

Minimalism in sub-genres of popular music: an analysis of Alt-Pop, Adult Contemporary and Synthpop genres

Name: Sally Shepard

Student Number: 2212889

MA Commercial Music Producer

Foundation (ADAD7003_LON)

Word count: 3,239

Introduction

An artist can create a song with almost an unlimited number of tracks, with countless numbers of effects, complicated automation and all for a fraction of what it would have cost over twenty years ago. Yet, even with all of this limitlessness, many genres strive to create music with a minimal approach. In this essay, I will explain the characteristics of three sub-genres of pop music that embrace minimalism, then explore how my provided reference tracks fit these genres, and how my tracks use these production techniques.

For analysing the songs in each genre, I have used an online tool [cyanite.ai](#) which uses AI to analyse songs on genre, mood, key, tempo, etc. In each genre I have used a playlist containing songs in that genre to see if there are patterns, and later in this essay I will compare the genre results with the songs I have written.

1. Defining characteristics of the musical genres

Alt-pop

Alternative pop, or alt-pop, exists to be “more original, eclectic, or musically or intellectually challenging than most pop music” (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, 2022). As a genre, it can be used for challenging normal pop conventions, often bringing in parts of other genres, making it a complex genre to define. Even with all of these divergent styles, it tends to have “minimal arrangements that put an emphasis on deep or quiet vocals, and frequently features a darker, dreamier, and more downbeat tone from other pop” (Rate Your Music, 2022b).

Within the alt-pop genre, instrumentation can vary greatly, due to how the genre often combines elements from many other genres, but overall there tends to be a blend of acoustic and electronic instruments, with occasional use of samples. Arrangements lean to being minimal, but still well structured, with lyrical content covering most topics. The music is not overproduced, usually aiming to be more lo-fi. Like pop, auto-tuned vocals are fairly common, and can often be used as an effect on backing vocals along with formant shifting. Since at its core it is an alternative form of pop, there tends to be more experimentation in mixes and effects, including adding sound effects, and automation. Tempo, key, time signature and mode can vary, again, since it combines different genres, but overall, the music tends to be more energetic.

Using the ‘Alt. Pop.’ playlist by Spotify (Spotify, 2022a), I used [cyanite.ai](#) to analyse the mood of each track to see if there are common themes across these songs. In figure 1.1, the results of this analysis can be seen.

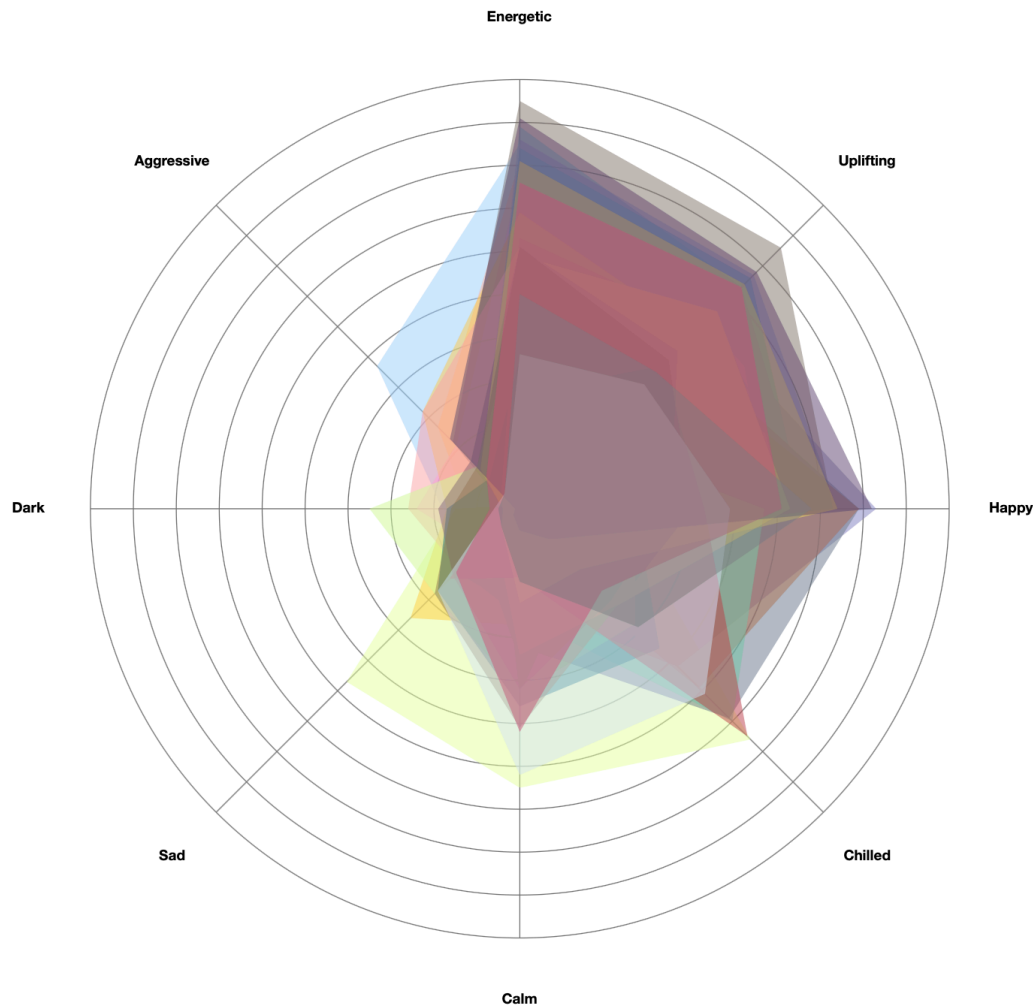


FIGURE 1.1 - CYANITE MOOD ANALYSIS OF SONGS ON 'ALT. POP.' PLAYLIST FROM SPOTIFY

Although there is some variation in mood, the figure shows most of the songs occupy the top right quadrant of the chart, leaning more towards energetic, uplifting and happy. As the above analysis is based on a single playlist curated by a person, whether consciously or unconsciously, they could have chosen to include songs that were more energetic and happy versus dark and sad, which would skew the results. The playlist contains over one hundred songs though, and for the purposes of this project the analysis should reflect a large portion of the alt-pop genre.

Adult Contemporary

Adult contemporary (AC) is a sub-genre of pop music that differentiates itself with its use of vocal virtuosity, relaxed rhythms, gentle instrumentation and love-focused lyrics (MasterClass, 2021a). Songs in this genre predominately “follow familiar patterns and are intended to be soothing rather than invigorating” (Rate Your Music, 2022a).

In AC, the vocals are the most important instrument, and there is a strong use of piano as a main accompaniment, with strings generally added for additional emotion, as well as a sparse amount of bass and drums. The arrangement of these songs are very minimal, they primarily start with just piano and vocals, while other instruments are gradually added and removed during the

song. The songs are made to sound more authentic and realistic rather than sounding overproduced and electronic. Although all the vocals generally use auto-tune, it is used in a more gentle and non-robotic way. The vocals are usually kept as natural and raw sounding, elements like breaths are generally kept in. The use of reverb, compression and EQ are kept to a minimum and are usually used to improve the balance and space between the different instruments in a mix. Mixing is straightforward and complex automation is left out in favour of simple but purposeful changes in instrumentation, such as adding a string part during the chorus.

Spotify does not have an official AC playlist, in its place I used the 'Piano Ballads' playlist by Spotify (Spotify, 2022b) since it contains AC artists and tracks. Using this playlist with cyanite.ai, I ran mood analysis and the results are shown in figure 1.2.

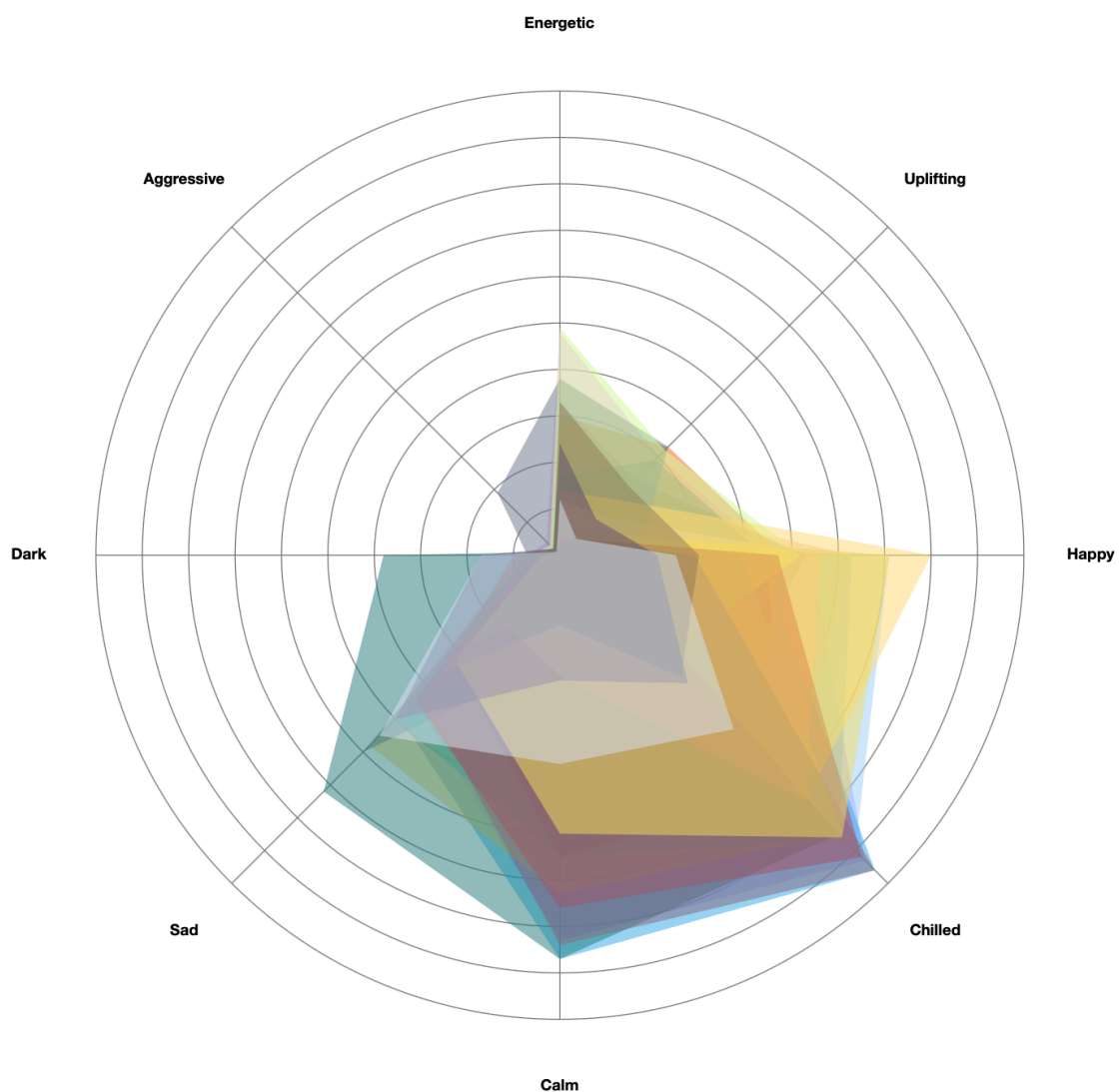


FIGURE 1.2 - CYANITE MOOD ANALYSIS OF SONGS ON 'PIANO BALLADS' PLAYLIST FROM SPOTIFY

Again, there is some variation in mood, but the figure shows most of the songs occupy the bottom right quadrant of the chart, occupying the calm, and chilled areas, and being more likely categorised as happy versus dark.

Synthpop

The genre of synthpop has existed since in the 1970s (Rate Your Music, 2022c), and can be described mainly as “a type of pop music in which synthesizers are used to create the dominant sound” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010). The genre has seen commercial success over the past 10-15 years as popular artists have incorporated aspects of the genre into their music—such as Lady Gaga (Fletcher, 2020), The Weeknd (Kenneally, 2019), Britney Spears (Fandom, n.d.), etc.

The instrumentation in synthpop is comprised mainly of synthesisers, vocals, synth bass, and electronic drums or a sequencer for the rhythm section. The arrangement in these songs is minimal, consisting of a basic repeating drum part, synth parts, basic bass lines, and vocals that are usually highly processed. The overall mix is usually fairly simple, but effects can be used in quite extreme ways including robotic vocals. The instrumentation fully embraces being electronic, but keeps a simple mix, usually with some flourishes or automation especially in more modern synthpop. Vocoder and auto-tune are used extensively on vocals to bring them more inline with the electronic instrumentation.

Spotify does not have an official synthpop playlist for modern synthpop, so to analyse the mood of songs in this genre, I used a playlist made by a Spotify user (Kartal, 2022), which contains over one hundred modern synthpop songs. Using this playlist with cyanite.ai, I ran mood analysis and the results are shown in figure 1.3.



FIGURE 1.3 - CYANITE MOOD ANALYSIS OF MODERN SYNTHPOP PLAYLIST ON SPOTIFY

In this playlist there is more variation in mood compared to the other genres. The figure shows the songs tending towards the right side of the chart, being spread between energetic and calm, while being mostly chilled and happy, and slightly more uplifting than sad. Compared to alt pop and AC, the synth pop genre has a wider spread of mood.

2. Reference tracks in the musical genres

Alt-pop

Crush by Tessa Violet - (Tessa Violet, 2018)

This track features vocals, keyboard, bass, piano, handclaps and electronic drums. The song begins with vocals over a repeating keyboard phrase, with some handclaps and a kick drum, with a high hat introduced during the pre-chorus. When the chorus kicks in, a simple bass is added, as well as a basic piano and backing vocals. The second verse comes in with the same arrangement

as the first with the addition of the bass. Overall, the arrangement and instrumentation are sparse and minimal in a playful way. The keyboard sound is slightly glitchy, and most of the instruments have a minor amount of effects added, giving each instrument a more lo-fi vibe than a polished sound. Sound effects such as a phone ringing, are used in the song to add to the story the song is telling. With the minimal style and pop structure and hooks, this song fits within the alt-pop genre.

Royals by Lorde - (Lorde, 2013)

The song includes vocals, synth bass, snaps, and drums. The arrangement is very minimal, with most of the song being vocals over a simple bass line, snaps and a kick drum. Backing vocals are added during the chorus. Some effects like reverb are added to the snaps and vocals, but overall the song is made to sound quite sparse and minimal. These elements combined with the pop structure and hooks make it part of alt-pop.

Adult Contemporary

Someone You Loved by Lewis Capaldi - (Lewis Capaldi, 2019)

This song features vocals, piano, bass, and strings. It has a simple arrangement, starting with a piano and vocals, with a sub-bass and gentle strings added in only the choruses and bridge. The mix has very present vocals, in alignment with the style of AC. The use of effects is to make the instrumentation sound realistic and raw, with the use of reverb, EQ and compression to help make the vocal stand out more. The sub-bass and strings blend in with the lower register of the notes being played on the piano, helping to support the vocal presence.

For The Lover That I Lost by Sam Smith - (Sam Smith, 2020)

The instrumentation for this song includes vocals, piano, bass, and strings. The arrangement is minimal, during the first verse, pre-chorus and first chorus, the song is just vocals and piano, with a some string parts coming in at the end of the chorus for just a few bars. As the second verse starts, a gentle bass comes in playing just the root notes of the chords. The strings come back in with the pre-chorus and continue along until the final chorus of the song, which returns to just vocals and piano. The mix is very standard for AC with very present vocals, matching the minimalism of the arrangement. The use of reverb and EQ is to make the instrumentation sound as realistic as possible. Compression is used to help make the vocal stand out more. All of these elements fit within the AC genre.

Synthpop

He Said She Said by CHVRCHES - (CHVRCHES, 2021)

This song contains vocals, synthesisers, a synth bass, and electronic drums. The arrangement is fairly simple throughout the track. The intro starts with a synth pad for a few bars until the drums come in, as well as an arpeggiated synth, synth bass, and either a synth lead or some highly processed vocals. The verse changes to just vocals with simple electronic drums and synth bass,

with some backing vocals added in the second half of the verse to emphasise certain lines. In the pre-chorus, the electronic drums drop out, and an arpeggiated synth is brought in, along with more vocal effects, in a build up to all instruments except for the vocals dropping out briefly before the chorus hits. The chorus then brings back the electronic drums, and another synth layer. This basically repeats throughout the sections in the song. The vocals are very present in the mix, and there is a lot of movement in the mix, especially compared to the AC genre, with panning and elements moving across the stereo space during sections, and large amounts of chorus, echo, delay and reverb. With a predominant synth sound and the above qualities, this song fits within the synthpop genre.

Blinding Lights by The Weeknd - (The Weeknd, 2020)

This track features vocals, synthesisers, synth bass and electronic drums. The arrangement is similar to 'He Said She Said', where the verses drop down to usually just electronic drums and synth bass. There are many more subtle differences between sections in Blinding Lights. Blinding Lights also makes use of riffs and countermelodies—an important element in a lot of synthpop (Collins, Schedel and Wilson, 2013). With a predominant synth sound and the above qualities, this song fits within the synthpop genre.

3. Genre and production techniques applied in my tracks

Alt-pop

In my track *Queen of Awkward*, I approached the song using a traditional verse chorus pop structure used in the reference tracks. The lyrics of the song are written to be somewhat quirky, showing a more playful point of view. The instrumentation and arrangement was chosen to reflect the lyrics, as explained by Gibson and Curtis (2019) “every aspect of a composition or song should support and tell the same story as the theme or title”. The instruments incorporated in the song are vocals, keyboards, guitar, bass and electronic drums. The vocals were tuned using Flex Pitch in Logic, with some light EQ, compression and reverb. The vocal performance was delivered with a light-hearted, almost laughing in some points to reflect the playfulness of the lyrical content.

Due to the more minimal arrangement of alt-pop, changing energy between sections in a song can sometimes be difficult since you cannot rely on a bigger or thicker sound for choruses. I wanted to make sure the chorus had more energy than the verses, and even with changing instrumentation, and experimenting with adding and removing different elements in various parts, I felt the chorus was lacking energy. An idea I tried was focused on changing the tempo, specifically in the chorus. After trying different variations, I ended up changing the tempo in each section by a couple of bpm to help exaggerate the changes in energy between sections: in the verses the tempo is 108, and in the chorus the tempo increases to 113. The change in bpm is subtle but makes a large impact on the changes in energy in the sections. I kept the drum parts sparse, using an electronic kit in Logic.

I feel my alt-pop song successfully meets the minimalism and quirkiness of the genre, while also incorporating strong elements of pop music like clear song structure, hooks, easy and relatable lyrics, and good repetition. An element that could be improved in this song is having additional vocal layers, harmonies and ad libs. Although I added some vocal parts outside of the main performance, it is not an area that I have practiced or studied much so I feel this element of the production is somewhat weak compared to what is found in many alt-pop songs.

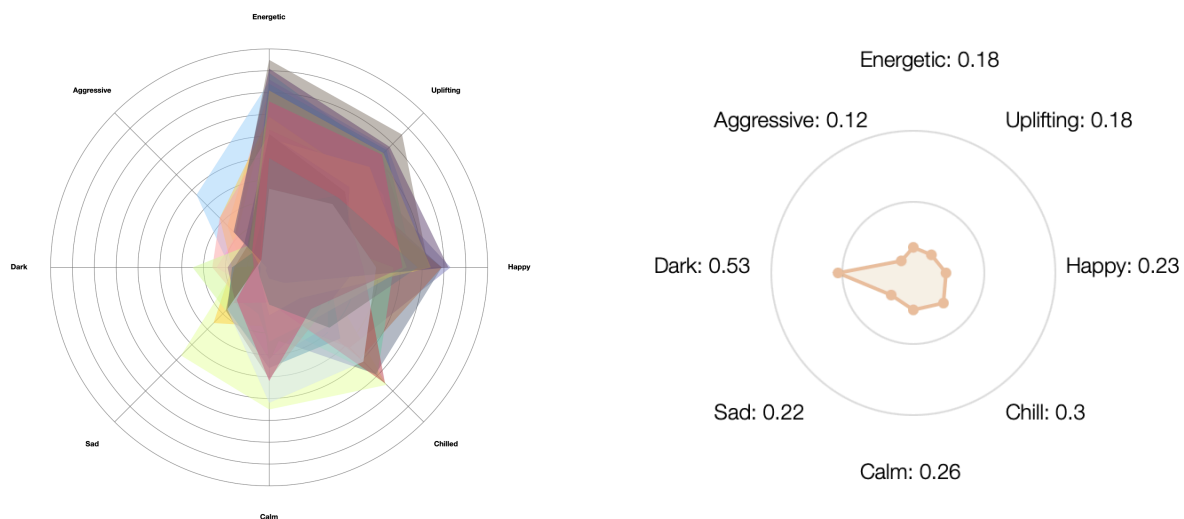


FIGURE 3.1 - COMPARISON OF MOOD ANALYSIS OF 'ALT. POP.' PLAYLIST (LEFT) VERSUS MOOD ANALYSIS OF MY ALT POP TRACK QUEEN OF AWKWARD (RIGHT)

As shown in figure 3.1, my track *Queen of Awkward* was analysed as being in a similar part of the chart as the songs in the 'Alt. Pop.', but with a higher classification of dark compared with the alt pop tracks. Although my track does not overlap as much as I thought it would, the alt-pop genre encompasses many moods and styles so it is definitely possible for a song in the genre to not match up well with other tracks in the genre, and as pointed out before, the playlist could have been specifically curated to skew towards being less dark, which would then make my track appear to not match as well.

Adult Contemporary

Break My Heart In All the Right Places features vocals, piano, acoustic drums and strings. To fit within the genre, the vocal performance had more emphasis on being delivered with emotion. The piano sound used was made to sound as realistic as possible. In the reference track *Somebody you loved*, Spectrasonics' Keyscape was used (Tingen, 2019), but I did not have access to this specific one so the stock Logic Classical Piano instrument was used in its place. To make the piano sound more natural, plugins such as Abbey Road Saturator and Slate Digital Fresh Air were used to add some warmth, harmonics and air. The track contains some strings, utilising the BBC Orchestra pack from Spitfire Audio. The string parts come in gradually in the second verse and build up from there, similar to the use of strings in the reference tracks. The strings and the piano overlap in the frequencies they occupy—this was done on purpose so that they blend together as

pointed out by Gibson and Curtis (2019) “If two sounds have a similar harmonic structure, they will blend together in a mix; you can’t keep them apart”—which helps the vocal stand out in the mix.

Due to not having the same ability to belt out the chorus like most AC artists, I used some minimal drums to build more energy in the choruses of the song. I felt like the vocal performance on my AC track was good at conveying the emotion found in that genre, but I was limited in the overall strength of the performance as I was recovering from a cold, and where that could be masked in other genres with all sorts of effects, in AC the vocals are meant to sound more raw so I found it difficult to make the vocals sound good.

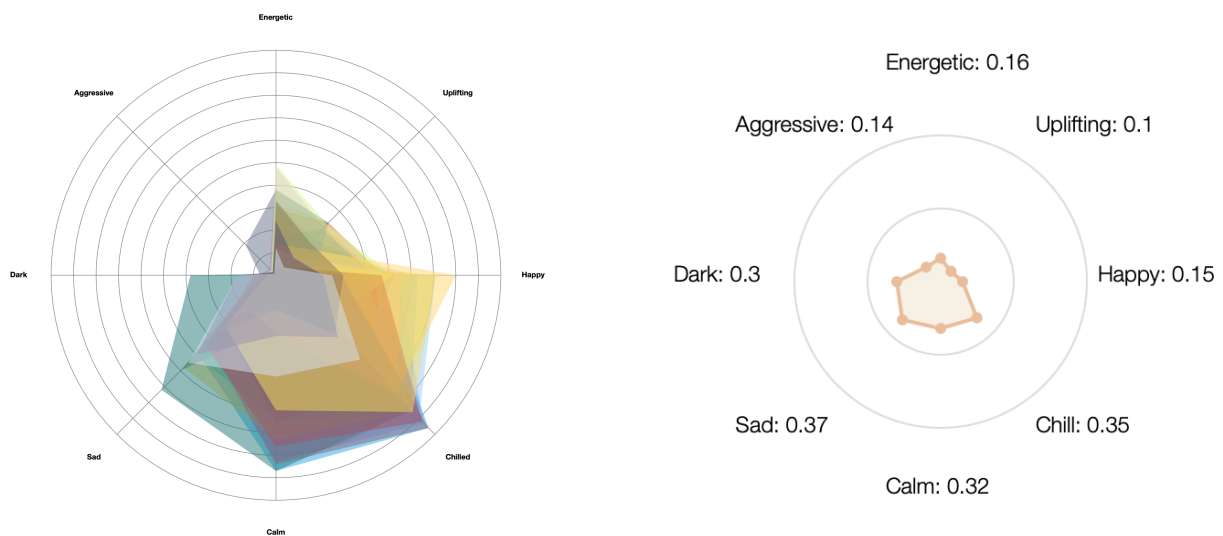


FIGURE 3.2 - COMPARISON OF MOOD ANALYSIS OF ‘PIANO BALLADS’ PLAYLIST (LEFT) VERSUS MOOD ANALYSIS OF MY ADULT CONTEMPORARY TRACK BREAK MY HEART IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES (RIGHT)

As shown above in figure 3.2, my track *Break My Heart in all the Right Places* was analysed as being in a very similar part of the chart as the songs in the ‘Piano Ballads’ playlist. Based on the mood analysis from Cyanite, the mood of my track matches the mood of typical AC songs. As my track is predominately vocals and piano, with some strings and minimal percussion, it makes sense that the mood of it is similar to other AC songs.

Synthpop

Be My Mirror features vocals, synthesisers, layered bass (synth bass and a sub bass layer), and sequenced drums using a Linn drum kit in Logic. The bass part in the chorus was written to emulate the riff style used in synthpop songs. The verse and chorus sections have been arranged similarly to the reference tracks. I used some automation on the effects to create some more dynamic and interesting sounds, similar to what is found in the reference tracks. Synthesiser sounds were created based on the production covered in the videos (Beat Academy 2020 and Beat Academy 2021).

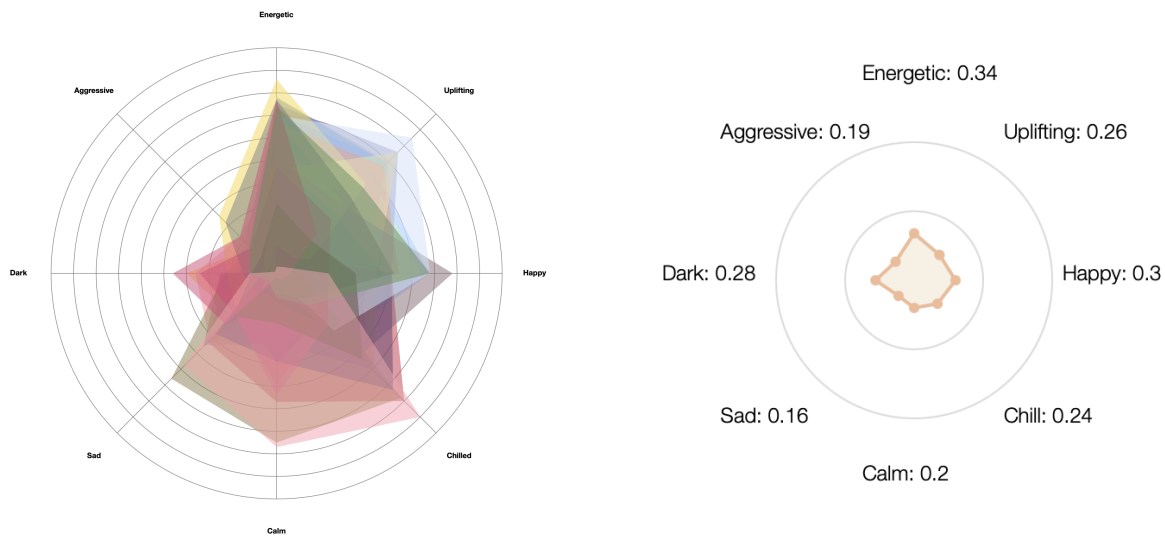


FIGURE 3.3 - COMPARISON OF MOOD ANALYSIS OF 'MODERN SYNTHPOP' PLAYLIST (LEFT) VERSUS MOOD ANALYSIS OF MY SYNTHPOP TRACK BE MY MIRROR (RIGHT)

In figure 3.3, my track *Be My Mirror* was analysed as being in a similar overall mood of the songs in the 'Modern Synthpop' playlist. Similarly to alt pop, there is a lot of variance between songs in the synthpop genre, but overall the mood of my song is within the moods shown by other songs in the genre. When the genre of the song was analysed, cyanite tagged *Be My Mirror* as being synthpop, meaning that a trained AI views this song as being in the synthpop genre.

Conclusion

With the constant increase in capabilities of recording technology and its affordability, there has never been a more accessible time for musicians to create complex music, but many choose to make music that leans towards minimalism. Through this essay, I've shown three specific sub-genres of pop music that use minimalism as part of their defining characteristics. Even with each of these genres making use of minimalism, they use it in different ways, resulting in vastly different production techniques.

Reference list

AllMusic (2022). *Adult Contemporary Music Genre Overview*. [online] AllMusic. Available at: <https://www.allmusic.com/style/adult-contemporary-ma0000004445> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Beat Academy (2020). *How to Produce: Weeknd - Blinding Lights Tutorial*. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0ggvhnSs1I&list=PLFlnDL5eGp3x-dKzUrqSA9xeqXB-FxZSF&index=2). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0ggvhnSs1I&list=PLFlnDL5eGp3x-dKzUrqSA9xeqXB-FxZSF&index=2> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Beat Academy (2021). *How to Produce: CHVRCHES 'He said She said' Tutorial*. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBfPpHcLksA). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBfPpHcLksA> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Bresler, Z. (2021). Immersed in Pop: 3D Music, Subject Positioning, and Compositional Design in The Weeknd's 'Blinding Lights' in Dolby Atmos. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, [online] 33(3), pp.84–103. doi:10.1525/jpms.2021.33.3.84.

CHVRCHES (2021). *He Said She Said*. [Streamed] Virgin Records Limited. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/1vVE2HYDwJKyPqjOnfwisH?si=c84f444b494c4cc3> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Collins, N., Schedel, M. and Wilson, S. (2013). *Electronic music*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cyanite (2022). *Home*. [online] Cyanite.ai. Available at: <https://cyanite.ai>.

Fandom (n.d.). *Femme Fatale (album)*. [online] Britney Spears Wiki. Available at: [https://britneyspears.fandom.com/wiki/Femme_Fatale_\(album\)](https://britneyspears.fandom.com/wiki/Femme_Fatale_(album)) [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Fletcher, H. (2020). *Lady Gaga: Stupid Love review – The return of classic Gaga*. [online] Evening Standard. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/music/lady-gaga-stupid-love-single-review-a4373971.html> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Gibson, D. and Curtis, M. (2019). *The Art of Producing : How to Create Great Audio Projects*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2010). synth-pop. In: *Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition*. [online] Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Available at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/synth-pop> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

James, M. (2022). *What Is Adult Contemporary Music? With 7 Top Examples & History*. [online] Music Industry How To. Available at: <https://www.musicindustryhowto.com/what-is-adult-contemporary-music/> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Kartal, I. (2022). *Modern synthpop - playlist*. [online] Spotify. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3lYkKKplafVGtQOKJm75Op?si=d7860d0477d742c0> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Kenneally, C. (2019). *The Weeknd unveils new synth-pop banger 'Blinding Lights'*. [online] The Line of Best Fit. Available at: <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/news/latest-news/the-weeknd-unveils-new-synth-pop-banger-blinding-lights> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Lewis Capaldi (2019). *Someone You Loved*. [Streamed] Universal Music GmbH. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/7qEHssek33rTcFNT9PFqLf?si=7f659b3e97f648d5> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Lorde (2013). *Royals*. [Streamed] Universal Music NZ Ltd. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/2dLLR6qlu5UJ5gk0dKz0h3?si=755b174378e44803> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

MasterClass (2021a). *Adult Contemporary Music Guide: What Is Adult Contemporary?* [online] MasterClass. Available at: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/adult-contemporary-music> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

MasterClass (2021b). *Synth-Pop Music Guide: A Brief History of Synth-Pop*. [online] MasterClass. Available at: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/synth-pop-music-guide> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary (2022). *Alternative pop*. [online] Merriam-webster.com. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative%20pop> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Mitchell, T. (2016). Lorde: a mole in the mainstream? *Celebrity Studies*, 8(1), pp.51–70. doi:10.1080/19392397.2016.1202122.

Rate Your Music (2022a). *Adult Contemporary - Music genre*. [online] rateyourmusic.com. Available at: <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/adult-contemporary/> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Rate Your Music (2022b). *Alt-Pop - Music genre*. [online] rateyourmusic.com. Available at: <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/alt-pop/> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Rate Your Music (2022c). *Synthpop - Music genre*. [online] rateyourmusic.com. Available at: <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/Synthpop/> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Sam Smith (2020). *For The Lover That I Lost*. [Streamed] Universal Music Operations Limited. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/2Dmm6Ln91KMvF5EcOvQbM8?si=583f884b9c3841a8> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Schmitz, Y. (2021). *The Weeknd: Blinding Lights - Song Analysis*. [online] Meinewebsite. Available at: <https://www.media-schmitz.com/post/song-analysis-the-weeknd-blinding-lights> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Spotify (2022a). *Alt. Pop*. [online] Spotify. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXdfR43X3iEzK?si=85520bf3da8f494a> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Spotify (2022b). *Piano Ballads*. [online] Spotify. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWVlzZt2GAU4X?si=e3516b88dc0a43ba> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Tessa Violet (2018). *Crush*. [Streamed] TΔG Music. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/6MYJv37Mpj5njLLbxKWNun?si=b521e52ef8d449db> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

The Weeknd (2020). *Blinding Lights*. [Streamed] UMG Recordings, Inc. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/track/0VjljW4GIUZAMYd2vXMi3b?si=6fcfddf437fc4f95> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].

Tingen, P. (2019). *Inside Track: Lewis Capaldi's 'Someone You Loved'*. [online] Sound on Sound. Available at: <https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/inside-track-lewis-capaldis-someone-you-loved> [Accessed 15 Dec. 2022].