

MA Commercial Music Producer (Online Blended)

CSO0123 – Creation Proposal

CPO Creation P1D

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Background

I began the MA Commercial Music Producer (Online Blended) course to, 'scratch an itch' that simply won't go away; a desire to write, record, arrange and produce my own songs to a standard I am completely happy with.

My song writing and music production journey started way back in my teenage years which is when I began having ideas for songs. Although ideas for songs used to pop into my head, I never really explored developing the ideas or trying to produce my own material. I spent most of my teenage years and 20's playing other people's music at various levels. When I reached my 30's, the desire to convert my ideas into a complete music product became too strong and I set about realising the ideas; I wanted to write, perform, arrange, record and produce all my own material. Up until this point I had never really sung or used a digital audio workstation to any sort of standard, so it was going to be a challenge! I began working hard to develop my songwriting skills, my ability to sing, record, arrange and produce; I got to a point where I felt I could produce a song to a reasonable standard. I used some of the online tools like 'Crowd Review' on Reverbnation.com and BBC Introducing to judge their success. My early material would receive scores of 5 – 6 out of 10 on 'Crowd Review' but later, just before I started this course, I managed to obtain scores of 8 out of 10 and was featured on their homepage. Although, I had made progress in my ability to self-produce music, I knew my material could be improved. Prior study (before this MA) explored the technicalities of music but never properly tackled music production. I felt studying this MA would help push my ability to create a music track forward. I also hoped it would unravel what seemed like music production mysteries and help me overcome some of the stumbling blocks in arranging and producing my music. The underlying issue I consistently faced with producing music was realising the quality and style of production I had in my head, compared to my actual product. Therefore, the purpose of my final project is to realise 6 – 8 tracks which I can listen back to and think yes, that is the quality of product I am aiming for. The finished tracks will correlate to the audio vision I had inside my head.

Approach

My approach to completing the 6 – 8 tracks is driven heavily by the research I completed throughout the Development Section of the MA course. Two particular books captured my imagination:

Zen and the Art of Mixing

This was published in 2011 by Hal Leonard, written by Mixerman.

and

Mixing with your Mind: Closely Guarded Secrets of Sound Balance Engineering.

This was published in by Flux Research in 2003, written by Michael Paul Stavrou.

'Zen and the Art of Mixing' (Mixerman, 2011) certainly being the most heavily influencing of the two. I felt this book really clarified my approach to mixing and posed solutions to the problems I had struggled with in the past.

Key Focus

My overarching focus in creating my tracks will be point 9 from Mixerman's (2011) 10 Steps to Better Mixing.

9 The overall vibe of the track is much more important than any individual part.

I have selected this point as I believe that historically, I have zoomed in on small elements of a track and lost sight of the 'overall vibe.' (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 14) In doing so, I have become lost in the finer details of the track and lost sense of the main track feel. The cliché would be, 'cannot see the wood for the trees!' or as Mixerman (2011, Pg53) writes:

As the mixer, you must be able to focus on detail to an exceptional degree while never losing sight of the big picture.

Additional Points

There are three other points from Mixerman's (2011) 10 Steps to Better Mixing, which will play a key role in my approach to creating 6 – 8 tracks.

4 Putting everything proportional in a mix is going to make for a shitty mix.

For some reason (and I have no idea why), prior to starting this course. I thought the best approach to mixing my music was to make sure everything was proportional. Up until I read this point, I have faced many internal battles about how I want sections of songs to sound but never been able to achieve it, mainly because I have tried to get everything to be proportional.

10 Just because a part was recorded doesn't mean it needs to be in the mix.

As I write and produce my music, I think it is quite easy to feel like, 'well I have composed that bit so it should be on the track.' When it actually may not be required.

11 Be aggressive! (Oops, that's 11).

Again, prior to starting the course I have shied away from being too aggressive within mixes, scared to perhaps go over the top with parts. However, I will certainly adopt a more confident approach throughout this project.

Benchmarks to Success

The first mark of success in my project will certainly be one of self-gratification, in that I will hopefully have created 6 – 8 tracks which realise my longstanding vision. To explain this in a more practical sense, I will be able to listen back to the track and think yes that is the vibe I wanted to create and hear the elements of the mix correctly.

Through the development section of this course, I found that I could often align my music with a commercial brief; this would suggest an element of commercial viability. A further measure would be that at least one of the tracks is considered for a commercial brief.

Production

To enhance the opportunity of my tracks being used for a commercial brief, I aim to write and produce 6 - 8 stylistically authentic tracks but diverse in terms of vibe and feel.

I feel my strength in writing and producing is working with vocals, guitars, synths, drums and bass. These instruments will form the sound palette for the tracks. In recording live sound, I will pay particular attention to the idea of Chasing the Flame. (Stavrou, M. P., 2003, Pg 46)

Each sound source wants to be a flame. The base of The Flame is at the speaker, and it booms out towards you with intensity and focus. (Stavrou, M. P., 2003, Pg 30)

Tracks

Most of the tracks I will be producing are songs I had written before the start of this course. However, I had encountered arrangement, mixing and recording issues in all of them; I have never been able to feel content that the track I had produced really matched how I wanted the track to sound. I will tackle each track using the knowledge from 'Zen the Art of Mixing' (Mixerman, 2011) and 'Mixing with your Mind' (Stavrou, M. P., 2003)

1) You Don't Know

I had the idea for this song a long time ago but have never been able to settle on the mix and arrangement of the track. I had envisaged the track utilising strings, piano, electric guitars, acoustic guitars, drum, bass and vocals. My plan was to begin the track with piano and strings, introduce crunchy guitars, bass and drums then drop down to an acoustic guitar-based chorus. I had struggled with several points in mixing this track but feel that 'Zen the Art of Mixing' (Mixerman, 2011) has provided solutions.

I encountered problems with managing the piano when other instruments entered. As explained in 'Zen and the Art of Mixing' on page 51 (Mixerman, 2011)

Stereo pianos, for instance, often gobble up space when placed stereo in a mix. Now if the piano is the dominant instrument in the production with little competition, that's a fine treatment. Otherwise, piano is often better placed within the stereo field as a mono source.

Working with this knowledge will help me adjust the mix and situate the piano in the next section. Previously when trying to introduce electric guitars, I had tried to make everything the focal point and the mix just became flat. I now plan to '... consider the focal point and make sure it's placed prominently enough to take on that role. (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 146)

Certainly, with the first chorus, I had a simple four chord idea which I felt should be performed on an acoustic guitar. I had been unsuccessful in trying to have too many instruments fighting for prominence. Mixerman (2011, Pg13) provides guidance in working with acoustic guitars:

If the track derives its overall rhythm from the acoustic guitar, and if the drums are quite simple in their part, the acoustic guitars are most assuredly designed to play a prominent role in the mix.

I think this track may be the most challenging to mix due to the spectrum of instruments and more widely contrasting sections than other material I shall complete. A further point I will bear in mind while completing the mix will be that, '...if the listener notices the mix, then it's not a good mix. (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 83)

2) Fire in My Veins

I wrote the chord progression for this track on an acoustic guitar and in arranging the track I was always concerned that perhaps there were too many bars of music without any vocals i.e., between chorus and following verse. However, the chord progression when performed on a synth, the song tempo and overall arrangement naturally move the song forward. In reading, Mixerman's (2011) comments on page 147, I felt confident I should push ahead with structure of this track:

A great song and arrangement will push towards the song by design, and we want to make sure our mix does everything to enhance both the journey and the payoff alike.

3) Lifelong Friend

Track 3, Lifelong Friend and Track 4, Mountain Bikes were originally one track. However, every time I tried to arrange the track, I felt like there were two quite contrasting vibes and it never sat quite right. So, I am going to produce Lifelong Friend as an acoustic guitar-based rock track.

4) Mountain Bikes

In splitting my original song into two separate songs, I can hopefully produce a much more effective mix:

A great mix is one that brings a production of a great song to its fullest potential by effectively manipulating the listener's emotions and focus, thereby forcing an appropriate and desired physical reaction while simultaneously causing the listener to sing. (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 24)

5) Winter Coat

Winter Coat is also a track I have previously recorded but never felt settled with the overall product. I have struggled with this track in creating contrast and relied simply upon volume to provide it. In arranging the track now, I will explore other areas of contrast but remember, '...these days we don't use much more than about 4db of dynamic range from the loudest to the quietest parts of a mix.' (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 77)

6) These Walls

This is a track which begins with piano but will contrast to a heavy synth bass line and distorted guitars. I will have to pay particular attention to separation here as it is easy for the instruments to become a muddy mess. 'Separation in a mix is a good thing. We strive for it. Separation allows use to hear all the different parts.' (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 133).

7) Secret Promenade

This track is designed to make the listener feel as though they are moving along quickly. To make the listener's journey clear, the balance of the mix will be critical. For example, in the verse, I want the listener to really focus on the lyrics and then in the break section quickly switch to the guitar arpeggio idea. I have referred to a Mixerman's (2011, Pg 85) explanation of directing a listener's attention:

Balance is our most effective tool for directing the listener's attention. If we make the vocal loud, the listener will tend to focus on it.

8) Black Hole

This is a completely new track I have written for the final project. Although my main instrument is guitar, I had previously always struggled to obtain a recorded guitar sound that I was satisfied with. This track is based around crunchy guitar riffs so I will refer to:

Sometimes a single guitar in the centre can be beneficial for a short period, especially if you come out of that treatment to two guitars panned hard. (Mixerman, 2011, Pg 123)

Equipment and Budget

Due to the financial constraints of postgraduate study, I am already funding a significant part of this course which leaves me with very little in terms of recording and production budget. I shall be recording at home using the techniques learned throughout this course into Logic Pro X through a Steinberg interface. I intend to purchase an Aston Spirit vocal mic as my current vocal microphone is subquality and after watching the Mic Shootout (Tilley Education, May 2023) video in earlier in the course, this seems suitable.

A key piece of equipment I would like to explore in the future is the use of a summing mixer, at this point however it is not feasible to obtain one due to costs. I have only ever summed my mixes through the DAW output but as Mixerman (2011, Pg 181) explains, 'Digital summing is wholly inadequate for mixing.

The cost of even a good quality second hand summing mixer is in excess of £1000, however, according to Mixerman (2011, Pg 181), 'it will provide you with a more extended high and low end, wider mixes, more punch and most important of all, more depth.'

Ideally, once I have completed all my tracks and I am happy with the mixes. I do plan to have them mastered by an external house. Mastering ranges from £0 to around £100 per track but it may take some experimentation and suggestions from others to decide who would be the best mastering engineer to use. It is also tempting to try and master my own work but as explained by Mixerman (2011, Pg. 267). 'Well, you can! (Mix your own work) It just won't be any good.

Marketing and Promotion

I am completely aware that my final project is purely based upon the creation of 6 – 8 music tracks and offers little in reference to the marketing and promotion of my products. I have deliberately approached the project in this way. I feel that I will be more confident in marketing the music once I am happy the tracks are at my desired production standard; I am also aware of the time span. I will be working full time while completing this project and really want to ensure my music is the best it can be in that period. To address the time span, I have completed a straightforward Gantt chart based on weekly targets (Appendix A)

I do intend to develop my Instagram page with a new logo and photos of the recording, arranging and production process as I build towards the completion of the tracks. This side of the project will be based on ideas taken from the Week 3 – The Context Mix lectures (Tileyard Education, 2023).

References

Mixerman. (2011) *Zen and the Art of Mixing*. New York: Hal Leonard

Stavrou, M. P. (2003) *Mixing with your Mind: Closely Guarded Secrets of Sound Balance Engineering*. Flux Research

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Appendix A

Time Plan Gantt Chart

