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Introduction

In this specific essay i will be reflecting on and analysing the key defining characteristics of the reference tracks and musical genres that i have chosen in my portfolio. I will be analysing specific key production techniques such as; the instrumentation, structure, overall mix applications, use of audio effects, tempo, key and arrangement that are applied in the chosen reference tracks. I will then be reflecting on how i have practiced these techniques, and what additional music decisions that i have made in the creative process of making my tracks.

Reflective analyses of the reference tracks and musical genres.

In order to break down each reference tracks key elements, i will be using active listening as my main technique. Ableton.com (2019) suggests using active listening as an effective method of analysing tracks. Active listening is described as an exercise that involves listening to a piece of music without any distraction. It is suggested that listening to certain chunks of each track in layers such as looping a verse and listening to each parameter of the music, for instance what sounds are being used, what harmony and melodies are being used is a great way of understanding the elements that each track and genre uses in order to give it a certain feel and emotion. Make Pop Music (2021) suggests that using active listening is a great way of breaking down a tracks key elements, and suggests that this technique is extremely helpful in terms of being able to adapt these techniques in your own production.

Through the practice of using active listening i have deconstructed the key elements to each reference track section by section. Make pop music (2021) suggests taking notes in order to keep reference points of production. I deconstructed a breakdown of each track in detail in my notes (See appendix 1, 2 and 3).

Instrumentation:

The instrumentation of each of my reference tracks differs per genre. For instance 'Levitating' (Lipa, 2020) uses key instrumentation such as swung acoustic bass, nostalgic synths, twangy funk played guitars and a steady beat in order to give it that nostalgic disco feel, however the vocals make it contemporary and pop (See appendix 1) which is also relevant to 'Prisoner' (Lipa, 2020) and characteristic of new disco pop. Whilst 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) utilises a more minimalistic style beat with unique softly spoken vocals, swung drum beat elements, foley textures, acoustic guitar played softly and creative syntheses, this in order to give it a more relaxed dark pop and downtempo feel that is characteristic of this genre (Darus, 2021) (See appendix 2). And 'My Heart Goes', (Hill, 2021) has a more upbeat dance style, using heavily driven house music drum elements as its core focal point, use of synthesised bass, Synthesised lead, background pads and a really catchy vocal lead to give it that dance house beat feel (See appendix 3). House music is defined by its distinctive 4 to the floor kick and drum machines like the Roland 909, with and upbeat 120-130 bpm rhythm (Hydride, 2016).

Structure:

The structure of the reference tracks are relatively similar with a few minor differences in places. For instance 'Levitating' (Lipa, 2020) makes use of using; 4 bar intro, 8 bar verse, 4 bar pre chorus, 8 bar chorus, 2 bar break, 8 bar verse, 4 bar pre chorus, 16 bar chorus, 8 bar middle 8, 24 bar final chorus (See appendix 1). This structure uses a shorter pre chorus from that of the dark pop reference 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) which uses

traditional 8 bar pre chorus, with a 16 bar chorus, however there is no intro (See appendix 2). Where as the dance track reference 'My heart goes' (Hill, 2021) uses a 4 bar intro, with an 8 bar pre chorus and a 16 bar chorus, however only repeats the chorus twice throughout the whole track (See appendix 3). However Mixedinkey (2021) suggests that in a typical commercial house track, 3 chorus's are usually used. Each chorus with subtle difference between them. This is something that i have looked to incorporate in my own track.

Mix applications and effects:

Each of the reference tracks use specific mix applications in order to execute their chosen sounds. For instance; the use of big guitar hits pushed wider in the mix in 'Levitating' (Lipa, 2020) is used to create urgency in the pre chorus build (Make pop music, 2021). Make pop music (2021) Also suggests that she uses the same synths in the chorus, as in the verse, however they are unfiltered and layered in order to make the chorus sound bigger and crispier with more top end. 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) uses slightly different mix applications with the synths by modulating the envelope of the synthesiser to a 1/4 note, and also side chains the layers of instruments to the kick in order to add more clarity to the drum element (See appendix 2). Through active listening i was also able to identify a use of vibrato on the vocal chain throughout the track in order to have a slightly haunting effect. In the track 'My heart goes' (Hill, 2021) I was able to reflect on the use of heavily compressed vocals, prominently in the pre chorus and chorus, i believe this was in order to tame the peaks and sit in the mix, I also noted that more of her tracks are treated in the same way. I analysed through active listening that the use of delay is automated in to the vocals, i believe that this is done in order to fill in the gaps and add movement in the track. In The Mix (2018) suggests that in electronic dance music, the use of delay is often used in order to add rhythm and progression in your mix, and is a useful tool when adding transitions and filling in the spaces in your tracks.

Tempo, Key and Time signature:

The time signature in each of the reference tracks are all 4/4, however the bpm is usually genre specific. For instance Kody (2021) suggests that in House music the bpm is commonly set between 115-130 bpm, and that keeping to what is typical within each genre helps the audience connect with 'a certain type of rhythmic excitement they enjoy' whilst also helping DJ's to mix genre specific tracks a lot more easily. 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) is set at 118bpm, and 'Levitating' (Lipa, 2020) is set at 103 bpm. The key of each reference track and genre ranges around the spectrum dependent on the tonality of the singer on what key he/she is comfortable singing in, however whether its major or minor can usually define the tone of the song. For instance Darus (2021) argues that dark pop is fundamentally sad and gives a gloomy vibe which is often associated with minor keys like in 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) (See appendix 2). I have taken all of this into account when creating my targeted genre specific tracks, and i have tried to use these notions in my work.

Reflective analyses of how i have applied key production techniques:

Track one:

This track has been heavily inspired by the new style of disco pop, that has in recent years charted in the UK. This has been evident in Due Lipa's releases 'Levitating' (2020) and 'Prisoner' (2020) (See appendix 4), both of which i have used as reference tracks for inspiration when executing this song. When reflecting on my execution of the song i believe that i done well in imitating certain aspects of the genre whilst infusing them with

my own sound. For instance, a key point that i believe went well was that i was able to implement the feel of the drum pattern and sounds. Holden (2020) suggests that in an interview with McEwen (2020) that Dua Lipa's sound can be defined by the 80's 'Splashy snare and kick drum with a lot of kick' (McEwen, 2020). I believe that i was able to apply this technique through the use of layering 2 separate kick drums (one with a lot of punch and top end, and one with a lot of thump and low end) I then used the eq tool to emphasise the layers characteristics and have them sit better in the mix whilst creating the punch that is characteristic in this genre. I also used layering when assigning the snare drums, I placed a punchy snare drum with 2 separate claps panning either side and a core snare with a short tail in order to execute the splashy sound. However, i analysed that this specific genre has a lot of live acoustic drum elements in it as well. Music (2019) argues that partnering acoustic and electronic drums together can create more of a live sound. I believe that this is something that could of been better in my own production, and in the future i will look to implement this technique in order to get the desired sound. A specific mix application that i was able to also implement was the use of big guitar hits pushed wide in the mix during the chorus, this is something that is characteristic in this genre and i was able to do this through recording my own guitar into Logic through the use of a scarlet interface, and then processing it using stereo imaging stock plugins to create the width, however i do believe that the processing effects on the guitar could have been better by using Guitar rig in order to imitate the tone that is characteristic in this genre, in the future i will look at applying this method. When reflecting on the vocal production on my track, i believe that we was able to capture the pop melodic feel and lyricism that is apparent in Dua's tracks. However, i noted that Dua uses doubling on certain words of her vocals (see appendix 1). Make pop music (2021) argues that stacking of the vocals during the chorus adds emphases and impact to the track, this is something that i believe could of been better in my own production, and i will look to multi track vocal recordings for emphases when recording in this specific genre in the future.

Overall I believe that i was able to implement a good structure that is apparent within this genre, and also capture the general feel and sounds that are heard in the reference tracks. In the future i will look to implement the techniques that i have talked about to create a more well rounded track, however through this process i have been able to expand my knowledge and learn about new production techniques that i can now apply in the future.

Track two:

This specific track has been influenced by the genre dark pop. A particular artist that has had success in this genre is Billie Eilish, this is evident with her track 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019) , I used this as a reference track for inspiration when creating my song. When reflecting on my execution of this song, a key point that i believe went well was my use of instrumentation and sound effects textures in order to create the feel of the genre. Kennedy (2020) reveals that an interview with Billie Eilish's producer Finneas, he states that he often uses creative sound effects and textures in order to set his music apart. I used the sound of a vinyl scratch and layered it underneath the key instrumentation in order to have a subtle layer that adds texture. However, in a play back session with other students, it was pointed out that the loudness of the effects was taking away from the other instruments, this is something that i noted down and then i later worked on it by lowering the volume of the sample in order to sit better in the mix. I believe that my use of syntheses during the chorus sections was also effective, i layered 3 different synthesisers and modulated the envelopes to a 1/4 pattern, similar to that of 'Wish you were gay' (Eilish, 2019), however i believe that i could've taken out more of the low end of them so that the bass had more impact, this is something ill look to work on in the future. Also

upon reflection i was able to notice that a key factor in the production was keeping the verses very minimal with instrumentation, and letting the vocals take the front, i believe this made the vocal performance stand out more. However it could be argued that if the instrumentation is too minimal then the track could lose energy and lack sonic range, Gearspace.com (2014) argues that another option to get vocals to sit better in the mix rather than taking instruments out, is to cut the frequencies in the instruments that are colliding with the frequencies from the vocals. Along with other mixing methods, this will help the vocals stand out and sit better in the mix. This is a technique that i usually apply in other productions, and will perhaps look to apply in the future when making music in this genre in order to fill up the sonic range.

After reflecting on the track, I believe that i was able to execute the overall intended feel of the genre. However in future tracks i will look to use more sonic range with instrumentation to create energy. However i enjoyed working on the track and have been able to expand my knowledge further.

Track three:

This specific track has been inspired by house/dance music, this is typical to the type of genre that i would usually create and consume. Artists that are popular within this genre, and that i have used for reference when creating this track are; Becky Hill and Joel Corry. When reflecting on my personal execution of this genre and song i believe that one of the key factors that i was able to do well in, was the use of an appropriate and catchy vocal lead. Through session time with the four writers involved, we all agreed that a catchy hook is going to be a key, so we looked for references, one of the references was 'Bad Habits' (Sheeran, 2021). In this track we took inspiration from the rhythm in Sheeran's vocal and adapted our own interpretation by keeping the melody simple and effective. Levin (2020) suggests that when creating a memorable hook, it's often a simple and repeated melody with memorable lyrics that captures the listener's attention. This is something that we decided to implement by repeating a simple but effective melody through trial and error with memorable and simplistic lyrics that were relevant to the overall message of the song. I also noted that tracks within this genre also use automated 1/4 note delays in sections of the vocals in order to fill in the gaps. In the mix (2018) suggests that using automated delay is a really good way of adding rhythm and glue to your mix, he suggests ramping it up to 100% effect rate during the gaps. This is something that influenced my decision to apply this technique in certain parts of the vocal lines. However, in this specific version of the track, we used two different singers. In the reference tracks 'Bad Habits' (Sheeran, 2021) and 'My Heart Goes' (Hill, 2021) and other popular house/dance tracks, i noticed that only one singer has been used. When reflecting on the use of two different singers in this specific track, as a group we agreed that in further recordings of the track, it might be better to use one vocalist as this would add more impact on the song's delivery of the lyrics and melody. This is something that i will look to add in the future. Another key factor was the use of stripped back instrumentation during chorus section, Levin (2020) suggests that stripping back layers of the instrumentation can add emphasis on the vocal hook line. In the reference track 'My heart goes' (Hill, 2021) i also noticed that the track makes use of a hard hitting four to the floor kick drum, and a donk style bass in the chorus sections which is typical within this genre. This is something that influenced my decision when creating the chorus, by layering 4 different synthesised basses and a kick drum at the start of the chorus, then adding more instrumentation bar by bar which is also typical within this genre.

Overall i believe that i have been able to deliver a track that uses relevant arrangement and instrumentation, whilst also making use of effects and mix applications that are

typically used within this genre. I can take away new mix application techniques and develop on my overall sound in the future.

Conclusion:

In conclusion i believe that i have been able to reflect on and analyse popular tracks within each of my chosen genres through the use of active listening effectively. I believe that i have been able to apply these techniques into my own music and develop my understanding of new methods. I have been able to identify and reflect on my execution of key production techniques that are relevant to each genre.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

Levitating production notes

BPM:103 Key:Bmin Time signature: 4/4

notes

funky upbeat disco, swung bass with steady drums with lots of elements to give it a groove, very disco inspired with contemporary vocals, catchy hook, everything moves fast. nostalgic synths, use of twangy guitars throughout, lots of real instruments used opposed to samples and vst.

INTRO (4 bars)-

Synthesiser playing the main chord progression

Bar 4 introduces a laser riser, a double clap and a bass slide before the verse

VERSE 1 (8 bars)-

Kick plays on the 1-3, snare and clap play on 2-4, closed hi hat on the snare hit. A double clap plays at the end of every 2 bars with a layered wide clap.

A crash plays on the 1 of every 4 bars, 'hey' shout on second claps. 'Woo' shout on last clap of verse.

Guitars play a funk rhythm, they are panned out wide, they sit in the background of the mix to add layers.

Synth is the same as the intro

Bass is slightly slapped with lots of movement in the baseline. It takes the front of the mix, is funky, with notes played on the off beat to add rhythm.

Melody/vocal- One vocal, there is a defending melody that plays twice before switching to a rising melody that plays once.

PRE CHORUS 1(4 Bars)

Drums same as verse,

Guitar- adds some accent hits, and becomes way more prominent in the mix

Synth- plays the same as the verse and there is an added string playing over the top (playing a single note)

Bass- uses a talk box layered underneath

Vocals/melody- Become wider and multi tracked with emphases on the ending phrases

CHORUS 1 (8 Bars)

Drums-Introduce hi hats and open hats on 4 every other bar, crash plays on the 1 of every 4.

Synth- Same as pre chorus, with that added string and a talk box doing extra melodies.

Guitar-Plays following the bass rhythm, extended notes rather than staccato

Vocals/melody- become stacked, panned quite wide with added reverb and delay in places (probably automated in)

VERSE 2

Drums- Same as first with added Toms.

Synth- extra low pad added, synth bass is also added playing extra notes, main synth is filtered and automates out through verse

PRE CHORUS 2

Drums- Same as before with kick playing quarter notes

Synth- extra one added playing the baseline. string hits playing the vocal melody at times

Appendix 2:

Wish you were gay

Key: G Bpm:118 Time signature: 4/4

overall notes

underlying textures, swung beat, unique vocals, lots of space for vocals to sit, solo vocals, foley texture, layering back vocals, minimal production, unique creative drum elements fill in the gaps, vocals are very unique and lazy in parts that gives it a certain relaxed feel

VERSE 1 8 bars

Very minimal

Guitar- Plays main chords and uses a palm mutes soft strum as the snare on beats 2 and 4, movement in the string scratches to give it elements of acoustic realism.

Vocals- Are very softly spoken, almost as a whisper and lethargically spoken with no real motivation. Not layered.

crowd noises are played as an ambience to fill in the gaps between sections

PRE CHORUS 1- 8 bars

Guitar- strums each note of the chord and opens it up but still plays a palm muted strums, which now sounds like it might be layered with a short transient clap.

Bass- Plays the root note of the chords as added depth and movement to the track

Vocals- Are now layered and accented on certain words. Spread wide and almost tremelo'd to give it a haunting vibrato effect.

Crowd noises play in the gaps again

A sub drop play the transition just before the chorus.

CHORUS 1- 16 bars

Kick plays on the 1 and 3

Layered claps with a snare and heavily crushed and distorted hit varies.

hats play constant with rolls in gaps to add transition and fill very minimal for first section on chorus

Synth plays a future bass sounding serum waveform with the envelope modulating at a 1/4 note,

bass follows the root note but also modulates at a 1/4 note

Very minimal with a piano playing the transition into the second part of the chorus

Piano added

Guitar added following rhythm of synth

extra synth to occupy the space

Drum fills are added

Vocals are now layered, the layers are very wide

Appendix 3:

My heart goes

BPM:124 Key: Gmin Time signature: 4/4

Overall notes

Typical Becky hill upbeat style house, Bass and melody driven, 4 to the floor kick pattern with house tops, hats toms fills. builds up to a drop that involves catchy vocals , done style bass and house inspired dum elements.

INTRO 4 Bars

Bass- Plays root notes, filtered bass using a synthesiser modulating the filter/cut off in the patch

Vocal plays main hook

Riser and reversed vocals plays into the verse

VERSE 1 8 bars

Bass plays same as intro

drums- top loop plays over the top of the bass added movement

synth lead plays a moving lead line, added pads filling in the space

vocals are minimal at this point with delay automated in the gaps to add movement.

riser leads into the pre chorus with another reversed vocal

PRE CHORUS 8 bars

Bass plays the same as intro with another unfiltered gritty distorted bass layered with it.

drums- more hats and a clap is added as layers

synth plays the same

big riser leads into the chorus

Vocals still minimal with delay added

CHORUS: 16 bars

drops with lots of event in the drums being added every 2-4 bars

Drums- starts with a 4 to the floor kick, clap added bar 5 with a closed hat on the off beats, top loops toms, fills reversed elements added in the second part of the chorus (drums build with house percussive elements)

Bass- Now plays a layered dunk type sounding bass playing the same rhythm as the vocal hook line.

Horns play in the second part of the chorus on the root notes

added synth lead plays filtered with no reverb then filters out in the second part of chorus

added pad synths play as well

Vocal- hook is very catchy, automated delay and reverb in the gaps, moves to a different melody in the second part of the chorus.>>|

Appendix 4:

27.08. 2020		LEVITATING DUA LIPA	WARNER RECORDS	05	65	00	buy listen	+
12.11. 2020		FEVER DUA LIPA & ANGELE	WARNER RECORDS	79	02	00	buy listen	+
03.12. 2020		PRISONER MILEY CYRUS FT DUA LIPA	RCA/WARNER RECORDS	08	21	00	buy listen	+