

Reflective Commentary

MA Commercial Music Producer

Darcy Poole

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Reflective Commentary on My Final Project Portfolio

1. Introduction

For my final project, my original proposal was to write and produce a 6 track EP for my artist project under the name of Darcy Blu. I originally chose to create an EP for my project as I am an artist as well as a producer, so I wanted to incorporate my production and artist project into one. Due to my extensive research on the music business, I decided to release my music through the “waterfall release strategy” (Deahl, 2019). A month after making this decision I was approached by an artist named Foxgunn within my network to do paid production for her artist project. This opened my eyes to the importance of professional production work not only for myself but for others within my network and enabled me to see how I could make a career for myself through production as well as through my artistry. I therefore pivoted and decided to do a production portfolio for my final project instead of the original EP. I will continue my EP project plan in my artist career outside of my final project portfolio.

I also noticed from the feedback given from my proposal submission the quantitative measurements of success for my EP wouldn't be available until after the MA has finished, meaning it would be difficult to address in my final submission. Working on my production portfolio made most sense to me for my submission and career in the music industry with my end goal is now to be a freelance producer.

2. My Portfolio

The portfolio will consist of the production work I have done for Foxgunn as well as my artist project Darcy Blu and live engineering. There will be two recordings of live piano and vocals in a professional studio environment, four tracks produced and mixed for Foxgunn and two tracks re-visited and produced for my artist project Darcy Blu. Creating this project pushed me out of my comfort zone forcing me to grow in all areas of production. I will discuss the successes and downfalls of this decision throughout this essay.

3. Research

When contemplating taking on the task of producing and engineering for other artists as well as myself, I was inspired and motivated by the lack of women engineers and producers in the

industry. Bossi (2020) explains women only make up for less than 3% of producers in the music industry. It is not only the production department that is lacking in women, a recent study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California found only 12.5% of songwriters were women too. This is something I take seriously and inspired me to build my engineering and production portfolio further.

When I was approached by Foxgunn to produce for her artist project I researched her biggest references who were Banks, Halsey and Tove Lo with her genre being what she would describe as alt-pop. I studied the vocal arrangement and production techniques used. When listening to Halsey's latest song 'So Good' (2022) it was clear the vocals take centre stage. They are raw and honest. I wanted to capture this feeling with Foxgunn. I was also inspired by Banks' song 'Someone New' (2014) as she uses her vocal production almost like an instrument, blending it in to the production and pitching it differently to what a natural vocal would sound like. I did this with Foxgunn's vocal on her track 'Reckless'.

When discussing what Foxgunn requested from production she was very particular about vocal production which is what we focused on the most. I researched into how to layer vocals effectively whilst using my own knowledge and intuition to ensure we developed the best results for Foxgunn. Native Instruments (2019) supports the methods I used when double tracking Foxgunn's vocals. We used double tracking on every song of Foxgunn's for the choruses and parts that needed energy to create contrast, energy and dynamic. Native Instruments (2019) supports this method stating, "one of the most effective methods for giving your lead vocal extra depth, energy, and dimension is to double it". Not only did we use this technique in the choruses we used it on all the backing vocals to add further depth. I used this method on the produced tracks for Foxgunn and Darcy Blu but not the live piano recordings as I wanted the stripped back recordings to feel as intimate and authentic as possible with only one main vocal and a few harmonies. I believe this method was effective.

3.1 Vocal Recording Methods Used Through Research

Through research as well as trial and error we used multiple vocal techniques to get the sound and energy of the tracks we wanted. Alongside double tracking the main vocals we used multiple layers of harmonies throughout the entire track. Hahn (2018) explains this is a way to create texture and emotion.

We also used whisper tracks on all the tracks in specific places as well as shouting the vocals from further away in the room and picking the sound up on the mic to create dynamics. We

used this technique on the majority of her songs but especially on ‘Use Me Properly’ in the choruses and on the second verse in ‘Don’t Want This to Go Anywhere’ to help build tension. Robinson (2017) states how ‘whisper pop’ is used by artists such as Julia Michaels and Selena Gomez. Robinson (2017) explains how the ‘whisper pop’ technique can create intimacy. I used this with Foxgunn intentionally not only to create a bigger sense of dynamic within the tracks but to exaggerate the element of sexual tension already within her lyrics. I found the contrast between whisper tracks and the main vocal worked well as it enabled us to keep Foxgunn’s powerful and recognisable vocals at the front of the mix whilst having whisper tracks blending in to set the tone. My main intention was to allow for Foxgunn’s vocals to feel just as much as part of the production elements as the bass, beats, synths and effects. We treated her vocals as an instrument within themselves as well as the main method of storytelling.

Alongside meticulously planning the vocal layers and arrangement I was very conscious of the plugins chosen on the vocals. For her track ‘Use Me Properly’, I layered the main chorus vocals with a deeper vocal texture underneath by using the Logic Pro X vocal pre-set ‘Change The Formant’. I did the same technique on ‘Don’t Want This To Go Anywhere’ and also added an extra layer of vocals transposed down by -8. I used this same technique on the outro of her interlude song ‘Reckless’.

My production techniques on the majority of Foxgunn’s tracks remained consistent as her intention is for them all to end up on an EP together. Sage Audio (2022) explains how formant shifting can be used when processing background vocals. I purposefully used formant shift for background vocals and transposed it down as I wanted it to sound lower, more masculine and a little bit robotic.

Fink et al (2018) explains how auto-tune and smoothing vocal imperfections has been a production tool in pop music since the early 2000’s. There are different types of tuning, for example there is auto tune used artistically like in Cher’s track ‘Believe’ as well as being used to smooth out imperfections. Reynolds (2018) explains how auto-tune is widely used as a creative tool in the industry as well as used to simply perfect vocals. I went through all the main vocals of all my projects including the Darcy Blu live performances and flex pitched the main vocals and any other necessary vocal parts. Willings (2020) explains how flex pitching is when you finely adjust the harmonic content to create a more perfect take. I did this to ensure all the vocals sounded in tune. I specifically chose to do this for my Darcy Blu recordings for

both the live recordings and the fully produced versions as the genre is pop, so it is important everything is polished.

Although auto-tune can be seen as disingenuous, Reynolds (2018) states it is the sound of the 21st century. Chances are any vocal on the radio today is subjected to an array of processes in one way or another. Fink et al (2018) supports this idea explaining how Taylor Swift's producers use auto-tune to correct intonation and amplify desirable vocal timbre showing how it is a common production technique in pop music. Therefore, it was important I tuned all the vocals for both alt-pop Foxgunn and commercial pop Darcy Blu.

I believe flex pitching the vocals was effective in creating the professional sound I was looking for. However, in the future I will invest in Melodyne as it is a more professional way of tuning instead of flex pitch. It is less time consuming and more accurate as you can set the pitch whereas with flex pitch you manually have to move the notes in Logic Pro.

3.2 Reverbs

D'Ark (2017) explains how reverb provides space and depth to one's mix and helps glue mixes together. It's applicable as a utility and creative tool. I found the use of reverb extremely helpful throughout all tracks but especially on the live recordings. Due to the performances being so intimate I didn't want to overload the vocals with processing.

An example of where I focussed heavily on the use of reverb and how I could use it as part of the arrangement and not just a vocal effect was in the live recording of 'In Another 4 Years'. I chose to add "Dream Hall" setting in Space Designer as a reverb layer on the vocal underneath the main vocal on certain words that I wanted to carry to add more space and texture to the mix. It is very subtle but helps add to the emotion behind the song. I saturated the introduction vocal with reverb as I wanted the vocals to sound far away and angelic. I also used reverb with artistic intention on Foxgunn's track 'Girl!' on the choruses where she is shouting "girl" as I wanted it to sound like she was shouting from a far.

I believe the Logic Pro reverb plugins used helped successfully achieve this. In future I would invest in Valhalla Reverbs to enhance this even further.

3.3 Microphones and Live Recording

When it came to producing tracks for myself and other artists, I recognised the importance of the choice of microphones. For Foxgunn we chose to use the Aston Microphones Spirit Multi-

Pattern Condenser as this was her microphone of choice. The Aston Spirit is a condenser microphone that excels in recording vocals. Aston Microphones (2022) states the spirit creates a natural and transparent recording. I found this very helpful when processing Foxgunn's vocals afterwards. The Aston was what she was used to and felt comfortable with. Although there are microphones that would be more expensive and potentially "better", this is all subjective. I found it is more important to use microphones that the artist is comfortable with and therefore will provide the best performance. This being one of the "soft skills" I learnt as part of studio etiquette.

For the live recordings of piano and vocals I chose to use the Neuman U87 for the vocals. I chose this as in my opinion it is the best microphone for my vocals. For the piano, the microphones used were two U87's on the bottom corners, two Schoeps towards the top of the piano recording the strings, and two Schoeps room mics. I also recorded the back of the piano with two Coles however realised this wasn't necessary to keep in the mix as it felt full enough with the U87's on the bottom corners. Again, these choices are subjective. One must decide on their choice of microphones through research and experience. I understood how to choose and set up vocal and piano microphones through shadowing and observing other engineers at Tileyard Studios and Abbey Road Studios, where I work part time. When mixing my live recording tracks, I turned up the Schoeps top microphones a little louder than the others as they captured the richest sound of the piano. I kept the volume of the other two relatively high to ensure they would all blend. During my time learning how to set up microphones for piano recordings and vocals my passion for the engineering side of production grew stronger.

Through my production work I was lucky enough to receive bursaries from Focusrite Group and Sontronics. This has enabled me to receive money to purchase an Aria microphone from Sontronics for my home studio. I intend on mainly using this microphone in the future for the pop vocals. It would be ideal for recording pop vocals as it is a condenser mic developed specifically for vocals and beta-tested by top producers and the engineers at Abbey Road Studios (Sontronics, 2022).

3.4 Darcy Blu and Pop Music

I incorporated my productions for my artist project Darcy Blu into my portfolio as I wanted to showcase the type of production I can do for commercial pop music. Burns (2008) states how pop music and production is full of hooks. They are the foundation of commercial pop music.

The hook is the repetition of notes or phrases that remains in people's minds. I ensured to bare this in mind when writing and producing my pop tracks.

I revisited two tracks I had produced at the start of 2022 and realised how far I had grown in my production techniques. For 'Stop Overthinking' I added an entirely new bass line using the Logic Pro bass plugin 'Liverpool Bass'. I rerecorded all the vocals to make them sound as clear as possible as I have improved massively on how to record, edit and layer vocals. Kiang (2013) states how 'double tracking enhances tonality'. I used chorus blocks for the track 'Overwhelmed' by double tracking backing vocals alongside the main chorus layer to create an even bigger feel to the chorus and add dynamics throughout the track. This technique was used with Foxgunn too. I made sure to record my vocals closer to the mic, layer the harmonies properly and pan them effectively. I used reverb with intention, compared to in the past where I have saturated backing vocals with reverb but without artistic intention.

As I did for Foxgunn and the live recordings I flex pitched all the Darcy Blu vocals. For the pop tracks I flex pitched every vocal track including the backing vocals as I wanted it to be as tight and polished as possible. Hoffman (2020) states how important it is to pitch correct as most singers will need pitch correction.

The beat for 'Stop Overthinking' was kept simple with just a kick and finger snaps samples I retrieved from Splice as I wanted the vocals to shine through and be the most important part of the song because of the lyrics being so intimate and personal. I also added a layer of Wurliitzer played via midi keys and a the 'Clean Organ' plugin from Logic Pro to add another hook into the song. I used the plugin 'Grand Piano and Pad' instead of just a grand piano as I used a lot of synth plugins throughout the instrumental. I wanted the piano to blend through the mix instead of standing out too aggressively.

For the second pop track 'Overwhelmed' the reference track for this was Griff's track 'One Night'. I used a loop of a bass line I found on Splice. Again, I rerecorded all new vocals with the new techniques learnt. I added an extra synth loop as the track needed some more high end and a bigger riser by using samples from Splice and a sound on Logic Pro called 'Ocean Waves Modular' to give the track a more dynamic pop feel. Overall, I believe I made both revisited tracks sound significantly better and more in line with what is released in the current pop world today.

3.5 Research Into Building Myself a Freelance Career

Through Foxgunn's paid project and building my portfolio, I realised I could achieve my goal of turning freelance production and engineering into part of my music career. Thornton (2018) explains how a freelance producer can range from someone who produces instrumentals and tracks for artists, choosing studio equipment, sound mixing, sound engineering, or mentoring artists to ensure the right performance occurs. Alongside this, one of the great perks of being freelance is the ability to create time to focus on one's own project as well. This is highly appealing to me with both my production and artist project going hand in hand. Shifting my focus onto this enabled me to broaden my horizons of how I can make money in the music industry.

My passion of working towards my career as a freelance producer then led to further production work for other female artists such as Becca James and Josefine Berntzen. When working with these artists we focused purely on the vocal production. I found focussing solely on the vocal arrangement and production with the artists was the most productive way to work. As I started off in the industry as an artist, I naturally have acquired the soft skill on how to treat and understand an artist in the studio environment which I believe is one of the most important skills when it comes to getting the best performance out of an artist. I understand their wants and needs and through my own practice of arranging my own vocals and harmonies, I can hear harmonies and layers that other producer wouldn't necessarily hear without being an artist or focussing solely on the vocal arrangement.

Berger (2014) explains how important it is to make the artist feel comfortable and safe whilst using words of encouragement to make them feel like everything they do is amazing. If one does this from the start, the artist will have an increased sense of confidence and is then most likely to perform their best work. I ensured Foxgunn and I were having fun whilst creating the records. We got to know each other on a deeper level, shared thoughts, feelings and laughed every session. By creating this environment, it enabled Foxgunn to trust me with her art meaning all she had to focus on was her performance. Keeping the atmosphere light and relaxed helped immensely. I believe this is what created the best vocal performance.

Many of the award-winning pop albums have specific vocal producers on them. Reynolds (2018) explains pop has seen the rise of specialist producers whose sole activity is capturing vocal performance. An example of this is Lorna Blackwood a vocal producer and vocal coach on Dua Lipa's album 'Future Nostalgia' who partners up with producer Cam Blackwood.

George (2022) explains how Lorna vocal produced six songs off Dua Lipa's record and won her first Grammy. She has also worked with other pop artists such as George Ezra, Mimi Webb and Tom Walker. I found this inspiring when considering my career moving forwards as a producer. Although I am not a trained vocal coach, my experience and abilities in singing and artistry allows me to understand and guide the singers through their vocal recordings to achieve the best results.

Through doing this project I realised I wanted my focus to be on live engineering and vocal production as these were the parts of the project I gravitated to the most naturally. I found a new love for understanding and setting up microphones in the studio alongside producing specifically vocals.

4. Personal Development Plan:

Objectives What do I want to learn or become?	• I want to learn to confidently vocal engineer • Make money and a sustainable career from production and engineer work • Have a portfolio to use a showreel as proof of my production and engineering abilities	Obstacles What might get in the way?	• Money - I am aware the smaller artists I currently work with can't offer me a huge amount of money. There is a limit to how much I can charge clients at the beginning; this will come with time when I build up my portfolio. • Time – due to changing my project I had limited time as my original focus was producing my own artist EP
Actions What do I have to do to get there?	• Book in sessions with other artists to produce for them • Practice production on my own artist project to improve • Research the best equipment and techniques to ensure I capture the best sound possible • Network	Review How did I do?	Success in: • Payment for my production work • Professional production completed as Foxgunn will be releasing her tracks on Spotify • Engineering freelance job at Tileyard • Gained confidence in my production skills and new clients for the future • Newfound love for specifically vocal production Improvements: • Would like a separate engineer to mix and master Foxgunn's tracks • Improve my home studio set up so I am not reliant on Tileyard • Focus on creating a name for myself as a producer and not just branding as an artist

Criteria How will I know I've achieved this?	• The most obvious and measurable way is through money • Client's reactions, testimonies, if they would work with me again, if they are happy in the room with me	Start Date	1 st June started producing for Foxgunn and changed my project focus to my portfolio
Resources What resources will I access?	• I will require access to studio rooms, microphones etc. This is easier whilst studying at Tileyard Education with access to studios however it will be something I need to consider when I have left. • I intend on creating my home studio set up with the money I received from winning two bursaries with Sontronics and Focusrite Group.	End Date	12 th August is the official finish date of portfolio but it will be an ongoing project building my portfolio

5. Reflection

5.1 Issues Encountered

The first issue encountered was the lack of time to complete my portfolio due to my change of decision. However, through natural desire, I was already shadowing engineers at Tileyard with the setup of live sessions to learn more. This helped me within my project when conducting my live recordings and knowing what microphones to set up for the upright piano and for Foxgunn's vocals. Changing my project did mean I separated my artist project and final project portfolio, naturally making more work for myself. However, I believed this to be necessary to enable me to focus on my production career.

I encountered issues when it came to recording the live tracks, for example in 'I Wish Me Better'. The pianist had his headphone slightly off his ear meaning the click from the metronome bled through and was picked up by the microphones recording the piano. This was eventually possible to edit out and quieten within Logic Pro X however it is still noticeable when soloed. This mistake enabled me to grow as a producer and engineer as I learnt for next time and didn't make the same mistake on the second live recording of 'In Another 4 Years'. I also learnt about the plugins I can invest in and use in the future to solve this problem such as

iZotope RX. iZotope (2022) explains how iZotope RX is a plugin that repairs noisy and damaged audio so would solve my issue with the click coming through on the track.

Another issue I found is the project could have been more varied. Despite gaining new clients during my project such as Becca James and Josefine Berntzen, my portfolio still only consists of Foxgunn, Darcy Blu tracks and live recordings. However, without doing this portfolio I wouldn't have secured my new clients. My portfolio will only continue to become more varied and grow with the more people I work with. If I had chosen to do this as my project when I was writing my proposal, I would have acquired more clients sooner and had a more varied track submission. However, in hindsight it still was a valuable project to do as it forced me to get the most focussed I have ever been when it comes to production and engineering. Through doing this I realised my abilities as a female producer and engineer and threw myself into understanding more deeply to help turn it into my career.

A final issue is despite my love for mixing, I believe for Foxgunn's track an external mixing and mastering engineer would be helpful as it is a new set of ears hearing all the sounds for the first time again. Rayden (2022) explains how in the industry mixing engineers are a separate entity to producers. For example, at Abbey Road Studios they have engineers specific to mixing tracks that have been produced by someone else (Abbey Road Studios, 2022).

5.2 Achievements

When it comes to considering achievements within a creative project it can be subjective. My original benchmarks for success were subjective as they were to do with audience responses and success of tracks in terms of label interest. I would also use quantitative data as benchmarks for success such as streams on the tracks released and the number of playlists they get put onto. With my new project, my benchmarks for success have changed. They are now more focused on growing my knowledge on live engineering and acquiring clients for freelance production. It is clear to see achievements through quantitative data such as payment, which I did receive. But it is also important to see achievements through other ways such as growth in network, skills, and confidence.

I would say I have achieved success with soft and hard skills learnt. As mentioned previously, one of the soft skills I have achieved is understanding studio etiquette and making the artists feel comfortable and safe. The success of producing Foxgunn's tracks to a professional standard is evidenced in her successful performance alongside her testimonial below.

"Working with Darcy has been an absolute pleasure. She's as professional as she is warm and friendly, creating a very comfortable environment to work in. Having worked with several people in the studio before, the sessions with her have been the most enjoyable I've ever been a part of. Darcy is the kind of person you want in the studio with you, someone who pushes you to sound your best whilst having fun doing it."

- Foxgunn

I have learnt the importance of widening my network to enable me to attract clients to produce and engineer for. I already had a wide network due to my artist career which helps as I can reach out to the artists I already know. I successfully did this with Becca James and Josefine Berntzen. I also learnt the importance of organisational skills and managing my time especially when it comes to producing for others as they are dependent on me to deliver to deadlines which I achieved with Foxgunn.

Another achievement I can see is my technical understanding of the studio environment when setting up microphones, pianos and other equipment which would be considered as 'hard skills'. I learnt a lot in a short period of time on how to set up a professional studio session and have now discovered a newfound love for studio engineering. This proved successful as I have been offered a freelance engineering assistant job at Tileyard when I graduate. This became one of my goals once I started to shadow in the studio environment trying to learn more about the studio as much as I could. This is proof of success to me and has given me confidence to continue in my career as a freelance engineer.

Another achievement is receiving the two bursaries from Sontronics and Focusrite Group. I was awarded these by submitting my own productions, my Darcy Blu pop tracks were part of this submission. This gave me confidence in my own productions and proved to me I would be able to produce for others as a freelancer.

"By being woman working in and making a difference in a completely male-orientated industry, Darcy shows signs of dedication, motivation and inquisitiveness, all of which will stand her in good stead in succeeding and excelling in her future career."

- Lisa Coley, Sontronics

A final achievement was receiving a paid freelance job to vocal engineer for the United Nations for their online course by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. The task involved recording two voice actors speaking pages of script for an online course for the Trade, Gender and Development programme. I had to set up the microphones and record their scripts, comp the vocals, edit 40 minutes of audio and present them to the United Nations in wav format. Without my portfolio it is unlikely I would have been offered and succeeded with this paid job. They offered me £200 for the job, in the future I would aspire to charge more but as it was my first time I was happy with this.

5.3 Improvements for the Future

Moving forwards in my career as a freelance producer I would like to specify in vocal production and further my understanding and skills in this area. I intend on doing this through experience, practice, investing in better plugins and learning through my peers.

In hindsight I would have liked time to do further research into the equipment I used. Through receiving the two bursaries I intend on investing in my home studio set up which will inevitably help assist the quality of my recordings and enable me to be a freelance producer from home as well as at Tileyard Studios. This will increase my quantity of clients. I am receiving a set of microphones from Sontronics, the Aria, the STC-2 and Corona. These will help my vocal production immensely due to the high-quality recordings.

I will also be receiving ADAM Audio A7X from Focusrite Group alongside the Novation Summit synth. These speakers will help immensely with my home studio set up and the Novation Summit synth will help when it comes to pop production. Having this gear will all help towards making my home studio set up which would make it possible to be a freelance producer.

Something I could improve on in the future is my branding around my freelance production career. I have already established a strong brand as an artist under the name Darcy Blu with somewhat of a big following (see appendix 1). I would like to now take these skills I have learnt through this and make the same kind of branding and name for myself as a freelance producer. I intend on using my already established Darcy Blu brand and branching off it.

6. Personal Development Plan for the Future

Objectives for the future What do I want to learn or become?	• Full time freelance engineer • Improve my branding when it comes to my production career • Focus more specifically on vocal production	Obstacles What might get in the way?	Money as a freelance producer can vary. I am aware it may take a while before I am full-time
Actions What do I have to do to get there?	• Set up my home studio to generate work from there whilst working at Tileyard as a freelance engineer	Review How did I do	TBC
Criteria How will I know I've achieved this?	• When I have a steady income from production work • Clients releasing songs I have vocal produced on them to a professional standard. Getting production credits on these songs will help push my name out further	Start Date	12 th August onwards
Resources What resources will I access?	• Home studio and equipment received from Sontronics and Focusrite bursaries • Tileyard Studios as downtime • Access to the network I have created for myself	End Date	Ongoing

7. Conclusion

To conclude, despite changing my project last minute giving myself limited time, focussing on my production portfolio has changed my career for the better. It has enabled me to secure a freelance studio assistant role at Tileyard Studios and gain clients who I can produce for and hopefully pass on my knowledge. I am extremely passionate about sharing my knowledge with the clients I work with even if it's just to a basic standard of how to track vocals. I strongly believe it's an important skill to have, especially for the female artists in the industry. By revisiting my old productions to reproduce for my portfolio I was able to see how much I have changed and learnt during the past few months by focussing on my portfolio and producing for Foxgunn. My success and confidence as a producer have grown immensely during this project.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

