

University Of Wales Trinity Saint David

Tileyard Education

MA Commercial Music Producer
2018/2019

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Term 3, Creation: Element 1

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Introduction

In this written proposal I am going to present and explain what my project for the Creation module is, and how I am going to carry it out.

Argument

Although the music industry is moving towards laptop-based production practices and sounds, the music based on real instruments and performance is still very powerful. Given my skillset and my taste, the best strategy for me is to use it to gain a competitive advantage in the commercial music industry.

Main points

What I am going to investigate in my final project is whether the demand and the supply of music professionals with a similar skillset to mine would make me gain a competitive advantage and/or allow me to be requested enough that I can build a sustainable career out of it, as well as demonstrating my abilities by building a portfolio that shows what I believe represents me.

This idea was born in the first place because of my personal feeling, taste, as well as my past experiences and long term plans.

I like to deal with musicians, music itself in its theoretical and practical form, and on its technical side, as my main education in music comes from studying classical music performance in the conservatory of Venice and working as assistant engineer and mixing assistant in commercial studios, as well as managing my own studio in Italy, before moving to London.

On the other hand, I like to be involved in the commercial music scene because of the satisfaction that I can get from projects I have worked on being aired, listened to, and the feeling of being part of the edge of music where new music professionals are introduced every day, in an ever growing artistic environment.

Why

In this era, thanks to new technologies, the costs of producing music can be cut dramatically, and thus the barriers to entry this business have lowered considerably, and the ground where the competition takes place has changed. There is a much higher focus on the quantity of music produced and the quality of the songs written, but the quality of the recording and the presence of real instruments played by musicians has become less important compared to what it used to be.

Nowadays the charts are populated by music that is produced mainly through a computer.

This music does not meet my personal taste nor my background. In other words, my skills include techniques and knowledge that is not necessary to produce electronic dance music

or other genres that are mainly produced by means of computers and DAWs, and do not include some of the techniques that are necessary for that kind of music.

So I have spent almost a year learning those techniques during the course, struggling to master them as they do not meet my natural way of making music. When I started adding to my productions elements from my skillset, like recording, writing and arranging by means of instruments and microphones, that I had used before in other genres like rock, folk, and even metal, I had an unexpected, very positive feedback by other students, A&R and other music professionals.

I then realized that some of the music that is still made with a real-instruments approach is having huge success even nowadays. In fact, sometimes even more. The main references I am going to use to support my idea are Quincy Jones, Mumford & Sons, Florence + The Machine and Mark Ronson. They all rely on real instruments and performance in order to create immensely successful music in the commercial environment.

I also have a feeling that performed music is still relevant to the creative process and to the listener, and I am going to test this assumption through research. The only assumption I do not need to prove is that I feel more creative while using real instruments and performance, as I have been exposed to both methods for years, and I have understood what works best for me.

Skills and education

The first assumption I need to validate is whether my skillset is actually not common nowadays in the commercial music industry or I am mistaken. A survey I have prepared for this purpose, shows that only 12% of respondents have studied music in a conservatory or music college, and 24% have studied in a modern music school, for a total of 36% of a RQF/CQFW level 6 or above. 47%, on the other hand, have never received a formal education - which does not mean they have not studied at all, but they are less likely to have studied music theory and music history (Appendix A).

The reason why the number of people that never had a formal education matters to me is the main difference between this generation of producers and the one that started working in the 1980s and 1990s: technology. With nowadays advanced tools, a music maker can outsource many skills like music theory, harmony, performance, sound quality, to a computer, thus not needing to learn and master those elements. Before the computer was largely employed in music production, even the non-formally-educated would necessarily learn those skills, as producers Michael Wagener, Fab Dupont and Alan Moulder told me during unofficial, unrelated chats.

Given the statistics, I think I can consider myself above average as per my knowledge in those skills - I am drawing a conclusion straight from the data I collected. On the other hand, by comparison with other producers I have met around Tileyard, I can consider myself below average when it comes to some computer-based techniques and practices. This is important as it is the first step in confirming that I might have a bigger chance of succeeding if I strongly differentiate myself towards my skills, rather than conform to the practices that are most common today.

Costs

Of course one of the biggest reasons the industry has shifted towards computer-based music is the production costs: the investment required to enter the industry nowadays is very small compared to how it used to be, thanks to computers. Based on the results of the survey, 76% of the respondents heavily relies on computers for music production - partially or entirely - and about 83% has invested less than 5000£ for their equipment, and no one has invested more than 10,000£ (Appendix A).

The costs of employing real instruments and musicians in the production of a song is almost strictly higher, as it usually is simply an addition to digital setups. This is because to not employ digital recording, editing and mixing is but a very niche practice anyway, nowadays. This can easily be demonstrated by observing the common music production practices in big recording studios, like I have seen in person in New York (Flux Studios and The Magic Shop), Nashville (Wireworld Studios), London (Zelig Studio, Assault & Battery, Abbey Road Studios, Resident Studios), Venice (Magister Recording Area, Teatro Delle Voci) and Milan (Officine Meccaniche), and from the equipment lists found on the official online documentation of other big studios.

My research, that I carried on by speaking to producers around Tileyard, shows that there is a significant difference in investment between laptop-based and instruments-based producers. The former work in a setup that is around 15,000 to 20,000£ in value: this is an estimate as I have researched the price of the equipment I have seen in person, but I did not have the chance to speak to owners about it; The latter will be represented in my research by two examples: Sean Hargreaves works in a studio that costed approximately 150,000£, and another Tileyard professional I have been interviewing - who would prefer not to be mentioned - works in a studio that is about 200,000£ worth in equipment.

I am going to investigate, through my project, how much money I would need to invest in order to achieve the results I am aiming for, in order to understand the economic sustainability of such career.

Time Constraints

Because of new technology, together with cost cutting opportunities come time limits: modern techniques based on computers not only allow for cheaper equipment, but also for shorter production time. The common opinion appears to be that the tight time limits imposed in the music industry, which of course are also related to costs, are limiting producers and songwriters: in fact, 88% of the respondents to my survey said that they feel limited, which means that they could achieve better results if they had more time to work on their music. Whether this is related to actual lack of time or to bad personal time management is not inferable, but only 27% of the ones that answered affirmatively feel that they are very limited, as opposed to feeling limited but not to a great extent. The majority of them (87%) feel a limit to their creative side, but there is also a strong limit (53%) to the technical side - as 40% of the total pool feel limited on both aspects (Appendix A).

I am going to investigate how much time I will need to achieve the result I am aiming for, in order to factor that into my study of sustainability of such career.

Creativity

This comes from my own experience but it is also a common topic among producers. Mike Crossey, for example, uses a lot of old-school techniques and instruments, together with analog gear, in order to get something unique out of the production and the sound, and he feels that he can fully tailor the sound around the artist (Tingen, 2013,). In the same way, I feel much more inspired and I am faster when I am producing with real instruments, musicians, and gear I can touch and feel. Being faster allows me to maintain the brief moments of intense creativity for myself and for the other musicians or artists involved. Thanks to this I also keep perspective for longer, being able to avoid being creatively stuck.

Reception Of Played Music

This concept came to me without really looking for it, and it is what ignited the spark for this project. While referencing music for my own commercial productions for the MA's assignments, I came across some artists that I knew but would have not considered commercial, mainly because of their genre, not being dance-oriented nor synth-based: Mumford & Sons and Florence + The Machine. At the moment of writing this proposal, the former artist have a total of 910,666,346 streams on Spotify, summing the streams of only the five most played tracks, and 8,756,015 monthly listeners (Spotify, 2019) as well as two number one albums and two number two albums in the UK (officialcharts.com, 2019), and nine Grammy nominations, plus two Grammy wins (Grammy.com, 2019); Florence + The Machine have a total of 771,397,477 streams across the five most played tracks, and 9,464,283 monthly listeners (Spotify, 2019), plus three number one albums and one number two in the UK, which means all of her albums peaked at UK top 3 (officialcharts.com, 2019) and six Grammy nominations (Grammy.com, 2019). This definitely proves that these two artists are commercially successful. Mumford & Sons' records are mainly made of organic instruments and live recordings (Tingen, 2011). The approach of real instruments and even more of performances by musicians, with little to no editing is what defines Florence + The Machine (Tingen, 2018).

When it comes to the taste of people and practices, the survey I designed has also highlighted an interesting discrepancy: the graph representing the respondents' taste in music when it comes to listening to music for personal pleasure, in terms of whether it is made inside the computer or with real instruments, is a normal curve, centred in the answer "half and half" (Appendix A). We can then say that on average there is no particular inclination towards one style or the other. When the same pool answered the same question but this time about music they make instead as the one they listen to, the answers were represented by a downward sloping curve, which reveals a strong prevalence of the laptop-based approach.

The non-correlation of the two slopes indicates that producers and songwriters are, on average and to a certain extent, producing music that is different from the one they enjoy listening to. Among the main reasons for this behaviour there could be limited skills, limited money, limited time, or responding to a specific demand for a particular style. All these possibilities are not inferrable by the two questions in the survey, but what we can deduce is that it probably is not a choice based on personal taste, as preferring to make music that is not the same we enjoy listening to is quite rare. At the same time, with the first question, I am confirming that instrument-based music still has a market - in fact almost as big as its

counterpart - and the second question is telling me that there might be an opportunity for me to tackle a field with less competition than its counterpart.

As an additional argument, I am investigating the amount of professionals around Tileyard that use the instruments-based production. In other words, not only will I be investigating the demand, but the supply as well. If the supply is lower than the demand, it means that there should be an opportunity for bigger margins, according to the standard principles of microeconomics.

Questions

What I am going to investigate in my project is how much more money and time I would need to use an instrument-based approach as opposed to laptop and virtual instruments, in terms of initial investment, fixed costs and variable costs. All of this with the goal of making better music that also reflects my taste and my skills, but mainly to understand whether this approach is sustainable or not. In other words, the questions I will need to answer by the end of the project are:

1. Do I think the music I have produced with this approach is of higher quality?
2. Do other music makers think the music I have produced with this approach is of higher quality?
3. Do music industry executives think the music I have produced with this approach is of higher quality?
4. Does the quality justify the costs?
5. Does the quality justify the time investment?

And they all come down to one main question: Can I make this approach my strength and make a sustainable career out of this?

Portfolio

The portfolio is going to be made of different genres and styles of music, having in common my personal production style and sound, and the approach I have described above. When that is ready, I will be able to combine the quality of the music and the costs incurred to produce it, and compare them to the same aspects in the laptop world, to my own judgement and research and to other music industry professionals, in order to answer the questions listed above and understand whether my position is defensible or not.

The main reasons for building a career around this approach are: I enjoy the process of making music that way; I feel stronger and I feel that I can achieve better results through real instruments; developing a career in music requires long hours, endless study and self-improvement, and handling uncertainty. I think that in the long run everything could eventually fall apart if it becomes too heavy: working the way you enjoy and believe in does not mean less effort, but it certainly means that the same effort is easier to bear, as it feels lighter.

Bibliography

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Officialcharts.com. (2019). *Mumford & Sons | full Official Chart History | Official Charts Company*. [online] Available at: <https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/5810/mumford-and-sons/> [Accessed 31 May 2019].

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Officialcharts.com. (2019). *Florence & The Machine | full Official Chart History | Official Charts Company*. [online] Available at: <https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/5108/florence-and-the-machine/> [Accessed 31 May 2019].

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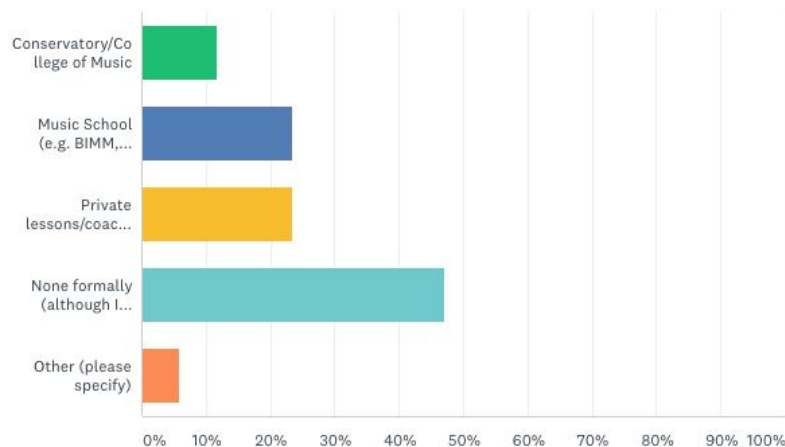
Tingen, P. (2011). *Mumford & Sons 'Little Lion Man'*. [online] Soundonsound.com. Available at: <https://www.soundonsound.com/people/mumford-sons-little-lion-man> [Accessed 31 May 2019].

Tingen, P. (2018). *Emile Haynie: Producing Florence + The Machine*. [online] Soundonsound.com. Available at: <https://www.soundonsound.com/people/emile-haynie-producing-florence-machine> [Accessed 31 May 2019].

Appendix A

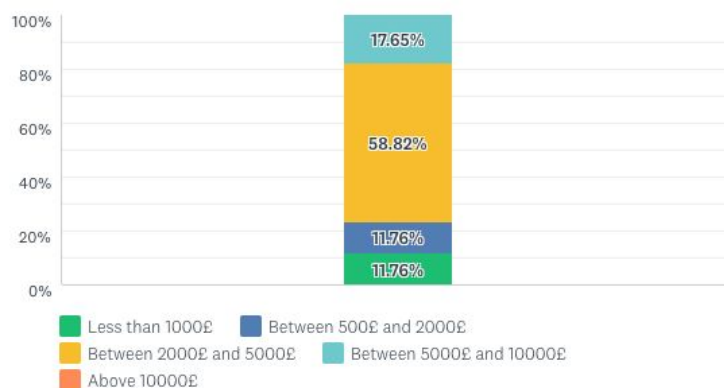
What kind of formal education in music did you receive? (Not including the MA you are attending if you are a Tileyard Education student)

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



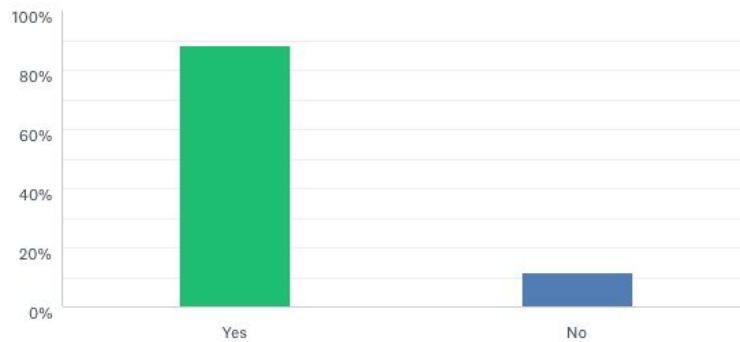
How much have you spent in equipment and tools for your job? This can include your computer if you bought it specifically for making music. (NOTE: Money actually spent: if you have cracked software we are not here to judge, but please do not factor that in)

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



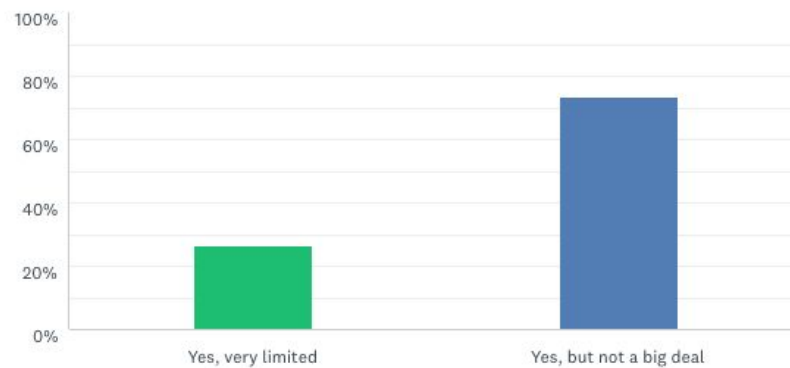
Do you feel that the music industry nowadays gives tight time restrictions?
(Next question is an "if yes...")

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



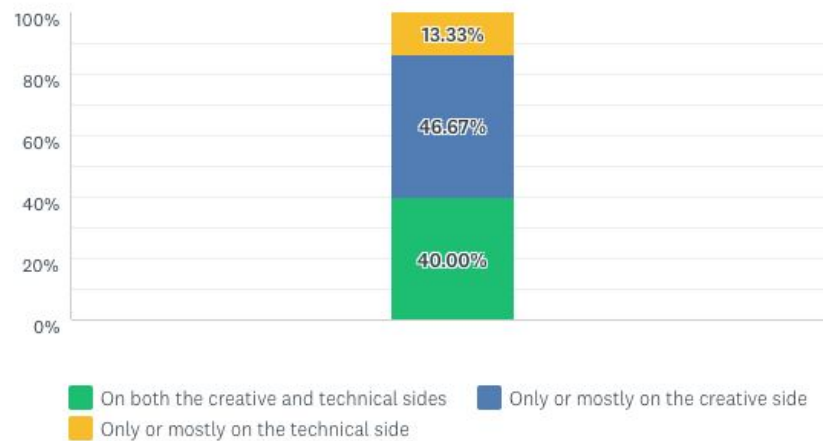
If yes, do you feel that the quality of your work is limited by these time constraints? (i.e. if I had more time I could do better)

Answered: 15 Skipped: 2



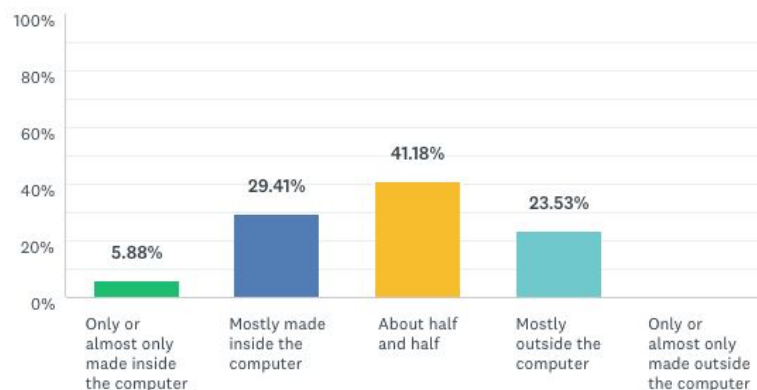
Where do you feel you are limited?

Answered: 15 Skipped: 2



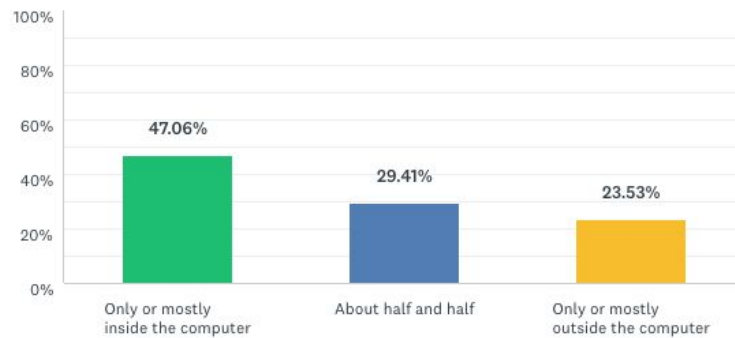
How much music you listen to for pleasure (not including referencing/study/etc) is mostly programmed inside the computer (MIDI Software-based synthesizers, samples, virtual instruments) as opposed to outside the computer (Real instruments, players and limited intervention inside the computer)? If you are not sure about how it was actually made, think about what you feel or think it was.

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



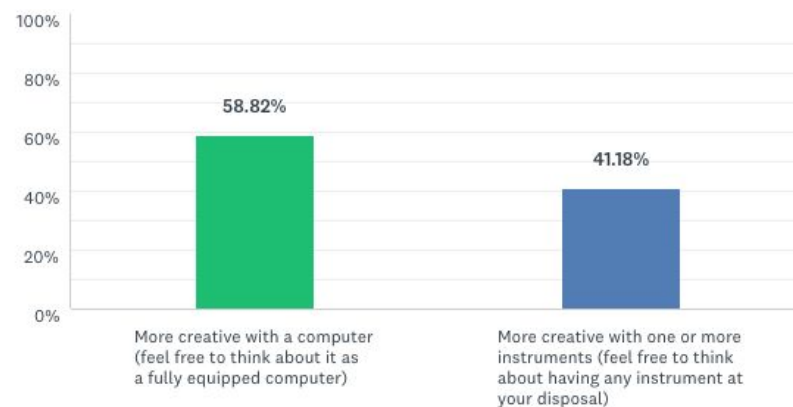
How much of the music you MAKE (writing/producing/arranging) is made inside the computer, as opposed to outside the computer? (Using a computer as a recorder/mixer only is considered to be outside)

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



Do you feel more creative when you are using a computer (virtual instruments, samples, etc) or when you are using an instrument (guitar, piano, analog drum machine, analog synthesizer, etc)?

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



What genres do you enjoy the most listening to? Please be broad (i.e. if you enjoy mostly progressive rock tick "rock" instead of "other"). Please select UP TO 3 answers.

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0

