

An Analysis of Dance, Contemporary Pop & Ballad Music

Foundation Module - Element II

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Dance Music:

NB: “Dance Music” is defined within this essay as Music released explicitly after the year 1980; and bears no reference to “traditional”/ definitions of Dance Music (e.g Jazz) within Popular Music circa 1920-1979.

The production of Dance Music today strongly correlates to the overall development in recording techniques and the rise of synthesis within popular Music. Typical features of Dance Music feature a BPM of (circa) 115-130 BPM and encompass techniques such as a high degree of processing on percussive and instrumental elements. Examples of such include Compression & Saturation; prominent with elements such as the Kick Drum & Sub-Bass. “If you try to stuff too many tracks into one part of the frequency spectrum, you’ll run out of room. It’s like trying to stuff too many clothes into one drawer.” - (BehindTheSpeakers, 2021) The purpose of Dance Music is, as the name suggests; Music created with the purpose of being rhythmically dance-accessible, with an overall “groove” that is suited for the dancefloor. It is commonplace for Dance records to feature a vocal, with often a catchy “hook” or lyrics that create both a “singalong” and a “call:response” pattern (when accompanied/performed by a disk jockey). Instrumentation-wise, (especially post 1988) elements such as Piano & Organ featured highly in these releases, correlating to the release of KORG’s M1 Music Workstation/Synthesiser (Ref: *Press Release, KORG, 2018*). Vocal-wise, Dance Music’s lack of rigidity when it comes to Vocal processing offers Musicians & Producers a high-degree of creativity when it comes to processing. It is still, however common/industry practice to ensure that normal mixing disciplines are applied with elements such as equalization, as elements do still need to “fit” within the spectrum. Where creativity is more open-ended, however, is in post-production effects such as AutoTune & techniques such as Formant Shifting & Talkbox techniques. Moreso than ever, today - formant-shifted Vocals have become more and more common, with Dance releases often featuring this as a preferred primary technique (versus “standard”, relatively unprocessed vocals) dubbed the (“Chipmunk” Effect) (*Albano, Joe, 2019*). Correlating these production techniques to the referenced works detailed below, is it clear that there is a high degree of commonality between all of these techniques.

The first referenced Material, “*Lonely*” (Thompson, L, Applebaum, N, Corry, J) is a track comprising of strong melodic elements, emphasised both with the “hook” vocal (“*La La La La, Lonely*”) and the strong Piano presence throughout the track. Whilst this record does not feature any high degree of vocal manipulation (e.g Formant Shifting) it does feature Auto-Tune to keep the singer (Sudworth) in-key. Due to the recent surge in Dance Records charting - the lyrics are in-keeping with current trends, focusing on relationships & the trials and tribulations of such. It is rare for these records to feature any explicit language, with only variations in production being either “Club Mix”, “Radio Edit”, or a “VIP”. FX-wise within “*Lonely*”, there are strong uses of Delay & Reverb both on Vocal & Instrumental elements. Within “transition” sections (e.g last words between the Verse & Pre-Chorus), Sudworth’s vocals especially feature audible uses of Reverb & EQ. The degree of such is not highly audible (to the point of “drowning” out); but to a lesser extent whereby it bridges a gap of (otherwise) vocal silence in between these sections. Additional production techniques such as Vocal Doubling are not especially audible in either “*Lonely*”, “*Goodbye*” or “*You & I*”.

Musically, Dance Music commonly comprises either Ionian (Major) modes or Aeolian (Minor) ones. This first referenced record (and indeed all three) are written in the Ionian mode; with an intention of being a happy, upbeat record designed for the dancefloor.

The elements of “Lonely” bear strong reference to the aforementioned production & mixing techniques; with loudness & a high degree of compression being both audible and visual. When importing this record into a DAW, it is apparent that allegiance to the “Loudness War” (Wykes, AJ, 2021) is still common. The track peaks at 0dBFS digitally, leaving zero headroom at the post-mastering point. The record is extremely bass-heavy, as when viewed using a parametric EQ, there is an overall strong boost between 50-105Hz (correlating to the Kick & Sub-Bass) placement within the track.

Conformity of these disciplines & instrumentation are again audible within Goodbye” (Dawe, N, Matthias, T)’s release - however to a slightly lesser extent. In this case, the instrumentation of the KORG’s M1 Piano is more prominent, yet there is a less saturated Kick within this record in order to make further space for the stronger Sub-Bass (to harmonise with the Piano)/Mid-Bass. In terms of melody, both of these records feature the “standard” I–V–vi–IV chord progression (excluding those used in the “Bridge” section). The texture of all three referenced tracks feature a Polyphonic texture with many elements playing at the same time (contributing to the overall *fatness* of the Mix) (“*My Favorite Trick For Fat And Tight Low End On Mixes*” (Slate Digital, 2018)) and additionally feature a 4/4 time signature.

Commonly, however, on all three records is the use of the “Organ II” preset from the KORG M1. This choice of instrument is still current (having stemmed originally/gained popularity from Robin S’ release “Show Me Love” *“It starts with a cymbal crash, a bumpy house beat and a prominent, punchy snare. There’s a gnarly, low synth stab that plays a simple three-note riff, and then a yearning, wordless vocal comes in, held over a few seconds while one of the most recognisable melodies in house music plays out. That skeletal, bouncing arrangement — a keyboard preset on the Korg M1 synthesiser — made the journey from underground clubs to become the soundtrack to a million nights out and eventually to countless wedding receptions, cab journeys, dodgem rides and weekend shopping trips.”* - (Heath, H, DJ Mag, September 2020) All three of the records are *circa* 124-126BPM and feature a 4/4 Time Signature.

Within my own submitted work, I believe my submission applies the same Musical characteristics as those mentioned above. Throughout my composition & mixing process, I paid particular attention to ensure that elements fit well within the mix and the arrangement/instrumentation was similar to those discussed above. Due to the submission being defined as “*suitable pre-production standard*”, I predict that at a postmaster stage, the audio levels & frequency boosts (within Kick, Bass etc) would bring the record onto the same production level as the referenced tracks.

Contemporary Pop:

The term “Contemporary Pop” (within a Musical Genre) is exceptionally open-ended in terms of composition, BPM, writing style & conformity to “traditional” musical writing disciplines. Billboard measures “Contemporary Pop” as “Popular soft rock/adult pop songs' artists, ranked by radio airplay detections as measured by Nielsen Music.” (Note: Now MRC Data as of 2021) MRC's Data for 2021 also denotes however that Pop had a 12.9% total volume of “Musical Market Share” (Ingham, T, 2021)

Thus, production-wise, the techniques for composition & writing are even less regimented than those discussed previously for Dance Music. However, the mixing style for Pop Music has become more standardised in recent years, largely triggered by the rise of DSP's and their strict loudness standards. Oversaturation & compression have again become even more commonplace at mix-level, using an array of outboard equipment or modern plugins (*“Through the decades, most pop records have benefitted from the sound of tape in one form or another, but the costliness and technical challenges that come along with tape have made it less likely to be involved in modern record-making. Fortunately, the many great plugins on the market allow us to impart the unmistakable flavor of analog tape onto our digitally-produced music.”*) (Vargo, I, 2018)

A common production technique used in Pop records is a high degree of Vocal Doubling/Overdubs. This production technique I aimed to emulate in my submitted material for this genre. The quoted works of Childish Gambino's record *“Redbone”* features several examples of this throughout the record, especially prevalent during the Chorus. It has been a production technique I've been fond of since hearing this; and believe it is delivered well in my submission. The art of Vocal Doubling may be discussed on two levels. The first, “Physical” doubling entails the artist taking multiple takes of a certain line of the record, recorded explicitly with the intention of it being served with this purpose. However, using additional plugins, “Fake” doubles have also risen to become a common practice/studio technique. Adam Cagan from SonarWorks describes this within Pro Tools using Avid's AAX Stock Delay Plugin as follows: *“For a wide stereo double, try duplicating the lead vocal and in(s)erting a mono-in, stereo-out delay. Set the left and right channels as above, except the delay time should be around 10 milliseconds on the left side and 25 milliseconds on the right. The modulation can be set as in the first example but varied slightly for more interesting effects. This double technique relies on the Haas effect which creates a stereo image from the slight delay difference between the left and right channels.”*. In some cases, this may suit the engineer as being a plausible way of creating doubles without the vocalist present (i.e from a post-production or remote perspective), *“The key to dynamic mixes is variation in texture. Your vocal should always be solid and present”* (Sonarworks: (Cagan, A, 2021).

Both of the referenced tracks feature a 4/4 time signature, however vary largely in BPM. *“Redbone”* has a BPM of 81/162BPM; yet *“Lonely Together”* has a BPM of 103/206. Comparing this to the smaller change in BPM with Dance Music mentioned above, this alone demonstrates the large variation of content produced within this genre.

In terms of melody & tonality, both of these pieces follow the Ionian mode with no accidental sharps, flats (e.g Blue notes) in either of their melodies/vocals. However, at the end of "*Redbone*", it is documented within the notation that there are two instances of "Mode Mixing" (taking a major/minor chord out of the respective scale & substituting it to the original relative major/minor chord). The "Choir" note alternating between a Major/Minor third contributes to the mood change in the overall piece, creating another perspective in the overall listening experience.

In terms of percussion, both tracks feature somewhat minimal (overall) use of percussion. Due to Avicii's production style being largely dance orientated, the signature "four to the floor" Kick pattern is evident in this record; however in "*Redbone*", the percussion is a lot more "relaxed" (using acoustically recorded drums as an alternative to pre-mixed samples in "*Lonely Together*".)

Instrumentation-wise, both records use extremely different methods of adding in these elements. An excerpt of the video "The Making Of Childish Gambino's 'Redbone' With Ludwig Göransson | Deconstructed" by Genius demonstrates the producer using real-world *physical* instruments (e.g the Rhodes) versus Tim Bergling's (Avicii)'s approach of using VST ("Fake") Instruments. Also within the video, it is viewed (on screen) that the producer is printing directly to Audio (versus Tim's production methods of MIDI) - this shares a high degree of commonality with earlier methods of recording (pre-1983 (the invention of MIDI)). It is audibly clear how both productions widely vary in analogue:digital recording techniques.

When writing/producing my submission for this genre, I opted for my composition to bear the strongest production reference to Avicii & Rita Ora's record "*Lonely Together*". The almost minimalist approach to Avicii's arrangement gave the maximum space for the Vocal to have precedence. Given the previously discussed high degree of Vocal doubling - I feel that, on balance this approach worked well in my case. Whilst, unarguably the Mix may need some further work (to create more of a blend between all elements), the vocal production elements taken from "*Redbone*" allowed me to produce a production that positively fuses both tracks' production techniques.

Overall in my composition, I'm extremely satisfied with the result as it is currently. I believe that should additional time be spent refining the overall mix & vocal processing, the content would be suitable for release and up to commercial standard.

Ballad:

NB: “Ballad” is defined within this essay explicitly as Ballads prevalent within Popular Music Culture (e.g Pop, Soul, Country, & Heavy Metal). This does not cover Ballads written with the objective of being written/performed for Musical Theatre.

Originating from 19th Century Romantic Music, Ballads often comprises one or two either Individual Instruments, or alternatively Groups of (e.g String Quartet) combined with a Vocal. It is described as “a short narrative set to song” (Cengage, N.A). Traditionally, the Lyrics of a Ballad follows several patterns of rhyming quatrains (e.g line I & III will rhyme with II & IV). The term “Pop Ballad” comprises of a slow love song and originally stemmed from a narrative folk song.

The first reference track is Adele’s current single “*Easy On Me*”, from her album, “*30*”. This record has a BPM of 71/142 BPM, and features a 4/4 time measure whilst also being written in the Ionian Mode (of F Major). The instrumentation of this record largely comprises of Piano, Percussion (Drums) with a largely filtered kick (but not to the degree whereby it overpowers the Piano). It is *very* subtle within the overall mix. Additionally, it features a Bass Guitar, lightly complimenting the notes played in the lower register of the Piano. There are no (audible) vocal doubling techniques used in this production, with only a prominently clear, lead vocal. What is interesting within this composition is the *blue note* around 2:47 in the track. This is not incredibly normal practice within Ballads; but is acceptable and shares some musical (borrowing) practice as referenced above with “*Redbone*” (the theory of “Mode Mixing”).

Alternatively, the works of Michael Patrick Kelly with “*Blurry Eyes*” feature a somewhat different production process. There is evident use of additional Vocal FX within this production such as Reverb & Delay within all sections of the track. What is interesting is that the production *largely* contrasts from that of Adele’s. Instead of a clear and concise lead vocal, there are several *ad-libs* sung throughout all sections of the track. Instrumentation-wise, it is audible that there are several accompanying strings played during the Chorus section. In terms of musical development, there is *clear* contrast between sections in this track, yet it is overall very repetitive. We do hear the highest degree of variation with the addition of percussive elements in the second verse. This was a feature I liked within this track and chose to add something similar in my own composition. This track was, written with an Aeolian mode (B Minor) & is a clear alternative to all of the works referenced in all genres discussed. There is clear contrast in the overall mood of the track. It could be argued (*although much as a matter of opinion*) that “*Blurry Eyes*” was “better produced” versus “*Easy on Me*”; and the reasons for such may comprise of the additional harmonic elements audible by the accompanying string section creating an overall fuller and exciting mix.

Both records bear historical resemblance to the origins of Ballads (as discussed - a “narrative set to song”) as the lyrics commonly refer to stories of pain, previous lovers & emotional heartbreak. To some degree there are several elements of imagery throughout both works; as the listener is quite easily able to imagine “conjure images in your ~~audience’s~~ mind with the

phrases you write..." (Cabeg, Y, 2021). The common lyrical objective of a Ballad is to provide an "orientation, complication & resolution." (N.A - EnglishSummary.com)

The instrumentation used within both records are in keeping with the historical styles; as elements such as synthesisers would be out of place in records within this genre. Mix-wise, both records conform to loudness standards, with all elements sitting well within the mix. There are no overshadowing elements that clash; but do feature highly one primary accompanying instrument, with any others being largely reduced in overall volume. There is no strict vocal panning in either of these works, with the vocal sitting dead centre. It would not be an inaccurate hypothesis to predict that AutoTune was used on both of these works; as this is a standard industry practice. Adele's record does not feature any "advanced" Vocal production techniques (e.g harsh panning) other than the obligatory very light Reverb & Delay. There are also no "transition" FXs such as downfilters or use of synthesis such as White Noise. Both works feature a Polyphonic texture with multiple instruments playing at once.

With my own composition, I opted to relate to the Musical characteristics mentioned above with having a (largely) minimal accompaniment. In retrospect, I believe that the Vocal does let this production down. Unfortunately, as this recording was done remotely, I was unable to engineer this recording in person to the same standard as the other pieces (as the Vox was recorded straight in as one take and sent to me via Dropbox). Due to the vocalist not being a (native) English speaker, the translation and pronunciation of some words were unfortunately slightly mispronounced. Should I be approaching this same singer in the future, I'd ensure that I was in a position to be physically on-site with the Singer at the same time, in order to ensure more takes were done, rather than minimal (and in some cases unusable) comps of Vocals. As a Musical piece, I believe the chord structure, instrumentation & Mix is in keeping with the referenced material. Should the vocalist be replaced, I believe there is a high degree of marketability for this record.

Overall, the body of work produced for this assignment demonstrates and encompasses the production techniques referenced above. The genres selected demonstrate a varied degree of Musical disciplines in both instrumentation, tonality & mixing decisions. The open-endedness of Contemporary Pop provided me with a high margin of exploration in terms of the content I was able to create; and I'm happy with the results produced in this case. Each Genre (and record, respectively) has its place within the wider Music market and in Popular Music Culture and I enjoyed the creative experience of producing a Ballad (something that I have never produced/written from scratch before).

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