

MA Commercial Music Producer Foundation: ADAD7003

Tileyard Education

Tariq Hussain

Word Count: 3141

Track One

Genre: K-pop/Funk

Coming from a background in underground dance music, I wanted my first choice of track to sit in a different realm, whilst still allowing me to introduce my flavour into the energy of the track. This led to my decision to produce a 'K-pop' record. Although the genre is very disconnected from what I generally produce, particularly with its defining characteristics being intentionally cheesy and/or over the top, there is still scope to use my experience with sequencing dance drums, as well as a prominent use of synthesis to progress the track.

Defining characteristics in K-pop music

As K-pop is a genre that I have very little familiarity with, it was important for me to research and define the genre's characteristics. One particular element called out to me as it is very much in line with what I do in my own music is blending cultural influences (kpopdeal.com, 2018). This would usually be implemented with having one clear genre influence for the verse, that would then flip into another genre into the chorus or breakdown section. It's also quite a common trait to find big synth leads to be used for the transitions between genres. With artists such as Exo frequently combining trap and heavy electronic influences into their music alongside genres such as disco and funk, you tend to notice a pattern of these tracks cutting back and forth throughout the songs.

Reference Tracks

The best approach for me to take was to reference one K-pop track as well as a popular track that sits within its genre blending influence, in this case, funk.

Exo - Love Me Right (SM, 2015)

Korean band Exo's track 'Love Me Right' contains several influences from funk music, a genre that has always resonated with me. Blending elements of electronica with the inclusion of growling basses and bright pop lead synths, alongside the funk guitars is what gives this track its typically expected over the top feel (aminoapps.com, 2016). The heavy use of electronic synths add to the EDM-like energy of the track, which has become one of K-pop's most prominent features. The true art in this is the ability to retain its status as a pop track, without fully falling being submerged into dance music territory. The funk elements are present with the guitars, but they use big synths behind it that give it that more typical k-pop flavour.

The vocals are very much at the centre of the mix, extending wider into the stereo field for the track's frequent backing harmony vocals. The track's synths are also spread out widely in the mix, whilst retaining a typical pan for the guitars, giving it a slight separation from the other layers of the song.

Exo blends both funk and EDM styles throughout. Although I personally find the blend to be quite unpleasant, due to the way it is mixed. The guitars sound quite tinny, almost making them feel too digital in order to match the electronic/soft synth feel of the synths. Although everything is clean and typically 'well mixed', I feel as though it lacks a small amount of depth, due to its brick walled sounding mix/master (soundonsound.com, 2011). It's unfortunate, as this causes some of the layers to be swallowed within the chorus, particularly the track's kick.

Phony Ppl - Fkn Around (300 Entertainment, 2020)

Fkn Around felt like the perfect funk choice to reference for my piece. The repetitive groovy bassline keeps the listener in the flow of the beat that follows. The piece feels somewhat reminiscent of a circa-2005 Pharell record. Using simplicity and space to maintain a groove, Phony Ppl keep the listeners locked into the lyrics whilst feeling the tracks energy around it.

Interestingly enough, the main claps of this track feel nicely spread with what sounds like a doubled layer, slightly adrift from each other, followed by a hard pan on each side. This technique is often used in funk influenced productions, even in the realm of modern dance music. You'll find this being a common trope of the producers 'Kaytranada', who's style blends perfectly with the Phony Ppl track (musicradar.com, 2018). This allows the drums to all sit in their own space, allowing the audience to easily dissect the monophonic kick, the panned hats and the hard panned guitars throughout the verses.

The vocals are beautifully spread out throughout the track, with the lead funk guitars sitting softly behind it with a light amount of low passing, allowing them to be used to compliment the lead vocals. The hats are also left nicely in the background, leaving the kick and snare to dominate the drums space within the mix.

It feels like there is definitely multi band imaging used on several layers of this track, for example, the synths sounds quite spread whilst also retaining some mid-lows in the centre of the mix. The higher the frequency, the wider the imaging feels in this piece (izotope.com, 2019). Again, this allows each layer to sit in its own space, ultimately crafting a great mix.

Produced Track

Monsoon - Lyrics by Martina Stramaccioni - Performed by Martina Stramaccioni, Composed by Martina Stramaccioni & Tariq Shafqat Maximilian Hussain (Shafkkat), Produced by Shafkkat.

How I applied the stylings of the reference tracks to conform to the musical genre

Upon analysing both tracks, I blended the particular aspects that I preferred in each track. In reference to 'Love Me Right', I kept the synths quite spread out within the mix to separate them from the vocals and guitars. Although the synthetic elements were directly influence by the K pop track, the rest of the song was more so influenced by Phony Ppl's groovy funk record. The claps were duplicated and slightly off time from one another with a hard pan on each layer, adding an almost live feel to a very electronic drum pattern.

Although K-pop tracks generally are in favour of genre-switch ups, I opted to just remove the funk layers for the chorus sections by going fully electronic. Perhaps it's due to my typical style of music, finding it quite difficult to incorporate the typical cheesy switch ups.

Besides having a poor standard of bass player to record the melody on the track, which involved a lot of time stretching within Ableton to fix, I felt as though the bass needed a lot more power to ever so slightly match the eventual sub bass that would come in to play during the chorus' more electronic section. To do this, I very simply used a mild amount of saturation with Soundtoys' Decapitator, alongside Waves' R-bass plugin to beef up the low end.

One problem that I encountered is my tendency to take an initial idea and just run with it, without listening back to the reference tracks often enough. This caused a few stylistic changes from the original vision of the track. Although the elements of both styles are very present in the production, the track feels more like a UK dance/pop record, rather than K-Pop song. This could partially be due to the fact that the demo vocal, which was pitched down to sound like a male singer, almost sounds like a poor impression of London based singer, MNEK. Perhaps using more extravagant synth melodies to make the track feel more over the top and including a half-time switch up, quite in the realm of trap music, would have assisted majorly in capturing the K-pop aesthetic.

Track Two

Genre: Indie Pop

For my second track, I was very much inclined to go for a more female led/focused piece. As I'm still familiarising myself with producing and writing pop music, I felt as though going for something very much out of my comfort zone was the best way to approach this.

Reference Tracks

Haley Kiyoko - She (*Warner Music Group, 2020*)

Haley Kiyoko's track has a very coming of age energy that surrounds it. Produced by Pat Morrissey, Kill Dave & Kiyoko herself, the team went for a very bedroom production sound. Keeping the drums extremely repetitive, with a lot of filtered vocals and effects throughout the song allows Kiyoko's vocal performance to control the energy of the track.

The drums are kept almost entirely in the centre, giving them a very lo-fi aesthetic, alongside its use of filtering. This gives the rest of the track space to carry wider synth leads at the tracks peak points. The tracks snares are very prominent too, turned up louder than what would be considered typical for this style of music, however, I quite enjoy the impact it gives the track.

The lead vocals also sit in the centre of the mix, only showing any form of width in the songs chorus and breakdown sections. This subtle trick helps to raise the energy without adding an overwhelming amount of instrumentation, ultimately retaining that bedroom energy.

The Filtered vocal on the pre-chorus, where the drums cut out completely, allow a strong impact to land on the chorus. The staccato bass notes on the versus allow the sustained bass notes of the chorus to feel more dramatic too, particularly because the drums retain the same feel throughout. This keeps the verses bright and bubbly whilst adding a sense of dramatics to the chorus. The high pitched vocals toward the end also adds an interesting quirky texture to the song.

Taylor Swift - I Knew You Were Trouble (*Big Machine Records, 2015*)

What I found interesting about this particular piece, contrasting strongly from Kiyoko's Indie pop vibe, is the percussive change from the verses to the chorus sections. In the verses, the drums are simply following the strum pattern of the guitar, leaving plenty of room for the vocals to dominate the mix. Upon hitting the chorus, Max Martin and Shellback, producers of the track, opted for a heavy electronic halftime pattern, quite reminiscent of the Vengeance sample packs that plagued dubstep music during its brostep era. Although I'm not personally a fan of the EDM styled snares of this track, it works very well to give the song the more aggressive character that it seeks for its chorus sections.

Whilst there are fundamental differences between both pop tracks, one very similar aspect to the previous song is how the drum sections are entirely removed in the pre-chorus, also adding a harder impact for when they finally return more heavily. This is not the only technique used to increase the dramatics of the chorus, as the lead vocals intentionally sit quite thinly in the verse sections before doubling up at the tracks peak points for a grander entry.

Aside from the tracks chorus, the vocals are kept dry. This nicely allows the brightness of Swift's voice to cut through cleanly without the disturbance of airy reverbs and delays. This also allows the harmonies that come in and out of the verses to feel very natural and almost like a live 'room' performance.

Produced Track

Goddess *Performed by Charlotte Samady, Lyrics by Charlotte Samady & Marco Mestichella, Composed & Produced & Tariq Shafqat Maximilian Hussain (Shafkkat)*

How I applied the stylings of the reference tracks to conform to the musical genre

My goal with both producing and composing this track was to find a halfway point between both reference songs. I wanted to play around with having quite a cute and bubbly bassline for the intro that can transition into something more hard hitting and almost EDM influenced for the chorus.

Just like both reference tracks, I removed the drums from the tracks pre-chorus section. In it's place, to help transition into our more aggressive chorus, I layered multiple synths, that contained tons of automation on filters and gates whilst also increasing the lead verses reverb before very noticeably cutting out everything to allow a harsh impact to follow.

I went for a different approach to my choice of samples for the drums, opting for clear 808 samples, as I'm not typically a fan of EDM sounding drums. By making the kick more low end heavy, it allowed me to still have that harsh feel within the mix, without choosing samples that I don't enjoy working with. I felt as though this worked effectively for the most part, however maybe a brighter snare would have gone a long way for the chorus.

Using the high pitched vocal towards the end of Kiyoko's song as a reference, I decided to have a multi-layered vocal chop to conclude the track. This was used to add a sense of darkness to the indie pop song.

In regards to the mix, I wanted to play with space quite a bit. Keeping the majority of the synth in the wider depths of the mix allowed more room for the vocals and drums to shine through the chorus, which is already heavily filled with multiple layers. The vocals also should have been re-recorded, as there was a large amount of background noise, that I was required to mask using gates, EQs, aswell making musical adjustments to the song to fill the space, such as background synths and adding noise. Another issue I faced, lied with the kick drum. Listening back, I can hear that it is far too low end heavy, ultimately compromising the entire track by overcrowding the bass frequencies.

Track Three

For my third track, I wanted to incorporate two very different styles of British underground music that have also received acclaimed success. The UK underground dance scene weighs a significant amount of importance within the commercial side of the industry. With artists such as Sam Smith (theguardian.com, 2014), Sampha, Jorja Smith (thefader.com, 2017) and MNEK having their first tastes into the uk charts from collaborations with underground dance artists, it is a proven style for cementing upcoming artists place in the UK music scene.

Reference Tracks

Disclosure - When A Fire Starts To Burn (*Universal Music, 2013*)

The UK house track uses its space very efficiently, keeping the lower mids wide, whilst retaining a monophonic low end below 200hz. The vocals also stay in the centre of the mix, giving disclosure space to have a ton of imaging throughout the record.

The arpeggiated bass sounds like a combination of a square wave for the upper layer, which carries the width of the bass, alongside a sine wave, that is monophonic in a typically mixed fashion. Both layers have a short decay that doesn't sound interrupted by

the side chaining to the tracks kick. This seems to be evident as it sounds as though Disclosure had only sidechained the sine wave layer, allowing the entire bass to sit more prominently in the mix.

The vocal sample feels intentionally dry, with a very short reverb just about audible on the tail end of the sample, alongside a very subtle delay that is almost completely missed during the tracks drop sections. Disclosure keeps the track very minimal throughout, by never having too many ongoing layers of instrumentation at the same time.

James Blake - CMYK (R&S Records, 2010)

On the more obscure side of UK dance music, this post-dubstep track by James Blake established the producer/singer as one of Britain's most talented underground artists (nme.com, 2020), shortly before his critically acclaimed self titled album '*James Blake*' was released, launching the artist into stardom.

What is most beautifully crafted about this track is the use of indistinct vocals in the tracks 'Drop' sections. James Blake's use of two legendary R&B vocal samples from Kelis and Aaliyah are scattered over the song more so as a supporting layer to the tracks instrumental layers (pitchfork.com, 2010). Using melancholic, yet somehow also uplifting chord progressions allow the track to feel like it's on a constant rise for the majority of the piece.

Blake incorporates a large amount of white noise in the track's pad's, that are used in conjunction with the warm bassline. This adds a sense of overarching dominance to the main melody that fills the high, mid and low frequencies in unison.

Produced Track

Jubilee Composed & Produced by Tariq Shafqat Maximilian Hussain (Shafkkat)

As both tracks have core stylistic differences, particularly in the drum patterns and mix aesthetic, I wanted to apply the elements that I loved most about each track to create my own.

How I applied the stylings of the reference tracks to conform to the musical genre

Almost paralleling James Blake's choices of samples, I opted to sample Alicia Keys' 'Woman's Worth' to retain that R&B influence to the track. This is used throughout all the core 'drop' sections of the track, acting almost as an indistinguishable vocal-led chorus.

The entire drum pattern was created with an 808 drum kit, giving it an authentic old school feel. I kept the kick at the centre in the mix whilst having a mild amount of width added to the snare. As we're in the realm of dance music, it felt fully justifiable to break the mould of the 'drummers perspective' within the mix (soundonsound.com, 2019). I did this to add space between my drums, with the closed hats automating from side to side throughout the track, and toms slightly panned on alternating sides.

Although the chords were very much influenced by James Blake, I leant more so towards Disclosure for the mixdown of the track. I used a lot of stereo imaging on the synths, and even a bit on the toms, separating it from a typical underground dance mixdown. Disclosure's track that was mixed for mass audiences. Therefore, I had to avoid my typical instinct of trying to mix solely for a club.

A key struggle I had with this song was perfecting where the bass sits in the mix. I opted to take inspiration from James Blake's track by leaving it as a pure sub bass, without any additional layers. Although that makes it harder to hear on regular devices, adding a bit of saturation has allowed the bass to come through more clearly. Listening back, I could have increased the amount of distortion present, to make it audible on all devices.

Conclusion

Having dissected multiple genres of music has given me further insight into the art of producing commercial music. This has allowed me to expand upon my use of tools like automation and stereo imaging by a large amount. My background in underground dance music helped in some regards, particularly with using plugins like saturators, possibly a little too frequently. Using a UK dance track as my final piece, whilst also applying more commercially standard methods of mixing was the highlight of this assignment, as I have now come away from it with a better understanding of where everything should sit within a mix.

Bibliography

[aminoapps.com](https://aminoapps.com/c/k-pop/page/blog/edm-influence-in-kpop-2016/02lk_ubXPNqozYN7Mdjqv244Xe3PV), 2016. EDM influence in KPOP (Online) Available from:

https://aminoapps.com/c/k-pop/page/blog/edm-influence-in-kpop-2016/02lk_ubXPNqozYN7Mdjqv244Xe3PV

Dixon, Daniel, 2019. 6 Tips for Widening the Stereo Image of a Mix (Online) Available from:

<https://www.izotope.com/en/learn/6-tips-for-widening-the-stereo-image-of-a-mix.html>

[kpopdeal.com](https://kpopdeal.com/what-is-kpop/), 2018. What Is K-Pop? (Online) Available from:

Modern-day K-pop has been the result of decade-long cultural blending that started in the 1950s.<https://kpopdeal.com/what-is-kpop/>

Future Music, 2018. How To Make Your Drums Sound Wider (Online) Available from:

<https://www.musicradar.com/how-to/how-to-make-your-drums-sound-wider>

Kemp, Ella, 2020. James Blake: "There's always been more to me than sadness" (Online) Available from:

<https://www.nme.com/big-reads/james-blake-cover-interview-2020-before-ep-2810292>

Powell, Mike, 2010. CMYK EP (Online) Available from:

<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14229-cmyk-ep/>

Deputy, Emmanuel, 2011. 'Dynamic Range' & The Loudness War (Online) Available from:

<https://www.soundonsound.com/sound-advice/dynamic-range-loudness-war>

Houghton, Matt & Senior, Mike, 2019. Q. How should drums be panned? (Online) Available from:

<https://www.soundonsound.com/sound-advice/q-how-should-drums-be-panned>

Renshaw, David, 2017. How Jorja Smith And Preditah Made A Love Letter To U.K. Pirate Radio Culture (Online) Available from:

<https://www.thefader.com/2017/09/14/jorja-smith-preditah-pirate-radio-love-letter>

Hattenstone, Simon, 2014. Sam Smith: 'I'm so scared for when it's going to stop'

(Online) Available from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/16/sam-smith-interview-scared-its-going-to-stop>