

In this essay I will outline three tracks I produced in three different commercial genres. Per track, I will note a few characteristics of its genre, I will explain how I used these in my own productions, and I will reflect on the creative process.

DIFFERENT – K-POP

K-pop's genre characteristics are hard to identify, as generally the songs are a combination of a multitude of different genres. Within one song, the production of a K-pop release can go from a trap influenced verse, over Arabic influenced instruments, to an EDM break-down or chorus. It has been described as entertaining music that fuses different genres (Mukasa, 2011). This hybridisation, although very apparent in this genre, might not be exclusive to Korean music however, as journalist Peter Robinson states he notices a movement of successful artist who are post-genre, who 'represent a cross-pollination' of styles (Robinson, 2016). Therefore, perhaps K-pop's mixture of influences might just be the way commercial pop music is moving forward, and just exemplified in the K-pop style.

K-pop is generally sung in Korean, but characteristic is the use of English phrases or words, often 'nonsense' words, or vowels, that act as hooks for the listeners. Arguably, to appeal to a western market, or perhaps because of the increasing number of western songwriters and producers who are creating the songs (Lindvall, 2011).

K-pop generally sounds energetic and 'hyper', has a lot of melodic changes and different parts, to fit all the team members of the often large groups. The bpm range in K-pop varies quite a bit, with some songs at 80, and other close to 200. The productions often have very well-balanced mixes and exhibit a 'glossy' finish.

The key signature of K-pop songs are quite varied, ranging from classic minor or major scales to using modes, and the songs often exhibit extended chords or dominant chords, to give a rich flavour to the harmonic elements of the song, often R&B influenced progressions (Dylan Tallchief, 2020).

The song structure again varies quite a bit from song to song but will often look like this:

intro	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	Post-chorus	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	Post-chorus	bridge	chorus	Post-chorus	outro
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A classic modern pop structure. Some songs will not have a pre-chorus, yet others will add an additional hook section.

For my specific song, certain references were listed, as it was a live industry brief. The song was produced and written as a submission for girl group Weeekly. Upon listening to their past releases 'Zig Zag' and 'Tag Me' I noticed a wide range of influences, such as American pop-rock, R&B, trap and EDM (Weeekly, 2020). They also listed Annie-Marie's 'Birthday' as a reference and Taylor Swift's 'ME!'.

Based on the Anne-Marie and Taylor Swift references, I chose to use a classic pop chord progression and steer away from extended chords or dominants, to fit the brief. I decided on a bpm of 150, as this was both similar to their previous releases and the Anne-Marie track. This bpm also fits the energetic feel many of the K-pop songs exhibit.

The hybridisation of genres becomes clear in many aspects of my production. Firstly, in the verses, where the drums are heavily influenced by trap music and by the sonic style of SOPHIE and other PC music producers. This is actually a direct reference from the 'Birthday' track (Anne-Marie, 2020), supporting the previous argument that not only K-pop songs borrow from other genres but even commercial pop artist like Anne-Marie are taking influence from other (underground) genres (Robinson, 2016). Other parts of the song that exhibit the influence of other styles are the pre-chorus, where the marching band drums are hip-hop influenced, much like in the Taylor Swift track (Swift, 2019), and the chorus has a distorted guitar part, mainly because I wanted to bring in an element of Weeekly's past releases (Weeekly, 2020), so their songs wouldn't sound too different. However, I side-chained all the harmonic parts of the chorus, which is more in line with EDM music. At first the post-chorus had a clear American pop-rock backbeat, but I felt like it needed an additional rhythm to fit in more with the other parts of the production so the track wouldn't lose any energy. There are some live drum samples mixed in here, adding to an overall live drum feel in this section, compared to the other parts of the song.

The bridge is heavily carried by trap brass, something I found is used often in K-pop songs, for example in the currently successful 'How You Like That' by girl group Blackpink (Blackpink, 2020).

As for song structure, me and the songwriters chose to go for the abovementioned pattern, even though the Anne-Marie and Taylor Swift songs do not have a post-chorus, I decided to

add one to allow for as much different parts as possible as the group consist of seven members. This also allowed space for an English 'nonsense' hook to appeal to non-Korean listeners, one of the K-pop characteristics (Mukasa, 2011).

I enjoyed producing and writing this song as I felt a lot of freedom by mixing the genres and taking influence from a variety of styles. I personally really enjoy listening to SOPHIE and PC music, so it was nice to be able to produce something like this but within a more contemporary pop frame. One of the parts I struggled with the most was the vocal production. Vocals in K-pop always sound very 'clear' and enjoyable to listen to, although the singers often have very nasal tones. During the recording process, I told the singer to sing quite nasally, to fit the style of the genre, but it turned out that on the recording, this sounded a little too nasal, losing important warmth in the tonality. That was a great learning curve. I also struggled quite a bit with the tuning, using Melodyne, as I am not very harmony inclined, so small pitch differences are often hard to hear, yet other musicians in my surroundings where able to pick up on these mistakes so I could alter them. Next time, I think I will definitely spend more time during the recording process to try and figure out the right tone for the singer, which will make the production process easier.

Another part I struggled with, not just in this specific production, but generally, is mixing. K-pop requires a very 'clean' and balanced mix, with a 'glossy' finish. There is no DIY element in K-pop, the mix and final product has been created with commercial intent, therefore has a high production standard and is all high-fidelity. This balancing of parts on that professional level is new to me and I struggled getting everything to sound clear, especially mixing the vocals into the track. Next time I will probably watch a few more tutorials on YouTube on essential vocal mixing tips (Make Pop Music, 2019), but I suppose it also just comes with practice.

WORK IT – REGGAETON

The obvious, most recognizable characteristic of reggaeton is its drum rhythm. Notably, this rhythm, called 'dembow', originated in Jamaica's dancehall scene. When Jamaicans then emigrated to different countries in Latin America, they took this rhythm and lyrical flow with

them and one of the breakaways of this would then become what we now know as reggaeton (Donohue, ND).

Reggaeton in itself is already a hybrid genre, as it is a mixture of Jamaican dancehall rhythms, borrowed from reggae, Latin merengue, plena, bomba and occasionally salsa (Ilich, 2018).

It blends electronic dance music, 808 drumbeats, tropical sounding percussion (timbales) (Takmakova, 2019) and is characterised by a kick drum that carries a steady 4/4 rhythm, accompanied by snares in a 3+3+2 pattern (Marshall, 2008, p. 149).

Generally, reggaeton is performed as a rap in Spanish or Spanglish, using a hip-hop style performance, but it can also be sung (Ilich, 2018).

For my reference tracks, I chose recent commercially successful tracks that use elements of the reggaeton characteristics. 'Con Altura', by Rosalía, J Balvin and El Guincho uses a simplified version of the classic dembow rhythm, mainly the kick and snare pattern and minimal percussion elements. The track is led by a sped up vocal sample that plays almost throughout the whole song, as the lead harmonic element. The track does not have a lot of different harmonic elements playing (Rosalía, 2019).

The second guide track I chose was 'Solita' by Kali Uchis. I really liked the structure of it, as it has a continued feel of building towards something, and the classic reggaeton beat only comes in in the post-chorus. I was also attracted to the synths with their phased chorus effect feel.

I would say that reggaeton mixes are generally quite bass heavy, as the kick is very accentuated, and it is usually played between 80bpm to 100bpm.

Based on the Rosalía guide track, I used a pitched vocal sample as one of the lead harmonic elements, as this would be in line with what is commercially successful. However, I felt that this sample wasn't enough to carry the song, so I found another rhythmic brass loop that accentuated a specific groove I desired and used this as the second lead harmonic element. I balance between the two throughout the production but in some parts they also nicely fit together. The guide tracks have a bpm range between 93 and 98, so I chose a moderate 97bpm, as I felt like the track needed to be more on the fast side to make sure the topline didn't drag too much, and this is in line with the reggaeton characteristics.

In reggaeton the emphasis is more on the drums and groove than the synths, so I used minimal synths that play full chords and mainly use single note parts that add to the groove

and fill out the frequency spectrum. As for the sonics of this, I tried to emulate the reverb-rich chorus feel like the synths in ‘Solita’ (Uchis, 2019).

For the structure I was inspired by both reference tracks. They both follow a classic verse – chorus structure, but ‘Con Altura’ features an intro and pre-chorus, while ‘Solita’ features a post-chorus. Therefore, I decided on the following structure:

intro	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	Post-chorus	bridge	chorus	Post-chorus
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This would allow me to write as many hooks as possible with commercial intent, and since current mainstream reggaeton often has various different artists on one track, this would open up the ability for this track to have many artists too. I was inspired by the production structure in ‘Solita’ and I tried to emulate the idea that all the parts are building towards a ‘drop’ where the full reggaeton beat comes in, which happens in the second verse. Much like in ‘Con Altura’ I used minimal percussion but focused mainly on the kick and the snare. The hats in the verses are actually playing a UK drill pattern, as I felt like these grooves complement each other.

For the topline in ‘Con Altura’, Rosalía explained that she was inspired by a classic Daddy Yankee style of delivering a vocal performance that feels like rapping but is actually melodic (The New York Times, 2019). As one of the characteristics in reggaeton is the rap vocal performance, I really wanted to emulate this, mainly in the second verse, where the full effect of the groove can be felt.

I personally enjoyed producing this reggaeton track. This was my first time producing in this genre and I think it turned out quite successfully. I am very happy with the chorus melody that in my opinion has a classic reggaeton ‘braggadocious’ vibe in the delivery.

It took me a while to find the right balance between the drums, bass and synths, but ended up having the drums as the loudest parts, supported by the bass, and then the synths at a lower level in the mix. I feel like this is in line with how reggaeton is generally mixed, especially based off the Rosalía reference track.

I like the build-up towards the drop in the second verse, as I feel like this is an element that is going to make the listener want to hear it again, and it puts the track into a slightly off-centre part of the commercial spectrum, much like 'Solita'.

Vocal production seemed to be the hardest part of the process again. Even though this time I was recording my own voice, I struggle mainly with tuning and timing the vocals. I used Antares Auto-Tune on the vocals as this is in line with commercial song mixes, especially for Rosalía, who uses it stylistically. Again, mixing the vocals into the track proved a hard task, although I personally think the end product is perfectly suitable as a demo.

After recording I also realised this track doesn't entirely suit my voice or style so next time, I will make sure I choose a vocalist who could possibly lay down a better reggaeton performance. Overall, I am quite happy with the result.

CALABASAS– POP/R&B

The characteristics for this one are slightly hard to define, as it pertains to two genres that are merged together, forming a hybrid that is currently popular and charting: R&B influenced commercial pop music.

The definition of pop music is adaptable, as the sound that is identified as pop music is continually changing. It generally pertains to what is popular on the music charts, however, not all popular music is necessarily pop music. The term is mainly used to refer to music that stems from the rock and roll revolution in the 1950's and music that is most accessible to a wide audience of the urban middle class. Most notable to pop music is its classic verse – chorus-based structure (Lamb, 2018).

Pop music is also known to borrow and incorporate elements from other genres and styles such as R&B.

Contemporary or progressive R&B is a genre that combines rhythm & blues with elements of soul, hip-hop, electronic music and funk. It may include samples or influences of hip-hop and rap, dance and also production elements found in pop, euro-pop, folk country music or alternative genres (Monroe, 2020).

When I listen to contemporary R&B pop, I mainly think of recognisable drum machine sounds (eg. Roland TR-909, TR-808), smooth R&B chord progressions that use extended chords and

close harmonies, and a melismatic vocal topline and performance, for example '34+35' by Ariana Grande (Grande, 2020). When it comes to instrumentation, jazz organs and electric pianos come to mind, as well as trap hats, analogue drums, guitar, bass and 808 bass sounds. I see it as a mixture of analogue sounds and digital textures.

I chose 'Thank U, Next' by Ariana Grande as my contemporary R&B guide track, as it encompasses all the before mentioned characteristics, and 'Close to Me' by Ellie Goulding, Swae Lee and Diplo as this is a more pop leaning song that still has a lot of R&B influences, such as the rap parts and the drums. Because the genre spectrum is so wide, again the bpm can vary a lot, 'Thank U, Next' has a moderate bpm of 107, while 'Close to Me' is faster at 144bpm.

One of the main characteristics of this genre that I incorporated in my track are the drums. I chose to go for a combination of live and electronic drum samples to get the contemporary R&B sound. I layered trap snares with live ones, used trap hats and patterns and combined this with both live and electronic R&B percussion loops to create that hybrid sound that is both modern and soulful. Although not part of my guide tracks, I used some drum elements from other pop R&B tracks too. Mainly the percussion in the verses, which is inspired by 'Better Now' by Post Malone (Malone, 2018) and the sample of crickets you can hear in the second verse, inspired by 'Positions' by Ariana Grande (Grande, 2020). I decided to do this as I felt this would bring an extra element of relevance and individuality to the tracks, as both songs were recently very successful.

Just like in 'Thank U, Next', I used my own voice as a rhythmic instrument by shouting words like 'hey' and 'yo' into the microphone, putting a high cut filter on it and mixing it in as part of the percussion in the chorus (Grande, 2020). This again adds to the more analogue feel of the track. I decided to take this a step further and record a few melodic phrases on 'ooh' and mix them into the verse and chorus, as part of the harmonic elements of the production.

The harmonic information stays roughly the same throughout the song, much like in the references. The main synth is one that emulates an electric piano, playing a mixture of standard triads and extended chords, again, in line with characteristics of this genre. I use a plucked rhythm in many of the sections, as this was inspired by the Ellie Goulding guide track, and it worked well to balance out the rhythms in the track and keep the movement going (Goulding, 2020).

I started writing the production with a bpm around 130, yet as I wrote the topline and came up with the catchy parts I felt like this tempo was too slow for it to work so I sped it up to 150bpm.

While I was making this, I was listening a lot to SZA's 'Hit Different' (SZA, 2020). and since this is a contemporary R&B track, I decided to try a similar structure to hers (having a chorus in the beginning). My structure is:

Intro/hook	chorus	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	hook	verse	Pre-chorus	chorus	hook	outro
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Since it starts with the chorus, I didn't need a bridge, but I did add an additional hook to create some space for the listener between sections.

I struggled quite a bit with this production. Even though this is my preferred genre to produce, for the longest time I felt like the chorus wasn't impactful enough and I couldn't figure out if it was an issue with the layers, the rhythm or the sounds.

Firstly, the track was meant to be more guitar driven like in Rosalía's 'Dolerme' (Rosalía, 2020) and I recorded my housemate playing two different guitars, first through a lead into the interface, and then also with a classic guitar mic setup (one dynamic mic by the body and one by the neck), but I ended up only using the guitar in the outro as I wasn't very happy with the sonics of the takes. It was my first time recording a guitar, so I was disappointed I didn't like the results, especially because it was time consuming, but I'm still very happy with the learning experience and with just having some guitar in the outro. I think it sounds great there. Next time I will listen more carefully during recording that all the rhythms are played correctly and that no other strings are resonating when they shouldn't (which was the main issue). I am very happy with the topline and song structure and I think the melodies work really well for this genre.

Overall, I really enjoyed producing these tracks, as this was very new to me. I had worked on K-pop before, but not as the sole producer, and I had never made reggaeton even though I had always wanted to. I think my biggest takeaway from the whole process is that I want to

practice and study vocal production more, as this is often the part that I struggled with the most, yet it is so important in commercial music. I am happy with the results, even though on some levels the tracks aren't fully polished, but I'm more content with the learning experience and the new things I was able to try such as recording an acoustic guitar or even producing in a totally different genre.

Final word count: 3321.

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