

Reflective Commentary

Evangelos Alexiou - 2007915

Introduction:

This reflective commentary aims to explain the process of the creation of a music album as well as the research undertaken in order to produce, mix, master, promote and distribute the album as a completed final piece. In addition, it will reflect on my input on the process and point out key influences that have led to the final result. Furthermore, a personal development plan will be presented with a future goal and the deadline for completion as well as an evaluation of the completed project against industry professionals. Along with the PDP, the artwork for the EP as well as an EPK is included on this present essay.

The Production Process

Whilst writing the proposal for the final project and before I started thinking about the production ideas, I had in mind that I would create an album based on human emotions and that it would not be limited or gravitated towards a specific genre. However, it turned out that most of the tracks were in Trance music, and the total amount of them was six songs, instead of ten that I was aiming for in the first place, which makes the project an EP instead of an album. The first two tracks of the EP, Fear, and Kindness were created with that exact mindset and the production and arrangement of them happened in a matter of one week. The third track, Love had required me to devote almost two weeks to it as I was doing it in parallel while watching a tutorial by ReOrder on (FaderPro, 2020). This was a tutorial that has helped me massively in terms of sound design and arrangement when it comes to Trance music, and it was almost a turning point for my production process as I adopted some techniques that helped me to a greater extent with the workflow and production process. One of these techniques was to sketch the arrangement beforehand so that it is easier to arrange the piece once the recording or production process is accomplished. It has helped me in terms of organisation, and it worked similarly to a map as I had a picture of what the song looked like before I could arrange it and hear how it sounded like. A different technique I adopted from this tutorial previously mentioned was to group channels depending on the instrument i.e Drums, Leads, Plucks, Arps, Sequencers, Pads and Sound FX. I realised that it was a lot easier to manipulate each of these groups especially when it comes to automation of different parameters, such as filter or effect sends.

The following two songs Indignation and Friendship were created within one week and the latter one ended up including a vocal as well. One of the main reasons as to why the genre of the tracks after Kindness started to lean towards Trance music, was because I had an opportunity to collaborate with an artist who has previously signed and was able to pitch music to Armada Music. After having a conversation with that artist, I was told that she and her husband could help by adding a topline to the instrumental, hence I decided to take that opportunity and start producing instrumentals that would fit Armada Music's repertoire. Both Love and Friendship were sent to them for toplining, but they decided it was best to work on Friendship which was eventually pitched to the record label. Finally, the track called Envy even though it is in the same tempo as Friendship, leans more toward the Psychedelic Trance

genre and it is the last piece of the EP. The time of completion was two weeks for this specific track and it was that time that I had encountered creativity block, I found myself endlessly creating a new melody or chord progression, adding more elements to them and then after a few days deciding that I did not like the idea and I had to change it. This cycle carried on for the first week of the two and while I was researching online I came across a video that had an obvious suggestion, deleting a track if the core structure of it is not finished in two to three days and starting one from scratch (Sonic Academy, 2021). However, I would use this method only in specific situations such as this one that I had to finish a project within a given deadline since I have previously found myself doing that consistently and the result was having a collection of unfinished tracks. This part of the assignment I found that it was the most time consuming and stressful of all the task that had to be undertaken. Having said that, even though the time of completion was not the same as what I was aiming for which was five weeks, the result was to a satisfactory level and will enhance the portfolio work on my website.

Mixing Process of the Produced EP

After having finished the production process, instead of moving immediately to the mixing process, I decided to take a two-day break so that my ears could rest, and I could have a more subjective point of view when starting with the mixing process. In those two days and having previously researched on the subject of mixing from a variety of sources, I started organizing each track, exporting the stems and labelling them accordingly so that it would be easier to start immediately mixing, and focus more on technical aspects rather than organizational. Wilkenfeld (2015) suggested that listening to the overall mix at only one level can lead to the misconception of the overall mix balance, hence before I started considering the mixing decisions I needed to make, I tested each of the tracks from the EP in three different levels, one being extremely loud, one normal and one barely audible. The same process occurred during mixing too. This way I was able to spot specific elements that were standing out and which instruments were masking each other. My input was to test each song in each of the three levels to a variety of sound systems such as my laptop speakers, a pair of studio headphones, my smartphone and the Alexa speaker. As a result, it gave me more clarity in terms of which areas I would need to pay attention to while mixing the EP.

For the majority of the project, most of the research has been conducted online from various articles, videos and forums, however, for the process of mixing and since I had available to my resources two books, I decided to use them as research material along with one documentary that was explaining various mixing processes and terms comically. There was a certain path that was followed for each of the mixes even though they were each treated in a unique way depending on the instrumentation and needs of the tracks. Senior (2013) suggested that a good way to approach mixing is to begin by accomplishing a healthy balance then figuring out whether compression is required, and which instruments would benefit from applying it to them. He added, after that the engineer should consider where equalization is needed and applying it reasonably, then applying sidechain where needed and finally sweetening to taste by using spatial effects such as Reverbs and Delays. I have chosen this particular method since it was one of the few that I was able to find in my collection of books and it was the only one that outlined the process from the primary stages of mixing until the stage of preparing the record and exporting it for the mastering process. It has also helped me in terms of the workflow and helped me visualize the sequence of the mixing process.

Although most of the research was based on a wide variety of genres that required studio recording, I adjusted these techniques in a way that could be used effectively in electronic dance music as well. Furthermore, in the track named Friendship, I decided to add some orchestral elements in the breakdown section, but I was only limited to the library sounds of the EXS-24 which admittedly are not the highest quality sounding samples available in the market. Thus, I was trying to find out a way to make the strings sounds of that plugin sound more realistic, wider and fuller. After having duplicated the strings I applied a delay in one of the channels and it turned out to make the sound very close to the desired outcome. An effect that happens when two identical sounds that are hard-panned left and right respectively and have a delay of less than 30ms with each other, according to (TVHomeStudio, 2012). This effect is also known as Haas Delay, which I have heard of before but have never put into practice and has offered me a new way to add width to certain sounds. Finally, even though it is a method to be avoided according to most engineers, the mixing process of this specific EP was carried out using headphones, mainly due to lack of room acoustics and a good pair of monitors. Whether the overall quality of this project would have been different or not if mixed using speakers is debatable, however, I realised that using professional reference tracks while mixing has helped me a lot in terms of achieving a healthy mix.

Mastering the EP

One of the great challenges, when one is mastering his own mixes, is to revisit certain decisions made and do it differently, additionally one of the main advantages of collaborating with other people for mastering is that the engineer will experience the record differently and be able to make more subjective decisions according to (iZotope, Inc., 2019). I realised that it is a common suggestion to avoid mastering one's own work, bearing that in mind and understanding the importance of having another person mastering the EP, I was not able to invest money in mastering hence I decided to try and execute the task to the best of my abilities on my own.

Since this was the first time that I had to master my music I decided to research this specific topic of mastering to have a guideline in terms of workflow and the process itself. Messite (2020) commented in his article that there are a few mastering tips that can help achieve the best results possible when the person who is executing the task is not a mastering engineer. The first advice according to him is to consider the destination that the master will end up in as well as the loudness standards appropriate to it. Since I have decided to distribute these on Spotify, I decided to use their guidelines in terms of loudness levels. The streaming platform is adjusting the loudness of the tracks to -14 dB LUFS according to the standards set by the International Telecommunication Unit (artists.spotify.com, 2021). Hence, while mastering the EP I was aiming for the -14 dB LUFS and the True Peak being below -1db. Another step suggested by Messite (2020) was to choose reference tracks in order to compare them with the songs that are about to be mastered and get a better understanding of what result should be achieved. In addition, an important factor to consider is to obtain lossless files such as WAV and it is a good practice to avoid files in the format of MP3 or AAC.

As a result, I listened to the entire EP and started considering which playlists can each of these tracks be placed on so that I could pick several songs out of them and do the mastering using these as references. Two playlists included mainly the music style I was looking for and these were the Night Rider and RetroWave/Outrun. The reference material that I chose to work with was Rodg – Signs for Fear, Chicane – Never Look Back for Kindness, ReOrder – Elevate for Love and Indignation, ReOrder – You Should Know for Friendship and Nostalgia – Section 303 for Envy. Furthermore, in terms of tools, there was a set limitation of three, an eq, a compressor and a limiter for the peaks since according to Messite (2020) doing so limits the possibility for the novice of ruining the track. In addition to that, as a main goal for the mastering process, I set out for each of the mixes to be able to translate in different sound systems maintaining the major qualities of each. To my disposal, I had the same sound systems as mentioned previously in the mixing session and I used these to test the masters throughout the process. Finally, for the main setup which was my headphones the level of the sound was fixed from the beginning until the end of the process since listening at different levels might lead to ear fatigue or inconsistent choices (Messite, 2020). The exact opposite to one of the methods that were used in the mixing process, listening to the mixes at different levels.

Mastering turned out to be the second most challenging task and admittedly the outcome is probably not quite as professional as anticipated. However, by undergoing this process of researching and executing the task not only did I learn more in-depth about what mastering is and what purpose does it serve but I also realised why it is so often suggested not to master my music. Furthermore, while mastering my mixes I was able to understand better what issues can and cannot be fixed at this stage and realise that the mastering can only enhance certain things that are already there. Hence from now on, I will be more alert in terms of getting the song ready as good as I can from the production stage, instead of expecting certain issues, if any, to be fixed either in the mixing or mastering process. Finally, even though the reference tracks I used were between -10 and -5 LUFS, I decided to target the LUFS suggested by Spotify just to be on the safe side.

Conversations and Feedback:

In the first place, I intended to obtain feedback both from Armada Music and Tileyard experts as well as friends of mine that are in the industry. In addition, I was planning to create surveys in order to receive feedback from more individuals, however, having reconsidered that option I decided that it would be better to receive feedback from a wider group of people when the EP was ready, that is to say, ready for distribution, and then use that feedback constructively for future pieces of work. There was communication between me, and the record label previously mentioned and one of the A&R managers was more than happy to provide me with feedback, but I am still waiting for his feedback response. However, I received useful and constructive feedback from three experts at Tileyard Education. Storey (2021), after listening to three tracks from the EP and a few older tracks of mine that included vocals, advised me that the instrumentals were good, but they needed more layers to be added as well as better vocal production and mixing. She has also offered to help by toplining one of the tracks, Friendship, along with her husband, so that I could hear how professional vocals sound like and use that as a reference. It has helped me to a greater extent in a way that I now know in what way a vocal needs to be treated to sound atmospheric and euphoric and fit in the Trance genre.

Additionally, during the one to one A&R Surgery sessions, I asked for feedback providing five tracks from the EP along with a list of questions. One of the major questions was whether the titles used for the tracks were self-explanatory in terms of the emotion felt by the listener. Searls (2021) explained to me that even though there were some of the songs that were expressing the emotions their title was, some of them had caused him to experience different feelings. However, he added that this is objective and different people understand or experience the same emotion in a different way, which was what the intention of this album mainly was, to express the emotions through sound as I experience them and not to set a boundary as to what they must sound like. Finally, as a piece of more general advice, he explained to me that there might not be much potential for this music in the London scene but it will probably have better potential in Europe, more specifically the Netherlands. The last Tileyard expert I received feedback from (Robinson, 2021) has offered me both advice in terms of a mixing issue he could spot in one of the tracks as well as advice for what are the possible dangers when mastering my own work. Before I had done the mastering, it was hard for me to understand in what way can it be problematic mastering my music, but I do now and for future mixes of myself I will probably reach out to an engineer to execute that task for me.

Portfolio – Website Creation and Social Media

Designing a portfolio instead of writing a CV was the result of the research conducted online, according to Babich (2021), it is hard to replace a portfolio with a CV when it comes to promoting creative skills since it only outlines a summary of employment history and achievements. In contrast, a portfolio offers the ability to showcase one's music to a targeted crowd instead of simply telling them about it. Furthermore, a portfolio not only offers a place for the creations to be listed, but it also helps for reflecting to where the artist has started, where they are now and where they are aiming to reach in the future. Since a music portfolio needs to be updated on a regular basis the artist gets to learn how to prioritise and structure their music. I decided to keep the design of the website as minimalistic as possible to avoid distractions from the main point of focus which is the music. I have also considered the fact that many individuals will be visiting the website from their smartphones, thus instead of creating multiple pages, there is only one page that offers the visitor the ability to scroll through it smoothly. At the top of the portfolio, there is the logo along with the tagline and the title of the website, after that, there is a short About Me section and then there is the web player with the showcased music available to stream instantly, at the bottom there is a Contact Me section too. Unfortunately for the time being the domain is the automatically generated one by Wix but it is in my plans to buy my own as nobodyssounds.com The website is: (<https://evansa44.wixsite.com/nobodyssound>)

For the setting up of the social media accounts which were Facebook and Instagram and after having researched online to find the best way possible to set up these two accounts, I realized that setting up the accounts is the relatively easy part. According to Mahir (2019), it is a good practice to prepare at least three posts in advance before setting up any of these accounts, this way the problem of wondering what to post next is avoided. However, since the EP was not mastered professionally, the distribution of the album will be postponed, once I have submitted the final masters for distribution I will start thinking about what content needs to be shared with fans in order to create engagement and anticipation before the official release, via the use of short demos for each track.

Self-reflection on the Overall Outcome of this Project

After finalising this project I came to the conclusion that it was easier said than done and that in fact, I set out some promotional targets that needed as much attention and time as the production process did as well. Unfortunately, by the time I finished with the mastering of the EP I had one week left before the deadline to research website creation and social media promotion. Because I have had no previous experience in that field one week was not sufficient enough to both research as much as I intended on the field and create enough content to share on the social media accounts. However, the fact that I do have a portfolio website, as well as both Instagram and Facebook, accounts for my artist page motivates me to create more music and share it with others. Admittedly, I could have organized my timeline more efficiently but there were some factors that worked as obstacles and I have not considered previously such as creativity block and self-sabotage.

The initial target for the size of the project was ten tracks but I took into consideration the advice given on the feedback from the proposal and instead of trying to create ten decent tracks just to hit the target, to reduce the number to six and try to create the best result to my abilities possible. To my surprise, the quality of the EP was better than what I expected and when compared to my previous music the difference is obvious in terms of the arrangement, sound design and mixing. Although, while comparing the mastered tracks with the professional references I found out that mine were lower in volume, that was probably because the professional records had significantly louder LUFS levels than what Spotify's loudness optimization level was, which was the loudness target rate I was aiming for while mastering. Also, while I was aiming to collaborate with as many people as possible I realised that it is not as simple as expected and that it does indeed need a lot of planning in advance, that is not to say however that there were not any collaborations at all, since it might have been only one collaboration that took place but it was a beneficial one from my point of view being the first track I created that was pitched to a record label. Finally, since Friendship has been pitched to Armada Music, the website will only include the rest of the five instrumentals from the EP until further notice from the record label.

Personal Development Plan and EPK

The Personal Development Plan was created following a specific guideline in order to be effective, organized and well thought. Spruce (2020) commented that creating a PDP is a mandatory step to help one's desires and dreams stay in plain sight and not be forgotten, additionally, it provides more clarity and allows the person to make better decision and avoiding backward steps. Furthermore, there are seven steps of execution when it comes to creating a personal development plan according to Spure (2020), these are sequentially, setting targets, prioritising these, considering deadlines for the time of completion, analysing the opportunities as well as the threats, developing skills and knowledge, making use of any help available from one's network and lastly, reflecting on the progress made so far. Bearing this in mind, the most important goal that I set for myself at this time of my career is to begin earning a living in the music industry so that I can focus more on the creative aspect without having to worry about finding a day job to support my art.

Understanding the amount of time such a goal requires and the consistent work and delivery of competent material, the deadline was set to be by 1st June 2022. Although, it will be broken down into smaller goals and manageable targets such as researching who are the A&R managers of specific labels that I will be aiming for and start networking with them and sending demos. Furthermore, since I have built a network from the Tileyard community I will aim to collaborate with songwriters for the production of vocal tracks since as Searls (2021) advised, a vocal track has a lot more chances to help you get into the music industry than an instrumental. Exploring different ways of generating income such as sync library, music for games and even creating gigs on Fiver is another manageable target that will help achieve the bigger target hopefully sooner than anticipated. However, there is also the consideration of unprecedented circumstances that might arise throughout and possible ways of encountering these and continuing to reach the target. Lastly, for the artwork of the EP as well as the creation of the EPK I used Canva since investing money for professional graphic design was not an option, however, I am satisfied with the result of both, at least for this stage of my career (see appendix 1 and 2).

The following board indicates the development plan in brief, and it is a template that I will continue using from now on:

What are my big goals?	Which goals need to happen first?	When do I want to achieve this?	What obstacles might get in my way?	How can I improve my chances of meeting my goal?	Where can I go for support?	Review: How am I doing?
Earning a living from music making	1) Reaching out to a variety of record labels. 2) Researching on potential sources of income other than record labels and live gigs.	By the summer of 2022	1) Labels not responding. 2) Procrastination. 3) Lack of motivation. 4) Creativity block.	1) Setting out small targets and executing a step at a time. 2) Carry on educating myself through various resources. 3) Staying organised.	1) Tileyard. 2) Ex-classmates. 3) Friend in the industry. 4) Artists who are in the same place in their career.	

Skills Obtained and Comparison with Professional works

Having gone through the process of creating an EP and preparing all necessary material and platforms for marketing has helped equip me with the knowledge that I will be able to use looking forward in order to enhance my professional progress. In terms of organisation and being involved with creating a personal development plan I realised the importance of it and the reason why I had lost motive when I finished my undergraduate degree, was because my future goals were not written down, hence forgotten. Also, I realised that such plans can be used for organisational purposes in smaller-scale tasks such as writing music or mixing an EP. Had I known this earlier I would have created a development plan before starting to work on this specific project, but unfortunately, I started researching on this topic only after I had mastered the EP which is one of the issues that could have been avoided and will be improved in the future. For example, having a creativity block was a factor that had not been considered and could have been prevented if it was documented in advance.

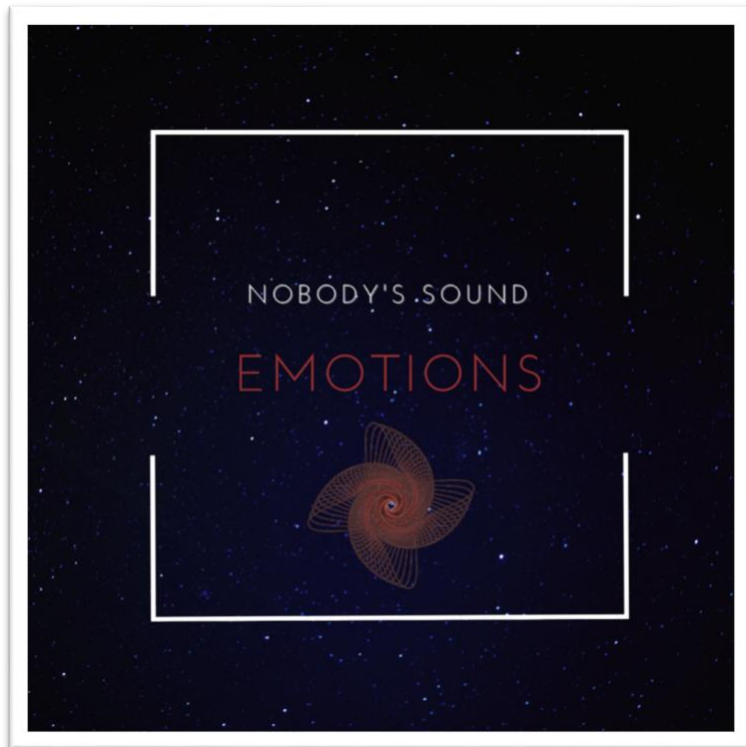
In terms of creative skills, by watching the video series by ReOrder on (FaderPro,2020) and by using the artist's creative process as a reference, I obtained the skills of better understanding the art of layering and applying it to my own production. In addition, by following a similar approach for arranging a piece I realised that the process unfolded a lot easier rather than when I was arranging on the go. Also, researching about mixing and mastering has helped me understand the process in detail and start reconsidering certain decisions made. In comparison to the two albums that I used as references, GAIA – Moons of Jupiter and Prydz – OPUS, even though my EP tells its story I believe that it still needs a lot of refinement until it reaches the level of professional success that these two albums have had. Although, on a personal level I am satisfied with the overall quality of the EP but I believe that it could be improved and the final master could have been significantly better.

Conclusion

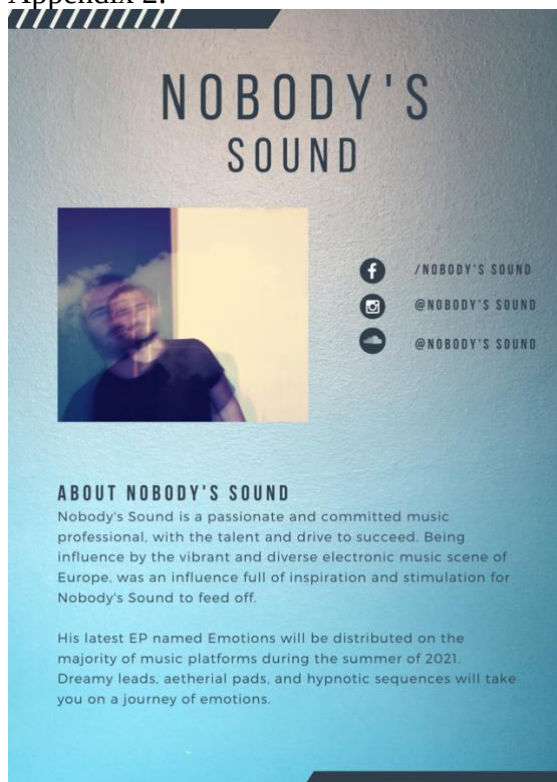
In conclusion, even though in the beginning the completion of a project on that scale seemed to be daunting, having achieved it has offered me a sense of satisfaction, confidence and motivation to repeat the process in the future. Having said that, there were certain times during the completion of this project that it felt impossible and overwhelming, and having a deadline was causing more stress than anything. However, without the deadline, it is uncertain how long it would have taken me and if the results would have been the same since some production decisions were made spontaneously due to the deadline. Looking forward and in the near future, I would like to start collaborating with various artists and begin adding to my portfolio more vocal tracks, another goal for the near future is to collaborate with an artist that is already in the industry and eventually learn from this process.

Appendices:

Appendix 1:



Appendix 2:



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