

An Analysis of Hyperpop, Orchestral Pop and Folk Music

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With the meteoric rise of streaming platforms and digital media, music is more a part of our everyday lives now than it ever was before. According to a study by Nielsen Music, the average American listens to music 32 hours a week in 2018, an increase from the previous two years. This has made music more accessible and in turn more integral in our lives. This has also increased the likelihood of people listening to other genres, increasing the commercial viability of music across the board. Within this assignment, I will be analysing three different genres, hyperpop, orchestral pop and folk, for their characteristics, showcasing how I interpreted them in my final productions. I will also be looking at the psychological and commercial effects these characteristics have, outlining the differences in production and arrangement.

Hyperpop is a genre that is considered up and coming in the commercial music scene but has already seen success with artists such as Charli XCX and 100 gecs. One of the main aspects of this genre is its exaggeration of typical commercial pop tropes to the point of absurdity. An article in The Valley Magazine states that the parody of such techniques and themes 'often pushes music boundaries with a randomness that almost feels reckless.' (Ogunbayo, 2020) A stand out example of this can be found in the vocal processing, in which the vocalist is made to sound as artificial as possible. In some cases, such as six impala's song *EPSILON LOVE*, the vocals are performed by a vocal synthesiser, completely disposing of any human factor. I decided to implement these elements in several ways. Firstly, the main vocals are heavily pitch corrected, distorted, and pitched up with formant effects, very similar to how producer Dylan Brady processes the vocals of 100 gecs. Another common vocal processing technique found in Brady's production is a wet, short reverb on the main vocals, which can be found in my track. This effect, however, is not as drastic in my track due to the lyrics becoming unintelligible when used at a higher intensity. A strong counterpoint for this amount of vocal processing is the debate about whether using pitch correction is a good or bad addition to commercial music. At the beginning of the Twenty First Century, many artists such as Allison Moorer, Ben Gibbard and Jay-Z publicly denounced AutoTune in their work or in interviews, with Gibbard saying 'Let's stop this, let's bring back the blue note, and let's really try to get music back to its roots of actual people singing and sounding like human beings.' (Gibbard, cited in Hughes, 2015) Another sceptic of AutoTune is music critic Neil McKenzie, who states that 'The singer is the human connection with the song...It's the soul and the heart, and it's the thing you lose when you correct every possible defect.' (McKenzie, cited in Holmes & Core, 2013) However, since these points were raised, using AutoTune as an instrument has become more commonplace in commercial pop, and I

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believe that hyperpop falls within those boundaries. Hyperpop is a celebration of the artificial and making the only human aspect as synthetic as possible really highlights this.

In a continuation with the theme of absurdity, the lyrics within hyperpop songs are typically surreal and sometimes nonsensical. In the Genius video *100 geecs "money machine" Official Lyrics and Meaning*, Laura Les from 100 Geecs describes the lyric writing process as something that doesn't go through a lot of testing, but goes with what sounds good (2020, 3:32) This is also evident in the track *claws* by Charli XCX, in which the focus is about the tight rhyming scheme instead of a chronological story 'I'm not shy, make you sigh/Slip and slide up my thighs (Ah)/Juicy just like clementines/Sorry if I make you cry/Party time, hop inside/We're so high, roller coaster ride/Gemini, switchin' sides/Yeah, that's so nice (Woo).' (genius.com, 2020) I implemented this into the track by making sure the third line of every verse rhymed and by making the rhyming scheme obvious and simple. The choruses of hyperpop songs are often one line or phrase repeated, which can be found plenty of times in the reference tracks. I replicated this, using the same phrase 'bet you wanna be me' with different melodies to make it not too repetitive. The rise in repetitive music has been documented by multiple sources, including an Independent article stating that there is a formula behind contemporary hit music. Whilst there is a debate about whether this is good for the industry as a whole, it is a necessary part of commercial music. A 2015 scientific paper studied the effect of repetitive lyrics and its impact on the listener, as well as its likelihood of becoming a hit:

"The results indicate that chorus repetition is a positive predictor of a song's likelihood of being a Top Song as opposed to being a Bottom song. More specifically... for each additional repetition, a song's likelihood of making it to #1 as opposed to staying at the bottom of the *Billboard* chart increases by 14.5%." (Nunes et al.,2015)

This shows that the humans subconscious prefers repetition, which then increases sales, making it more commercially viable. As the rise of repetitive lyrics is somewhat recent, there are many critics of contemporary pop that long for the lyrical variety found in the Twentieth Century. However, the parodical nature of hyperpop mocks this trend in its own surreal way whilst simultaneously using it.

One area of hyperpop that I did not use was explicit lyrics. Out of the three reference tracks, two of them are marked explicit. Furthermore, in the Spotify playlist HYPERPOP, 47% of the tracks are marked as explicit, which is less than the 38% of songs on the Global Top 50 List (as of 20/9/2020). However, when you compare these numbers to the Billboard 100 Number Ones from the last 60

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years, you can see that there has been a sudden rise in musical hits that contain explicit material. NME (2017) hypothesises that this is down to streaming services dictating what is a hit rather than radio, which means explicit songs do not need to be censored to be broadcast and then get popular. This change can also be contributed to the shift in opinion about swearing over the last decade, which genres like hyperpop fully take advantage of. I chose to not use swearing in my track because I felt that the song would not benefit from it and would lessen the impact of the themes. And despite the recent trends, having your music on the radio is still an important way to get your music heard by a large audience, so a clean song from the beginning stops the issues of radio edits and censored versions.

When looking at wave forms of hyperpop music, it is clear to see that dynamic range and perceived loudness are not wanted in the final mix. The LUFS (Loudness Unit Full Scale) on the reference tracks range from -9 to -6, which is considerably more compressed compared to the limit of -14 LUFS found on streaming services like Spotify and YouTube. This mixing and 'brickwalling' is what gives hyperpop its iconic in-your-face sound. I decided to aim for -8 LUFS to have the benefit of the overly compressed sound and keep the integrity of the quieter, more dynamic ending together. Whilst the loudness war has been around for decades, the recent trend of loudness normalisation in digital media has put a supposed end to it. Compressing your track to hyperpop levels would make the track sound quieter in comparison with more dynamic songs. However, more electronic based genres rely on highly compressed mastering to generate their impactful sound, and hyperpop is no exception. Therefore, despite the consequences, the track must be mixed to the point where there is little to no dynamic range. This helps explain the rise of hyperpop on SoundCloud, as it has no loudness normalisation, making the tracks as loud and distorted as possible.

In retrospect, I believe that I created a track that is faithful to the hyperpop genre, using characteristics found in all the reference tracks. I also branched out and added my own production and songwriting techniques into the track, such as the lyric writing and vocal performance, to not make it a carbon copy of the genre.

Contemporary orchestral pop, a genre popularised by bands such as Clean Bandit, is more commercialised and refined when compared to hyperpop. One of the clearest examples of this is the

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vocal processing and pitch correction. Within the reference tracks, the vocals are all clear and human whilst simultaneously not showing any vocal flaws like pitch drift and off beat timings. I decided to replicate this by pitch correcting the vocals finely, smoothing out the sustained notes and preserving the natural note transitions. This creates the illusion of having a pitch perfect performance without the pitch snapping you hear in hyperpop. In the video essay *The Problem With Auto-Tune* by the Youtuber Sideways, a point that reoccurs is that the whole point of pitch correction in popular music is to not be heard: 'If you know it's got some kind of pitch correction in it, then you kinda (sic.) did it wrong.' (Sideways, 2020 3:07) He then goes on to say the majority of the music you hear on the radio or on streaming platforms has had some form of pitch correction on it, despite the fact it is considered taboo in the eyes of the general public, calling it dishonest or cheating. This problem has been going on in other forms of media for decades in the form of redubbing vocals in films, like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* for example. Whether the general public has noticed it or not, it has become the norm to finely process vocals in pop music, hence the decision I took to do the same to mine.

The defining characteristic of this genre is the use of orchestral and classical instruments. A string section is often used, with other sections such as percussion and woodwind occasionally added into the mix. Both *I Miss You* and *ghostin'* use a string quartet in their instrumentals, with *Cosmic Love* utilising the impactful sound of the percussion section alongside the quicker and melodic harp arpeggios. Adding these instruments helps express the strong emotions and themes of the songs as they have been the primary source of expressive music for centuries in the form of classical music. In addition, the debate about music's ability to express emotion has been ongoing since Descartes in 1649. The chapter *Expressiveness in music performance* in the book *Algorithms for Sound and Music Computing* explains that the expressiveness within a piece of classical music is used to convey the composer's message alongside the performers interpretation, and as such is a very human characteristic. The rise and fall in dynamics in a live performance is never perfectly linear and should be considered when recording or programming an orchestral piece. I implemented this into the production of the pizzicato, spiccato and legato string sections as well as the brass and percussion parts in the second half of the track. Using the dynamic fader found on Spitfire Audio's plugins combined with a variation of note velocities, I managed to achieve an expressive and human 'performance' of the orchestral parts. This synthetic reproduction of classical expressiveness is deemed questionable by the chapter's author Giovanni De Poli, stating that 'even if (synthesis) models could be very accurate (and they still are not), some very important artistic aspects of this kind of music will be omitted.' (De Poli, 2006) However, since the publication of this paper, the

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quality of synthetic orchestral instruments has improved exponentially, meaning that it is possible to have an expressive performance without picking up a real violin. To differ from the genre, I decided to add more than a string section into the song, with the second build up including brass, classical piano, and percussion. I also made them the primary instruments in the mix rather than an occasional accompaniment to the main instrumental. The pre-chorus is almost entirely made up with orchestral instruments, which helps create an emotional and dynamic build towards the chorus.

Lyrical content is a defining part of this genre. In all the reference tracks, the loss of a loved one is the main lyrical theme, with more complex stories being told in *ghostin'* and *Cosmic Love*. The tracks are also accompanied with an upbeat or a progressively evolving instrumental in a major key. This combination of sad lyrics and happy music causes a musical phenomenon called lyrical dissonance. In 2014, Kazuma Mori and Makato Iwangawa conducted a study among Japanese students, in which they discovered that listening to sad songs with happy music provoked a more positive emotion out of the more sombre themes. They conclude their paper by saying that this musical combination 'captures something about the complexity of emotion' and helps trigger the release of the hormone prolactin 'without... real physical pain.' (Mori & Iwangawa, 2014) This sense of catharsis in contemporary orchestral pop music is something that I wanted to include in my final track. To achieve this, I first analysed the lyrics to *ghostin'*, which speaks from the true experiences of Grande around the time of the release. I decided to do the same, allowing myself to write lyrics that were true to my experiences of heartbreak and loss. This alongside the more electronic pop influenced chorus created the lyrical dissonance that can be found in the reference tracks. An argument can be made that this experience is not felt by most people. A study conducted in 2008 by Paul Evans and Emery Shubert found that 61% of the participants had a 'positive relationship' with the musical stimuli (i.e. they felt a happy emotion when a happy song was played). However, the study also found that 22% of participants had a 'negative relationship', proving the existence of people that gain positivity out of negative themes. Plus, in other art forms such as theatre, the cathartic enjoyment of a performers suffering has been a part of human culture since the Ancient Greeks. With all the evidence considered, I believe I made the right choice to include lyrical dissonance in my track.

In hindsight, the most striking part to me is the commercial and catchy feel to the choruses. The lyrics are memorable and are complimented with a simplistic but effective instrumental. One area I wish I went more in depth with is the orchestral sections, possibly adding woodwind arpeggios to

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add variety and make the track more unique. However, overall, the song is undeniably orchestral pop and fits in well alongside the reference tracks.

Folk, especially minimal, guitar focused folk is a genre that I personally do not listen to but is a perfect juxtaposition to hyperpop and the next natural progression from orchestral pop. One characteristic that makes it stand out from the other two genres is its natural, performative sound. In the video essay *the Problem with Auto-Tune*, Sideways raises the point that no one will sound as good as their studio recording unless it is one person and very few instruments performing something that doesn't have the polish of a commercial pop song (2020, 8:22). The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók remarks that the natural differences in various performances of the same folk song are an integral part to the genre as a whole:

“...we must not believe that every song must have its own tempo defined by law: folk-people often perform the very same song at widely different tempi... The folk-people do not recognize dynamics. Their singing is louder or softer on different occasions, but there is no variation [within a performance] other than the inherent changed that occur with rising or falling pitch... Yet, we do not suggest that the only proper rendition of a folk song would be the strict limitation of its folk-performance.” (Bartók, cited in Fabian et al. 2014 p. xxv)

While this may primarily refer to his Twentieth Century Hungarian Folk pieces, the statement still rings true for contemporary folk music. I tried to capture this raw and varied feeling by cutting back on my vocal and instrumental processing. For instance, I used the best take and only lightly corrected the pitch, leaving the natural vibrato and pitch drift intact. I also used minimal compression and EQ with the vocals and instrumentals and used one reverb bus for the whole song. Furthermore, the reference tracks seem to have little to no EQ in the instruments. This gives the song a realistic and human tone; unlike the other two genres I have explored. I could have gone further, like Kerine Polwart, by not using any reverb on my vocals at all, but I decided against this, as the reverb complimented the atmosphere created by the lyrics and instrumentation. This approach to music production goes along with the viewpoints of artists like Ben Gibbard, who called for music to return to its roots and make it sound human again. There is an ongoing debate about whether this conservative view on music is naval gazing or does damage to popular music's natural evolution. Folk is a good example for this argument, as producing a folk song like it is clean cut commercial pop would remove the atmosphere it creates, changing the genre of the song completely.

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Folk music has aura of tradition surrounding it, a celebration of local people, accents, and dialects. This can be found in the etymology of the word folk, as it derives from the Germanic languages, often referring to a tribe, a crowd or even a dwelling-place. In the music genre, it is shown via the use of accents and region-specific vocabulary. For instance, Kate Rusby often sings with a Yorkshire accent in her songs, with Karine Polwart singing with her natural Scottish accent. As such, I thought it necessary to use my West Yorkshire accent in the vocals to properly capture this characteristic. Furthermore, I decided to add some geographical references and local slang in the lyric 'On t' Pennine mountains'. These further cements the local aspect that folk music celebrates. Accents are not usually heard in popular music, with singers' voices often merging into a generic American accent. I personally struggled with this myself when recording the vocals, as I did not know I slipped out of my native accent until playing back the take. This is suggested to be caused by the increasing influence of American pop music on the rest of the world and can even happen when the singer intends to use their native accent, as shown in The New York Times article *The Disappearing Accent in Pop Music*. The main comparative example of this not being the case is American country music, where the southern accent is celebrated. Folk music throughout its history has also featured the accents of the people that sang it, and as such is a fundamental part in this genre.

When looking back at producing my folk song, the limitations in knowledge and experience with this genre seemed to help the creative process. In my opinion, I believe I created something that both captures the characteristics of folk and the characteristics of my music. One change I would make is to make the lyrics even more based around nature, creating a poetic story like the lyrics in *Follow The Heron*. Nevertheless, I surpassed my expectations with this song and now can see the appeal of folk music.

The music scene is more varied and complex than the average listener knows. From the artificial, bubble-gum-flavoured world of hyperpop to the pure and natural sound of folk, the various steps to get from an idea to a finished track is not always obvious on first listen. It is also clear that the reference tracks used are defining songs of their respective genres. They outline the typical characteristics seen in each genre and they have been successful commercially within their demographics. From the research gathered, I have created three tracks that are faithful to their source material and implement many genre specific styles that are seen in the industry today.

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