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Track Analysis:

Country Pop: “*Rescue Me*” (2020) – Chris Young

Film Score: “*The Ecstasy of Gold*” (1966) – Ennio Morricone

House: “*These Are Just Places To Me Now*” (2019) - Folamour

Music Production Focus: *Using the Guitar as a Starting Point and Song writing Tool*

Introduction

Of all the instruments one could opt for in music production, the guitar is one of the most versatile yet challenging to incorporate successfully into a song's anatomy. However, the guitar is my preference as a starting point in terms of writing, composing and producing music. Therefore, I wanted to create a series of tracks which all utilise the guitar in some shape or form, be it a distorted, or clean electric, or a melancholic sounding plucked classical or acoustic. To demonstrate the guitar as a production/instrumental tool which works well across all 3 genres, I would need to firstly examine its position (or juxtaposition) within 3 different reference tracks. I will endeavour to explain how the instrument works in conjunction with other instrumentation in the following contexts within these arrangements: **key signature & mode, harmony, arrangement, and lastly use of EQ, compression and effects in the mix process.** All these elements are equally important to all recordings, but essentially, it's the methods of using these techniques that differs widely across different genres.

Key Signature and Mode

With regards to the reference track *Rescue Me* (Young, 2020), although in the key of E Major, the song feels as though it carries a sad mood, partly due to the lyrical content, but also because the guitarist is using the minor pentatonic scale over the chord progression. The chords are A, E, C#m, B, therefore the E Major Ionian mode will work nicely as will the major pentatonic scale, but in this case the acoustic guitarist chooses to use C#m pentatonic, since the chord progression is moving towards the C# minor chord. Therefore, C#m Aeolian mode could also work here, but that would be too technical for this type of Country Pop song, and would make it less appropriate for the genre, and less radio friendly.

Since *Rescue Me* starts on the IV, then the tonic, this lends itself well to minor pentatonic as the starting point is not the 'root chord' of the key signature. The alternative approach to this would've been to play 'chord-scales', which utilises the scale borrowed from each chord in the sequence. This is partly what is going on in *Second Chance*, whereby I have literally

played an inversion of the chord that I'm playing over in the chord sequence, to use as my riff.

Harmony in Different Genres

Although this would seem quite obvious, nowadays, music has become even more simplistic than what Warburton is suggesting, especially as songs are getting even shorter. However, even the more complex of House, Country Pop and Film tunes have their fair share of simplicity where harmony is concerned. The idea of including anything other than a minor 3rd, major 3rd, perfect 4th or perfect 5th harmony in a Country Pop song would seem preposterous. There is more stimulating harmony taking place in House music these days, but nothing more adventurous than a minor 7th/9th or major 7th/9th. Warburton (1979) explains the use of melody and harmony in music and how it should be structured to make musical sense when two or more instruments sound together:

“Tonality is the feeling of relationship that exists between musical sounds, both melodic and harmonic, and it is therefore the foundation of Melody and Harmony. If sounds had no ordered relationship to each other music would sound formless and nonsensical” (Warburton, 1979 p.1).

Therefore, it is the Film score genre that really benefits from a more unconventional use of harmony, mainly to convey the complex nature of a horror scene, or the indelible characteristic of a love scene which requires more depth and character than just a major or minor triad. Within all of the reference tracks though, (especially *Rescue Me*) the guitar plays an essential role in terms of harmonic content, mainly as a lead instrument and other times as a rhythmic support mechanism. Whereas, in *Ecstasy of Gold* it can also play a significant role in the emotional context of the score as Astley-Brown (2017) suggests:

“Filmmaking is first and foremost ‘storytelling and emotion’. Guitar can augment the emotional or psychological dimension of music for film if it is applied carefully and tastefully” (musicradar.com, 2017).

This characteristic is quite evident in the film scores of Morricone, however, this use of the guitar was not applied to this scene of the film. Therefore, Morricone chose to use the guitar

for an alternative purpose, in this case for harmonic build and tension. Although *Ecstasy Of Gold* is not the main theme of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Leone, 1966), it does feature some leitmotifs from the title track of the film. For instance, the bells, the percussion, the strings, and of course a lead operatic Italian vocalist (Edda Dell'Orso) carrying the main melody.

Running from the opening scene, then again repeated at the closure of the piece, my acoustic guitar is reliant upon the moving image and does so in an implied harmonic fashion. This is achieved by chordal tones produced through the acoustic guitars arpeggiated ornamentation, which delineate the harmonic structure of the opening segment within the score. The only issue encountered here, was that the moving image is ever changing, it builds from an almost stand still position, to a livelier spritely movement, as the actor Eli Wallach begins to jog, leap and skip across the gravestones. There are only two options to overcome this, one is to accelerate the tempo, the other is to increase the number of notes played, using diminution.

The House reference track *These Are Just Places To Me Now* (Folamour, 2019), demonstrates yet another functional harmonic purpose for the guitar. Since the guitar parts have a harmonic influence on other instruments in the mix, the guitar maintains its role as a support and not a lead instrument. The vocals are going to take a lead role here (as they often do), and therefore the harmony between the guitar and vocals needs to be congenial at least. However, both the guitar and vocals have been heavily sampled. The guitar is not a long-lasting performance, it is a short phrase that has been comped and then 'copied and pasted', using the DAW editor. Like-wise with the vocals, they have been spliced, turned into a repetitive loop for the intro, which provides a hook for the song. This technique is very typical of the house genre, and is characteristic that dates back to the early part of the 20th century in the design of the first sampler called the Rhythmicon (Leon Theremin, 1930).

Furthermore, in *Rescue Me*, the electric guitar is harmonising with the piano and strings, utilising the root notes in between the two, therefore providing a 'harmonic bridge' between the piano and the strings, as well as the lead vocals. Whereas, in *Ecstasy of Gold*, the guitar plays a more subtle role in terms of harmony, playing an ostinato riff which builds the song to a climactic ending. However, Folamour uses the guitar in the intro, and then utilises its quality to build tension in the mix, providing a harmonic antiphonal part which plays against the backdrop of the busy hi-hats, claps, and percussion and eventually locks into the kick

drum pattern. This musical dance and interaction between the pitched and percussive instruments build tension harmonically before the vocal enters in the verse, to retain the listener's attention.

Use of EQ, Compression and Effects

It could be argued that the same recording and engineering techniques have been applied in all three circumstances for all the reference tracks. For instance, all recordings have utilised multitrack recording techniques, (made possible and invented by Les Paul in 1945), all have used reverb or some form of echo to simulate space, and all have utilised EQ and compression, either on the way in or in post-production. Let's firstly diagnose the film score *Ecstasy of Gold*, whereby the recording was captured in 1966, and therefore the technology would not allow for a high-definition sound.

The recording has since undergone re-mixing and re-mastering and general clean-up of any harsh artifacts. The song was released in both mono and stereo, and later re-mastered for VHS, and again in the modern era for DVD/Blu Ray in 5.1 surround. However, there's one thing that has not changed since its release, and that is our perception of the frequency spectrum when listening on different playback devices. Alek Palmersmith (2020) refers to this notion when discussing the research made by Fletcher and Munson, and their discovery of the frequency spectrum:

“As Harvey Fletcher and Wilden Munson discovered in their research in the 1930's, we're much more sensitive to upper midrange frequencies (about 2k to 5k), compared to the lows and highs. To keep it simple, break up the frequency spectrum into four bands, as you find on many EQ designs: Low, Low Mid, High Mid, High” (2020, p.4)

In the context of House and Country Pop music, the bass drum character is the most fundamental of all of the instruments. It can make a difference between the song holding up and driving the low end, or it can seem weak and incoherent, and therefore the rhythm section falls apart. To tackle this, I decided to stack the bass drum and layer it from three different samples (low, mid and high samples to represent the thump, the punch and the transient). All samples were different from each other, but nevertheless work well, as long as the EQ and balance are used effectively. In addition, the snare drum is so fundamental to House and Country Pop, since the backbeats 2 and 4 rely on it so profoundly.

The same process applies to all other instruments and samples, as evident in the reference tracks. When recording *Ecstasy of Gold*, it's more than likely that mic position and mic choice were the main contributing factors to the overall tonal characteristics of the groups of instruments. Morricone will have captured the orchestral parts with a stereo pair or a Decca tree configuration, as well as combination of spot mics. Whereas I am using sampled instruments for my score, and even though they have been recorded in a controlled environment, the EQ and compression must still be applied carefully so that the score carries an even distribution of frequency content.

“Music that should be danceable requires more focus on the highs and lows of the beat, because if the midrange instruments attracted too much attention, you would lose the hypnotizing rhythm. For intimate sounding music, too much build-up in the upper midrange is a big no-no, as this will make it sound agitated” (Oltheten, 2018 p.46).

Whilst I agree with Oltheten's theory, EQ and compression are oftentimes overused, and the resulting mix can leave the song feeling laboured and inappropriate for that specific genre. For instance, listeners of House music expect a 'big low-end punch', since it would be produced for a club situation, but it still needs to translate on smaller speakers. There are several techniques that Folamour employed to ensure the gain staging is properly executed within the mixing and mastering processes. Firstly, EQ and compression has been applied judiciously across individual tracks. Moreover, the energy is tangible in the mix, it sounds big and open, yet controlled. You don't get ear fatigue when listening to it at louder volumes, which means that it must have been tested on larger main monitors or club speakers. Louder volumes can reveal more about the bass frequencies and the low end, which you cannot monitor at lower volumes, say, anything below 85 dB.

The acoustic guitar can be especially problematic when it comes to EQ and general balance in a mix. The drums and acoustic guitar often clash as they share some of the same frequencies, particularly the high end of the snare, the hi-hats and cymbals. To eradicate this problem, I made sure to EQ the two in relation to each other, (not in isolation), and then again in the context of the whole mix, for all of my tracks. Sarafin (2020) explains the notion of making the drums and the acoustic work together in a mix without getting in the way of each other:

“If the purpose of the guitar is to offer rhythmic high frequency information, you can once again reduce the overall body of the guitar. You can also boost the upper midrange and high end in an attempt to make the guitar strumming more aggressive. Either way this sort of treatment will allow you to more easily tuck the guitar into a dense mix” (p. 130).

I found that since my guitar was recorded dry and with a condenser microphone, the artefacts that are picked up (low end rumble and pops/clicks) needed to be taken out without sacrificing the body and the high frequency content of the instrument. Therefore, although Sarafin suggests boosting the high end, I’d argue that its equally as important not to be too aggressive with this frequency, as it can lead to ear fatigue. Especially around 4 -7 kHz, in which the human ear becomes increasingly more sensitive.

Arrangement

As a producer, it important to understand how all instruments interact with each other over the course of the song that makes a difference to the whole arrangement. Therefore, you might ask yourself, why is the guitar included in almost all popular music genres? Could another instrument take its place, and still carry the same character for that particular genre? To fully appreciate this, I analysed how *Rescue Me* was arranged. Firstly, it was recorded in Nashville and utilises a lot of pop music instruments as well as samples, it can be considered a typical Country Pop track. However, the instrumentation used in the song is as follows: Drums, Bass Guitar, Lead Guitar, Resonator Guitar, Acoustic Guitar, Keyboards, Pedal-Steel Guitar, Piano, Lead Vocals, Background Vocals, Drum Samples, particularly snare and bass drum. Guitars have been D.I’d and amp’d, there is a clear use of crunch and mild distortion setting on electric the guitar amps, whilst chorusing and short reverbs are used on the clean acoustic guitars to complement one another. The piano and the keyboards play a key role here to bridge the gap in the arrangement, between the bass and the acoustic guitars. This production technique has been used exceptionally well, especially when mixing and mastering the song. Therefore, the guitar was used not only because its conventional to do so, but it fills the gap in the sonic character between all of the other instruments.

Another arrangement technique I would like to address is how *Ecstasy of Gold* was edited into the penultimate scene of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (d. Sergio Leone). During this scene, Tuco (played by Eli Wallach), is searching for a gravestone marked “Arch

Stanton” which contains \$200,000 in gold coins. However firstly, the character needs to find the gravestone amongst the many thousands that are scattered around the graveyard. It’s like searching for a needle in a haystack! Therefore, the music had to serve this purpose, to build the tension as he searches frantically, but also the arrangement serves as an ‘optimistic’ and ‘uplifting’ mood, since the audience knows that he can find the gold, and it’s only a question of time. Mervyn and Forde (2016) discuss the intention behind *Ecstasy of Gold* in relation to the film and the scene itself:

“L’estasi dell’oro was conceived as an ambitious audio-visual project: Morricone was asked to compose a self-sufficient and structurally unified piece while using implicit sync points (sincroni impliciti) to bind it to the movie images”

When analysing the score of this song, it is clear to see how the arrangement has played a key role in the exposition, development and recapitulation within the soundtrack. It is evident how Morricone was using the sync points to try to express the feeling and mood of the protagonist, re-enforcing the narrative in this scene. “An explicit sync point is the exact and unambiguous correspondence between a filmic and a sonic/musical event: at times the music ‘doubles’ the sound by superimposition and imitates it. An implicit sync point is a more subtle conjunction: this category comprises changes in timbre, harmony, rhythm and dynamics” (Mervyn & Forde 2016, p. 290). The main instruments that carry the narrative here which run throughout all other songs in the soundtrack is the piano and the guitar. In this case the piano starts by playing an arpeggio which is designed to reference the state of mind of the protagonist. In *Il Brutto*, the guitar would now play the lead role instead of the piano since the guitar gives a more ‘earthy’ sound characteristic, this would benefit the scene since the graveyard itself is the very foundation of the earth. Moreover, the guitar leading the piece would reinforce this hypothesis, especially when the timbre of the instrument and the way it is treated in the mix is taken into consideration.

Naturally though, in all of my tracks I wanted to support the guitar ideas within the arrangement by incorporating celli, violas and violins, woodwinds, brass, percussion or using synths, keyboards, bass and electric guitars, as well as backing vocals to allow for frequency distribution, downstream during the mixdown/mastering phase. Therefore, what do we really consider when building an arrangement in these genres? It is not just a question of what the

instruments play, it is also about ‘when’ the instruments play, and what that can provide for the syncopation of the song.

Conclusion

If I had the opportunity again, I would have experimented with more radical use of background vocals in *Second Chance*, such as singing counter melodies, adlibs and other figures. This could have been a feature of the song that stood out more in this regard. In other words, using the backing vocals as a motif and not always as a harmony of the lead vocal. The use of texture is a strength in the production, since the song features a lot of polyphonic movement, and contrapuntal passages, where the guitars play specific melodic lines that are counterpoint to the lead vocals, especially in the final chorus.

With regards to *Il Brutto*, it was a case of using an accompaniment and drums and percussion to accent the acoustic guitar, classical guitar and electric guitar. The bass guitar does a particularly good job of supporting the acoustic throughout the piece, which I was very pleased about. The classical guitar has been utilised for another dimension, something more akin to the spaghetti western feel. I noticed in Morricone’s piece that the energy and frantic nature of the piece has been increased towards the ending of the song, where the scene reaches its climax. I wanted this same feeling in my song since I was governed by the scene and moving imagery, therefore the piece needed to climax otherwise it wouldn’t match the on-screen action. I felt like I have done this well in *Il Brutto* and that the music serves the moving image accurately in all aspects of the action. The only thing I would have changed here was more live singers or operatic vocalists, a real choir to support the whole orchestration. That would have made a significant difference to the whole timbre.

Folamour’s piece was quite different to mine in its timbral qualities, but nevertheless I have tried to be more original with *Back To Cielo*. I wanted to create a mix of Soulful and Deep House vibes for the track as a whole. I feel that the low end could be bigger and rounder and with more time, it could have been tested in a club environment. That said, I feel the balance works well on smaller speakers and ear buds. Overall, I am very pleased with the outcome in this track, as I set out to record my guitar as a central or supportive focus within the music. Lastly, I would've experimented even more with a wider array of soundscapes, such as

including more live instruments and real world sounds where applicable. This would have enhanced the realism and organic nature of the music.

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