

MA Commercial Music Producer

**Tileyard Education
University of Wales Trinity St. David**

**Creation Element C1
Written Proposal**

**“Exploring using the studio as an instrument to assist in the creation
of electronic music”**

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What I'm intending to create:

The studio has changed format many times over the past one hundred years as technology advances. Through change and development a number of different engineers and producers have found ways to creatively misuse and manipulate the studio, transforming it into an instrument. From Lee 'Scratch' Perry's use of delay's and filter sweeps in dub music, Conny Plank's overdubbing experiments with NEU! and Kraftwerk, or Daphne Oram's tape experiments with the BBC radiophonic workshop, these small experiments and tricks are often taken for granted due to the ease of the digital audio workstation (DAW).

For my final project, I'm planning on exploring how the studio is used as an instrument to assist in the creation of music within the ambient and progressive electronic genre. The final result of this research will be in the form of a seven track EP with each track representing different forms of a studio being used as an instrument. "The idea of the 'studio as an instrument' – that creating a compelling musical recording requires more than simply documenting a performance, but rather that manipulating audio is itself a compositional artform – is one of the pillars of Ableton's philosophy." (Ableton, 2016). The EP will be centered around this exploration, with each track representing a different form of the studio being used as an instrument, ranging from the manipulation of the DAW (digital audio workstation), to automating live with outboard gear with a studio desk, to pitch shifting entire tracks on a 4-track cassette recorder, and destructively editing a master tape on a reel to reel. Influenced by the works of Kevin Shields, Lee Perry, DJ Screw, and Pierre Schaeffer to name a few, I will be working within the ambient and progressive electronic genres as I believe they are broad genres that are better suited to extreme manipulation and obscure effects, alongside being the genres that I primarily work within.

Why I'm taking on the project

I've always had an interest in studios, workflows, and creatively misusing music equipment. My final project for my BA was on manipulating and damaging tape to process the audio stored on the format, influenced by Lee 'Scratch' Perry and his process of burying tapes in the ground. To explore the different forms a studio takes, and how people use them as instruments, seems like a natural progression from my previous work.

By undergoing a close analysis on the different styles of studios and their applications as instruments, I will be able to find the form that works for me. I often find myself uninspired when using a DAW - it's easy to get comfortable with having delays, reverbs, and EQ's at the click of a button, alongside being able to carefully draw in any automation. I think by going back to traditional studio methods I will feel more inspired as limitations breed creativity. Being unable to undo an error easily, manipulating tape by hand, or turning a delay knob physically, results in numerous happy accidents and an overall rewarding feeling when it goes well.

In regards to the final result, a collection of seven songs, I want to leave Tileyard with a selection of tracks that represent the musical style of my 'Robinson's Village' project. Then, I can release them over the coming year, allowing me to grow my artistry and skills within the ambient and progressive electronic genre, and hopefully build a cohesive portfolio to show for future work and collaborations. I've been working on this project for a long time, primarily developing short Instagram content demonstrating experiments with my modular synth, tape, and bits of old 80s and 90s hardware - creatively misusing and manipulating these sounds to inspire creativity in others whilst adding to my toolbelt of unique techniques. Through developing these tracks, particularly within the area of using a studio as an instrument, I will uncover techniques and processes influenced by various producers, artists, and engineers that I can apply to future work, allowing me to grow within those respective areas.

Benchmarks for success

Frequently whilst writing music, I will tweak and edit a song indefinitely, failing to know when to stop. By taking pre-made songs and recreating them in these studio environments, I'm creating an end point whereby I cannot realistically alter the track much further aside from a few minor tweaks. My benchmark for success includes: creating six tracks that I'm happy with, the tracks will be within the ambient and electronic genre, and whilst they will be created in different forms of the studio they will sound cohesive when put together in an EP. To further my benchmarks for success, when the music is released I want it to be featured on at least ten playlists and for each track to reach over one thousand streams thus improving on my prior releases. The main dangers to these goals are: potentially, I may become dissatisfied over time with how the tracks sound, as typically I prefer a slower creation process for my music (creating a track and revisiting it three months later). The transition of mediums, from tape to digital, can greatly alter the overall sound of the music as tape is known to colour and warp audio, "in addition to your standard noise and tape hiss, you've got the phenomena known as wow-and-flutter – a subtle to not-so-subtle variation in speed and pitch due to nonuniform tape motion during recording, playback or both." (Qualls, 2017) Alongside this, I'm exploring how the different styles of using a studio as an instrument will influence the work, therefore naturally songs may end up sounding sonically different to each other, I will have to meet a middle ground whereby I want continuity between the sonic characteristics of the tracks, whilst still being experimental with my production method. Finally, being able to get on playlists and get streams is not determined by the music alone, ambient music is not necessarily a popular genre and therefore can be challenging to market. External factors such as the tastes of playlist curators, my own fanbase size, and my ability to market the music will affect the number of streams I get, so I will have to keep this in mind when revisiting my benchmarks for success.

How I intend to approach the project, alternative approaches and why I decided against them

In order to maximize the time I have within these studio environments, and to replicate the processes of producers such as Lee Perry and Conny Plank, I plan to develop multiple rough tracks prior to the sessions so that I won't waste studio time trying to create the songs. I will then deconstruct and reproduce these tracks from scratch within these new environments, whilst being open to experimentation with the gear. I plan to use a variety of studio techniques such as reamping synthesizers, tape manipulation, using hardware delays and automating delays in real time. This will allow me to completely transform these tracks through using the studio as an instrument.

I've already researched a number of artists and producers that are renowned for using the studio as an instrument. A pioneer of using a studio as an instrument is Brian Eno, "for Eno the studio is a musical instrument, one made possible by magnetic tape and advances in multitrack recording. Record the tones and motives, find some that charm, cut, and massage away. 'It puts the composer,' Eno says of the studio, 'in the identical position of the painter—he's working directly with a material, working directly onto a substance, and he always retains the options to chop and change, to paint a bit out, add a piece, etc.'" (Lysaker, 2017, p.165). As of this moment, I have access to the various rack compressors and desk in the studio at Tileyard, allowing me to recreate a somewhat similar setup to Brian Eno in this era (DAWless in regards to processing and editing the sound). I plan to use the desk and pieces of equipment to manipulate the audio in real time through adjusting equalizers and compressors - automating sends to delays/reverbs in real time, and changing the volume of tracks throughout the piece, allowing me to explore a workflow I've not carried out many times before.

French composer, Pierre Schaeffer, is renowned for laying the foundations for sampling, manipulating tape, and using recording formats to alter the sounds and tones of field recordings. "The same could not be said of turntables and tape recorders, which, in fact, were only recording devices, really intended for radio broadcasting, and which

musicians had gradually infiltrated, not without conflicts or feelings of guilt. They nevertheless got results; amid so many formless and facilely surrealist works, so many failed experiments, an unexpected musical landscape was revealed to them, surprising, incongruous sound entities, where the most difficult question was what to do with them.” (Schaeffer, 1966, pp.39). Arguably he birthed the concept of using a studio as an instrument through taking field recordings and manipulating them through tape splicing, and adjusting playback speeds, to name a few of his techniques. To reflect upon this form of using the studio as an instrument, I will use my Tascam Portastudio four track cassette recorder in combination with a tape loop (a short infinite loop of cassette tape), and adjust the playback speed to adjust the pitch of the loop, allowing me to gain further understanding on Schaeffer’s reasoning behind these techniques alongside seeing how this inspires the creation of a new sound through destructively manipulating older tracks.

As mentioned before, I also plan on using a DAW in one of my compositions to demonstrate the studio as an instrument as every time we automate a delay or a fader, or tweak an effect on a master bus we are demonstrating how a studio is an instrument, as we are not necessarily playing a conventional instrument, instead we are playing a DAW. The ability to take clips of audio, manipulate them and stitch them together is an essential tool in the modern producers toolbelt, and thanks to DAW’s it has never been easier to do this. I want to explore whether the ease of manipulating audio within a DAW, and the option to easily reverse any destructive editing restricts the chance of any happy accidents or enhances it compared to tape or using a studio desk.

A slightly more contemporary case study of an artist using the studio as an instrument is DJ Screw. Whilst more of a DJ and less of a producer, the few tracks he did produce still carry on his ‘chopped and screwed’ technique. “Sometime around 1990, a young hip-hop DJ named Robert Earl Davis, Jr decided music was just too fast for his liking. Using the pitch controls on his turntables, he began slowing records to preternaturally slow speeds, augmenting his mixes with smooth cuts and slurred commentary that sounded as if delivered from beyond the grave.” (Serwer, 2010). The act of producing and finishing a song only to drop the track to half speed and add some slight equalization is a process now regularly seen within the “vaporwave” (Arch-Music, 2021) genre, the “slowed and reverbed” (Cush, 2020) phenomenon, and in ambient music. Not only does the tempo change, but the pitch of the track drops an octave below, the percussion becomes stretched, and the overall tone of the piece becomes slightly psychedelic and haunting. For one of my processes I plan on producing a track, recording it on my reel to reel, and then reducing the speed to explore these techniques popularized by DJ Screw.

My original idea for the project was to bring a band into the studio and have a slightly more traditional recorder producer role, whilst working as an engineer to use the studio as an instrument. “A record producer must choose the script (songs or material) and cast (match material with the artist or group), see that the proper arranger, conductor, musicians, and, if needed, singers are hired” (Reisman, 1977, pp.65). I was going to work with the artists to develop their songs, or perhaps record extended ‘jam’ sessions, meanwhile I would act as an additional member of the group by automating various phaser, flanger, and delay effects on various sends on the desk to enhance the music and add a psychedelic input to their music. I dismissed this idea as whilst it would have been an interesting learning experience, I would prefer to develop my own music and artist project. Alongside this, switching between different forms of the studio (such as 4 track, DAW, and tape) may not create cohesive results for a band therefore it would be challenging to find a band willing to work within these conditions, and I can always recreate the live manipulation of music using the studio acting as a solo artist instead.

Another alternative idea was to focus entirely on using a 4 track cassette tape machine as the studio, working alongside the concept of using the 4 track as an instrument whilst embracing the creativity that the devices’ limitations may bring. Working with a Tascam Portastudio would mean if I wanted more than 4 tracks, I would have to bounce all of my tracks down to one channel thus meaning I cannot alter or change any mistakes which would be challenging as my methodology for creating ambient music features plenty of experimentation before eventually stripping a track back. Alongside this, recording an entire EP to cassette will yield ‘lo-fi’ qualities that don’t

necessarily complement the style of music I've released under my artist project prior. However, I do like the concept of using the 4 track cassette recorder as a studio for one of the songs on the EP as opposed to all of them, therefore I will take this forward to my final project.

Conclusion

I'm anticipating the final form of the project, as of this moment I've already roughly produced five potential tracks. I've experimented greatly with tape and DAW's over the years, and used the studio as an instrument many times during my undergraduate degree. I'm looking forward to seeing how far I can perform using the studio so that I can learn and apply these processes to future work. Not only will I be finishing this term with a collection of songs to release over the coming months, but a vast wealth of knowledge that will make me beneficial in future sessions and will act as inspiration for future projects.

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Appendix A: Timeline

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