The aesthetic preference in music-making: A case study of self-production processes influencing the exploration of artistic identity

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Abstract

This exposition is a case study of discovering a musician's aesthetic preference through self-production processes as part of the exploration of artistic identity. Music self-production requires a clear understanding of artist's own aesthetic preference for effective planning and execution of the production. This process, in turn, has been proved effective in exploring artistic identity in this case study. This case study used an autoethnographical approach to discuss several dimensions of musical aesthetic preference based on life experience and music making processes. The self-production processes suggest that it can create an environment to consciously reveal and clarify a musician's aesthetic preference from musical and aesthetic dimensions. This study contributes to the research on music production, aesthetic preference and artistic identity, and opens up discussion for future studies on the interrelationship among these three artistic aspects.

Keywords

Artistic identity, aesthetic preference, case study, digitalized era, music production, music-making, self-producing

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1 Introduction

My music making was always done using acoustic instrument piano and voice and that was my artistic identity. However, digital technologies of music making are updating in fast speed that music making software become affordable to many. The easy access of online educational material and online forums provide rich resource for self-learning, home studio has become a norm for musicians to produce their own music, which would not be possible financially or technically before.

Because the transition from physical copy of music to digital streaming, the current business model of music industry requires musicians to become self sufficient, which means musician not only should have skills in music making, but also other skills such as producing,

That is why I decided to get into the digital way of making music.

I have been a musician who is always interested in many different genres and styles of music, such as jazz, electroacoustic music, electronic music, film music, game music, and folk music. Among all the genres of music, I was intrigued particularly by electroacoustic music and sonic art and fascinated about sound. The exploration of my own artistic identity has always been a priority to find out what kind of artist I would like to become. When I became interested in making music digitally, I noticed that artistic identity cannot hide behind certain acoustic instrument anymore, for example, I cannot simply identify myself as "I am a pianist" or "I am a singer". The "sea" of virtual instrument offer musicians endless choices in sound that one could easily get lost. How and what sound do I choose become an interesting phenomenon for me instantly. I would like to discover what are the reasons behind all of my decisions. This is the reason for me to start this research. There are abundant studies on aesthetic preference during childhood and adolescence from music education and identity development perspectives (Folkestad, 2005; Hargreaves et al., 2006; Lamont, 2011a; Lamont & Webb, 2010; Miranda, 2013; North & Hargreaves, 1999). Music preference has a function for adolescents to identify themselves among social groups which reflect how they perceive personality traits of certain types of music as part of their own self-concept development. Music influences adolescents' aesthetics and identity development (Folkestad, 2005; Hargreaves et al., 2006; Lamont, 2011a; Lamont & Webb, 2010; Miranda, 2013; North & Hargreaves, 1999). Studies on adults regarding the relationship between personal traits and musical preferences also show the personal preference in music elements, structures, and social functions that provide pleasure for music listeners (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013; Lamont, 2011b).

Studies which investigate into the aesthetic preference have been conducted in the art field, especially in visual arts (Jacobsen, 2006; Leder et al., 2004; Leder & Nadal, 2014). Specifically, the aesthetic enjoyment in music listening is one angle to dive into the reason behind the individual's preferences in music from cognitive perspective (Cross, 2001), cultural difference (Balkwill & Thompson, 1999; Jacobsen, 2006), social evolution point of view (McDERMOTT & Hauser, 2005).

The relationship between aesthetic preference and musical identity is another research area relevant to this research. The aesthetic self is an important part of our identity (Bamford et al., 2024; Fingerhut et al., 2021) and social and cultural changes affect the music aesthetics and values (Chow & Kloet, 2013; Mans, 2005; Roy, 2002; Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2002; Wang, 2024). The aesthetic preferences manifest themselves through music playing, improvising, and collaborating with other musicians. But the reflection on aesthetic preferences is done in a conscious and reflective way in music self-production processes. The music self-production processes became an alternative approach to explore artistic identity besides other approaches such as through reflection on composing process, rehearsals, performances, and recordings.

The determinants of aesthetic preference in music are studied from different perspectives, for example music genres, styles, self-identity, emotion, and culture (Rentfrow et al., 2011; Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2010), and also from music element and dimension point of view, such as melody, rhythm, form, abstract and realism, etc. as a listener's profile (Rogers & Ogas, 2022) which is related to the individual internal music library which is constructed by listening and music making experience (Folkestad, 2002). This case study was structured to explore artistic identity from several musical dimensions. The discussion is based on life experiences and music making processes to understand the music aesthetic preferences from both musical point of view and life and cultural background point of view.

Because producer is part of my own artistic identity, and the crystallization on artistic identity and music aesthetic preferences during the process of producing made me realize that music self-production is a way to explore artistic identity. The artistic identity of producers were discussed under the general research on music production such as from the perspective of music production which requires sonic identity and aesthetic decision making (Burgess, 2013). However, with the technology and society changes, more and more producers are breaking the stereotype of old producer image. Studies have been increase to focus on gender and producer identity (Hepworth-Sawyer et al., 2020; Wolfe, 2020) and on producer's persona especially among electronic music producers (Formilan & Stark, 2023).

Even though there are researches on aesthetic preference in music, artistic identity and music production separately, there have not been many studies on music aesthetic preference in music self-production to explore artistic identity. The aesthetic preference is an important part of artistic identity to understand why we are attracted to certain type of sound, timbre, melody, and expression and so on and how those preferences are related to our life experience and music making. This would help us to better understand ourselves as musicians and artists. This is the reason that I chose to explore self-production in music in this research, as well as reflecting artistic identity, is that it requires understanding of one´s aesthetic preference, strength, and weakness as a musician. This research is relevant to the current digitalized era. Music producing has lowered the entry level due to the connivance provided by digital tools such as a digital audio station and many other open source software.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate the aesthetic preference in music-making specifically in the context of self-production in music, as one essential aspect of evolving artistic identity. Furthermore, I will explore the aesthetic preference and self-production processes through a case study, where I reflect my own artistic process to answer the research questions. The research question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. What kind of factors may influence aesthetic preference?
2. How may the musical self-production in the digitalized era impact artistic identity?
3. What is the relationship between aesthetic preference and artistic identity in artistic processes?

These three sub-questions are explored through literature review as well as the discussions on multiple dimensions of listener's profile, including authenticity, realism, novelty, melody, lyrics, rhythm, timbre, form and function, a framework constructed from a producer's point of view (Rogers & Ogas, 2022) to explore the intertwined relationship among aesthetic preference, artistic identity and music self-production process.

Prior to the music production, the producer needs to have a clear the music aesthetic preference and a good understanding of the artist's artistic identity to decide on production aesthetic direction and unique sonic identity. This applies to music self-production as well. This research will use an autoethnographical approach to reflect on personal music making experience. Rogers' listener's profile gives this study a clear procedure and framework to explore the influence of music aesthetic preference to the development of artistic identity.

The music self-production means that the artist takes upon the role of a producer to produce their own music. In my case study, I reflect on my processes as a producer to produce my own music. The processes include the planning, composing and/or recording, and mixing. The planning includes producing songs in certain genres, with specific sonic aesthetics such as timbre of virtual instrument, tempo and duration. The composing and/or recording includes song-writing, arranging, choosing suitable virtual instrument, making beats, harmonization, sound processing, vocal recording, and sample recording. When the song structure and arrangement is finalized, I move on to the recording stage. The recording includes preliminary recording for composing ideas and harmonies and final recording in studio. There could be some back and forth between composing and recording stage because of inspiration that happened during recording session or if certain issues become problematic that must be fixed. The mixing stage not only make sure the sound quality meet the standard steaming platforms for publishing, but also is a crucial stage to bring out the identity of the composition through various mixing techniques. Besides the technical knowledge, mixing also requires autonomy in making artistic decisions from the mixing engineer, i.e. the artist in this case study. The reflection of my personal music making experience will be used in formulating a listener's profile, which provides a picture case example of the aesthetic aspect of my artistic identity. Through the music self-production process, not only the aesthetic preferences were clarified but also developed understanding of other aspects of my artistic identity, which are analyzed through the maturity in music making skill, collaborative skills, and production skills.

To become a good producer in general require the producer to understand what is the ingredient that make one artist different from the others and to have the ability to bring that side out and accentuate it. Producer needs to the "ears" to listen for the "gem" from the raw material despite all distractions, for example poor sound quality in demo, a good melody buried among other sounds, the way to allow the artist to express themselves in the most natural way. The producer needs to be the one who can filter all the noise out and be confident about artistic decisions.

This research will start with a self-reflection on my personal background in music making. Then based on the seven dimensions of Rogers' listener's profile - authenticity, realism, novelty, melody, lyrics, rhythm, and timbre - I will analyze my music aesthetic preference using my own music production to investigate how these dimensions are connected to my artistic identity. On top of the seven dimensions, in the additional section "form and function",

I discuss the importance of music listening. The skills I acquired during the music self-production process will be discussed as part of the artistic identity development. A complete listener's profile will be presented as the outcome of the music aesthetic preference analysis process in the end. In the conclusion, I discuss how to become a music producer for my own artistic work, what kind of initiatives does a producer need to take to serve their musical identity, and how does the self-analysis in production help in exploring my artistic identify.

2 Literature review

Aesthetic preference is usually seen explicitly through composition process, finished pieces, or music playing with other musicians. To understand better my own artistic identity evolvement, it is beneficial to start with what type of music do I like, what kind of sound is interesting to me, and try to understand why I like what I like. Different from intuitive music composing or improvisation, music self-production requires conscious decision-making and planning on aesthetic directions to either create a suitable production on a musical idea or to bring out the essence of a music piece. In terms of self-production, it requires the producer to have a clear understanding of their own aesthetic views.

Aesthetic preference and artistic identity

Many factors affect the development of musical identity such as age, gender, taste, culture, national background, religion, etc. (Folkestad, 2002).

When you go on a first date with someone, one of the most common questions to ask is "What kind of music do you like?" When searching for a partner, aesthetic preference helps to communicate personal identity with each other to reduce uncertainty by exchanging personal information for a better chance of compatibility (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). Not only does music help with finding love, but also to express personal values and establish connections with others (Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2010).

The aesthetic self in personal identity is an important component besides the moral aspect, such as political views and religions. Music was investigated with visual arts in the concept of aesthetic self in Fingerhut's research. The results show that the aesthetic self has a greater impact on self-identity than leisure activities such as hiking or game playing (Fingerhut et al., 2021).

Aesthetic preference impacts adolescents to identify themselves with certain characteristics and values within fans of different musical styles. Aesthetic preference is a "badge" for adolescents to navigate through their social circles (Music and Adolescent Identity). Not limited to adolescents, music is not only important to form the identity of individuals but also to a group of people on the national level (Folkestad, 2002). Aesthetic preference towards certain music genres can be affected by national and local cultural background and social relevance, for example when the western musical genre hip hop

crosses the cultural boundaries embraced and adapted by the Chinese artists, or the Hongkong and Dutch pop music localizations (Chow & Kloet, 2013; Wang, 2024).

Adrian c. north categorizes previous studies of aesthetic preference into three aspects: music itself, the listening situation, and the listener. The investigation of the listener aspect shows that the reasons to listen to one's favorite music in different styles reflect on their personality (North, 2010).

Factors in aesthetic preference

Aesthetic preference is a result of complex influences from culture background, life experiences, national and regional identities, age, gender, social status, and so on. There is a strong link between aesthetic preference, social background, and cultural capital. However further studies should look into how aesthetic preference is affected by the property of music itself (Brisson & Bianchi, 2020).

This research is to look at aesthetic preference from the focus of how personal preference in music (musical and aesthetic elements) affects musical taste and musical creation based on the framework of Rogers' listener's profile (Rogers & Ogas, 2022) and personal inner musical library (Folkestad, 2002).

In Rogers and Ogas' opinion, every individual has a "listener profile" that is unique. The listener's response to music is categorized into seven dimensions: authenticity, realism, novelty, melody, lyrics, rhythm, and timbre. The first three dimensions are binary: "above-the-neck versus below-the-neck, realism versus abstraction, novelty versus familiarity" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 90). They are aesthetic dimensions of the listener's profile. The formation of the "profile" is determined by your life experience, randomness in music encounters, the place and time in life that affect the sweet spot in choosing and processing music.

The "listener profile" is close to the concept of "personal inner musical library" (PIML) (Folkestad, 2002). However, Folkestad proposed the PIML concept in the context of music creation, particularly in composition and performance. Rogers and Ogas' listener's profile looks at individual's listening preferences from seven musical and aesthetic dimensions for readers to find their personal sweet spot of listening to music. Through this framework, listeners can better understand their own musical identity. PIML is more from a composer's

point of view while listener's profile is from a music listener's point of view which is useful for composers, musicians and producers.

Folkestad argued that individuals acquire music over time under different circumstances that form a unique inner musical library like no others. The library does not mean any specific piece of music, but a backdrop formed by all the previous music experiences, even though a particular piece or experience might come to the foreground while composing or performing (Folkestad, 2002).

In the concept of "Personal Inner Musical Library" (PIML) raised by Folkestad, the "personal" indicates the unique knowledge individual acquired and "inner" means the musical experience of individuals instead of any specific records or albums. The concept of PIML was discussed in the context of composition and performance that individual would draw from their unique musical experience which is stored in their individual PIML when it is called upon. The PIML functions as an implicit background and specific musical experience would come to the foreground when it is needed (Folkestad, 2002, p. 198).

Personal identity does not remain the same. Our identity changes over time along with our quest for what kind of person we want to be (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 124). When we watch a movie or listen to a song, we indulge ourselves in the world the director or composer created and image how we would be like in this temporary imagined world. We relate ourselves to the protagonist or the persona in the song. Therefore, our taste in movies, books, songs say a lot about ourselves and our identities. We make friends with people who share the same interests. Quite often, we get interested in new things and we exchange new findings to connect with each other. The shift in interest also relates to the shift in identity.

Sharing music with other musicians is probably the best way to get to know each other and enrich my personal music library. During the course S-MT93 Electroacoustic music seminar and S-MT8 Artistic production of popular music 1 at Sibelius Academy, Uniarts, Helsinki, each student needs to bring one of their favorite pieces or song to share. It was the most efficient and direct way to get to know another musician. It does not only tell you the aesthetic preference of the fellow students, but also tells a lot about this person's interest and how they identify themselves. Getting to know the songs a person listens to is a good data point to know what else this person might like, such as clothes, jewelry or even political standpoint (Schwartz, 2004).

Music production and musical identity in digital era

Musical identity is present and has an impact on every part of the music production process. And a producer's identity can be reflected in the product instead of the artists' identity (Burgess, 2013). Therefore, the process of self-production for one's own songs is a good channel to explore and reflect the musical identity. To produce an artist's own songs, the artist needs to have a clear understanding of their own musical self and musical identity, from sonic to aesthetic dimensions.

There have not been many studies purely focusing on the relation of establishing musical identity through music self-production. Through this research, I aim to provide empirical observations from an autoethnographical approach to explore my own artistic identity through music production for myself (Ellis & P. Bochner, 2000) .

Furthermore, as musicians are living in a digital era, the changes in the music industry over the years demand musicians to have certain production skills, which is a relevant topic.

With the emerging of music steaming platforms, majority of music have been distributed and consumed digitally nowadays. Even though small amount of CD and vinyl are still sold sometimes, we have entered the digital distribution era. In the digital distribution era, the music business landscape has been revolutionized in how music is distributed and consumed. Music production costs have been significantly reduced due to technological improvements. Music distribution has been transformed from physical copies to digital subscription streaming. The benefits are that music can be accessed by much broader audiences and everyone can publish their music just from their bedroom studios (Wikström, 2014).

However, without the physical product, music streaming barely provides revenue for most of the musicians who make the actual product. What is more, musicians are required to become self-sufficient to take on more skills in music recording, production, mixing, and tools for marketing, social media savvy to establish their fan base and sustain their music creation among immense competition. These changes call for collaboration among independent producers and musicians under the reality of a lack of financial resources. The understanding of production and acquiring certain production skills are beneficial in a musician's career development (Walzer, 2017).

3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study, which serves also as a methodological tool, is based on the seven music dimensions of listener's profile (Rogers & Ogas, 2022). Rogers' framework is the most suitable for this study because it is formed from a music producer's point of view and focuses ~~only~~ on music elements and dimensions.

There are seven music dimensions in Rogers' listener's profile: authenticity, realism, novelty, melody, lyrics, rhythm and timbre. Each dimension is a spectrum with two end points. These two end points are not necessarily opposite from each other but two related aspect in one dimension. Each individual would have different preference in each dimension. It is not a standard to evaluate whether the profile is positive or negative. It is a tool to discover personal musical preference and to formulate a personal listening profile which in turn gives the user an overview of their music listening and better understanding of their aesthetic choice and listening preference (Rogers & Ogas, 2022).

The first three dimensions, authenticity, realism, and novelty, largely deal with the approaches of music making which are closely related to artistic identity. The two end points of authenticity, "below-the-neck" and "above-the-neck", describe the most innate drive for music creation and the craft of making music using knowledge and technique. In the realism dimension, the two end points "realistic" and "abstract" concern two types of music recordings, i.e. music that is recorded through playing conventional instruments and music that involves virtual instruments as well as sound manipulations that can only be done through computer. This dimension not only indicates the two type of aesthetic choice but also reflect on the technology revolution in music industry and how it affects the music creation. Novelty discusses the preference in familiarity and novelty in music. The music listeners' preferences change over the time throughout history in terms of what type of music to listen to. In one period of time, listeners would prefer to listen to music that has more familiar elements so it is easier to relate to or to evoke certain emotions. Music that contain too much novelty would make it hard to majority of the music listeners to relate to. However, the general music preference pursues novelty in a bigger time frame. Music with novelty might become the next norm for listeners over the time. It is a delicate balance for musician to make musical decision depending on what outcome each individual is going after. The rest four dimensions, melody, lyrics, rhythm and timbre, focus more from the pure music elements' point of view to discuss personal aesthetic preference such as melody dimension entails narrow or wide contour, which could be a preference for music listeners. The expression and

meaning of lyrics range from personal to general, which are closely related to individual preference in music listening, especially listeners who is prone to lyrics over melody. The preference in straight or syncopated rhythm is largely related to the genre of music and listener's personal life history in music listening. Timbre is a preference in the overall characteristic of sound in music, which comes into consideration during composing, improvising, and listening.

4 Research design and methodology

The musical aesthetic preference requires a close examination of individual music experience in music making and listening. Self observation is also helpful to reflect on the formation and development of artistic identity. Moreover, because the research question is explored in the context of music self-production, the autoethnographical approach is the most suitable method to use for this research. The autoethnographical study is to explore the research question systematically through self-reflection (Chang, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Autoethnography is an autobiographical way of analyzes the experience of the author and how it is connected to self identity. The musical aesthetic preference is a personal preference that varies from individual to individual due to different life experience, cultural background, and personality. Also, the aesthetic preference is reflected through self-production of music in this research. That is why the autoethnographical approach is the most suitable for this case study.

A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1994, p. 13). A case study fits the purpose of this research in finding out the music self-production as an approach to explore artistic identity through in depth self reflection of music which draw from multiple sources such as life experience, cultural background and music making process. There are different types of case study, such as Exploratory, Explanatory, and Descriptive (Yin, 1994) and Intrinsic, Instrumental, Collective (Stake, 1995). The goal and interest to discover the music aesthetic preference as part of the artistic identity through music self-production make this case study exploratory and intrinsic, which could be expended into a collective study that a group of cases are studied. Based on the Rogers' listener profile, I will examine my aesthetic preference from the seven music dimensions one by one using the observation of my music making experience. The result of self-reflection will complete a personal listening profile as a concrete example of music aesthetic preference. Through the seven dimensions, the aesthetic preference is explored through the self production processes, compositional process, artistic choices, cultural and life experience background, and music making tools etcetera to discover their relationship with the overall artistic identity.

The composition materials were chosen from works that are from different period of time, or were composed and produced over the span of several years. The development of compositional ideas reflects the change in aesthetic preference overtime through the process

of re-editing, recomposing, re-structuring, and re-producing. The fluidity and development of aesthetic preference and artistic identity can be shown through those examples. The materials also cover different styles to explore the aesthetic preference and artistic identity fully.

As each dimension is a reflection of one side of aesthetic preference and artistic identity, the discussion focuses on the most prominent and relevant element(s).

5 Findings

In this section, I will analyze my musical processes of self music production in order to explore the artistic identity development.

My personal background in aesthetic preference

"Sky Horse" was the first song I have written that the melody and lyrics satisfied me. It was written five years ago, and the arrangement was finished two years ago. The lengthy process is a good example of a musician's adventures in music production. When "Sky Horse" was written, I was at the beginning of my music education in university. It was written on piano with me humming on top. The whole process was very quick. The melody came first, and then lyrics followed not long after. It was arranged with the help of ensemble Lauri Salokoski and performed with strings, choir, and drums for the Global Orchestra performance in Gyllenberg-Sali, Helsinki, Finland in the April of 2019. What should have been followed was to find resources to record this piece, which did not happen. The song was put on the shelf to collect dust until I decided to re-arrange it and produce it by me.

The idea of producing music was not a concept available for me because I had no knowledge of recording, Digital Audio Workstation (DAW), and most important of all, I have no concept of what a producer does.

My knowledge of production developed after my exploration in various genres of music. I have always set my heart in film music because it combines my two favorite art forms: music and literature (story). It is fun to compose music for a story. Music has the power to enhance a story and even alter the meaning of the story. A story made it easy for me to start my composing process because I feel what the protagonist feels, and through the music I want to share that emotion with the audience.

Because of my hobby in film music, I started to venture into classical music. Though I played classical piano as a child, I had never studied music theory, let alone orchestration, which is very useful in film music.

Almost all film music composers not only compose, but also produce music either with a real orchestra, acoustic instruments, or with DAWs and virtual instruments. I decided to teach myself Ableton Live just to have a better sound than notation software.

The combination of music theory and DAWs turned out to be useful as later I became interested in game music, which has many things in common in terms of music composition and skill set, but with more freedom. Besides game music, I began to use Ableton Live to

compose some pop songs. But due to the lack of knowledge in utilizing the tools, my use with DAW was very limited.

While enjoying the exploration in film and game music, I dogged into electroacoustic music, sound art, EDM, and expanded my musical palette from there. It was a whole new world for me compared to my old palate, which consisted of mainly western art music (as opposed to folk and pop traditions), a very narrow part of western popular music, and traditional Chinese music.

Amongst all my favorite genres of music, electroacoustic music is the one that fundamentally changed my view of music and sound. Sound-based Composition uses recorded sound as material for composition and manipulate sound through various audio techniques (Holmes, 2008). It concentrates on sound itself instead of the source. It is this aesthetic that opens doors for many possibilities in composition. Through this lens, I realized that genre is only a man-made concept that helps to categorize but can be crossed freely in music making.

With improving proficiency in digital tools and increasing knowledge in producing, I finally finished producing some songs that I composed years ago. During the producing process, I also gradually discovered my own artistic identity. It was a struggle to find my own voice. I have attempted many styles of music from jazz to folk, classical to contemporary, pop to electroacoustic music. But the question of "what kind of artist do I want to be" was not answered. I have had so many interests in different music that it was hard to choose. However, producing songs for myself proved to be an effective way to discover my aesthetic preference as a foundation to further develop my own artistic identity.

The seven dimensions of listener's profile

In this section I will discuss the artistic identity exploration process under the framework of Rogers' seven dimensions in listener's profile using my own songs. There are seven dimensions in the listener's profile: authenticity, realism, novelty, melody, lyrics, rhythm and timbre. The first three dimensions are aesthetic dimensions and the rest four dimensions are musical dimensions. Each dimension is a spectrum with two extremes on each end. These two extremes are not necessarily opposite, for example in the dimension of lyrics, the two endpoints are "personal" and "general" in terms of the style of lyrics. Individual music listener can use this listener's profile as a scale to locate their preference or music listening

sweet spot in each dimension (Rogers & Ogas, 2022). I will discuss what each dimension means and how they are reflected during the music production processes which influence the exploration of my artistic identity.

AUTHENTICITY

The two endpoints of this dimension are "below-the-neck" and "above-the-neck".

Music making techniques (instrument skills, sound design, arranging, and digital tools such as DAWs) can be learned and refined over time, but music instinct is unique to each musician. Below I discuss what the two endpoints mean.

One way to achieve authenticity is to express without catering. "You hear it in the performance of a musician who thinks no one is listening" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 22). It is hard to break the shell where it is self-conscious to be sincere or exposed according to the social standard about appropriate behaviors. The "music from the neck down", a concept from Tommy Jordan, singer-songwriter and front man of Geggy Tah (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 23), describe music that comes from the gut, without the expectation of meeting the standard or profit, but takes the inspiration directly from instinct and express with freedom. My understanding about music in general and especially popular music started from understanding of the gut feeling music making. Music can be whatever you want it to be. Genre should not be a formidable boundary that limits creativity.

The "music from the neck up", on the contrary, describes music that is crafted with knowledge gained from music training, can also be authentic. However, if it is not combined with the "music from the neck down", it will be just "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing" by James Brown (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 25). If a piece that is composed with the intention to be complex but does not engage the gut feeling, then the appreciation from the listeners can stay only on the level of the music composition skills and instrumental performative skills. A song or composition that touches the listeners can never be achieved with only complexity in instrumental skills. With music that uses virtual instruments, I would compare digital technologies with "music from the neck up". The gut feeling is the core to touch the listeners. What touch us are the emotions, not the sound plug-ins, filters, or sound effects.

Motivation as one attribute of meaningful engagement with music composition is the primary stimulation for engaging with compositional work. Another attribute is sensitivity which is related to intuitive decision making that encourages creativity (R. Brown & Dillon,

2016, p. 96). These two concepts are close to the music from "neck up" and "neck down". However, through my compositional process, the motivation or "neck up" and sensitivity or "neck down" are not always separated as in "either...or..." relationship. A song writing session can be planned with a particular genre or style in mind, then use the *gut* feeling to guide the compositional process. And even during the gut-led compositional process, it is somewhat guided by the general direction decided in the motivation or "neck up" planning, and the music training as tools to realize musical ideas. But sometimes, even with a plan, the composition can veer into a new direction which brings surprising outcomes.

In "Soda", I deliberately want to make a piece with the influence from IDM (Intelligent Dance Music). At the time when I started to compose, my personal music library had not encountered this concept, even though I might have been exposed to this type of music. The seed had been planted back then, but the composition was eventually brought to life quite late until the time I started to prepare for my masters' degree concert. Because by that time, I have been acquainted with major EDM (Electronic dance music) genres, understood the aesthetics and expanded my listening profile in this category. Like Daniel Lopatin (commonly known as Oneohtrix Point Never) talked in the behind-the-scenes video of the making of "Uncut Gems" soundtracks, a lot of composition is a "conversation with the past" (*Behind the Soundtrack: "Uncut Gems" with Daniel Lopatin (DOCUMENTARY)*, 2020). The past is consisted of all the musical experiences in the personal musical library. Without knowing the past, it is hard to move forward with a conscious mind.

There is a difference between composing with only gut feeling without any knowledge or training in music and composing deliberately with gut feeling by using the tools and knowledge consciously. The comparison between *Philosophy of the World* by Shaggs and "Overy Z's" by Geggy Tah is a good example (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 74).

To find my own style in "Soda" happened as a combination of "music from the neck up" and "music from the neck down". The "neck down" elements are the musical world I wanted to create, as well as my listening preference which gravitates towards IDM and rhythmic music. The "neck up" elements would be the decision to make "Soda" an IDM influenced song, and utilization of my knowledge in vocal harmony, instrumental arrangement as the tool to realize the musical idea, and deliberate choice in sound timbre and so on.

REALISM

Rogers categorizes music into two groups in this dimension: realistic music and abstract music. This is related to the major change in music production when DAWs (Digital Audio Workstation) appeared. The techniques in recording were crucial in the high-fidelity era, aiming to provide listeners with a mental image of a live performance with every detail and nuance. This is the aesthetic of realistic music.

Recording techniques are crucial in the DAW era, but with a few changes: virtual instruments can imitate, technically speaking, every possible sound including instrument sound. Everything can be fixed digitally post recording (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 50). What is more, DAW and virtual instrument can create sound that does not naturally exist. Music created through sound manipulation can be abstract.

The arrival of DAWs brought both advantages and disadvantages to music making. The good thing is that everyone can make music and learn to make music with abundant resources online. Music can be created without the limitation to rent expensive studios, equipment, and instruments. Musicians can create sound that does not exist in real life and manipulate sound to fulfill what their desire. However, DAWs also created the culture of perfection: every mistake should be fixed because it is possible to do so. Rhythm is quite often quantized. Virtual instrument sounds lack of warmth, etc. When everything is perfect then the music starts to lose human touch (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 54).

The appearance of DAWs also created the detachment of music production and live performances. Because of the freedom to create abstract sound, to dub and manipulate sound, not everything can be performed live the same. Take vocalist for example, when working with a DAW, the vocal recording can be auto tuned and edited to reach perfection. The human factor is corrected as if it is a malfunctioning machine that needs to be fixed. However, this level of perfection is not realistic even for the most skilled vocalists in a live performance in terms of pitch, how it is mixed, the sound system, etc. Same thing applies for other instrumental sound that adaptation and rearrangement are necessary for a live situation when the music is heavily produced using effects or editing.

When I first entered the music school, I had zero knowledge about DAWs. All music making was done with acoustic instruments and vocals. The learning of DAWs was combined with other courses in sound art and electroacoustic music, which opened a new world for me to explore. I could spend hours designing a sound that cannot be played on acoustic instruments (or at least not easily). The tools give me much freedom to create sounds

that I like and go beyond verbal explanations. The abstract music palette breaks free from the limitations of physical instruments and objects. The only limitation is imagination.

When creating music from DAWs by one musician one track at a time using virtual instruments and recordings, there are a lot of work and time spent alone. However, studio work does not mean total isolation. By collaborating with other artists, might it be another musician using virtual instruments, or a musician who plays acoustic instrument or objects, or visual artists, or movers, the inspiration from each other is endless.

No matter the music is made by using virtual instruments or acoustic instruments, using familiar musical elements in terms of harmony, rhythm, form, or using unusual sound and timber, irregular musical structure, each listener has their own preference. I am attracted towards abstract music but at the same time still enjoy well produced music with familiar musical elements.

NOVELTY

We often hear from listeners commenting on certain music as "easy" or "hard" to listen to. The endpoints of this dimension are: "familiar" and "novel".

Landy proposed the concept of "something to hold on to" when discussing how composition can provide a helping hand to the listeners in understanding a piece in electroacoustic music. The consistent parameters throughout a piece can offer the audience something to follow even with the absence of melody, meter or tonic (Landy, 1994). When traditional elements are prevalent in a piece with familiar form of melody, meter, rhythm, timbre, musical idioms and structure, it does not demand as much effort from the listeners as it is comparing to the piece with novelties in all musical dimensions. The unfamiliarity and complexity in music would result to higher difficulty level for the listener to follow or understand.

The generative theory of tonal music (GTTM) explains the "formal description of the musical intuitions of a listener who is experienced in a musical idiom" (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 2010, p. 1). The musical intuitions are the unconscious knowledge of the listeners to understand the musical style or idiom through recognizing the patterns in musical elements, such as melody, pitch, timbre, rhythm, etc. If a listener is less exposed to certain style of music, it would take more time and effort to become accountant.

The repetition in a composition is a tool to introduce musical ideas to the listeners. There are two kinds of repetition in music. One is the repetition within music and the other is we as listeners repetitively choose to listen to familiar songs or pieces again and again. In music, "Repetition is a sort of natural state of music" (Zuckerkandl, 1973, p. 219). New elements would break the repetitive and meditative cycle in music, and in turn, require more concentration and effort to recognize and internalize them. Similarly, if we are exposed to an unfamiliar genre or style of music, irregularity in rhythm, melody, structure or sound texture, it would require more energy from the listener to follow (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 75).

The relationship between record sales and novelty constructs a subtle balance which forms a bell shape. The least novelty and the most novelty would result in least sales, while a balanced novelty combined with recognizable elements from familiar music style would most likely have the higher record sales (Rogers & Ogas, 2022). Our ears always enjoy familiar sounds but would always pursue new interesting music.

For producers who work for commissions for themselves or for other artists, especially those who aim at commercial returns, it is necessary to keep in mind the balance between endearment and conservativeness. For artists who produce their own music, it is a choice to make a self-analysis to understand their location in the music market. It is, however, not to say that artists should consider this balance before music creation unless it is their deliberate choice. The pre-planning can guarantee certain success but would limit the artistic input because, after all, music making is an intuitive process.

In the song "Soda", there are novelties in rhythm, vocals, and lyrics. The composing process of "Soda" started with playing around with soda bottles' opening sound: a sudden hiss after the crisp sound from metal cap being opened and the carbon dioxide rushing out from the soft drink. Then I realized that this sound can be used rhythmically and be part of the beat in the composition. The song starts with only the bottle opening sample (normal samples and manipulated samples) to form the percussive but not regular four on the floor introduction for vocals. Then gradually during the verse while the vocals were telling the story about comparing personality with different types of drinks, I gradually added in normal sounding digital drum beat until the second verse, the normal drumbeat become dominant. The whole song would not be interesting if the normal sounding drumbeat already jumped in from the start. I consider this combination a negotiation between novelty and familiarity both in sound design and rhythm.

Vocally, the recordings have been pitched up to double the original pitch. This gives a wicked playfulness to the speech voice in verses. This vocal texture corresponds to the bottle opening sound in percussion. However, the balance between novelty and familiarity lays in the syncopated rhythm, which is oriented from funk and hip hop.

Metaphors have been used in love songs traditionally. In the research on love songs, Climent and Coll-Florit put love song metaphors into three categories: closeness, physical contact or unity (Climent & Coll-Florit, 2021). The lyrics in "Soda" describe a toxic relationship using different drinks as metaphor. It has its own novelty but is still relatable and self-explanatory, not far-off that listeners cannot comprehend. The lyrics talk about a relationship with irony and playfulness instead of fully embracing it.

Looking back on the different versions of production of my songs from different period of time, they reflect the growing maturity in negotiation between novelty and familiarity. The early works turned to introduce new and irregular elements everywhere without offering a consistent thread for the listeners to hold on to. The skills in recycle and vary existing music material and ideas or compose with a clear intention all helped to create a balance between novelty and familiarity.

MELODY

From here onwards, the discussion is more relevant to specific elements of music: melody, lyrics, rhythm, and timber.

A melody is not simply a collection of notes with a certain way of arrangement. Rogers discussed the phrasing of the melody, the contour of a melody, harmony, chord progression, and how much role the melody holds in a song. The endpoints of the melody dimension are "narrow" and "wide" in terms of the melody contour (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 89).

A good melody has a captivating contour that induces emotions from listeners. However, only following the exact notes and the accompaniment of other instruments is not enough to convey the underlying meaning. It is the vocalist or instrumentalist's job to *lead* the song into the realm where music comes alive. If the music is played exactly as the MIDI clips in DAWs, it would feel stuck because it lacks the momentum in driving the music forward. A good singer or band leader can make the music become a breathing living being.

A good song needs not only good melody, lyrics, harmony, chord progression, arrangement, timber, but also the core drive to bring out the true color. As a singer myself, a

song can be sung with different emotions, which will bring out different colors in voice, phrasing, tempo, and even meanings that were not originally intended. The human factors here from the singer would affect the rest of the elements to follow, correspond, grow, which in turn will inspire the composition to flourish. The intuition, freedom to improvise, performance energy, musical communication in music making and music playing can bring music alive from scores or MIDI demos.

Sometimes, melody has a fundamental role in a song, but sometimes, songs need to rely on a combination of things, such as melody, groove, and chord progression to achieve the result the composer wants. My song "Sky Horse" was melody-oriented piece. The melody is always prominent even though the piece used many orchestral instruments. It starts immediately with an orchestral introduction with string and horns play melody and countermelody to build up a small climax then sudden discontinues the movement to let the vocal come in. Throughout the piece, there are several buildups until the modulation one whole tone up. But the vocalist is always at the foreground leading everything from beginning until the end.

The recording of vocals has many versions that I did over the years. I decided to use the very first recording because the subtlety in the phrasing was the best to convey the meaning, even though that recording is not the best in terms of sound quality. This brings up an interesting observation. Recording from the time when the song was just composed turned to have the most passion and emotion. It again approved that musician's identity is a moving and changing thing. With the increasing of life experience, our values, views, and expressions would change in a way that is hardly noticeable. But through the recording for "Sky Horse" vocal, I realized how much I have changed, not only my voice quality, but how I express my feelings. The change is so obvious, when you put two records side by side, it would give the listeners the impression that they are sung by two different singers. As I want to preserve the original atmosphere in this song, the vocal recording from years ago fits the best. If it was replaced by new recordings, it would break the fragile balance that the song needs the most.

As Rogers pointed out, understanding melody pattern is an innate capability in our brain that is co-developed with the capacity to recognize speech patterns. The influence of our native language on our conception of melody contour can be traced back to infancy. Rogers gives three attributes to the melody dimension in our listener's profile: melodic range, articulation, and complexity (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 108). Reflect on my native language Chinese, it occurred to me that I do compose melody with large intervals for lifting or falling

contour that might be influenced by the tones in my native language. For example, in the chorus of "Sky Horse", the melody starts with an ascending arpeggio of minor seventh leap, then immediately followed by a minor six falling interval, almost instantly a second arpeggio lifting begin which is a major seventh interval and a major seventh falling interval. This type of contour appears quite often in my melodies to express a poignant yearning or nostalgic emotion. Besides the influence from my native language, I realized that this simple preference in construct melody does reflect my listening sweet spot, and this sweet spot reflects the influence of life experiences on my composition.

The preference in wide pitch intervals does not mean that I only enjoy legato type of articulation. On the contrary, I quite enjoy the staccato type of expression as in funk, disco, and hip pop, just like I appreciate simple and tasteful melodies but also am drawn to the bewildering power from complexity. The sweet spot is not really a spot but a spectrum on the axis of the abovementioned three attributes.

From the listener's profile of mine I have been trying to understand so far, I do realize that my personal taste in music would largely influence what music I produce for myself and what I am interested in or capable of producing for others, that is the artistic identity of a producer.

LYRICS

In the lyrics dimension, the endpoints are "personal" and "general". When singing other people's songs, one can temporarily become someone else (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 119). It is true that when we listen to a song, we associate ourselves with the message of the song. If we share the same experience, we relate to the lyrics. If we are not familiar with or have not yet experienced the same experience, we would use this as an opportunity to feel what other people feel during the song.

This is true for listening to music but also true for writing lyrics for songs. For example, in the song "Friday Night Dance", I try to create a personality that is fond of dancing out on weekends, daring and not afraid of calling out to someone this person is attracted to from the lyrics such as "I ma take you out tonight. We'll go dancing through the night", "I can make you happy like a fool like a fool with extra cool you don't learn at school". This persona matches the stage persona but not the daily life of me. It is common for singers, standup comedians, actors to have different personalities on and off stage/camera. We experience

something new through a song, a movie, or a book, might it be sci-fi stories or just another anecdote of someone's neighbor.

As the "music inputs to our brain get divided into lyrics and melody before they are reunited...", we tend to listen to a song with different focus (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, pp. 117–121). When I listen to music, I usually focus more on melody instead of lyrics. I would only check the lyrics if the lyrics were particularly interesting to me. There are many songs that I like that I am not familiar with the lyrics even I have listened to them for many years. This is almost away the case when I listen to popular songs nowadays compared to old songs from last century. I found it is easier to understand the lyrics of old songs due to the style of singing and style of enunciation. There are many songs nowadays that favor slurring speech or mumbling that is difficult to understand the lyrics anyway.

Because of the focus on melody, I tend to write melody first then come up with lyrics. It is usually a difficult task to accomplish. I did a self-diagnosis was done through all the songs that I have composed over the years. If I have ready lyrics in mind, when I compose a song, the melody is more like an embellishment to accentuate the meaning of the lyrics. This is the easiest approach for me. For example, the first line of lyrics of the song "Another House" popped out when I was taking a bus: "You don't live here, I live far away, we never talk, we just sometimes text." The melody came naturally with the lyrics like a water downfall. The rest of the lyrics and melody expanded along the direction of the story and quickly I was able to take this song to arranging and instrumentation phase.

Another song I have written with the working title "All These Years" is an opposite case in terms of lyrics writing. I composed the melody quite naturally on piano in a relatively short time. But the lyrics have been difficult to match the melody. Even though I have a general feeling of what the melody is, because of the lack of specific context, I have not been able to come up with satisfying lyrics. It felt like there was no grip to put my hands on. The more options I have, the more trapped I am.

The third approach is to compose melody with a general topic in mind even lyrics are not written down yet word by word. The "Sky Horse" is a good example. I sat down at the piano, and quickly came up with a melody. I mumbled with some random syllables. But different from "All These Years", I had a topic in mind about combating depression.

Because of the co-existence yet separate processing of melody and speech, patients with Aphasia are encouraged to sing what they want to say because melodic intonation helps to

"string individual words together" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 121). The mumbling with random syllables when writing a song is a crucial part of writing lyrics. The mumbling when I was writing "Sky Horse" is not aimless but almost speechlike. It was if I was too emotional to express myself but temporally could not find the right words. I started with some words in a phrase, and then found more words to fill in the blank.

The whole lyrics are conversational meaning I was singing like I was talking to someone:

Verse 1

You,

you are sitting there

Watching out of the window

I see,

You want to leave

To the place I can't go

Pre-Chorus 1

The sky is gray and pale

With a flying horse cloud

But the farm down is green

With the fruits of hope I grow

Verse 2

I cry,

Without a tear

Cuz my heart is dry

I jump,

And close my eyes

Let my body tremble

Pre-Chorus 2

Give me a chance

Let me show you what we are

The shinning stars

Are the eyes in the sky

I sing to myself on the tree

When day is gone and

The night comes back in

The moonlight is cold and inviting

I write down the night sky your name

Verse 3

You said,

Follow me no more

This is our very end

Turn around,

you smile to me

Like this is our only choice

Chorus

If you are falling down

I fall down faster to catch you

If you're a fish to save

I cry out an ocean for you

If you are falling down

I fall down faster to catch you

If you're a fish to save

I cry out an ocean for you

(repeat)

Music allows musicians to express in a poetic way that cannot be done in a daily context. I think even though my perception goes straight towards the melody when I listen to music. It is the lyrics that would truly touch me in the end.

Among writing many of my songs, "Sky Horse" was the one that I had the most satisfying compositional process and most satisfying result all because the lyrics are very personal and also it is a topic that many other people can relate to. Even though I tend to notice first the melody the first time I listen to a new song, I do look up the lyrics from time to time. Sometimes the lyrics surprise me and I fell in love more with a song. But sometimes the lyrics might ruin a song I liked initially because the lyrics do not express genuine feelings. For me, the writing of lyrics is also affected by the theme and whether or not it is a genuine reflection of my artistic world. When writing for a certain type of music where the lyrics do not relate to me, it usually made the lyrics writing a time consuming task.

RHYTHM

The rhythm dimension has two endpoints "straight" and "syncopated" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 143). I am always drawn to syncopated and funk music. But I have not given it any thought to why it is like this. Back to the 90s when China adopted the opening-up program, foreign music started to come in China. A lot of cassette tapes and CDs were sold with edge cut off because music was still controlled. I remember my father brought home sometimes five sometime ten CDs or tapes. Nearly all of the music he purchased was western classical music. The Internet was not common at all back then, not to mention personal computers. The only source to listen to music was from radios, TVs, cassette tapes and CDs. There was very limited foreign music on TV and radio, mostly western classical music or Chinese pop music. The first time I encountered rhythm was at a music store. I was waiting for someone next to some low tables full of tapes and CDs. There was a CRT TV hanging next to a roller shutter entrance playing music videos. Suddenly, I was mesmerized by this black panther that turned into a human in a video. He began to dance with such passion that I could not move my eyes away from him for even a second. I didn't know who he was, but I felt the strongest attraction for the first time. He was dancing without music. But from his gestures and dance moves, the rhythm was the most obvious and intense. I was frozen and watched the whole video without taking a big breath. I was interrupted for a moment but immediately I returned to watching. With no money to buy, I had to leave without even knowing who he was because no one bothered to talk to a kid who was obviously not going to buy anything.

Michael Jackson was one of the biggest if not the most superstars back in those days. Even in China where music has limited access to, people would know his name. Among my small collection of CDs and DVDs, the one I watched the most was one of his hit collections. It

contains the most well-known songs and footage of fans crying and fainting at his arena concerts. My parents could not relate to say the least and quite against me watching and listening to his music because western classical music was deemed superior. If I listened to popular music in general, then it was rotten behavior. But no matter how much western classical music was played in the household, how many years I studied to play classical piano, my natural attraction towards rhythmic and funky music could not be reduced. No matter how significant an influence our culture and environment of growing up have on our taste in identity and music, I believe there is something in us that has made us attracted to certain music that has little to do with our native culture.

There is a reason why people are generally comfortable with 4/4 time signature because it is the natural rhythm of walking. However, there is still the difference between feeling rhythm in downbeat and upbeat, straight or syncopated (Rogers, P158). My dance moves have always been in the style of "pigeon neck" (Rogers, p160). I feel the most satisfying dancing with syncopated funky music. Even though the syncopated complex rhythm requires more effort for me to practice, I enjoy it and never considered it a burden. But no matter what type of rhythm, people always feel united upon hearing a familiar rhythm from a group of friends to tens of thousands of fans in an arena. It is the experience to connect with each other and to be close to the artist that sells the live performances even though the sound quality might not be as good as listening alone at home with high fidelity speakers.

My preference in syncopated rhythm is reflected in many of my songs: Friday Night Dance, Soda, Bounce, etc. I would have either a melancholic slow song that emphasizes melody, such as "Sky Horse", or a fast syncopated song like "Friday Night Dance". I do compose music in other than these two fashions in other genres, such as electroacoustic music, but when I write a pop song, these are the two most frequent ways to express myself.

TIMBRE

Timbre is hard to explain to others verbally as it is unique and personal to individual listeners. Wishart define timber as "A catch-all term for all those aspects of a sound not included in pitch and duration. Of no value to the sound composer!" (Wishart, 1994, p. 135). This dimension contains two endpoints: "acoustic" and "electronic" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 184).

We built up the connection between sound and object/action from an early age to help us to understand and identify the world. This is the timbre-source relation that is deeply planted in our memories and life experiences. Just like we recognize that hard objects would make a different sound falling on the ground compared to soft objects, we associate sounds with each instrument. Each instrument has its own role and is expected to deliver a certain sound in solo, ensemble or orchestra performances. For musicians, we practice and perfect our skills in our instrument to produce the desired sound. Certain sounds became so iconic that we would immediately understand the musical context upon listening to them, for example the Roland TR-808 drum machine that has been frequently used in hip hop, rap, electronic music (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 175). The link also exists between timbre and time period (Lavengood, 2020). For music from certain era or music that imitates the style from certain era, we like to comment by saying for example "This song has the 80's sound". The prominent aesthetic in each decade would instantaneously remind us of the sound of that period, especially when we lived through it.

However, stepping into the world of electroacoustic world especially acousmatic music helped me to break the link between timbre and sound source, providing me a new way to look at traditional instrument and what is instrument. Sound and the meaning can be isolated from the source. One can appreciate sound purely from the timbre and abstractness (Emmerson & Smalley, 2001, p. 3).

This turned out to be a game changer for me to rethink the concept of music, sound, and composition. I started to incorporate the aesthetics of acousmatic music with pop music. This approach gives me many inspirations of what other possibility there is to make a pop song outside of the style of the chart toppers. If the aim is not to produce a standard pop song, then there is freedom to have novelty in a production. Instead of historical timbre in certain genre, a new timbre can refresh the ears. The novelty can be in song structures, lyrics, melodies as well. The balance between popularity and novelty is delicate. But as our ears always look for something new and our perception of novelty is changing over time. What was considered novel would become familiar to us nowadays, although some novelty would be lost and never made it to be widely accepted. When choosing what type of music to make, it is relatively decided how much commercial success it would be. Every artist has their own value in what is success in life. It could be to freely express their artistic view, or to pursue the maximum financial gain, or it could be somewhere in between, or it could be both. But we can only

make music that makes us satisfied, then the unique listener's music profile will eventually decide what it is that they like.

Timbre is the quality of a sound. But from a broader point of view, timbre can be the sound of a city as well. There is a contrast between my culture origin of China and current residing European country Finland. There is an environmental timber to my ear. Every time I travel back to China, it felt like I am in a totally different sonic world. My home city Kunming is warm and moist. It never snowed until recent years due to the climate changes Kunming started to have very light snow in exceptionally cold temperature according to local standard. It is called "Spring City" for a reason. Kunming has 1 million more population than the whole Finland but is one seventh of the land area of Finland. The sonic timbre of a city includes many sounds. They can be from the traffic, construction, birds and insects, human talking, shopping mall music, restaurants, parks, etc. A typical day in Kunming would be sunny, butterflies and birds flying among flowers and trees with the smell from soil after a quick pouring shower. On the street, food stands along the street with a row of restaurants behind them on both sides of the street. You can hear sounds from cooking, people's conversation, food stand's owner promotes loudly of their products, cars passing by one by one. But a typical day in Finland would be getting off a quiet train ride after work, then go to nearby forest for a walk, looking at the snow covering everything, icicles hanging with the tip reflecting the sun from lower horizon.

Everything above combined with the mental state of being away from home and being together with family has influenced my composition. The difference shows up in overall sound of the compositions, sound choice, instrumentation, lyrics and so on. Similarly to artists who take a weekend off to a countryside cottage for an intensive music creating session, going to another country means to take myself out of a familiar environment that usually give me a new perspective and inspirations in creating music.

FORM AND FUNCTION

This section I discuss the importance of listening to records and albums.

In Rogers' book, she raises the question: What is the function of an album? Who would listen to the music and when to have the best listening response? Before getting into nowadays the sophisticated algorithms or analytical tools, it is worthy to go back to the novelty-popularity bell curve. "The more limited the function, the less the commercial

appeal"(Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 201). Rogers argues that highly functional forms would stay on the safe side of the novelty-popularity bell curve but would face much more competition as a result (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 202).

Ultimately, commercial success is important for music creation to be sustainable for the life of musicians and producers. Musicians and producers all listen to music, but they listen to different things with different perspectives. Musicians listen to their heart for music making while producers look at a bigger picture for the overall atmosphere and function of the music.

Even though they listen differently, it is important for artists and producers to match their view towards music. Which producer should an artist collaborate with? I remember a lunch conversation with a producer I could potentially collaborate with. We talked about the artist that we like, the sound palette we like and have, individual workflow, what kind of beat we enjoy, what kind of live format we desire and so on. The interest match always lays down the foundation for future work and makes the working conversation easier and smoother.

Despite the personal listener's profile, music production is affected also by the mega trend in changing listening habits. Technology affects how people listen to music. With the appearance of Sony Walkman, listening can happen anywhere anytime. That also transformed "active listening" to "passive listening", or "half listening" because people would listen to music while going about their other daily activities (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 203). Music, such as classical music, that requires "psychological space" becomes harder and harder to fit in people's ever busy life (Behrman, 2022). Music that demands much attention from the listeners would not appeal to most of the audience. With shortened attention span and less leisure time for listening to music in general, music production targeting at mass audience tent to become safe with less surprises as decided by the law of supply and demand.

Inside the functional form, there are differences in genres and styles. I used to wonder can one artist do music in more than one genre. Then again it requires defining genre precisely. Every artist has their own style that does not matter in which genre they create music. We can hear their style throughout. The style is decided by their listener's profile and what type of music is appealing to them. There is a benefit of having a coherent artistic image. That is to build a steady fan base and cultivate the targeted market.

One saying that is attributed to Abraham Lincoln is: "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." It is impossible for a caterer to cater to everybody's taste. The three groups, critics, musicians, and public, do not have the same criteria when listening to music. The "Triple Crown" as the overlapping area among the three groups is very small (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 207). I remember the experience of attending a Dirty Loop's live concert in Helsinki. Jonah Nilsson, the keyboards and lead vocalist of the band, asked the audience the question "how many people here are musicians?" Almost everyone in that venue raised their hands. Then he followed up a second question "Who here are not musicians?" Then the audience looked around and could barely find any hands rose. Dirty Loop became famous due to their jazz fusion cover of popular songs, such as "Baby" by Justin Bieber, "Rolling in the Deep" by Adele and so on. They rearranged with jazz aesthetic of the songs that were produced to appeal to mass audiences that might not otherwise appeal to musicians who listen more to the music complexity or instrumental techniques. Their work might gain respect from musicians but might not be so easy to gain the public who would minimize the effort due to the change in our habit of listening to music.

Among the songs that I prepared for my final master's degree concert, "Another House" is a pop song that I composed as practice to write a song that lean against the left side of the novelty-popularity bell curve. It means that I used familiar form and no surprise in the composition. I used a synthesizer sound with a timbre that can be commonly found in pop music and strictly followed the verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus pop structure with a frequently used tool modulation to emphasize the chorus in the end. When I invited friends to listen, the reaction from listeners was that they immediately understood what type of music I was trying to make from the sound timbre, harmony, rhythm, singing style, and lyrics. A similar reaction was found among singers and other instrumentalists in my band that this song is the most straightforward song to sing and to play.

The process to produce "Friday Night Dance" is a good example of finding artist's identity. "Friday Night Dance" started as a deliberately composed melody as opposed to melody that comes with inspirations. It was written with the stylistic of city pop in mind. The first production of beat and background instrumental were also aligned with city pop aesthetics. However, writing lyrics was a quite difficult task and the right lyrics just never came. The song was put aside with a rough structure with the hint of city pop in an Ableton Live project and a cell phone recorded hummed melody.

After a while, I went back to the song determined to finish it. I opened the Ableton Live project and listened again and felt that I wanted to try another style. I abandoned the city pop idea and started the song with a strong sequenced plucking bass and strings pad inspired by 80s funk and disco. Without vocals, I smoothly finished the background music with pleasure. The whole song started to take form. I further did rough mixing before I was ready to go to studio for vocal recording. It was during a long holiday break. The studio was available quite often. Just as I thought everything was going smoothly and I could finish the song in two days, I realized that the vocals did not match up with the background instrumental music that I had finished. I went back and forth to find the good key for my voice while the real issue lays in the singing technique. For strong and funky music, the airy vocal just doesn't cut it. I changed to the lower key but just to realize that that was where the singing problems were. With the difficulty finding a comfortable key for a song that is fast and requires nimble motions, I struggled with pronunciation more. So, after I decided on the key, I was again looking for a comfortable tempo. A lot of time was wasted in trying and that only fueled the frustration. I spent several late evenings in the studio but couldn't decide on the result. There was a lot of work that should be done, and decisions should be made before going into the studio due to the time pressure.

6 Discussion

After looking at my musical aesthetic preferences through the seven dimensions of listener's file, I realized how important to understand my own aesthetic preferences. Understanding one's own aesthetic preferences is the first step to become a producer for music self-production. A good producer should get to know the artist through their strengths and weaknesses, singing technique, temperament under pressure, and flexibility in music creativity. Knowledge in those aspects is important to make decisions that would affect the key, tempo, melody, lyrics, beat, instrument, function of the song, workflow etc. In my case, besides the clear benefit to find another producer to get feedback and another fresh pair of ears, I became clearer about my own strengths and weaknesses that I would not know otherwise. The Rogers' listener's profile is for all listeners. The listener can be a producer, a musician, or anyone who listens to music. It is a good framework to understand individual's musical aesthetic preferences and use the understanding for production, composing, improvising, deepening knowledge about music. The most important thing is not to just form an individual profile and listen to music that fits into this profile. On the contrary, we should venture into the unfamiliar territory to give our ears a chance to listen to new sound, so we are sure the listener's profile is true to ourselves. Also, our aesthetic preference might change over the time as our life changes. The listeners' profile should be updated.

To produce my own songs, I acted as my own producer. The production process enables me to listen closely to my own songs while analyzing why I am attracted to certain style or timbre based on what I have been listening to and internalize into my inner personal music library. The inner library does not necessary contain a specific number of music as sheets stored in music library. The inner library is the knowledge, aesthetic preferences and music intuition that I have gained and practiced through music listening and music making experiences. The experiences are the resources and fuel to do music work. Similar to the listener's profile, the inner personal library is a constantly updated and refueled tank that keeps evolving throughout life.

There are several skills I acquired through this process that helped to establish my own artistic identity including compositional skills, feedback and collaboration (co-production) skills, and instrumental skills.

6.1 Compositional skills

The production process requires constant decision making from aesthetic direction in terms of for instance genre, style, overall timber, dynamic, musical gesture and metaphor. Also, it

requires making practical decisions such as tempo, key, arrangement, structure, and music ideas. Tempo and key can influence the general feeling of a song, and also affect the phrasing and expression in voice. Tempo and key should be the first thing to fix before vocal recording to avoid unnecessary waste of time and energy such as the recording session of "Friday Night Dance". Music ideas are always endless. However, arrangement and structure are two useful tools to limit and recycle ideas. I designed many sound for "Bounce" but soon I realized that it has become a distraction from the core of the compositional idea. So I decided on structure and arrangement to repeat certain sections so the listeners would not be overwhelmed. The process gives me a chance to practice how to utilize the musical knowledge I have learned and also give me a bigger picture and clear view towards my composition intentions. Sometimes it is hard to get rid of a very good riff which does not serve the purpose to support a song. I learned to save the riff for other songs instead of desperately trying to fit it into the current project because I just could not let it go.

The production process also helped to optimize my workflow. For example, finding a suitable key and a suitable singing style for the vocal can affect the overall timbre of the piece and subsequently affect the decision on instrumentation. Decisions like these should be made clear at the early stage to avoid extra labor to overhaul all the work in constructing the sound world.

6.2 Feedback and collaboration (co-production)

Every listener has their own musical aesthetic preferences. Those preferences can be a good tool for music production but also can be a limitation. When I invited friends and colleagues for a listening session of my work, it never stop surprising me how the feedback can widen my views. Peer listening and feedback form a basis of firm producing practice. Peer feedback provides a second or third opinion for music production. It is up to the producer themselves to decide how to utilize the opinions. Peer feedback is especially important for my music production. Because I function as my own producer, it is easy to be blind in the process of music making. It is necessary to have several pairs of fresh ears to get a comprehensive picture of the music.

A group feedback can provide a producer general understanding of how a song is received. While working with a few producers can give in-depth feedback in terms of musical, aesthetic elements and mixing suggestions. Being able to give feedback also reflect how a musician look at music from their artistic identity.

While collaborating with other producers, it is important to have shared personal music personal library to have the motivation to help each other to explore music in the same direction. But diverse background would bring good challenge to learn from and challenge each other.

Other listeners can hear what I do not hear when I am blind from over listening. Other listeners can see the core quality and encourage amplifying it.

6.3 Instrumental skills

During the process of production of my own music, an interesting phenomenon drew my attention. While I was trying to finish some old songs that I recorded years ago, I noticed that my voice production has changed over the years. On top of that, my expression also changed due to the changes in personal values. Even though they are my songs, and I produced them, but it felt like two singers and two producers collaborating as a team from different time. With the change in timber in singing voice and with the development in singing technique, my old songs have become new songs.

Practice singing for music production helped me to train my voice in certain genres, to understand better about my voice quality, register, and how to compose to accentuate my voice quality and singing technique. Listening to vocal recordings give an objective view of my own voice. The music writing also practiced to improvise singing on the spot, and to experiment voice colors and expressions. The vocal recording also helped me to explore different recording technique and the possibilities to use voice as an instrument through manipulating the recording material.

Through the production processes, I obtained an overall view of what kind of singer I am, how my voice sound likes, what my strength and weakness are.

6.4 My listener's profile

It has been an eye-opening self-realization process of what kind of artist I am and what kind of artist I want to become based on the listener's profile I have made for myself through the production of my own compositions. All the realizations were built on the exploration of my identity. "..., your experience of aesthetic pleasure is bound to your sense of personal identity" (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 233). We simply cannot choose what we like, we just simply do. This is probably related to us being different individuals, having different life stories, coming

from different part of the world, going through different life stages, encountering different friends and families, working towards different values, and believing in different meanings of life.

Here is how I mark my listener's profile based on Rogers' seven dimensions. Rogers categorizes the first three dimensions as aesthetic dimensions and the last four as musical dimensions (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 227). Here is a chart of my own personal listener's profile on seven dimensions:
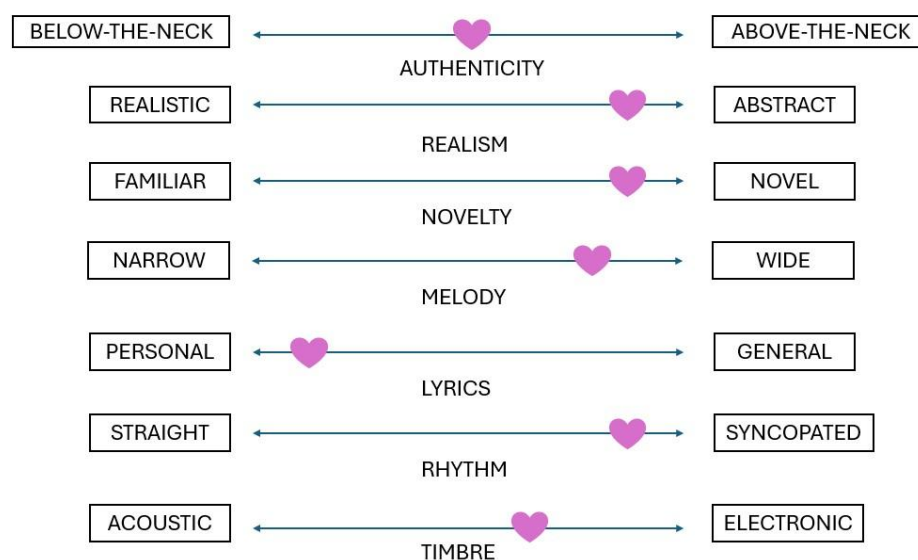
Figure 1 The listener's profile of the target listener in this case study. This graph is based on Roger's listener profile chart (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 229))

- In terms of authenticity, I sit in the middle between below-the-neck and above-the-neck. I deeply care about the raw emotions and expressions, but I am also analytical about the music that I make. The proportion of above-the-neck might seem to gradually decrease and below-the-neck would more and more take over. But I believe this is a necessary learning curve that every musician could experience at some point of their career.
- I am always attracted to more abstract sounds or thinking of sounds as it is separated from the realistic sound source. Sound itself is interesting enough for me. We normally associated sound with a sound source. But because of this, we also

tend to not hear the beauty in sound because they are very much normalized. It is a pleasure to listen to sound from a detached point of view from their physical source.

- Novelty for me is very important. I would get bored easily if there was no *novelty* inside a piece in terms of song writing or composing. In the music that does not provide enough *novelty* for me, I would listen more closely to find out if there is a undiscovered gem hidden somewhere in the music and then figure out how to bring the good quality forward.

- I have my soft spot for melancholic melodies with big intervals in melody contour, for example "Somewhere over the Rainbow" by Harold Arlen. I'm not so much a fan of over repetitive melodies, for example techno, or flat one note melodies that do not have emotional momentum, for example Taylor Swift.

- A song can touch me if it has good lyrics regardless of their musical dimensions or aesthetic dimensions.

- It doesn't matter how much rhythmic music I listen to from EDM to world music, the syncopated rhythm in funk which is rooted in the African American communities always make my body move and feel like myself.

- It is hard to pinpoint exactly where I sit on the timbre scale. I appreciate the organic feeling in acoustic music but also strongly attracted to electronic music that is full of emotions.

As Rogers pointed out, music is just like a lover. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. The lover might have small or big flaws, but "Your beloved will never be perfect – but they can be perfect for you." (Rogers & Ogas, 2022, p. 237).

7 Conclusions

In the end, I decided to produce my song "Sky Horse" with a cinematic approach. I had an orchestra sound timbre in mind, so I used strings, horns, flute, timpani, to support the main instruments piano and electric guitar. There are two ways to finish the song. One is to record the song with real instruments. One is to use virtual instruments combined with acoustic instruments. Either way, I need to find resources to make it happen, such as players, sound engineers, etc.

I underwent a process from not knowing what to do to produce a song that is up to current publishing standard, to understand what I need to take initiative to produce a song from beginning to publishing with today's music standard. Beyond answering the research questions of this study, I learned to answer the following artistic questions, which help me to understand how to develop self-producing, high-quality aesthetic artistic identity in the future digitalized era:

1. How to become a music producer for my own artistic work?

In order to become a music producer, I have learned to have musical vision and execution skills. The music vision varies from person to person, but the key is to recognize the uncut gem and bring it to life. The execution skills include musical skills and technical skills. The musical skills include composing (if you need to start from writing a song yourself), lyrics writing (or working with lyricist), arranging, orchestrating, notating, etc. The technical skills include proficiency in DAWs, recordings technique, ear for sound design, mixing, and/or mastering.

2. What kind of initiatives does a producer need to take to serve their musical identity?

As the music industry demands more and more from an artist, they need primarily to be a musician, secondarily acquire skills to manage non-music related tasks such as promotion and marketing. Because there are different types of producers and producers might not be good at everything, assembling a team around you is the key to making things happen. The team would include musicians, producers/co-producers, recording engineers, mixing engineer, mastering engineer. This applies to both DAWs oriented productions, acoustic oriented productions, or both combined productions.

3. How does the self-analysis in production help in exploring my artistic identify?

I gained structured knowledge about my own aesthetic preference and my own artistic identity as a musician and as a producer through the production process for my own artistic

work. From the macro perspective, this experience helped me to crystallize the reason to make music and what kind of artist I would like to become. From micro perspective, the production process offered me an environment to systematically improve my skills in composition, instrument, arranging, and improvising. It also helped in optimizing my production workflow.

The approach to look into details in a case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994)and the way to explore my artistic identity through reflection of my music making process (Chang, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) enable me to look at my own musical aesthetic preference thoroughly. Because each individual has a unique listener's profile due to the different aesthetic preference, a comprehensive and in-depth discussion in the format of case study and autoethnographic approach are the most suitable in this study.

This study is limited to one musician's experience in self-producing. A more in-depth investigation on the same topic but with more case studies or more participants would help to understand better how music production helps to establish and develop musicians' and producers' artistic identity. Future studies can further investigate the development and formation of musical identity in both producers and artists through the interaction in production processes. In terms of the digital music streaming era we are living in, future studies can look into how the change into digital music industry influences the identity as an artist, and how the music streaming platforms are shaping and classifying the music that we listen, and what kind of skill set would benefit artists in developing their long term career.

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