

**MA Commercial Music
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Track 1 – K-Pop

Genre: K-Pop/Trap

My characteristics as a music producer are influenced heavily by my background in musical theatre tied in with my hands-on approach and love for music. I consider myself a holistic/pastoral producer with versatility in the style of music I make, ranging from Hip Hop, RnB, Latin Pop, to film scoring. So, writing to a K-pop brief seemed like a great challenge to put my producing practices into action.

Before I start producing any genre, I familiarise myself with the lead billboard charters, current trends and artist. I think it's essential to look at the current global state that we are in as this influences the way our audience interacts with music. A process I apply when writing music for an artist or brief among thinking about how the music video could look, how live performances can work or finding new trends we can use to boost their social media presence.

Common characteristics of K-pop is the Bubble-gum pop sound mixed with a range of other genres like funk, dance, trap, electro and RnB. K-pop focuses more on band acts than solo acts with a vast selection of Boy/Girl bands ranging from 4 to up to 30 members per group. K-pop incorporates different genres into its songs, having a breakdown almost every minute or so and mixing English and Korean lyrics similar to the use of "Spanglish" (Ardila, 2005). K-Pop is still heavily driven to be the next trendsetters while maximising profits for shareholders meaning the defining characteristics of K-Pop can be at risk of being altered to meet the current market landscape.

I discovered that the K-Pop landscape is going through significant change in its sound, as the ever-growing pool of K-Pop bands sounding or looking the same is becoming more noticeable, predictable and boring to fans. The K-Pop labels try to overcompensate by having more international influences to feature on their tracks and usually with poor execution like 'Icy' by ITZY highlighting the industries struggle to keep up with the rapid shift within its audience taste. It is pushing away younger Korean artists and fans back to traditional Korean folk music called Trot (Mitch, 2020), shining light of the underlining struggle between K-Pop, its residential audience and the rise of TikTok chaperoning the start of a new wave of music.

Reference Tracks

My K-Pop brief was for the girl group "Weeekly" having only one reference track attached, I decided to use Weeekly's previous releases as points of references.

Anne-Marie's – Birthday (Asylum, 2019)

Singer/Songwriter Anne-Marie's track "Birthday" is predominantly a Pop track with its tempo sitting at 152 BPM setting it up to be a happy, upbeat song (Kim, 2015). The producer made a great choice using this particular BPM as it sits in the middle of Trap music's BPM

ranging from 125 to 180 BPM. The song is in the key of G sharp minor which isn't a standard scale for pop or trap music as the common scale used is D or C minor and being in the sharp minor scale, the relative Major is B which I found interesting as the song still sounds predictable and lack-lustring.

The song starts with the lead hook, which sounds like a mallet blended with a detuned synth flute. I can hear that the synth has a small amount of distortion, allowing the hook to have some grit and punch in the mix while leaving room for the vocals. The choice of sound for the drum percussion adds flavour to the song using vinyl scratches, various claps, snares, gritty hi-hats with a bouncy trap pattern that's always transitioning between 1/16 to 1/32 and having triplet breaks. Before the chorus, there's a weird delayed bell pluck synth that sits horribly with the mix clashing with the low-mid frequencies and once the chorus starts it's lost in the mix. Guitar's layer the main chorus accompanied by a big synth stabbing over the staccato guitar lead, all drenched in a coat of reverb that reminds me of the Valhalla Vintage Reverb.

The mixing engineer working on Anne-Marie's vocals mixed it to a high standard, and it sits perfectly over the whole production with excellent stereo imaging. You can hear the vocals have been equalised vigorously to remove all the unnecessary frequencies to allow all the backing vocals to sound like an anthem making space between 700hz to 2khz. Which allows room for the producer to add chopped vocals with a big delay, reverb and pitched up to sound to emulate a lead synth.

Overall, it's a decent Pop/Trap song with a good girl gone bad vibe. However, I still think it has a short shelf life because the lyrics are unimaginative and predictable (Vos, 2020) compared to Anne-Marie's previous successes.

Weekly's – Tag Me (@me) (Play M Entertainment, 2020)

Tag Me starts straight into a high energy cool schoolgirl vibe reminding me of early 2010 K-Pop, the vocals go directly into a catchy cheerleader Trap chant with a very funky bassline and big drums which throughout is panned and mixed well. We then go into the first verse where the chord progression opens up with some overdrive guitars and brass that adds extra energy (Owsinski, 2020) the song is in the key E minor an excellent choice to provide range while keeping the clear bubble-gum sound.

The pre-chorus and chorus have this weird whistle melody that sits terribly on the mix, I first assumed it clashed with the frequencies, but I realised it's the melody that clashes with the vocals with it off-beat swing through the pre-chorus and chorus. Still, in the post-chorus, it blends in well, which is a shame because the production is so tight in the chorus it kills the catchy vocal melody and feels alien in the chorus.

The vocals are mixed beautifully and never lost through the busy production, and you can tell there's a lot of multiband imaging and compression as the production is equally spread out with a punch. The trap breakdown (1:26) is probably the most underwhelming section with a weird synth lead that clashes with the rap melody. While in contrast at 2:26 it goes into a reggae dubstep allowing the track to go into a full breakdown rendition of the song at 2:37 making the whole song have depth in dynamics.

Track Produced

Fire – Lyrics by Lucan Mills and Abigail Edwards, performed by Abigail Edwards and Veira, Composed and Produced by Luis Gustavo Silva Navarro.

After analysing both tracks, I decided to use Anne-Marie's Birthday structure making my tempo at 150 BPM and going down a semi-tone into the Key of G minor as it's a scale I'm familiar with. The chords I chose to use as the base was C minor 7th, D 7th and Eb Major 7th, allowing me to blend both Weeekly's and Anne-Marie's sound in one scale.

When the song starts, you can hear I use a stabbing technique with the serum string synth to mimic Anne-Marie's lead hook followed by Trap hi-hats keeping to the Birthday structure. The percussions are Panned decently throughout the track allowing space for the big drum hits and hi-hats. In references to "Tag me", I created a breakdown rendition for every verse, with the second verse breaking into an upbeat electro break, leading into a Rap Trap break layered with a Latin percussion swing and Trap hi-hats. A recording technique I used for the vocals on the trap break, was having Abigail Whisper the rap section as it lacked energy. This technique allows to bring more clarity to the vocal mix and is wildly used in heavy metal for screams (Chambergo, 2016), giving an Ominous cool touch to her rap.

When producing the harmonies, I tried to visualise each girl from Weeekly singing each section and what they could be doing to support the lead vocals. Take, for example, the RnB soul breakdown at 1:58 where I mimic Destiny's child harmonic sound and have each harmony come in one after another to ensure each band member is vocally engaged which I apply throughout the song.

Overall, I think the song as a solid foundation but feel that my mix lacks energy and isn't complimenting the track due to my lack of experience in post mixing. The prominent synths should be panned more efficiently to open up the track to clear up some of the muddiness in the low to mid ranges, developing a faster tuning and pitching method and adding some pads and 808's to fill in the gaps.

Track 2 – Bossa Nova

Genre: Bossa Nova/Jazz

For my second track, I decided to try a genre I've always resonated too because of my parents, and the best way to put my creativity to the test is to try a genre I'm entirely unfamiliar with in hopes to have a better understanding of the style.

Reference Tracks

Gary Burton and Keith Jarrett – Como en Vietnam (Rhino Records, 1971)

When I first heard this song, I was blown away by the musicianship and overall mix of the production. Initially, I struggled to pinpoint the exact tempo of the music as it was recorded live and dances around the 85/170 BPM mark. Even though it recognised as a Jazz Pop song, it holds characteristics of Samba as heard with the beginning Latin piano and the uncanny drum pattern and crashes that emulate that Latin swing.

The root note is C sharp, and when playing alongside it, I struggled to understand the relationship between each key change. For example, I was able to run through the C sharp scale while being able to play clashing notes like D and E underneath it, making me understand the Pivot chord technique (Ewar, 2009) and how the theory behind it works.

The song has an unorthodox mix, and you can hear that the majority of the drumkit is panned right with piano slightly right and the vibraphone and saxophones sitting in the middle of the mix. Panned left is the Bass and guitars were even in the mix you can hear the strumming of the electric guitars which is interesting as modern mixes have the Bass, snare and kick centred in the mix. This method allows the element of improvisation to work as we know recording in the '70s was limited to a twelve-track multi recorder (Hogan, 2016). Occasionally the bassline does overplay itself in the track causing some clashes which I enjoy hearing the human mistakes left in the end mix, limiting the number of takes and errors.

Astrud Gilberto – Agua de Beber (Verve, 1963)

Agua de Beber was written in the key of A minor, with the base tempo being 74/148 BPM and composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim. Like Como en Vietnam, the mixing techniques are very similar to the shakers, clave, rim shots and double Bass panned in the right-hand spectrum. To the left of the mix are both the Spanish guitars and a slightly detuned upright piano which have blended perfectly with minimal frequency clashes. I identified that both instruments tend to mirror each other to avoid conflicts and go a higher octave when riffing in the track.

Whilst both songs are two different genres, the similarities shared between mixes almost a decade apart, highlighted the standard mixing techniques used in the 60s. Both vocals sit in the middle with Astrud vocals layered with reverb and rarely does the male vocal overpower Astrud voice in the mix. The percussions at first sounded complex when in hindsight after recreating the exact percussion pattern, the actual patterns are straightforward and far from complex.

Track Produced

Two Souls (Dos Almas) – Written by Martina Stramaccioni and Luis Gustavo Silva Navarro, performed by Martina Stramaccioni, Alessandro Faverson and Luis Gustavo Silva Navarro, composed and produced by Luis Gustavo Silva Navarro

For this song, I instinctively chose the faster tempo as the bossa nova rhythm is a two-bar pattern derived from samba music. It recalls the syncopated clave of Afro-Cuban music (Masterclass, 2020) the pace of 170 BPM allows for a more vibrant vibe similar to Como en Vietnam. I wrote the song in two keys C major and G minor, starting in F Major 7th to the C

Major 7th where I pivot to Eb Major and end on Bb Major 7th. At the 2:37 mark, we added an extra bar to the piano section shifting the time signature momentarily to 5/4 and back to 4/4. My reason for this is to disrupt what the brain thinks should be the next coming chords and using jazz run down of Ab, F Major, Eb and D Major in a rapid transition reengages the listener.

Alessandro and I recorded the piano and Rhodes at 170 BPM an oversight I had when setting up the recording session as it bought issues when trying to add Midi percussions. The Midi samples were recorded at 85 BPM making the samples play at double-time or out of sync, my solution due to time constraints was to use some real percussion instruments like the Clave, Cabasa, Shakers and an actual snare for the rim shot. For the Midi instruments, I used an Open hi-hat, a Kick Drum and a Bass as I didn't have any Jazz bass players at hand. The piano has a mixture of Midi and Live audio as I was having difficulty quantising the audio track due to the swing and accent of the keys not registering accurately on Logic Pro X. This was my workaround to the problem as re-recording the piano wasn't feasible. I managed to alter and blend a Yamaha Upright, and Alicia Keys piano two Mimic the Yamaha U3, I also used Fabfilter Pro EQ 3 to clone the U3 EQ frequencies to have an exact mirror of the U3 in Midi and purposely left the mistakes.

For the Piano Microphone set up, I used a vintage 1970s AKG D12 just above the pianist's head as it has a Bass chamber allowing it to capture an exceptional range of dynamic and high frequencies. Below I used a Neumann's U87 another great mic from the 60s which is fantastic in picking up every nuance while keeping that vintage sound. Finally, the AEA R88 ribbon microphone which has two ribbon mics at a 90-degree angle, I placed the R88 slightly angled away 2 meters from the piano ensuring both figures of 8 microphone were within its peripheral.

Despite my lack of knowledge in this genre at the start, the vocals will be developed to standard of Agua de Beber, and I'm confident that the final live recording of this song with a band and finished lyrics will pay homage of the Bossa Nova genre with a modern touch.

Track 3 – RnB

Genre: RnB/Soul

For my third track, I had the opportunity to co-produce with the very talented Nostalia working alongside Maliek, a talented RnB Producer giving me confidence in creating a rendition of Rihanna's Diamonds with the team. We also use the bands favourite RnB artist Brandy as a reference for harmonies.

Reference Tracks

Rihanna – Diamonds (Def Jam, 2012)

Listening to Diamonds again now with a better-trained ear, I understood why the team wanted to recreate a proper RnB cover of Rihanna's song. Diamond's is in the Key of B

Minor with the tempo of 92 BPM, and the base drum pattern is similar to a marching beat throughout. Diamond's barely has any backing vocals or harmonies with the upbeat tempo it's hard to call it an RnB Pop track when it feels more Pop.

The Vocal mix is clean and tight but is layered with reverb and a delayed decay that unpleasantly fills the mix and lacks control. The piano sounds like it's blended with a detuned piano and either a toy piano or mallet, the kick punches right through the mix along with the blending of the strings and synths lifting the energy in the chorus but becomes repetitive and predictable by the end of the song.

Brandy – Borderlines (eOne Urban, 2020)

Brandy's second single release for her album B7 dives into a dark melodic Rnb vibe, with a muffled warped synth that has a blend of strings and an electro pad. This is heard throughout the track representing a lonely and haunting undertone, accompanied by a typical 2000s drumline with some interesting off-breaks that fits well with the main synth and vocal production.

Brandy's vocal arrangement is tight, and her vocal technique in layering harmonies gives the impression Auto-tune has been cranked up (RedgoldenChild,2020), when in fact brandy is intentionally mimicking that technique, with carefully placed vibrato. The use of ad-libs in the mix allows the simplicity of the production to work, leading us to the outro interlude that brings us to an enlighten eerie closure that inspired us to base our production of Nostalia's Diamonds around.

Track Produced

Diamonds- Written by Sia Furler, Performed by Nostalia, Produced by Maliek, Veira, Arieleno and Luis Gustavo.

Diamonds was an ambitious choice for us all to make a new rendition off. We decided to use Brandy's methods as a reference for the overall production, and we replicated her harmonies and ad-libs to showcase each girl's vocal capability exceeding over 100 tracks in layering's. We grouped each girls' harmonies to be able to do group mixing, equalising and bus sends to Auxiliary channels granting even more control of the reverb and auto-tune.

The Song is in the original key of Rihanna's Diamonds with Nostalia's version two beats faster at 94 BPM. Maliek's gospel background allows him to add a modern jazz touch with his arrangement of synths and keys. We do a standard 1, 2, 3 order for the girl's vocal intro all coming together for the pre-chorus leading into the massive harmony led chorus.

The intentional drag of the instrumental track is done to create a sense of tension that gives a feeling a production build-up will come but isn't given till the last chorus keeping the listener on edge.

Conclusion

Researching and producing these genres has given me so much insight and experience in Jazz music theory, the relationship between vocal harmonies and chords, predicting potential

shifts in music trends, how to vocalise my ideas effectively to a team. Exposing me with more vocal and studio work, enabling me to understand my mixing strengths and weakness where I've developed a more effective method for mixing in postproduction.

My highlight in this assignment was able to compose and conduct multiple musicians in the creation of "Two Souls." This experience gave me the confidence to be able to help co-produce Diamonds and a passion for taking on more formidable challenges to better my technical, social and creative skills.

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