

Branwell Black 2006413:

Commercial Music Production

Foundation Assignment Element 2: Essay

A 3000 word essay that should aim to provide insight into the production process, outlining key aspects of your methodology that are underpinned by research.

Introduction:

This essay will provide an insight into the production process and creation of three tracks: Track One – ‘Wink Wink’, Track Two – ‘War War’ and Track Three – ‘Hunny Hunny’; in addition, it shall outline the key aspects of the methodology employed – and will be supported by research. The specific genres chosen are: K-Pop, PC MUSIC/HYPERPOP and Electronica Art/Pop Rock. All three Tracks correlate musically as commercially produced entities. The characteristics of the genres shall be individually identified and analysed; this shall include an explanation of how the element of the specific genre has been incorporated into the relevant track. A reflection of all three tracks will also be given, which shall include a hypothetical remodelling of the work undertaken and a conclusion of what has been learnt.

Track One – ‘Wink Wink’:

The first song created is inspired by K-Pop; a genre described as a journey into adulthood for pre-teen Koreans, particularly those ethnically or culturally dispersed (Kyong, 2019). In addition, the term ‘Hallyu’ translates into ‘the Korean wave’, referring to the impact of commercial products emanating from South Korea – which especially includes the music of K-Pop. For example, in order to comprehend to what extent the impact this genre is having globally, K-Pop girl band Blackpink have fifty-four million subscribers and ten million ‘likes’ on their debut single ‘Boombayah’- YouTube video, which has reached over 1,054,889,311 views (Blackpink, 2016). Sim (2017) describes the music as a ‘... multi-layered formation composed of hybrid cultural practices and diverse lived experiences’ (pp. 292–318). The Bangtan Boys (2018) blog identifies the local to global realisation of K-Pop, whilst My Passion (2018) provides a history of K-Pop over the last thirty-years in an internet popular article titled ‘My journey with KPop’.

The structure of Track One was laid out following a brief previously received and was to be targeted for the K-Pop girl group WEEEEKLY, who were looking for a more ‘hard hitting’ sound – this song contains exactly the K-Pop stylistic characterises and formula currently performed on commercial outlets. The experience of creating intense sounds and new rhythms experienced through K-pop, made for a very enjoyable process - although completely out of a personal comfort zone (having a broadly ‘Rock’ centred background) - the endless possibilities this alien genre gave made it all the more exciting. An example of K-Pop seems to draw a lot

of inspiration from much of current Western popular music, but more specifically 2010 to 2015, with the birth of dubstep and much of the mainstream music being heavily electronic synth centred. K-Pop has taken from this and mixed it all into one for every song, creating a sense of constant intensity. The song was written with two female songwriters: Amanda Abramczuk and Celine Love Newkirk, who helped start the lyrical process by throwing around the ‘tongue in cheek’ style words, before the name ‘Wink Wink’ was settled on. Laforgia (2017) reminds us that the visual image of K-pop is also highly manipulated and structurally strong, particularly regarding the identity of ‘plastic surgery-enhanced, shiny-haired, doll-like women and metrosexual men (p. 3). Although she also identifies Amber Liu from f(x), as a K-Pop artist attempting to break the mould with an androgynous image (p. 4). Once the format was established, it became clear the lyrical meaning to the songs was cleverly but utterly - nonsensical.

The track was created in Ableton Live to a tempo of 120bpm. In order to create characteristics of K-Pop, the voices of the two female vocalists were mixed into sounding like a supergroup with the use of vocoders, distortion and flanger, in order to both enhance and tonally manipulate them to portray the allusion of more vocalists. The song was mixed and produced around the introductory synthesiser which was originally a sample - this set the tone for the key to then layer different Realtime played midi synths for the entire song, as well as a mix of midi synths and samples.

It was especially important to capture the intense and fluid female voices of K-Pop by girl groups, with many harmonies to exploit and analyse. The genre has a huge sound that retrospectively sieves, and then throws them all together to create a hybridic genre, with influences from Dubstep, Rock, Hip Hop, EDM, RnB and of course Pop - as well as ‘always’ having a riser, in order to have songs which constantly keep fans on the edge of their seats - wanting to create a sense of anticipation. Koreaboo (2020) highlights another reason for fan anticipation: ‘... fans are being kept on the edge of their seat as they await agency decisions regarding the contract renewal of their favourite K-Pop bands - very often not renewed causing upset all round’ (para. 4). In relation particularly to ‘Wink Wink’, multiple risers were used as a ‘special piece’ to introduce or highlight each member of the group – a popular and habitual tool.

In reflecting on how this process went and what to do differently next time, working with the co-writers/vocalists ‘in-person’ as opposed to virtually would be essential. Although being able to meet on a couple of occasions, constant receipt of multiple voice stems was, at times,

relentless and whilst contributions are always welcomed - working in a studio with the girls ‘face to face’ would have been both more rewarding and practicable. At certain times, the process was frustrating, as the otherwise talented cohorts were not familiar with sound engineering or production techniques. The responsibility for the complete finished process of ‘Wink Wink’ lay solely with the Producer, which also highlighted the necessity to explain the need to recognise deadlines. Although the lack of shared technique/comprehension for the complex production and engineering commitments and the lengthy process was at times frustrating, we jointly created a very good product. Experimenting with K-Pop was most enjoyable and will not be the last foray into more production in this vein.

In a future creation of K-Pop, one would avoid following the designed standard recipe - in an attempt not to use the perfectly laid out - almost mathematical process. Instead, the choice would be to interpret a self-imposed impression of seeing the genre from the perspective of a consumer/listener, and in a more authentic representation of self-artistry – in an attempt to distance one’s own creativity from what one could consider to be *cookie cutter factory fabricated assembly line versions*.

Track Two – ‘War War’:

The following track was inspired by the genre of PC MUSIC or HYPERPOP and more specifically the work of Charli XCX, who is sometimes produced by the hugely successful modern producer/performance artist known as SOPHIE. Geffen (2016) comments ‘... the duo challenge each other ... moments of real danger ... grow from the messy, feminine space where they meet (para. 5). This genre is rather strange, possibly being one of the only popular ones to also be considered underground, with the following originating from SoundCloud (Bulut, 2019). There are futuristic sonic qualities and sometimes borderline noise in this music – the general reason it works is because, bottom line, the songs follow a steady structure, but are coated with electronica eccentrics, creating what is possibly the most recent new genre. Elements of this genre referenced within Track Two are most notably the use of noises such as ‘squeaky doors’, ‘scratching walls’, distorted risers and ‘woosh’ sounds to musicalize sound into instrumentation. The process for recording ‘War War’ was built with the use of samples and noises being manipulated with distortion, modulation and transposition. This was then mixed in with guiding synthesisers and metallic drums, referencing percussion from songs such as ‘Vroom Vroom’ (Charli XCX, 2016) and ‘claws’ (Charli XCX, 2020). Wolfson (2015)

remarks PC Music was manufactured by a group of Londoners in their twenties and says it could be described as ‘Japanese future tween pop’ or a ‘club-based version of the Disney Channel’ (para. 2). PC MUSIC was created by Producer A.G. Cook in 2013, and after his first release on SoundCloud, started the record label ‘PC MUSIC’ for the specific genre HYPERPOP. HYPERPOP can be identified in music which uses overblown bass, incorporating artificial synthesisers and very high-pitched vocals and indeed traced to the artist Kesha - formally known as Ke\$ha (MicTheSnare, 2020). This is a glorified sound for generally bedroom producer made tracks, which was the process chosen as such. In analysing the back-to-back 2017 Charli XCX mixtapes ‘Number 1 Angel’ and ‘Pop 2’, the emphasis on having a heavy bass centred sound, ‘dynamic hyperpop’ (Fricke, 1995) became apparent, with an engaging vocal top line and driving drum sections.

This genre of less than ten years allows extreme freedom, in that there is a ‘thick’ line of parameters in what denotes HYPERPOP. The sound seems to polarise and insult the socially recognised values of the general understanding of format of sound into music. In other words, flipping music producing on itself. Therefore, to interpret the genre as an art form - it is freer compared to K-Pop - as the component parts are yet to be picked apart, labelled and formatted. Basically, all the ingredients are available – but no recipe is followed.

This is an invigorating process which allows the producer to feel creative; the feeling of inventing without parameters. However, Bittner (2020) juxtaposes ‘I just don’t get it’ (para. 3). HYPERPOP is the only genre which allows itself to not interpret what makes music with instrumentation from previous influences, but to interpret what makes ‘sound’ music. Controversially, this could indeed be portrayed as innovative. Liddle (2020) offers an alternative insight, with an interpretation of PC Music/HYPERPOP as self-consciously experimental and inane with unexpected operatic warbling – but sometimes with a ‘repetitive electronic motif with a luxurious melody’ (para. 2).

On reflection, to reapproach this track as a remodelling, one could access samples of material from these artists and create an homage track, in an attempt at being less creative, but more identifiable to a specific artist track - for instance ‘Faceshopping’ (SOPHIE, 2018). Also, the use of effects with plug-ins would be relied on and effectively applied in a stylistic filling out of the sound, in order to create a song that could be identifiable as the music of a specific producer - much like identifying a genre to a band or artist - this would be to identify sound and production to a producer.

Track 3 - 'Hunny Hunny':

The third song was within a personal 'comfort' realm, a genre which can easily fall into anthemic post punk, art rock, pop rock, alternative rock, electronic rock, (Huey, 2020, 'Tokio Hotel', 2020), and was created following the feel of three such electronic 'real' bands: Simple Minds, Tokio Hotel and Radiohead. Walsh (2016) recalls meeting Simple Minds in their early twenties, noting that even at early an age, the harmony and focus was ultra-important to the band members: '... there was an atmosphere of the music, it was in the way the guitars and the keyboards linked together' (Hasted, 2016, para.10). The sound of the guitar featured in 'Hunny Hunny' is an homage to the Charlie Burchill Gretsch White Falcon '62 he used in 'Someone Somewhere in Summertime' (02.38), from the album 'New Gold Dream', Simple Minds themselves unceremoniously disclaiming the album as an obviously undiluted accolade to their musical influences (New Gold Dream Reviews, para. 22). Tokio Hotel frontman Kaulitz (2014) says whilst recording their new album, he likes it because it is 'true Art Pop', and he thinks that is 'what Lady Gaga would say' (3.51). The third chosen influence is early Radiohead, possibly due to the mesmerising and repetitive instrumental sounds of guitars and vocals. Osborn (2017) offers a complex and intense analysis of Radiohead, but does admit to the use of an 'overriding dominant-functioning chord' impression (para. 08). The group are described by Nowark (2013) as 'one of the most complex bands in history' (p. 100), although, Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke goes on to reflect '... it's pop music and it's not anything more than that' (p. 101).

All three artist examples offer a perfect blend of real humanly played instrumentation and electronic instrumentation. It is hard to pinpoint when or where exactly the idea to place the start of mixing electronica (machines with a heart) with bands, but this accolade is often attributed to 'Godfathers of Electro' Kraftwerk (Schiller, 2014, p. 619). The coveted title being contentious still, Wakefield (2010) anoints synthesiser master Gary Numan as the 'Godfather of Electronica'. Regardless, these artists/bands helped inspire those such as Depeche Mode to hear those sounds and incorporate them within the mix in the studio; although Daly (1993) says there are arguably two ages of this particular band: the 1990 'your Father's Depeche Mode' and then the 1993 rebirth, with a hard hitting sounding blues rock and the previously 'fresh pixie faced' frontman Dave Gahan being metamorphosed into the 'long-haired, goateed and tattooed singer... with a messianic pose' (pp. 90 - 96). The use of digital sampling and synthetic sounds within bands of most genres is a very common thing in this modern age. Taylor (2005) reminds us that the historical influence of synthesisers can also be found from the band Roxy Music - popular from the early 1970s. Although Roxy Music enjoyed a standard instrumental

line up of guitar, bass and drums, they are also attributed with heavily influencing post Punk and New Wave with their Brian Eno electronics and arty lyrics ‘... they made playing music look really cool and sexy’, (p.107). What was found to be particularly enjoyable whilst producing ‘Hunny Hunny’, was reimagining a song that mimics the specific sound of blending the two worlds together - to create a song not only the commercial listener would find appealing - but also one that would be *potentially* acceptable to the Rock music scene also. The song was self-penned and blends electronic synths and mixing with real human drumming, guitar and natural sounding vocals. The aim was to create a heavier sound that was ‘full’ like a band, while still being commercially driven; instrumentation being just as much a vital aspect as the vocals, rather than just a complimentary sound for an upfront solo artist vocal.

In creating this song, the use of electronic sampling and/or Realtime played midi instrumentation was recorded and utilised first during the writing process - it is a song fully written whilst being produced simultaneously. This method was chosen, as it would aid in having a perspective on how much human instrumentation could then be layered within the mix, to help enhance and relate to the desired sound. The synthesisers are a mix of synth bass pad, guitar and midi Ableton Live packs, overlaid with the Roland TD-50K V electronic drum kit and human electric guitar, in order to reproduce the sound of the characteristics of electronic Art Rock: obvious use of electronic instrumentation, projected vocals, musical silences or breaks, followed/emphasised by a crashing cymbal, rousing choruses and often peppered with clever sound effects - sometimes in reverse - for example the intro. to ‘Blindfolded’ (Simple Minds, 2014, 0:24-0:32). This is referenced in the intro. of ‘Hunny Hunny’ and also as an homage to the electronica section in ‘The Heart Get No Sleep’ (Tokio Hotel, 2014 1:09-1:25). These soaring guitars are infected by delays and reverbs, creating an anthemic like arena quality, also found for example in ‘MANiCURE’, by Lady Gaga (2013, 2:50-3:20) – in short, a heavier portrayal of commercial Pop Music:

... **pop** is some of the most universally appreciated music that reaches across countries, gender, and age. It’s something that everyone can get down to — even those of us that “hate” pop will find our feet tapping or mumbling along to the lyrics (Mission, 2019, para. 3).

If this song was to be remodelled, it would be approached, firstly by being written during a jam session with a full band, recording individual takes and then layering over with electronic midi instrumentation, which would give a different perspective as to how much electronica would need to be added in accomplishing a fully-fledged electro Art Rock portrayal. Perhaps, by giving the track a more eclectic Producer’s gaze and having knowledge of a variety of music

to draw upon, it could be possible to format an upgraded version of this genre with clashing electronic sounds, much like HYPERPOP 'Did U Ever Love Me' (A.G Cook, 2015), mixed with the live instrumentation.

Conclusion:

Through analysing the above three genre examples, it could be said that Commercial music is mutating into a caricature of itself. The need to enhance and incorporate what has already been popular for future commercial release, means music is again attempting to reinvent itself. But, by doing so, it is losing at its core, what it was originally created for: feeling, passion and emotion. In creating the songs to a 'recipe' or format, the ideals of what makes certain genres individual, has allowed more understanding in what it takes to build and produce songs that are inspired by specific genres. But, by doing so, the secret of what makes each individual genre special - may have been at best diluted - and at worst formulaic '... but hasn't that always been the case?' (Gilmore, 2018, para. 3).

The exercise of producing three tracks in the style of these specific genres has allowed for an increased understanding of the intricacies and technicalities of commercial producers within these industries, and in doing so has enabled appliance in new and previously unexplored musical territory, adding to a growing production techniques portfolio. Although all three songs have been written and focused specifically for their identified and individual genres of K-Pop, PC MUSIC/HYPERPOP and Electronica Art/Pop Rock - with a re-use of the methodology - they could potentially be modified and reworked into each other's genres. This could be a worthy future project experiment: to change the characteristics – follow each other's recipes which individually identify them – and ultimately hear how they would sound if adapted.

Words: 2,988

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