each other. I started by adding a low pass filter using the channel EQ in Logic Pro as this is what reggaeton producers do in some songs. This can be heard in the reference track Agua by Tainy and J Balvin: listening from 0:41 (the chorus) to 0:51 (the verse) you can hear a filter has been added to the drums and this changes the whole dynamic of the track. After doing this I felt as if the drums still sounded similar but just with a filter added on top, so I decided to chop up the loop and add extra kick hits to play at the same time as the bassline on the chorus. This I felt differentiated the chorus to the verse and added more excitement to the track, especially the chorus.

When producing a track producer Tainy explains that he usually decides if the song will be driven by a chord progression or a melody line which he can build further during the song with effects (Pitchfork, 2020). This is the same approach I took after I dragged the dembow drum loop into Logic, I played around with different synths on Arturia's Analog Lab V and created a melody line. The whole song is in the key of A minor and the only chord I play in the song is an A minor. The reason I did not add any more chords was that I felt like if I added more chords I would have to add more to the melody/riff and this would have taken away from the track rather than add. In the reference track Titi Me Pregunto by Bad Bunny, the first chorus, verse, and the second chorus is also just one chord (Em) and in Agua majority of the song is just Em and C, so for this type of reggaeton production chord progression doesn't really drive the songs. This also supported my decision in the chopping up the drum loop to add more energy to the song.

When structuring the song, I did try and use a strophic form song structure going for riff – riff - verse – bridge -riff – verse - riff however the more I worked on the track the riff did turn into choruses and tilted more towards the basic verse - chorus form. If I did go more for an electro dance type of chorus which is not uncommon in reggaeton I would have stayed with the strophic form however once I added a chorus the arrangement of the track changed. Reggaeton instrumentation includes the dembow drums, deep bass and other percussive sounding instruments such as flamenco guitar, timpani, harpsichord etc (MusicRadar, 2021), this can be heard in Titi Te Pregunto in the intro with the bachata style electric guitar. I opted to go more for a synth-based production as that of Agua without any live instruments. I did plan on adding flamenco style guitar in the planning stages of the track but once I messed around with the drums, I felt flamenco style would no longer fit the track so instead I added a synth pad, and a synth bells. Reggaeton producers tend to use a synth bass utilizing the sine wave to create a deep bassline (Splice, 2022), I implemented this using the Mini V by Arturia (name of preset: basso) which has a deep but bouncy tone which plays well with the kick.

As I was creating the instrumental of the song, I was also mixing the song and shaping it how I wanted it to sound with levels etc, so when it came done to mixing it was straight forward in trying to get the vocals to fit into the song. Mixing the vocal for a reggaeton song depends on how the singer or rapper is projecting their voice for example in Agua, J Balvin has auto tune added even when he's rapping which you can hear it clear when he lengthens a word. Bad Bunny also has subtle auto tune when he sings in the chorus which becomes very evident towards the end of the song at 3:20. I followed this by adding autotune to the vocals – I did start off using the Waves Tune plug in however I felt the autotune effect didn't come out as clear, so I opted for the AutoTune plugin by Antares. Recording and mixing vocals is the one area of the song which I felt I should have spent more time doing and experimenting with as comparing my vocal mixes to the reference tracks – there is more clarity in the reference tracks than mine even with the use of reverb. I felt the way reverb is used on Bad Bunny's voice enhances the whole track further rather than just the voice.

Genre: Synth Pop

Synth Pop became prominent in the 80's in Britain and USA as synthesisers became more affordable (Reynolds, 2009). In 2013 Drake released Hold On, We're going Home which peaked at Number 4 in the UK Charts (no date). I've based the third genre on this track of synth pop which has strong disco and rnb influence.

Synth-pop as the name suggests is synthesiser and drum machine heavy with simple lyrics (Masterclass, 2021). In my recording, I started with an ARP2600 vst from Arturia, which gave a pad like warm but airy sound. I played the chords Am, F, C, G, which being in the key of Am set the tone of the song to be sad or reflective. I then did not use a synth bass on this track but opted to use the Scarbee MM-Bass in Kontakt double-tracked with the bass slapper from Waves. I did this because I wanted the disco vibe to kick in and double tracking with the bass slapper, it gave a funky element to the track again. In the reference track Hold On We're Going Home producer Majid Jordan uses a synth bass which aligns more to synth-

pop. Once I had the bass added, I dragged in two disco drum loops to make it sound thick and with the bass, the foundation and weight of the song were in place.

Trying to get back to a synth pop track and further away from Disco, I added two synthesizers that makes the track synth pop. That was the DX7 vst playing arpeggio creating more rhythm and energy and the matrix 12 vst which played strings sound which sounds bright but adds thickness to the midrange. Finally, I added a few fills during the song using the solina vst which added more excitement to the song. The same way when I was creating the reggaeton instrumental, I was also balancing the volumes and getting the sound of each instrument as I wanted so when it came down to mixing the song, it was all about getting the vocals right. When recording the vocals, I really liked the vocals of Kanye West's Heartless, which also includes characteristics to that of synth pop such as the use of drum machines. So, I used the autotune plug in maxing out the retune speed to get the same vocal effect as that of Kanye. Overall, I believe I got the feel of a synth pop track in my production, there were areas of improvement such as experimenting with sound design and creating original sounds however this was an area I did not research enough to try and include into my production.

Analysing these three genres have given me the skills required to create any genre of music if you study the process of a track for example the arrangements, instruments, mix etc. An example mariachi music needing a vihuela and guitarron as the essence of the track but if you haven't got access to a vihuela, also finding solutions in my case triple tracking guitars. Looking back at the three final tracks I produced there were certainly areas of improvements: trying other song structures such as 12 bar blues, having dynamic punctuation, changing keys and using pivot chords would have created better songs. The most important aspect I learnt in this analysis is the feel of a song whether that be the dembow drums of reggaeton or the way synthesizers create the groove for a synth pop. Without these different characteristics it would be difficult to differentiate different genres and subgenres.

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