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Introduction

For this assessment, I've been asked to create three commercial tracks by choosing a genre for each track followed by reference songs.

The genres I've chosen were Disco, Pop/Rock and Soul Ballad as I felt that they all had distinguishable aspects that set them apart.

My goal with these three songs was not to make an exact recreation of the reference tracks, but instead to make my interpretation of each genre by combining similar songwriting and production ideas.

Song 1 - Disco

My main objective for this song was to capture the groove from disco and funk music whilst applying modern production elements and techniques.

The reference tracks I chose to base my production on are "Don't Start Now" by Dua Lipa, and "Disco Yes" by Tom Misch. Even though I didn't get the same sound like these songs, I managed to create a blend between the two tracks by using the best elements each one has to offer. This blend will be explained in-depth in the next sections :

Instrumentation

This was probably the track's most important element because this is where the genre can be perceived by the listener- if someone was listening to this song I would like them to say "This is a disco song".

The instruments that give this track its Disco essence are the slap bass, the syncopated funk guitars, the upbeat tempo (which most of the time is around 120bpm), the vocals and the violins.

Even though the sound was developed throughout the years, when the musicians and producers started experimenting and adding more instruments (eg. Giorgio Moroder with the synthesisers), I feel that these 5 elements were the core of Disco music when the genre was introduced in the early 70s.

“In addition to a time signature of 4/4 and a fast tempo, disco music was characterised by the so-called "four on the floor" rhythm style. This is when the bass drum plays on the "on" beats and the hi-hat cymbal plays on the "off" beats” (Estrella, 2019)

Composition and Arrangement

I chose to base my composition and production on the 2 tracks mentioned before, as I felt that these were great examples of disco. Even though they sound and feel different (Dua Lipa’s is a pop-driven song while Tom Misch’s has a Jazz element to it) they are still perceived as disco songs.

After analysing the two tracks I decided how the structure was going to be for the most part - basically a short intro, verse, pre-chorus, "build up" section and “drop” section and then repeat the same sections.

I decided to use predominantly the structure from “Don’t Start Now” as this is a very commercial pop structure.

The song starts with a vinyl crackle and a reversed piano just to give the song some atmosphere, then the classic double clap jumps straight into the next section - which is meant to be a very minimal 8 bar verse. Like the reference track, the only instruments being played are a main vocal, a kick on the first and third beat and a snare with a clap on the second and fourth beat. With these elements, the song already has a sense of melody and rhythm.

The harmonic element comes when the pad is introduced in the pre-chorus followed by the guitars which made the track sound wider.

Then the “build-up” section comes in and this was made with the same type of approach as Dua Lipa’s track by adding a piano and a similar vocal melody. The main purpose of this section is to give the song some space to breathe only for it to explode into an uplifting chorus/drop which is a different concept comparing to her track.

“There needs be a noticeable jump in hype from pre-chorus to chorus.” (Findeisen, 2015)

Ian Kirkpatrick (“Don’t Start Now” producer) wrote an anti-drop section as a chorus instead of going for the explosive type of choruses, while I decided to write a drop similar to Tom Misch which included some guitars licks and added some vocal chops which can also be heard in Kirkpatrick’s production. To keep the second and third chorus/drop interesting and engaging I added syncopated guitars and the violins to make the track sound much bigger in comparison to the first chorus/drop and also to make the track have that disco feel which was mentioned earlier in this assignment.

Effects

One of the most interesting production elements of this song is the development of the reverb on the Vocals- it starts very “dry” and then becomes wetter as we’re leading to the chorus where the vocal chops have a lot of reverb.

This effect was also used as a dynamic tool, as this one is drastically taken out after the first chorus so that we can go back to the verse.

Another interesting effect being used is the Delay on the vocal chops. I found to be a great tool to create a dimension and separation.

Song 2- Pop/Rock

The reference tracks that were chosen for this genre were “Youngblood” by 5 Seconds of Summer and “You Deserve Better” by James Arthur. I felt that these tracks were in the Pop/Rock realm as they are not as aggressive as rock music, but at the same time, they don’t sound just like most pop songs due to their instrumentation and vocal delivery. My aim wasn’t to make the classic Pop/Rock track that we’ve been listening for the past fifty years, but instead to make a song that uses some elements of Pop/Rock and tie them to a modern pop commercial production.

“Early Pop/Rock is a style that took shape in the post-rock & roll era, once the more conservative elements of the record industry had come to terms with the new musical landscape”. (AllMusic, 2019)

Most of the times, a Pop/ Rock song would start with a Riff being followed by the Lead Vocals, Bass and Drums. Just like Rock music, these four elements are the main conductors of the sound of this genre although Pop/Rock pays more attention to production elements in comparison to Punk or Rock music where the driving force of the song is the attitude of the performers playing their instruments.

“You Deserve Better” is a good example of a singer-songwriter type song blended with an amazing pop production, while “Youngblood” has a very contagious chorus due to the attitude of the shouted vocals which is a very common technique used by Rock singers.

Composition and Arrangement

Starting this song was interesting because I came up with different ideas until I was sure of what would be a good way to start. In the end, I decided to keep the guitar lick as my Intro as I felt that it was very memorable.

Based on the composition and production of these two songs, my vision was to make a track that had a big dynamic range between the verse and the chorus. I wanted the production to be a modern blend of samples and real instruments.

I wanted the verses to be very conserved so that the choruses could stand out with their “anthem” feel.

The best instrument that can reflect this idea is the **Main Vocal**.

In the verse, the vocal melody was written to be very soft and not invasive. As we’re listening to it, we notice that it’s getting lower in pitch while it’s being followed by the sub-bass in the Pre-Chorus.

The idea behind this was to make the listener think that this song had a “club” feel similar to “You Deserve Better”, but then the vocal changes its tonality again when the Chorus comes in.

Not only do the vocals change but also the production, as this is very different from the other sections which change the atmosphere of the song. I tried to make this section more realistic for the percussive instruments by using Studio Drummer from Native Instruments. I would change the velocity on the drums to try and capture a “real feel”.

The guitars and bass also have a distinct sound in this section as they sound very punchy while keeping the bounce felt in the previous sections.

Production

Continuing on the guitar and bass, I used amp emulations to try and achieve a similar sound to other rock songs. For the guitars effects, I used a Flanger, Chorus and Distortion on both of the double-tracked guitars and panned them hard left and hard right, which was a technique used a lot in Rock productions to create a big space in the mix and also to add a feeling of being in an arena which was popularised in the late 70s by bands like Queen, Journey, Bon Jovi, etc.

For the bass I duplicated the track and added a talk wah which is being automated by an LFO to mimic the sound of a Talk Box. I felt that this sound gave a lot of character to the Chorus. (see in Fig.1)

In terms of Vocal production, I didn't do anything drastic to alter it other than subtractive Eq and some light compression so we could hear the dynamics of the vocals more prominently without destroying them.

Compared to the other songs I did in the assessment, this song was probably the one where I decided to be more experimental with the sound design. Even though I wanted the song to sound like Pop/Rock, I might have been too ambitious with blending modern pop production with rock elements.

Song 3- Soul Ballad

Ballads have been around for many centuries and have been written in many different genres becoming “the pop form that has best expressed a public mood or emotion” (Frith, 2019)

In the 60s, Ray Charles was the pioneer in Soul ballads, setting up the stage for many singer-songwriters in following decades.

I took a lot of inspiration particularly from the two referenced tracks which were “Best Part” by Daniel Caesar ft. H.E.R. and “If You Leave Me Now” by Charlie Puth ft. Boyz II Men. Not only have they given me the guidance for my song but also the vision of how I wanted it to sound.

My objective was to make a soul ballad that had the same feeling as “Best Part” in fusion with Boyz II Men’s backing vocals, which these were very prominent in the late 80s/early 90s.

Composition and Arrangement

Vocal Arrangement

The first step before recording the song was to ask one of my female friends at Tileyard to sing on this track. I felt that her vocal would suit flawlessly this type of track.

Then we decided to take on a similar approach as “Best Part” where the female singer begins the track and carries it out until the first Chorus when the male joins in by harmonising the lead Vocals and then his vocals take the lead part in the second verse.

After the second chorus, there’s multiple vocals singing and each vocal was harmonised and then it was panned differently so they can all have a place in the mix without stepping on each other. The only vocal which was left in the centre of the mix was

the Low harmony because it has more “body” comparing to the other ones that sound airier. (see in Fig.2).

Harmony

Comparing to the other two tracks I produced, this is the track where I really delved into harmony (*see chord progression in Appendix A*)

I felt that I had the opportunity to do it since the song was very simple in its instrumentation.

I used specific harmony techniques which can be heard in both reference tracks, as well as mine. The reason why I used these techniques was to create different types of tension throughout the song without the need of production elements (eg. risers).

One of the techniques I used was **borrowed chords** which means that it's "a chord that is borrowed from another mode. It can be from a Greek Mode or from a Parallel Mode" (Simplifying Theory, 2019). This can be heard in the Chorus section, where the key of the song is D major but instead of playing A7 as my fifth degree chord (in the major scale), I played Am7 which comes from D parallel minor scale.

By harmonising this parallel minor, our fifth degree chord now becomes a minor chord (*see Parallel Major and Minor in Appendix B*)

This is only one of the many borrowed chords I used in this song.

Another harmonic technique that was used was **modulation** between the chorus and the bridge/middle 8 section.

“Modulations, commonly known as key changes, can help you create drama at key moments in your songs”. (Pop Grammar, 2019)

I decided to change the song's key from D to F to “brighten up the intensity” of the song (Mulholland and Hojnacki, 2013).

Effects/ Sound Design

Both of the referenced songs are a representation of a live performance even though they weren't recorded in one take. Based on these, I intended to capture the same organic feel and apply it in my song one of the challenges of obtaining this sound was where to sit the vocals in the track.

With the use of panning and reverb, I managed to create a homogenous sound where all the vocals and the backing vocals have their own space.

The reverbs that I used were mainly synthetic digital reverbs as I felt this suited the song the best.

"Because we tend to be conditioned by the music we grew up with, synthetic digital reverb and plate reverb (either real, modelled, or convolution sampled) are still the first choices for most pop work" (White, 2006)

I decided that the two main vocals should be in the same type of room reverb with a short decay so it feels like they're in the same space in real life and they're pretty close to the listener (see Fig.3).

"The vocal is less wet and more upfront and intimate which also makes the effect less obvious" (Owsinski, 2017)

When they're singing at the same time I panned one slightly to the left and the other to the right just so they don't clash with each other (see Fig.4)

For the backing vocals, I thought it would sound more interesting if they had a different type of reverb with different values to add more depth to the sonics of the song (see Fig.5)

This track was probably the most peculiar one that I've done for this assessment. The reason for this is because I tried to keep the song very minimal throughout its structure so I could let the vocals and the songwriting outshine the production. Even though I always feel that this should always be the key element of a commercial song, in this one, the song is mainly about the relationship between the female and the male vocals. The production was just to add texture.

Conclusion

In this section, I will give a brief and honest opinion on this whole experience.

Although I feel very happy and proud of these songs, I do believe that are certain aspects that could've been improved.

Some of the issues I've made were the fact that all my songs had guitars and the same singer. This is because they are the main instruments that I use for my productions and I feel very comfortable in using them. I still think that I could've substituted some guitar parts for another instrument like a lead synth for example or had another male singer.

Another concern I've encountered was the fact that I didn't use a lot of real instruments.

The virtual instruments that were used were very good, but I believe that the songs could've sounded better with real instruments and real musicians.

The last problem is related to mixing. Even though we weren't asked to mix and master our tracks to a professional standard, I conclude that my mixing skills need a lot of

improvement. This is something that I'll definitely work on throughout this year and hopefully, I'll have a better understanding of this subject.

Regardless of all the negative aspects, I considered this assignment to be very interesting.

Not only it was challenging, but it was also gratifying to make songs in a short time frame -ever since the assignment was announced.

I found it to be a great exercise, not just to study productions from other people but also an incentive to finish songs which is something I've always struggled with- making me a better producer than what I was before this assignment.

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Appendices

Appendix A- “Don’t think I’ve Had Enough” Chord Progression

Verse - Am7 | Gmaj7 | Dm7 | Cmaj7

Pre Chorus - Am7| Gmaj7| Bbmaj7| Cmaj7

Chorus- Dmaj7 | Am7 | Gmaj7 | Bbmaj7 - the same chords as “Best Part”

Bridge/ Middle 8- Fmaj7 | Gmaj7 | Bbmaj7| C7 | Fmaj7 | Gmaj7 | Bbmaj7| Ebmaj7 |

Appendix B - D *Parallel Major and Minor*

D Major: D - E - F# - G - A - B - C#

D minor: D - E - F - G - A - Bb - C

Fig.1- Talk Bass Sound design



Fig. 2- Panning of Vocal Harmonies



Fig. 3- Main Vocals Room Reverb



Fig 4- Panning of the Vocals in Chorus 2

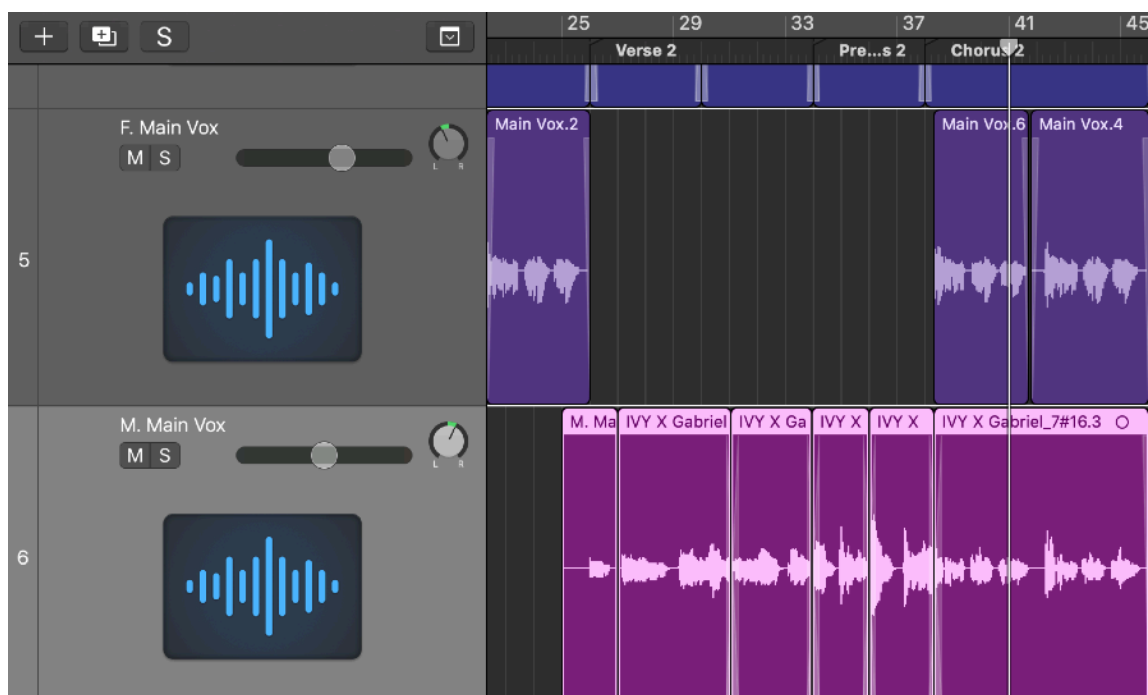


Fig.5- Backing Vocals Reverb

