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Commercial Music Production

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For this assessment I used three main reference tracks to inform the creation of the three tracks in my portfolio, and an additional three for further context. The different genres I chose to work in were, Hyperpop, Techno, UK Rap/ Punk.

The first key step in my process was to conduct in-depth research into each genre. Having precious experience in the Techno and UK rap genres, my research was not as in depth, but focused more on the reference artists. I started with the tracks themselves, analysing the different production styles created by each producer. For reference, the Hyperpop track is produced by Dylan Brady and A. G. Cook, the Techno track is produced by Skin on Skin, and the UK rap/ Punk track is produced by Mura Masa. I start to recognise which motifs or specific styles of production they had incorporated throughout their production process, in particular how the drums sound, what type of synths they had used, or what type of specific tonal qualities are most present. By doing this as a first step, I was able to start thinking about what my own approach would be to working in these genres and how I could vary my production style to create a uniqueness. "Reference tracks are especially useful for looking at the bigger picture. For instance, they can help us establish the overall tonality of the song" (M. McAllister, 2021).

Formulating my ideas led me to complete further research into the conventions of each genre to better understand the conventions from a commercial perspective of the importance and relevance of key components. "They increase our comprehension of the art form, help us recognize innovation and improve our ability to appreciate quality" (P. Cram, 2021). This included the different BPM's, types of synths in relation to the desired sound or specific drum patterns or time signatures, mixing styles, and determining which instruments are essential to achieve the desired outcome that best reflects my production style, whilst staying true to my chosen genre. By having a clearly established genre it should lead to greater commercial viability if I can leverage established marketing and distribution channels more effectively.

I also watched interviews from the artists and producers who worked on my reference tracks to enable me to gain a deeper understanding of their process and rationale to inform my own style. I utilised YouTube and various podcasts as a useful resource especially when the artists included insight into their own creative process for the reference tracks.

I considered the genres as a whole and reviewed key influencing creatives and their styles, this was especially important for the hyperpop track as this was the genre, I had the least previous experience in, recognising it's also a relatively new genre. "Hyperpop is a genre born from the internet. This is reinforced by all aspects of its conception, from its name arising from the title of a spotify playlist." (E. O'Regan-Reidy, 2021). I found sample packs online from each genre, which helped me gain a better understanding of the different types of sound design which each of my tracks would benefit from. The packs were on sites such as Reddit or Splice, which are all royalty free. Sample packs were also used to create my demos which enhanced the effectiveness of the initial development of the instrumentation, saving time on the whole process. It also enabled me to layer different sounds to create a custom end result. "Layering is the easiest and most effective way to change up the character of your samples and find the perfect sound" (J. Kendall, 2018). To help create the best possible sound design, I also found several online tutorials which showed how to create genre specific sounds particularly for the Hyperpop track to develop a unique instrumental.

Once I felt confident enough with my research findings, I started development of the instrumentals. I prefer to do this in this order as it enables me to lay the ground work for the track, whilst also giving the song writers a clearer idea of what exactly I am trying to achieve for the lyrics and style I want to create. Being mindful to make the writing process as quick and effective as possible for the whole team. For the Hyperpop track I wanted the instrumentation to be mainly drum led as this is a key part of any dance track. "Drums are the backbone of any dance track. They make up most of the groove, which is why they need careful attention" (S. Matla, 2017). To achieve this, I wanted to create a unique and powerful drum beat whilst using a number of effects creatively and appropriately. I used three effects on the drums including a phaser, a filter, and the RC-20 plug-in. I used a phaser to give the drum sound a warped feel. To make sure that the phaser didn't overpower the drums I also added a filter. This filter was used to help create a pulsing effect which was most impactful on the snare, it further enhanced the warped qualities and created an exaggerated and unique drum sound I was seeking. To help add more texture and wobble to the drums I used the RC-20 plugin. This plugin helped tie together all the effects I had used to make the drums sound as cohesive as possible. To add to the effects on the kick and snare I also chose a very metallic sounding hi hat. This gave the overall drum sound a more industrial feel. I automated the pitch on the hats so that they would go up and

down in pitch in certain parts of the track. This was done to create more bounce in the drums which I felt to be important as a focal point of the track.

Having created the desired drum sounds for the Hyperpop track I was then able to start focusing on the synths. I used the Korg minilogue XD synth as I already had a number of pre-sets that I had previously created which were ideal for adding textural layers. I only wanted to use the synths to fatten out the overall sound, not to be recognised as a lead element or main part of the track. Once I was happy with the instrumental sounds, I then focused on the vocals. For the vocals and song writing I wanted to work with a fellow TYE student called Lilvii. I selected her for the Hyperpop song as I knew her writing style and vocals would be perfect for the sound I wanted to create. I was aiming for a punchy, aggressive style similar to Rico Nasty and Charli XCX. This aggressive over exaggerated style was ideal as it meant that when I applied the overall effects to the end product it would be both impactful and different.

When creating the Techno track, I worked predominately in the box. "Digital technology has arguably reached the point where you can get an equally good result mixing in the box" (B. Voss, 2022). This ensured the process was more efficient, and I have the greatest experience in this style of production. I knew the type of sound design I wanted to create, using gritty, distorted synths. With some similarity to the Hyperpop drums approach, I wanted to create an industrial tone throughout this track. I was able to create this tone through largely focusing on the sound design, using a range of different synths and sound effects. One key effect I used frequently was the tremolo, I used this on multiple sounds all at different rates to create a unique pulsing effect which carried and changed throughout the recording to add a desired amount of variation. By creating this pulsing sound, I was able to add more of a groove feel to the whole track which I felt to be appropriate for a Techno track, I was aiming to create a level of energy in the listener to create a 'hyped' up feel. For the remainder of this track, I worked in the key conventions of the genre. This meant using 909 inspired drum samples, as well as a constant 4 on the floor kick pattern. To enhance the overall production and bring it to a higher level I also used a high level of automation. This created an opportunity for the overall mix to be more dynamic and impactful in certain areas such as the use of builds and drops. I felt this was key to the overall track sound as it elevated certain elements to create the desired sound outcome.

For the final track in my portfolio, I decided to take a different approach to the track's overall creation. As the track is UK rap/ Punk inspired, I wanted

to record as many live elements as possible to build that raw punk feel. To create the instrumental, I started with recording and layering different guitar sounds. I started with some muted harmonic stabs which succeeded in adding texture and a layering up of the percussion. I then created a number of different riffs and chords, to create a bassline. I wanted this bassline to be the main focal point of the track which would be played throughout. To make the bassline standout I wanted it to be catchy but not too repetitive. To achieve this balance, I also used the sound toy effect rack to ensure the bass recordings sounded as live as possible whilst still retaining a DIY feel. By stacking multiple effects, I was able to quickly experiment with different plug-ins until I was happy with the sound. To create a punk inspired track, the main effect I used on the bass sound was a distortion plug in. By adding distortion, I was able to create a much more driven and gritty sound which was appropriate for the overall project.

For the drum sound, I wanted to follow the same idea as the reference track but add my own interpretation. The drums I used to support the verses are similar to an old school 808 electronic drum machine, where the drums in the chorus are live drums, which are then layered. This variation adds more intensity to the chorus and makes the track more dynamic overall. To help add to the DIY style, the drums on the chorus were recorded with an iPhone and then layered with additional samples to intensify the overall drum sound. By using an iPhone, the recording wasn't as clear and sounded a lot more 'crunchier' which was what I wanted in order to create that recognisable punk feel to the chorus. The final thing I added to the drum fill was some heavy compression at a certain point to give off a distorted sound, which I felt suited the punk style fit.

Having completed the majority of the instrument sections, I was then able to start engaging songwriters to write the vocals and help with the arrangement. The techno track has a lighter vocal overlay and is not the main focal point of the track by design. For the Hyperpop track I chose to use a female artist to benefit from a female voice with a higher pitch, and I used multiple effects including auto tune to create the vocal chain. For the UK rap/ Punk track I chose a male vocalist as I wanted more of an aggressive/ screamo type of vocal delivery. I already had a male vocalist in mind who wanted to work on a track that specialised in this kind of vocals. I have worked with this male vocalist for a number of years, so we already have an established understanding how each other works.

For the Hyperpop track I wanted the lyrics and the vocal delivery to be more aligned to rapping with an almost chant like effect in the chorus. The rationale for this approach was that when the sound effects were added it should be a lot clearer to hear the effect, and the vocals wouldn't be too distorted or difficult to understand. To complement this, recognising the main part of the instrumental was the drums, I wanted to create stronger rhythmic lyrics that fit the overall style of the track. By simplifying the lyrics, it would enable listeners to hear the words more clearly encouraging them to join in and sing alongside the song much quicker. A key consideration to help with the overall success of the song, trying to make it as catchy as possible so it "gets stuck n people's heads".

The lyrical content for the UK Rap/ Punk track was heavily inspired by punk vocals. I wanted the vocals and lyrics to sound more like a rant than a rap. Both reference tracks provided good examples of what I wanted to achieve. Peaches by the Stranglers was the best example I could find to help demonstrate to the vocalist the desired sound I wanted to achieve. That said, I also wanted to add my own style, which incorporated an actual delivery that was much more intense and closer to shouting. Something I knew the artist was very good at. By having really exaggerated lyrics almost screamo, I was able to build on the thrashy instrumental and boost the DIY feel of this track. This approach also meant that the production time required for the vocals was much reduced. I also included some EQ, compression, distortion and reverb to boost the performance of the vocals in preference to adding or creating a new sound through the use of plug-ins.

Once I was happy with the lyrics and the arrangements of each track, I was then able to start the mixing and mastering process. When creating the instrumental and adding vocals I try to mix as I go along to be efficient. Each track is a different genre and therefore required a different type of mix. The Techno and Hyperpop tracks required a much more detailed and specific mix. Whereas the UK Rap/ Punk track required much less due to the style and aesthetic I wanted to create. "Mixing punk music can be a delicate balance. You don't want to sound too polished, like a bunch of corporate sellouts. But you also don't want the track to be too raw like a demo" (B. Pack, 2018). The Techno track required a lot of automation which meant before starting I needed to set all the volumes and make sure my gain structuring was correct first. After the automation, I went back through all the EQ's on each track to make sure that as a whole, all the different frequencies were working together and not muddying anywhere. To double check this I used an EQ on the stereo

out channel which enabled me to see the whole frequency picture of the track. I then made small boosts or cuts. For the techno track I made a small cut from about 30Hz to 20Hz, recognising that these frequencies are so low most people can't perceive them. However, on many monitor systems and headphones these frequencies tend to muddy the overall mix running it. I applied this type of EQ adjustment to all the tracks in varying degrees to different levels depending on the track's requirements.

The mix approach taken for the Hyperpop track was a hybrid of the techno and UK rap/ Punk. I wanted there to be a DIY feel to the mix, I didn't want it to be super clean like a pop track, I wanted it to showcase the gritty industrial sounds that I used. That said, I still wanted it to sound professional and well balanced. There were only two main elements to this track, so it was quicker to mix, which gave me the opportunity to focus on other parts of the mastering process. The main objective I wanted to achieve for the Hyperpop track was to ensure the drums stand out as much as possible. This was mainly achieved through the effects I used. However, when mixing and mastering I was able to tie all the other elements together to complement the drums and vocals. I achieved this through using compression on all the synths and textured elements. For the drums I use parallel compression, as it's an effective way to make drums sound fatter and more present in the mix which is exactly what I wanted.

Once I was comfortable with the first mixes for each track, I then began to listen to the tracks in different environments. I did this to make sure that the mixes maintained their integrity through different systems remaining consistent to deliver a similar listening experience throughout. I tested all three tracks through my monitors, studio headphones, apple headphones, car speakers and iPhone speakers, making notes on what I wanted to improve or change in each mix for the different environments. I repeated this process two times to make sure I was satisfied with the mixes. I did find errors and made enhancements to the tracks. A good example of this is on the UK Rap/ Punk track in the chorus where the kick wasn't cutting through enough, specifically when played through cheaper headphones. The solution was to go back and EQ the kick differently, and to add some more distortion and compression.

Overall, I enjoyed working on this project as it allowed me to refine my production process, whilst experimenting and learning new techniques. There were also challenges and changes I needed to make to improve the portfolio. A vital part of this was going back to my reference tracks for influence and to use

as a reference point. This was especially important for the Hyperpop track, as it's the first time working within the genre. By having multiple reference tracks, I was able to gain a wider appreciation of the genres and the different conventions of each. The research proved invaluable as I was able to utilise other reference material that helped inform my tracks, including interviews and blog's as well as online tutorial videos. In the future I will be using more reference material regularly as I found it really helps me create a certain style, which is important when working on commercial briefs. Therefore, this project has enabled me to develop my production process as well as learn and grow as a producer.

Brad Pack (2018) – “Easy EQ tips for powerful punk rock” (Audio Issues)

[LINK](#)

Brett Voss (2022) – “Music Tech Special: The ins and outs of ITB production” (Mix Down Mag)

[LINK](#)

Emma O’Regan-Reidy (2021) “What is hyperpop? And introduction to the intoxicating music genre” (Screenshot)

[LINK](#)

Jaclyn Kendall (2018) “How to creatively use sample packs without sounding like everyone else” (Landr Blog)

[LINK](#)

Max McAllister (2019) – “Reference tracks: How to use them and mistakes to avoid” (Produce like a pro)

[LINK](#)

Preston Cram (2021) – “Are music genres important? 3 ways to enhance our enjoyment of music” (Blog)

[LINK](#)

Sam Matla (2017) – “5 tricks for making your drums sound more interesting” (EDM Production)

[LINK](#)