

MA Commercial Music Producer

Foundation Element 2 – Essay

Lorenzo Martelli – Student No.2005406

1. Indietronic Assignment

The Indietronic genre, born in early 1990s, became a trend during this decade with many other similar waves as post rock, shoegaze and slowcore, characterized by a combination of indie rock-based music and electronic music with an extensive use of drum machine, sampler, modular and compact synthesizer. The most particular aspect is the juxtaposition of pop/rock melodies and arrangement with a unique and specific mixture of acoustic and electronic sounds that distinguish every single artist or band. Two of the most iconic bands of this period are Broadcast and Radiohead.

Idioteque is probably one of the most famous and celebrated pieces of music of this genre. The song was born from Jonny Greenwood, who previously recorded a DAT of 50 minutes from which 40 seconds was extracted and became the instrumental for the track. This part of the DAT consisted of an electronic drum kit pattern made with a modular synthesizer and a loop of four chords sampled from a piece of experimental music named "*Mild und Leise*" by Paul Lansky. On this beat, Thom Yorke's lyrics describe an apocalyptic world with references to natural disaster, but the real meaning behind the song and the concept of "idioteque" has never been explained clearly by the band.

Despite the minimal structure and the simple melodies, Idioteque became the most famous track from the masterpiece album Kid A, thanks to the iconic sounds easy to recognize from the first few seconds. The synthesizer loop and drum pattern work perfectly together and they seem to synergise with each other from the beginning to the end of the song while other instruments and sounds fade in and out creating the arrangement. Most of the sounds are reminiscent of acoustic elements such as shakers, cymbals and snare but they are clearly not acoustic, it seems that Jonny Greenwood wanted to recreate some elements inspired by real drum kits by using modular synthesis. The result sounds incredible and simply amazing.

The production and the mix by Nigel Godrich really elevates the quality of the whole album, every sound is in its right place and this helps the listener to distinguish all the elements clearly. At the same time the tracks sound unique and compact like every instrument interacts with the other, creating a whole master that sounds perfectly assembled, as if all the tracks were destined to be together.

In order to create a track inspired by Idioteque I decided to take a cue from the arrangement, using similar instruments for the same purpose of the reference song, trying to create my own sounds and my own melodies.

The structure of my song is very similar and minimal just like the track from Radiohead, composed by two main sections that alternate each other in a A-B-A-B scheme.

The track starts with a chaotic drum pattern composed of one-shot drum samples from different sample packs. I chose samples that could work all together with an acoustic vein and a timbre inspired by Idioteque's sounds, then I worked to combine them and to make them interact with each other using sidechains, hard compression and heavy distortions in order to emulate the effect of compactness that distinguishes this song and Radiohead's music.

Then I added the synthesizer lead sound created with the Prophet 5 plugin from Arturia. In the loop sampled by Jonny Greenwood, the synthesizer plays a progression of seventh chords in E flat key, with B flat and E flat played with the right hand and G and D with the left hand. All the other following chords are just inversions of the root position of the previous ones. In my case I chose a progression of 6 chords keeping always the same note (Db) and changing the other note on every chord using different musical intervals in order to create a sequence of 6 two-notes chords. There is also a guitar in the background always playing the same note and a dreamy synth sound played by a Korg Volca Keys through a Strymon Big Sky Reverb that creates an additional voice to the lead synthesizer.



Fig 1. Patch on Korg Volca Keys



Fig 2. Patch on Strymon Big Sky

Afterwards, I added some vocal loops from the Exhale Kontakt library from Output, noise samples and other percussions from Maschine NI. With regards to the bass, I created a patch on my Moog Minitaur synthesizer. This instrument helps me to find the right sound for this song, it was very easy to realize a deep and warm bass loop that matches with the kick.

I used the same loop for the noise sequence that fades in at 01:07, processing the bass line with Movement, an FX plugin developed by Output that combines step filters, sequencers, distortions, delays and reverbs all in one interface.



Fig 3. Patch on Moog Minitaur

The voice loop that says “I didn't mean to” that kicks in at 1:43 is a recording of myself through the a Littlealterboy processor from Soundtoys which is a plugin that helps to create vocal pitch effects and manipulations.

Since Thom Yorke's voice has such a specific and unique tone, I wanted to make something particular and weird with the poor vocal skills that I have. With this tool I was able to build a vocal melody by automating the pitch parameter step by step on every repetition. This technique helps me to achieve the robotic and electronic effect on my voice sample.

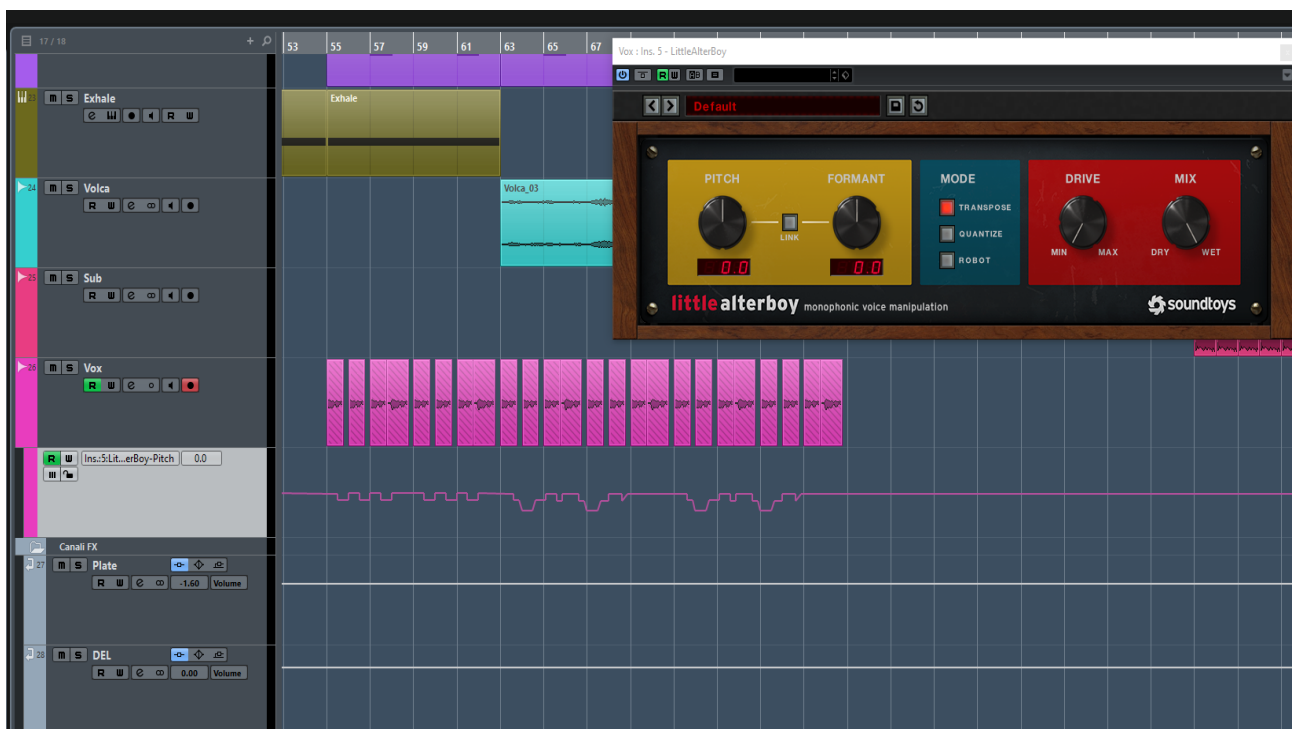


Fig 4. Littlealterboy Automation

The last element that I added to the track is the noise that fades in at the end and in the middle of the track. It was realized by playing with the repeats and the decay parameters of a Memory Man, a delay pedal by Electro-Harmonix, in order to obtain this feedback sound that I used as a sweep between the A and the B parts of the song to make the transition more smooth and at the end of the track to make it more dramatic and impactful.

2. Hiphop/RnB Assignment

Rhythm and Blues is probably one of the most borrowed from genres in contemporary pop music. Born in the 40s and originating from the Afro American community, it has evolved and been influenced in many different ways thanks to its versatility. It's characterized by catchy and engaging rhythms, inheriting vibes, sounds and melodies from blues, soul and jazz music. Nowadays RnB is very affected by other popular genres, incorporating elements of pop, hip hop and electronic music, giving it different reading keys and interpretations that make it one of the most variegated music styles. Timbaland, Beyoncé, Rihanna and Alicia Keys demonstrated that this genre is eternal and destined to fill the global rankings forever.

Malamente by Rosalia, produced by El Guincho, is a perfect example of how this kind of music can be reinvented, carrying a product that sounds unique and original, taking inspiration from reggaeton and flamenco with the characteristic smart use of percussions and instruments.

The main elements are undoubtedly the claps which sound acoustic and real, due to being performed by the singer. The pattern helps to remind the listener of flamenco music that instantly catches the attention of the audience. All the drums are combined together sweetly and interact perfectly, creating a beautiful record that matches genuinely with the seductive vocals.

The mix from the great sound engineer, Jaycen Joshua gives to the song and groove a spectacular and priceless vibe. An interesting fact about the production process is that when Joshua opened the session for the first time, he found a drum bus with 8 NLS plugin by Waves in a roll with all the same settings. Believing this was a mistake, he bypassed all of them, losing the body, depth and width. This uncommon technique helps the drums to gain bottom, low end and space for the drum kit.



Fig.5 Drum group processing

Another aspect worth mentioning is the movement of the clap from left to right and from back to front producing the effect of a flamenco dance around the vocals keeping them in the spotlight. This song is a good example of how sometimes choosing a few effective elements could be more than enough to produce a great piece of music rather than of adding several bland instruments without character.

With concern for my track, I decided to produce an RnB beat inspired by Malamente, combining similar sounds and the typical vibes of the genre.

My plan was to apply some of the production ideas used in Rosalia's song but in a slightly different context, leaving out the flamenco's spirit. I started by recording a piano loop, a progression of chords in C minor key, and resampled that reversing it and layering it with the original one. This helped me to create an atmospheric and eventful piano tone which became the main instrument. Then I added a minimal and basic drum pattern choosing an acoustic clap sample and processing the hi-hat with the Panman plugin by Soundtoys, in order to recreate the movement effect from the original song.

The structure of the song is very simple and typical of hip-hop beats with no big variations in melodies, building the arrangement mostly with samples and just by kicking in and out elements between verse and chorus.

The bass line was made with Massive software instrument by NI and processed with the Pumper plugin by Waves, which gave space to my sub kick and resulted in a nice bouncy effect. Then I substituted the piano for a synth from Diva U-he and a guitar in the pre chorus to distinguish it from the verse. At this point I also added strings in the chorus.

My goal was to produce a track that was effective but very minimal and gaunt at the same time, so that I would later have the chance to add a potential vocal track which will fit into the song without clashing with the other instruments.

With regards to the mix, I opted for very basic processing approach, as I liked the sounds as they were. I compressed the bass and the kick together using a 1176 emulation by Slate Digital. As well as this, I also used three different reverbs (the Blackhole by Eventide, a plate and a room) with distinct decay settings to place every sound in the stereo panorama.

In the end, I equalized and compressed the master track to glue everything together and give the final touch to the song.



Fig 6. Master track processing

3. Pop Punk Assignment

With the advent of the “punk revival” in the early 90s, the Pop Punk became one of the most successful and appreciated genre. It combines the typical fast tempos and distorted sounds of the Punk Rock wave with the catchy melodies and chord progressions of Pop music. The worldwide success of Pop Punk during the late 1990s and early 2000s is due to big bands such as Green Day, Sum 41 and Blink 182, who embody the most distinctive characteristics as the concise and frivolous lyrics and the rebel mood of the songs and topics covered, leaving to chance technicalities and compositional skills. The concept was: to be a punk musician, you don't need to be a musician but you need to be punk. This genre is a perfect example of how sometimes your attitude is more important than your abilities.

In the last decade, Pop Punk music has taken a back seat, but in recent years some sonorities have been sampled, recycled and reinvented especially in a Trap/Rap context.

The new album of Machine Gun Kelly named “Tickets to My Downfall” with the participation of Travis Barker (Drummer from Blink 182) is the perfect example of how sometimes the music and the art are cyclical and how everything comes back, sooner or later.

Bloody Valentine is probably the single that better encapsulates all these concepts, a song that could be fifteen years old, but which sounds recent and contemporary.

The structure of the song is simple but effective and it can be outlined as follows: A B C A B C D B C.

Every section remains the same with regards to the melodies and chords, the whole song is built on the same 4 power chords and the dynamic of the track is created by volume variations and different intensities at which all instruments are played. The most important element is undoubtedly the voice, without which it would be difficult to understand and distinguish the verses from the choruses.

The vocal lines are designed to work perfectly in the section where they belong in order to maintain the complete attention of the listener.

The mix sounds very compressed which helps the song to remain loud despite the gaps of power during the different parts of the track. All the instruments are distorted and glued together to form a whole piece in which it is difficult to understand what is going on and this helps to create a rich musical ground on which only the voice, the kick and the snare stands out.

In this genre, the idea that the main concept and mood are more important than anything else, is applicable not only to the production and arrangement of the song, but also to the technical aspect of mixing and mastering.

In order to produce a track in Machine Gun Kelly's style, I decided to keep the exact same structure of Bloody Valentine by reusing similar elements with the same purpose.

I started by layering several guitar tracks recreating dynamic variations for the different sections of the song by playing power chord progressions, leads and solos.

Then I made the drums by choosing acoustic samples and creating a pattern that sounds like a real drummer and adding a simple bass line with a Moog Minitaur, at this point, I felt like 70% of the production was already there.

In order to make the track more interesting, I layered three lead synthesizers in the chorus realized with the Juno 106 plugin by Roland, The Diva by U-he and my hardware Korg Volca Keys.

All these sounds were processed with the Pumper VST by Waves to create the bouncy and pump effect that fits very well with a fast tempo track. Additionally, the pluck sound was made with Unfiltered Audio Lion, a software modular synthesizer.

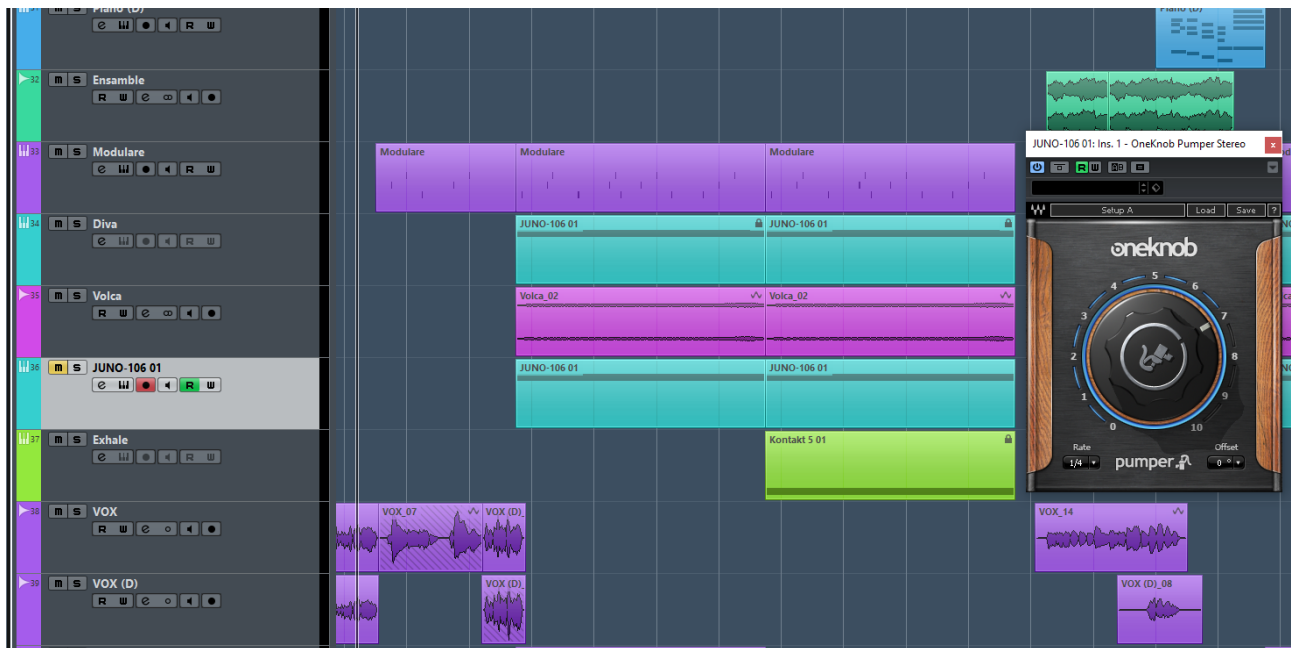


Fig 7. Pumper by Waves

Most of the parts of the song are connected by a short drum break processed with a flanger. I wrote an automation of the VSO knob obtaining a sweep effect that helped the sections of the track to kick in with more impact, also creating a moment of emptiness to contrast with the loudness and energy of the verses and choruses.

Later on I decided to add “a special” between two choruses, I wanted it to sound different and out of place with the rest of song in order to destabilize the listener and make something unexpected. So I opted for a string ensemble and a piano using a chord progression that grows step by step bringing tension and suspense until the drop of the last chorus, where I added more guitar layers for a loud and chaotic conclusion.

As mentioned before, the main element of this genre is usually the voice, specifically the lyrics. In my opinion the production didn't make sense by itself, so Cathal Reynolds joined me in writing the song, making use of the typical topics of Pop Punk music. Then we recorded the vocals bringing the track to the next level and making it sound complete.

Concerning the mix, I began by processing all the vocal tracks giving them a heavy sound with a crispy high end, making them pierce through the instrumental and always keeping them in focus. The only exception to this is the chorus, during which I opted for a different balance, with the voice becoming less prominent, coexisting with the other instruments to give the idea of a real full band playing in front of the listener.

Then I centred my attention on the drums and the bass trying to shape all the elements and make them sound big and wide. Parallel limiting, compression and stereo imagers helped me to achieve this result. Moreover the use of slap delays gives more space and thickness to the drums, especially the snare.

I finally mix the guitars and synths, recreating that mid-range ground sound. I then processed the master track with a compressor, tape and EQ, glueing all the elements together.

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Credits

Indietronic Assignment: Composer - Lorenzo Martelli
Producer - Lorenzo Martelli
Mix Engineer - Lorenzo Martelli

HipHop/RnB Assignment: Composer - Lorenzo Martelli
Producer - Lorenzo Martelli
Mix Engineer - Lorenzo Martelli

Pop Punk Assignment: Composer - Lorenzo Martelli
Producer - Lorenzo Martelli
Lyrics - Cathal Reynolds, Lorenzo Martelli
Vocal Performer - Cathal Reynolds
Mix Engineer - Lorenzo Martelli