



## A NEW BREED OF HOME STUDIO PRODUCER:

### Agency and cultural space in contemporary home studio music production

The purpose of this article is to examine the creative and collaborative agency of a young, professional home-based studio producer of popular music, who identifies as a *tracker/producer*. The study seeks to illuminate how music production technologies and practices shape our understanding of the agency of the contemporary aspiring music producer and to provide insight into the music production studio as a socially constructed cultural space. In this article the music producer is seen to do more than just work with an artist on an existing work. Producing here means having a creative input on a song from the very beginning of the compositional process up until the point where the song is sent to the mastering engineer. By combining cultural study of music technology (Théberge 1997; Taylor 2001; Greene & Porcello 2005), which understands music technologies as cultural practices that produce and mediate musical meanings and experiences, and ethnographical methods, I approach the home-based music production studio as a cultural space (Bates 2012) where social and musical performances and interactions take place and meanings of music and its authorship are constantly in negotiation. My aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. What kind of a creative agent is the independent home-based studio pop music tracker/producer?
2. How is the creative agency of the producer constructed within a collective with respect to other creative parties working in the production of a song?
3. What kind of a cultural space is the digital home music production studio and how does it contribute to the construction of the tracker/producer's creative agency in a production process?

By answering these questions my aim is to “paint a picture” of the work of an aspiring pop music producer, who identifies first and foremost as a tracker/producer and is on the way to becoming an established figure in the industry (Vep-säläinen 2015a). By analyzing various forms of data gathered by ethnographic means I have acquired a multifaceted comprehension of the producer's aims, values, actions and interactions in the production process of the pop song. Furthermore, by listening closely to the song being produced and comparing versions of it at different stages of the production process I will provide yet another perspective on what the music producer's role in the production process is and what the producer's agency is with respect to the music that is being produced. Listening to versions of the song in its different developmental phases provides a chronological view of the production process. I understand close listening as synonymous with close reading, but with emphasis on “reading” sonic material instead of written texts. Close listening as a mode of music analysis promotes deep understanding rather than merely at the surface level (Richardson 2016). In this article I aim at increasing an understanding of the producer's role by finding connections between the music, the production process and the agency of the producer. Combined with interview<sup>1</sup> questions about the different versions of the song, I have obtained detailed insights into the producer's agency and musical judgment during the song's production process. Additionally, my choice of methodology has been an attempt to tackle the challenge of having to “chase a moving target” (Slater 2015: 67; Slater 2016: 170) while not being able to be con-

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews for this article were conducted in Finnish. I have translated any citations used in this article from Finnish to English while attempting to maintain the style of the language spoken by the interviewee(s). Therefore some of the citations may have grammatical errors.

stantly present when examining a song's production process, which took place at different times and different places during the course of almost a year and during which the creative parties involved could be working together at 5 minutes' notice. Despite my focus on the agency of the producer and the studio as a cultural space, I cannot avoid dealing with aspects related to the record industry, as "in popular music the musical, artistic, social, cultural, economic and technological aspects are merged, and separating them from one another can be very difficult if not impossible" (Muikku 2001: 31).

My intention here is not to imply that all of the results I present in this article would necessarily be true for all producers of the same status. I do nevertheless think that the producer I am describing here, Mikke Vepsäläinen, represents a somewhat typical aspiring Finnish producer of the 2010's and I do think that some of my findings have relevance beyond this individual case study. This is because I find it hard to believe that any producer could be an outlier to the extent that he/she is entirely independent of the prevailing practices, financial necessities and cultural norms of the music and record production trade.

In the following, I will first discuss earlier research on the music producer and the record production studio, after which I will discuss the methodological and theoretical background and introduce my research materials. After this I will give background information about the producer and the singer he worked with in this case study, after which I will analyze my research material. I will end this article with some concluding thoughts about the agency of the producer, his home studio as a cultural space and some suggestions for further research.

## Earlier study: The producer and the production studio

It is evident that writings on established "star producers" are interesting to readers both in the academic realm and within the general public. Studying the work of non-canonized producers who are not widely known might not be equally interesting to the general public but is important to music researchers, since it nevertheless produces knowledge about the actual "grass roots level" work and practices of music production and also brings up new perspectives on music production, on music producers, on agencies and on the producer's values be-

fore media content and a public image add a new layer of meaning to their work. Furthermore, studying the work of such producers offers a perspective on how careers are built in the music industry, giving a voice to the unknown producer before the heroic narrative of the successful, exceptionally talented and hard-working individual comes into play<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, studying producers “in the making” instead of established names sheds light on aspects of the present and future of the music industry instead of the past. While efforts to give a voice to relatively unknown producers working at the margins of the music industry have taken place before (see Crowdy 2007), it only partially remedies the fact that such voices have not yet been heard to a sufficient degree especially within the western pop industry. These facts motivate and provide justification for my research that focuses on a younger aspiring producer and so contributes to the academic research on the role of the producer.<sup>3</sup>

A considerable amount of writing on the role and agency of producers discusses the producer, his/her relationship to studio technology and how its development has contributed to the change in the creative role of the producer (Moorefield 2005: 111). Studies like this include Virgil Moorefield’s (2005) account, which takes a rather canonical<sup>4</sup> perspective on the development of the producer’s role, and Timothy Warner’s (2003) examination of a highly influential English pop music producer Trevor Horn. Mark Katz’s (2004) book on music and technology offers the concept *phonograph effect* as a tool for the examination of “any change in musical behavior—whether listening, performing or composing—that has arisen in response to sound-recording technology” (Katz 2004: 2). Horning (2004) adds to the list of authors who have written on technological development and its ramifications for the agencies of producers, musicians and engineers (Horning

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2 This discourse can be seen both in the media and to some extent in academia (e.g. Moorefield 2005; Warner 2003; Swedien 2009). I consider the researcher’s choice of concentrating on successful and famous professionals without questioning the reasons why these people are being chosen as objects of study to be taking a position in this direction.

3 Much of the literature on music production and producers is professional literature written to help production personnel to develop their skills. This kind of literature can be important for academic research, but does not primarily aim at producing scholarly knowledge. (See e.g. Swedien 2009; Visconti 2007)

4 I consider canonical any text which clearly constructs a chronological continuum of successful and famous individuals. Moorefield’s (2005) monograph presents a continuum of famous producers, who follow one another more or less in a master-apprentice -like fashion. This strongly resembles the canon formation of western classical composers (e.g., Citron 2000).

2004: 714–715). Earlier research on the home studio includes, for example, Denis Crowdy's (2007) ethnomusicological article on studios and their technological and acoustic shortcomings in the Solomon Islands.

In addition to discrepancies and similarities between different historical eras, the role of the producer and the dissemination of agency also vary depending on genre and production model. Sometimes the producer stays in the background while in others he/she takes a center-stage role (Moorefield 2005). Different styles and genres feature different production settings, in which the agents called "producers" might occupy altogether different roles. Bennett (2011) provides a typology of songwriting models, where the role of the producer ranges from someone completely excluded from the songwriting process to an active participant in it. He labels one of his models "top-line writing", in which

a completed backing track is supplied by a 'producer' to a top-line writer who will supply melody and lyric. The backing track acts as harmonic/tempo template but more crucially as inspiration for genre-apposite creative decisions, such as singability of a line.

Due to the similarities in role descriptions and terminology, this model, albeit simplistic, will work as a starting point in my article. Agencies do nevertheless change and intertwine.

Linking more specifically to the effects of (digital) technological development on the agencies of music production personnel, Alan Williams (2012) argues that the graphic display of the DAW (digital audio workstation) has shifted the power relations between the musician and the engineer by revealing secrets that were formerly accessible to engineers only. As the digital revolution has led to the home studio "being a prerequisite for any aspiring pop musician" (Warner 2003: 20), this idea can be developed even further to suggest that the DAW has also led to the blurring of the boundaries between the roles of musicians, songwriters, engineers and producers. The emergence of the DAW and its installation on laptops again has introduced the notion of the mobile studio and made the studio expand from its isolating physical confinements, although a mobile studio might call into question ideas of different kinds of isolations in the form of laptop screens and headphones as isolating elements (see Hosokawa 1984).

The home studio is not a very recent invention. Producers and artists started building project studios in their homes already in the 1970's. Up until the digital revolution, it was possible only for prominent individuals who could afford a "wide range of quality equipment to rival that of the commercial studios" (Théberge 1997: 232) as studio equipment was rather expensive and spaces with good acoustics were not cheap either. The emergence of MIDI sequencing, which offered the possibility to pre-produce music at home without the loss of audio fidelity, changed the nature of the home studio and resulted in the integration of the home studio and the professional studio. (Théberge 1997: 232.) The emergence of the DAW finalized the home studios' possibility to produce music that may rival the quality of commercial studios. In addition to the fact that home studios provide the opportunity to avoid paying rent to the studio owner, its development can also be seen as a phase in the continuum in the development of the independent studio. Along with the creative opportunities provided by developing studio technology, people started spending more time in the studio, which "instigated sweeping changes to studio design" (Horning 2013: 208), as people needed to enjoy the time spent in the studio. Furthermore, the home does not always offer the best conditions for music production even if it features the latest production technology and the most comfort; the home as a space entails values that do not necessarily go hand in hand with the idea of working. Moreover, since a home usually is not designed as a recording studio, acoustic shortcomings of the physical space might affect audio recording and mixing in undesirable ways.

## Theory and methodology: The ethnography of the music production studio, cultural space and agency

I consider myself a material-oriented researcher leaning towards the ethnomusicological research tradition (Bates 2012; Porcello 2004; cf. Rice 2008: 42)<sup>5</sup>. My position in this case study became that of something between an outsider and an

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<sup>5</sup> The study of record production is a new academic field with an introductory reader published as late as 2012 (Frith & Zagorski-Thomas). Ethnographic study of the music/record production studio is often not strongly theory oriented (e.g. Jarrett 2012) whereas theoretical considerations usually take place when the study of record production concentrates on the end result (Moore 2012a: 99; 2012b; Moylan 2007). This illustrates the fundamental difference between ethnographic approaches and musicological approaches (Mantere & Moisala 2012: 205)

insider. I was not involved in the creative process of the music produced during my fieldwork. I was nevertheless an insider to some extent, firstly because I used to do production work myself and therefore had some prior “tacit knowledge” (Horning 2004: 710–711) of music production, and secondly because I knew Vepsäläinen from before. I got acquainted with him in 2010 when I was asked to play the electric bass for a singer-songwriter, for whom Vepsäläinen played drums. Eventually we ended up playing together in various other short-time projects. We also played together in a more long-term act for about two years. Our active musical collaboration more or less faded into the background when he started to concentrate more on his work as a producer in the urban pop (see Burgess 2008) scene (in which I am very much an outsider). My prior work with Vepsäläinen was perhaps the very reason that I was allowed to observe his work and collaboration with the singer Ida Paul. As Bennett (2011) puts it:

The other challenge is that songwriting is not easy to document in practice. The first difficulty is finding songwriters who will agree to be observed, followed by the need to construct an observational environment that minimizes the risk of damaging the process due to the observer-expectancy effect.

Bennett’s notion mirrors back to the reason that I chose to study the work of this particular producer. Without initial trust based on a long-term work relationship, I find it rather unlikely that a producer would have opened up in interviews to the extent that he did, let alone let me sit in during production sessions in the studio.

The seven in-depth interviews of the producer Vepsäläinen and the singer Ida Paul (Vepsäläinen 2015a–c; 2016a–c; Vepsäläinen & Paul 2016) took place at Vepsäläinen’s home studio in Kamppi, Helsinki both during the production of the song “Kunhan muut ei tiedä” (Paul 2016b) (Eng. “As Long as the Others Don’t Know”; Paul & Vepsäläinen 2015a–d) and outside of production sessions. Field observations (Auvinen 2015a; 2016a–c) were written in a field diary during production sessions at Vepsäläinen’s home studio. Field recordings (Auvinen 2015b; 2016c) were made, photos taken (Auvinen 2016f–l) and video footage (Auvinen 2015d; 2016d–e) shot at Vepsäläinen’s home studio during production sessions. I have analyzed the materials according to the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009) in a triangulation (e.g.

Bennett 2011) of interviews and field observations, photos and video materials. When interviews are considered, the strength of this method for the interview lies in it “being interpretative in a double hermeneutic form” (Martin 2009: 55; see also Smith et al. 2009: 3). Furthermore this method has successfully been used before in similar studio ethnographic case studies in the field of the study of music production (Slater 2015; Slater & Martin 2012). The role of memory supported by videos, photos and field diaries “as a part of formalized reflection” (Slater 2016: 171) has also been of some importance.

In a study where the names of the case study subjects are revealed, questions about research ethics are important. Both Vepsäläinen and Paul, perhaps due to the fact that both have entered the industry quite recently, were to some extent concerned what certain interview quotations in a publicly available research article would do to their reputation within the industry. I overcame this problem by letting both of them read through and make redactions to my manuscript before sending it to be published. The redactions that the research subjects wanted to make were more or less cosmetic. This however ensured that I have the subjects’ full approval to publish anything that I wrote about them and that my research would not harm them in any way.

The concepts of *creativity*, *agency* and *cultural space* are central to my research questions in this article. For agency I draw on Timothy D. Taylor’s (2001: 35) definition of agency as “an individual actor’s or collective capacity to move within a structure, even alter it to some extent”. Basing this theory on Ortner’s (1996, quoted in Taylor 2001: 34) practice theory

provides a way of avoiding the traps of theorizing the subject and agency in the face of technology without falling back into the polarized positions of voluntarism on the one hand and some kind of structural determinism on the other.

Another strength of this definition is that it takes into account the premise that the production of a pop song is a collective effort (e.g. Hennion 1983: 160). For my purposes here, by structure I mean the song production process, which is a set of practices, values and ideas evolved over time facilitated by physical studio spaces and technologies used in the process. The production process nevertheless intertwines with larger structures of the music industry.

The concept of creativity in the music production context has previously been discussed by, for instance, Bennett (2011), McIntyre (2008), Gibson (2005), Slater (2015) and Slater & Martin (2012). All of the aforementioned more or less draw upon Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) systems model of creativity in which creativity results from

a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 6, quoted in McIntyre 2008).

When considering creativity in the case of "popular song the experts in question are consumers, albeit mediated by the mechanics of the music industry's pre-selecting gatekeepers (A&R, record companies, music publishers, radio playlisting etc)" (Bennett 2011). This conception of creativity suits this article well as it is compatible with the structuralist approach on agency. As McIntyre (2008) puts it

This is to say that a record producer's agency, the ability to make and effect decisions, is dependent on the structures, principally the domain and field, they encounter and surround themselves with.

I nevertheless share Bennett's (2011) concern about applying the systems model as such in the context of popular songs; it might lead to only enduring classics being regarded as truly creative. Therefore I concur with Bennett (2011) on the view that the

- - definition of creativity - - in songs has a lower threshold. There are many songs that are 'original works' (in the legal sense) that may become economically successful, but this does not necessarily mean that they will become influential on the domain of songwriting.

I would even take Bennett's idea a step further. I suggest that true creativity can occur even if a song is not economically successful, as in the contemporary situation it is very rare that a single song published on Spotify (as in this case study) becomes economically truly successful. A song enters the domain, which is the

field of works (McIntyre 2008), when it is published and validated by the field when listened to. In the case that a song is original and brings “novelty into the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 6, quoted in McIntyre 2008), creativity has taken place.

Discussions on cultural space in the field of the study of record production usually deal with the production studio, as it is the essential arena of record production. For my purposes in this article I draw from Eliot Bates’ (2012) ideas on the studio as a cultural space. Following Bates’ ideas I consider the production studio “simultaneously as acoustic environments, as meeting places, as container technologies, as a system of constraints on vision, sound and mobility, and as typologies that facilitate particular interactions between humans and nonhuman objects while structuring and maintaining power relations” (Bates 2012). Furthermore, I agree with Bates (2012) on his critique of previous conceptions of the studio space as a “laboratory” (Hennion 1989: 406), an “isolated non-space” (Théberge 2004) and an “assembly line” or a “workshop” (Kealy 1982, quoted in Bates 2012). As Bates (2012) notes, studios are unique and the choice of studio is not completely irrelevant from the perspective of the end product. From a techno-cultural perspective, these descriptions fail to see music technologies not as ends in themselves, but as systems complexly bound up with surrounding cultural practices and as systems that are shaping cultural meanings of music. The aforementioned analogies about the studio draw the attention to the work and away from the studio itself, making the assumption that the product would turn out the same regardless of “which particular laboratory or assembly-line was used” (Bates 2012). Yet much of the discourse surrounding music-recording studios suggests that each studio is unique and has its own sound (Bates 2012), not to mention the mythological reputation of certain studios (Gibson 2005: 191). Questions about how unique home studios are from the end product’s perspective can however be raised when and if music producers become consumers to the extent that many will purchase the same production technology (Théberge 1997). This understanding of the studio also stems from my comprehension of cultural space as a physical or a virtual space in which meanings are created, produced and transmitted and which is present wherever social interactions take place. Thus the studio as a cultural space is not the same if different people replace the individuals who work in it. This space extends beyond the physical

space of the recording studio. This would shift my comprehension of cultural space towards the social constructivist tradition (Lefebvre 1991), as I understand that spaces “sit somewhere between agency and structure” (Gieryn 2002: 35).

A third, more general theoretical approach will complement the two already presented. Keith Negus’ theory of *the culture of production* (Negus 1996: 62) offers yet another valuable approach and is something that I perhaps cannot avoid, as the culture of (music) production is the very thing I am studying. The value of this approach is in the notion that “the cultural practices of personnel cannot simply be explained by reference to the determining influence of corporate capital or according to formal organizational criteria (job descriptions, occupational hierarchies etc.)” (Negus 1996: 62).

## Introducing the producer and the artist

My case study producer, Mikke Vepsäläinen (born 1992), is a pop music producer who lives in Helsinki, Finland. During the time of my fieldwork he was working primarily from his home studio in Kamppi, in downtown Helsinki. Vepsäläinen has a background as a professionally schooled touring drummer. He became interested in music production when he observed the work of a producer while working on an album of one of his own acts. Consequently he switched his career path from being a musician to producing music. After graduating from the Helsinki Pop/Jazz conservatory he also started to study law at the University of Helsinki. (Vepsäläinen 2015b.)

As a producer, Vepsäläinen could be described as aspiring. He is not yet an established name within the trade, which he does realize himself. According to Vepsäläinen, the scarcity of production projects and the small amount of money available for music production makes it even harder for younger producers to get assignments. Projects are more easily given to producers of higher status. (Vepsäläinen 2015b.) He states:

As I have entered the game only very recently, it is very hard to prove to people, mostly record company people who decide on things, money - - that I would be entitled to get the same projects even with good production work. (Vepsäläinen 2015b)

According to Vepsäläinen, not having an established name in the industry puts him into a kind of a vicious circle. Record companies hesitate to give him production projects because they have not given them to him in the past and because he has yet to produce any major productions (Vepsäläinen 2015b).

Despite admitting the fact that he is not yet a well-known name in the music production trade, Vepsäläinen identifies himself first and foremost as a music producer and he works within the constraints of the music industry. Between my first interview with Vepsäläinen in March 2015 and my second in September 2015, he signed a publishing contract with Warner Music Finland (Vepsäläinen 2015b). This means that it is easier for him to arrange for songs and production to be assigned to artists who are represented by Warner Music. This doesn't necessarily mean that it would be easier for him to be recognized as a producer, though, as the songs on which he might have worked as a tracker/producer might be "re-produced" or "post-produced" by an "established" producer before publishing.

The singer Ida Paul, whose collaboration with Vepsäläinen I have observed, is a 19-year-old singer/songwriter. Before her first solo single "Laukauksia pimeään" (Eng. "Shots in the Dark") (Paul 2016), she already gained some publicity as she acted as a featuring singer and songwriter for the 2015 hit "Madafakin darra" by the pop/hip-hop group Roope Salminen ja Koirat (2015). Vepsäläinen and Paul first met at a songwriting camp organized by Warner Music. They had been in contact a couple of years before that; Paul had uploaded a video of her singing online and when Vepsäläinen saw it he contacted her online. This initial contact did not result in further collaboration. Their cooperation started when they ended up working for the same publishing company. (Vepsäläinen 2015c.)

Even though Vepsäläinen and Paul originally met at a Warner Music songwriting camp, the basis for their collaboration is not label-driven employment. According to Vepsäläinen:

How this started is that Ida and I both like to make music together and that an A&R -person at our publisher has told us that we should make music together, [he said] "that's good material". Ida has also played our songs for the record company representatives and they've told us that our songs are good and that we should finish them. (Vepsäläinen 2015c)

Despite their publishing contracts, in practice Vepsäläinen and Paul work as independent entrepreneurs who try to sell the song to the record label. (Vepsäläinen 2015c.)

As the production process of the song I am analyzing here continued, an A&R person at Warner Music listened to a fairly advanced demo version of the song. The song got a “green light” from the label, which meant that Vepsäläinen and Paul could move on to produce the final version of the song. (Vepsäläinen 2016a.)

## New skills in the changing music business

A changing music industry, in which album budgets are shrinking, requires creative individuals to possess new skills, which again contributes to the construction of agency. Smaller album budgets mean smaller fees for producers, who consequently need to find new sources of income. (Burgess 2008) Vepsäläinen’s background as a professionally schooled drummer on the one hand and his lack of formal education in music production on the other are definitely not new characteristics for producers. Being a law student and thinking of that as an important part of building a producer’s skill set, though, can be viewed as fairly unconventional. According to Vepsäläinen (2015a):

The reason why I started to study law and why I study it at the moment are different things. Why I started is that I have lots of close people who applied [to law school] and got in and made it sound easy - - I wanted a safety net when my musician’s education was ending. I wanted something to lean on to be able to concentrate on music. Why I do it now is that it actually helps me with my current work. I need to be involved with a lot of contracts and I need to think about publishing and copyright issues and licenses - - As I need to run a business, my current school is very helpful with that.

Stressing the importance of knowledge about the legal aspects of music, such as copyright and contract law, may perhaps be a reaction to the highly publicized copyright wars, which have emerged especially in the Internet age. This also mirrors Burgess’ (2008) notion of legal fees becoming an even greater percent-

age portion of an album's budget. Furthermore, strongly publicized stories about artists, musicians and other content creators being ripped off and exploited by multinational record labels in their contracts may illustrate the need to protect oneself by studying law and consequently being less dependent on outside, often costly, legal help.

A producer with a strong creative and artistic role in law raises questions about the necessity of making a career as a music producer in the first place. Law studies could easily be seen as the "real" career and making music more of a hobby-like activity on the side. Vepsäläinen (2015b) however, provides an interesting perspective on why he is making music:

I didn't choose music. It chose me. I've tried to quit making music several times but it never works out. It's really hard for me to think of it as a choice because making music for a living or being a professional [musician] doesn't make any sense.

He continues:

I hit on pots and pans before I got my first drum set. - - When I started to play it just felt so good that I really got engaged in it - - Everything has just been a natural continuum in my music making. (Vepsäläinen 2015b.)

Thus making music for the most part has not been a conscious choice for Vepsäläinen but more of a natural way of living.

## Working in the home studio

During the project Vepsäläinen mostly worked in his studio flat, which he has turned into a music production studio. Despite its small size Vepsäläinen's home studio features plenty of comforts one could expect from a place where people need to enjoy spending time. Vepsäläinen's flat, which is on the 7th floor (hence the name 7th Floor Studio), includes a room which functions both as a living room and a bedroom; a kitchen, which is somewhat of an open space due to the

lack of a door between the kitchen and the living room, a wardrobe that doubles as a recording booth, a bathroom, a sauna and a balcony (Auvinen 2016j–k). Vepsäläinen’s DAW, which functions as the studio control room, is situated in a corner in the living room against the wall that separates the wardrobe and the living room (Auvinen 2016i–l). The other end of the living room, which is separated from the DAW/control room by a bookshelf, features a comfortable couch. The bed is situated at the other side of the room and is separated by a small wall of dimmed glass. The wardrobe, which is separated from the rest of the apartment by a simple door, has been turned into a small recording room. The wardrobe features dark-colored foam rubber in the walls and in the ceiling (Auvinen 2016f–g). This effectively takes out any echoes or standing wave frequencies. Furthermore Vepsäläinen has tucked a towel between the upper edge of the door and the doorframe to decrease bleeding (Auvinen 2016d) between the control room and the vocal booth. (Auvinen 2015a.)

In the studio drinking coffee is an important ritual before any other activity takes place. Vepsäläinen’s ability to offer a variety of different kinds of coffees emphasizes the comfortable experience one has at his studio. (Auvinen 2015a.) Earlier research on studio production supports the idea that it is perhaps more of a universal custom connected with spending time at the production studio (Bates 2012). Drinking coffee can be seen as a way to relax and ease pressure before starting to work. As a social situation it can also be somewhat of a bonding experience, something that strengthens the relationship between the people starting to work together. This emphasizes the importance of the social and collaborative nature of music production; people working together must enjoy spending time with each other at least to some extent.

From an outsider’s perspective Vepsäläinen’s studio seems to offer everything a producer would need for working and for customer satisfaction even if the lack of a larger room for recording drums limits the kind of music that can be produced. Therefore Vepsäläinen’s eagerness to move out from the home studio and start working in another studio space might at first seem peculiar. When he was asked, the reasons become somewhat obvious. According to Vepsäläinen (2015b):

My work efficiency suffers when I work at home as there are so many other things that I should take care of as well. Also, I don't get the feeling of going to work when I work at home, which is harmful in the long run also for privacy reasons. Furthermore I don't get the feeling of going home from work as my work is in the same [space]. General disturbances are also a problem as there are other people around. My work would require a quiet space. My work would also require a space that has good acoustics at least to some extent or that would be symmetrical even to some extent or that would have at least some elements that working in a studio room would require. This space has no such elements. A great plus would also be the social element, which has never really been emphasized in Finland yet, but which is on the rise all the time. Studio complexes with many songwriters and producers and engineers are being formed as we speak. This development enables a collective atmosphere and hence a collective working style.

In the summer of 2016 Vepsäläinen moved his studio out of his home and rented a studio space in Töölö, Helsinki.

As a young producer, Vepsäläinen has always produced music on digital platforms. In Vepsäläinen's home studio most work happens in the digital space of the DAW. This is a stylistic choice too. The overall sounds of Vepsäläinen's productions are essentially electronic and the producer himself defines his style as "urban pop" (Vepsäläinen 2015a) (See Burgess 2008). Vepsäläinen's choice to work in a predominantly digital environment makes him reliant on plug-ins. On the other hand his "choice" could be seen as a result of the lack of larger recording spaces. Without the possibility to record a real drum set, the overall sound of the produced music ends up being electronic, as the rhythmic elements have to be constructed using samples and/or synthesizers.

During a vocal recording session the acoustic limits of Vepsäläinen's home studio became evident. Due to the bleed between the living room/control room and the recording booth Vepsäläinen could not use his studio monitors during takes, which resulted in the singer Ida Paul and Vepsäläinen both having to wear headphones all the time (Auvinen 2016d). Vepsäläinen even gave me a headphone jack with a wire extension for me to plug my headphones in so that I could listen to his and Paul's conversations between takes in the digital space of the DAW. (Auvinen

2015a; Auvinen 2016a-b; Auvinen 2016d) Observing this it is no surprise that Vepsäläinen brought up his desire to move out of the home studio to a professional studio. In his study Crowdy (2007: 148) describes similar soundproofing problems. The difference is that Vepsäläinen's studio location on the 7th floor provides an escape from outside noises. The problems in Vepsäläinen's studio have to do with internal soundproofing. The lack of visual contact between the control room and the recording room is another common studio design characteristic missing from Vepsäläinen's home studio (Auvinen 2015a; Auvinen 2016a-b). This eliminates any visual aspect of communication between takes when Paul stays in the recording booth. The lack of visuals and thus a greater feeling of isolation, however, might evoke the right kind of feeling in the singer depending on the song.

## Collaboration between Vepsäläinen and Paul

When Paul arrives at the studio she and Vepsäläinen have coffee. They talk about the coffee and music business. Surprisingly little of the discussions evolve around the song they are about to produce. Most talk concerns recent hits, chart success, music business and certain individuals in the business. Furthermore, much of the talk revolves around how the music business and especially how management-culture in Finland differs from that in Sweden. At first this appeared to me as disinterest in the actual content of the music they are making. (Auvinen 2015a.) Taking into account the enthusiasm and hype the two demonstrate at times during recording (Auvinen 2016a), it would nevertheless seem more appropriate to consider these conversations as important social prepping. Talking about the industry in which they work might give both a sense of mutual respect; they consider each other peers and professionals in their common field.

After drinking coffee, they start to record vocals for a song called "Kunhan muut ei tiedä" (Eng. "As Long as Others Don't Know"). They've already recorded a demo version of the song and now they work on vocals. Vepsäläinen pays a lot of attention to the feelings and emotions conveyed by the vocals. He is very mindful of the small paralingual elements in the vocals such as creaks, sighs and minute timing changes in the vowels of the vocal text. (Auvinen 2015a.) This demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the voice carrying much

more information than the “semantic value of the actual words it utters” (Lacasse 2000: 10; see also Frith 1996: 192) or at least that a “paralinguistic dimension is often as important as direct verbal meanings” (Middleton 2000: 29). The driving force behind the decisions about which takes are deleted and which are kept seem to be considerations of what possible audiences would like. Vepsäläinen also gives interpretation instructions to Paul between takes and instructs Paul to make a certain kind of sound “which people dig” (Auvinen 2015a). This resonates with Hennion’s idea of the producer as the “ear of the audience” (Hennion 1983: 161). This makes Vepsäläinen a coach and a collaborative agent behind the vocal performance that ultimately is strongly tied to Paul’s artistic agency and persona. A possible reason behind the dominance and sheer volume of Vepsäläinen’s comments and instructions to Paul during vocal recordings became evident to me during a later vocal session. The two would record take upon take of the same spots. They could spend lots of time on one single bar and record it with different sounds to get lots of options for the editing process. Later on they would sit down in the living room and build the vocal track from dozens of different takes syllable by syllable. Vepsäläinen is in charge but listens to Paul’s comments and takes them into account. Furthermore, Vepsäläinen would edit the final track on his own but he would send it to Paul for approval. If Paul didn’t like something, Vepsäläinen would redo it. (Auvinen 2016a.) Vepsäläinen’s comments and instructions serve the purpose of getting different kinds of vocal takes with different kinds of sounds to be used as raw material later on in the production process. Sitting behind the DAW and having visuals (see Williams 2012) of the project as a whole puts Vepsäläinen in a better position for keeping track of what they already have recorded and what they still need. This would be more challenging for Paul as she concentrates on her vocal performances in the isolation of the singing booth.

## The song “Kunhan muut ei tiedä” and its development

Upon request Vepsäläinen sent me four versions of the song (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016a–d). The lyrics tell about a stagnated relationship between the narrator and someone else. The first version (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016a) is a short 1-minute-

long songwriting demo in which Vepsäläinen and Paul tried out the melodies for the verse and chorus. It explores a basic rhythm and some chords. This version (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016a) worked as a sort of a starting point and does not even reveal the whole structure, as the purpose was to try out compositional ideas and jot down the “main elements” of the song, which were harmony, the top-line (melody) and the lyrics. Vepsäläinen and Paul decided to think about “production ideas” afterwards, even though it was possible that some ideas in the very first session demo would end up on the final version. Vepsäläinen and Paul composed this initial “session demo” in Vepsäläinen’s living room in early August 2015. Before starting the creative process, the two discussed topics on which they wanted to write a song. Once they had decided on a topic it was “easy for them to start to compose a song”. (Vepsäläinen 2016a.)

The second demo (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016b) version follows the main lines of the very first session-demo. This version features a second verse, a second chorus and a bridge before the final chorus. The structure of the song could be represented as follows (bar count in brackets):

Intro (4)  
Verse (16)  
Chorus (8)  
Post-chorus (5)  
Verse (16)  
Chorus (8)  
Post-chorus (8)  
Bridge (9)  
Chorus (8)  
Post-chorus (8)

The second demo features changes in the second half of the verse along with a greater instrumental change. Minor changes to the beginning include high-pitched electric guitar strums. The chorus is almost identical in the first two versions. The only difference is that the grand piano introduced in the verse continues in the chorus. Therefore the chorus in the second version has much more mass than the chorus of the first version.

When asked about the origins of the new ideas introduced in the second version Vepsäläinen referred to another version he had produced between the original session demo and the second version he had sent me. In between the two versions Vepsäläinen had produced a “larger production demo” of the song. He had discarded this version but he kept some of the ideas in the new version. According to Vepsäläinen this version had lots of production ideas, like a 4-on-the-floor rhythm pattern and the guitar strums, which he and Paul wanted to try out. In the end they decided that the ideas were not good. According to Vepsäläinen this was nevertheless an important phase because they could “zone out ideas that were not suitable for Ida’s voice and artistic persona”. (Vepsäläinen 2016a.)

The third demo (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016c) version is basically an enhanced and “better sounding” version of the second one. A bass drum was added so that “one could get a better grab of the song”. Also, Vepsäläinen and Paul wanted to “remind themselves” about the fact that they didn’t want the song to be a “traditional slow song”. (Vepsäläinen 2015b.)

The fourth (Paul & Vepsäläinen 2016d) and last demo version of the song structurally follows the lines of the preceding version. The melody and harmony remain mostly the same. Several instrumental changes have been made and lots of small sound effects and details have been added. The piano, which dominated the arrangement in the second and the third versions, has been removed and replaced by softer pad-sounds. This change was made because Vepsäläinen and Paul wanted a production that sounded more “urban”. This version, which didn’t have the piano, also “felt” better suited to Paul’s developing artist persona. The A&R person at the record company also agreed with this view. (Vepsäläinen 2016a.)

The greatest single change in the fourth version compared to the preceding ones is the key. The key has been raised from Bb minor to C minor. This is the result of trying out different keys to “find the suitable one for Ida” (Vepsäläinen 2016a). According to Vepsäläinen (2016a):

Often a key that is a little bit too high gives the vocals the best tone. Many singers have one or more hotspots in their voice and by changing the key we try to find these hotspots. The studio affords the possibility to work on these things so that the result sounds good.

Examining the development of the song reveals that Vepsäläinen's main duty is to come up with the arrangement, which he often calls "production ideas", whereas the melody and the lyrics often come from the artist. These roles are nevertheless subject to constant change and renegotiation during a project. The arrangement as a term is of course strictly a technical one that is used when copyright percentages of a song are divided. This might be connected to the producer's aim of getting his share of royalties and copyright fees (see Burgess 2008), as discussions of copyright laws to include producers and engineers have just begun (see Middleton 2016). Vepsäläinen's involvement in the arranging process moulds his agency into what he calls a "tracker" (Vepsäläinen 2015a), possibly with the combination "producer/tracker" or a "programmer" (Vepsäläinen 2015b; Auvinen 2016b). According to Vepsäläinen, the tracker is responsible for the programming and/or playing of the backing tracks, whereas the "top-liner" is responsible for coming up with the melody. The "lyricists" (Paul) again is responsible for the lyrics, though Vepsäläinen assumes some responsibility for the lyrics and for the top-line as well. These three agencies form the songwriting/production team, in which agencies constantly become mixed and overlap, even if both have their own main area of responsibility (Vepsäläinen 2015a). In the production of "Kunhan muut ei tiedä" Paul was mainly responsible for the lyrics and the melody, whereas Vepsäläinen was in charge of all the rest. The writing and the production of the song was nevertheless a collaborative effort throughout the process (Vepsäläinen 2016a). The melody and the lyrics were constantly changed during the process and both would have ideas for alterations. Vepsäläinen would nevertheless have had more say in the lyrics and the melody than Paul on the arrangement, or what Vepsäläinen would call "production" (Vepsäläinen 2015b) (Auvinen 2016a–c). A setting of this nature calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional divide between the melody, the arrangement and the lyrics. According to Vepsäläinen (2015a) an "even split", in which the copyright fees are divided evenly between the members of the creative collective, is a standard since the tracker's role is much greater than what the standard 16,67% (Teosto 2013) maximum copyright share for an arrangement would suggest. These findings expand on the idea of a "top-line writing model" described by Bennett (2011), which I mentioned earlier. Bennett's assessment is fairly accurate, even if the roles get mixed to some extent. Furthermore the idea of the producer as a "tracker", a term

used by Vepsäläinen of himself as a producer, describes the producer's role more accurately when he/she is working in a top-line model.

A third important agent in the production of the song is the A&R person, who represents the record company. When Vepsäläinen and Paul are recording final vocals for the song they mention the feedback they got from the A&R. According to Vepsäläinen (Vepsäläinen & Paul 2016a) "he told us to fill in the gaps that were in the demo". Paul continues on Vepsäläinen's thought:

In practice how it works is that he tells us feelings, I think, very often, for example "there's a lot of stuff here" and "there's very little stuff here". But they tell their own opinion. If they comment on a single line I might still keep it, if I feel that it's better for me as an artist. Nobody puts words in my mouth. (Vepsäläinen & Paul 2016a)

This way the A&R person comes into the studio and assumes agency in the production process without necessarily being physically present. Despite the notion that the A&R person refrains from being directly involved in the creative process, in a situation where the producer and the singer themselves have entered the industry fairly recently and have yet to achieve fame, the A&R person as the representative of the record label may assume a fairly strong agency in the process. In his analysis of power and agency in the studio setting McIntyre (2008) discusses how stardom and fame increases the power and strengthen the agency of an agent. This mirrors back to my study in a reversed way since I have deliberately chosen, as I have stated before, to study people that have not yet acquired fame and stardom.

## Negotiating the producer's agency

Driven by the developing music technology, the agency of a record/music producer has been in constant change after the 1950's. In addition to the producer's agency changing historically and between different individuals, this agency might also differ between different projects. In many projects, Vepsäläinen describes himself as a tracker/producer. As I mentioned in the previous section, the

tracker is the agent whose responsibility it is to create the tracks and come up with the arrangement excluding the melody. The tracker might also be the producer and a producer might be a tracker. A producer might also be an engineer, but this does not have to be the case. According to Vepsäläinen (2015b):

If I sign up for a songwriting camp they might ask me, “so are you coming as a tracker”? But they also might ask me, “So are you coming as a producer/tracker”? So they use the term producer/tracker, which practically is the same as a songwriter-producer. But I would say that it is not a “full producer”, because there are several songwriting situations where we’re only asked to finish the song in the traditional sense.

These views would suggest that there is a difference between a tracker and a “full producer”. The difference remains somewhat vague. According to Vepsäläinen (2015b):

Well, if I’d have to tell a difference between the tracker and the producer. It is a little challenging in Finland and especially in these “small games”, as the concept of the producer is very wide. The producer is also the engineer etc. A tracker is more of a technical term. It describes the person who engineers the production, i.e. the backing tracks. So the tracker is the one who programs the different instrument tracks. The tracker might play and record the tracks and the producer has more of a general picture of the song as a whole. The producer has the last word in what sounds will be used and might influence the song after the tracker has worked on it.

The unification of the roles of the engineer and the producer in one person, the tracker/producer, could be seen as a phase in the development driven by technology, which Horning (2004: 714–715) describes. Williams’ (2012) notion on the alterations of agencies as a result of graphic displays offers another view on the idea of tracker-agency. When examining the work of Vepsäläinen and Paul, the latter showed no interest in the graphic displays or the technology involved in the production process (Auvinen 2015a; 2016a–b). Consequently, instead of multiple separate agents being empowered by DAW technology and visual dis-

plays, as Williams (2012) suggests, the empowering in Vepsäläinen's case takes the form of multiple agencies coming together in one person. The tracker/producer encompasses elements from engineering, composing, arranging and even musicianship. This again could be seen as a result of the accessibility (Williams 2012) afforded by digital technologies; one does not have to get deeply immersed in the engineering of technologies and thus is freer to engage in other activities. This shift in the agency of the producer could be viewed with good reason as a phonograph effect (Katz 2004: 2). The combination of agencies in the role of the tracker/producer takes to a natural conclusion Horning's (2004: 714–715) idea of producers and musicians becoming more involved with technology and engineers again having more creative input as a result of technological development. In spite of engineering becoming a central activity of the producer and being carried out in the home studio, my data would support the view expressed by Gibson (2005: 205), namely the survival of a part of separate engineering services that he calls "high-level mastering and post-production facilities". Vepsäläinen sent the song elsewhere for mixing, in which he took part to some extent, and mastering, in which he did not take part (Vepsäläinen 2016c).

## Uses of (new) technology

The increasing use of the Internet and the emergence of the laptop DAW have ramifications for the studio as a space. According to Vepsäläinen (2015a), his computer is the only piece of equipment that is absolutely necessary for him to produce music. He says:

The computer. Because that is the only piece of equipment with which I can create productions without having anything else. It's not very sensible but its possible. I have lots of projects that I tweak just sitting on a train with a laptop on the table and headphones on my ears. (Vepsäläinen 2015a.)

Despite this notion, Vepsäläinen's seeming disinterest towards his production technologies echoes Martin's (2014: 232) findings. When asked, Vepsäläinen briefly mentions the names of his main recording and editing software and the

hardware he uses without going into any kind of details on specific models or technical information (Vepsäläinen 2015a). This strengthens Martin's idea that technology is secondary to the creative ideas in the studio and weakens the pre-conception of producers as technology enthusiasts. This could also be seen as a typical trait of the contemporary generation of producers, who started their careers with home studios and digital technologies. According to Gibson (2005: 198), as more emphasis is put on "post production tweaking instead of spending time to find the perfect spot for/experience with different mics & acoustic spaces", the producers' relationship towards the technology, especially the hardware, might become different. This could be regarded as a typical feature of the tracker/producer, whose emphasis is on "tweaking" as a post-production activity (Vepsäläinen 2016b) rather than on the recording process. The more the recorded audio, in this case Paul's vocals, is processed, the less the individual qualities of a microphone matter. Thus Vepsäläinen doesn't have to find "the right microphone" to record Paul's vocals. The development could also be seen as a result of a standardization of digital technologies. Different pieces of music production software might not differ enough from one another to result in producers strongly preferring one to another, thus resulting in a seeming lack of interest in technology. This state of things might nevertheless be limited to the western cultural realm where the equipment available generally exceeds a certain level of quality. More interest towards technology might be demonstrated in places and situations where good quality equipment is scarce (Crowdy 2007: 148–149).

The latest technological trend in music is the shift from buying physical CD's or storing sound files on hard drives to listening to music on streaming services. Even if it is obvious that the main implications of this development are for the consumer market, there are some ways in which this alters music production. Furthermore this echoes the notion that with the ever-developing music production technologies, producers have become consumers as well (Théberge 1997). Online streaming services come into play when the practice of *listening to reference material* is in question. This practice connects with McIntyre's (2008) ideas of the record producer getting to know the field of works or the "domain", which includes all prior products accepted by the field (of experts). According to McIntyre (2008) the domain includes:

the body of songs they use as a template to make judgments in the studio. The more a producer understands the domain the stronger their knowledge will be and the greater their ability to produce work in a studio situation.

Traditionally the reference material, the available domain, from which a producer could draw ideas, was limited to his/her record collection. Vepsäläinen (and Paul) listen to reference material as well but with the difference that they have access to an increasingly vast, if not unlimited amount of western popular music through Spotify. As we wait for Paul to arrive at the studio Vepsäläinen listens to the demo version of the song under production. At the same time he listens to other songs on Spotify for ideas. He selects songs with approximately the same tempo and the same style as the one they are going to work on. Furthermore Vepsäläinen and Paul listen to material from Spotify as they're sitting on the couch taking a break from recording and try to come up with ideas for a post-chorus melody line (Auvinen 2015a). The situation is very much like a jam session but it happens without instruments in the traditional sense. Vepsäläinen and Paul only use their voices and Spotify to work on the melody for the post-chorus. (Auvinen 2015b.) Consequently Spotify, a software consumer technology, becomes a production technology. The line between production and consumption becomes blurred as producers become consumers, but also vice versa, as producers make use of a *consumption technology* in their production process. Furthermore, a new kind of music consumption practice by music producers might contribute to a less personal, more commoditized relationship to music in general.

### Concluding thoughts

Through ethnographic means and by examining the evolution of a song during production I have attempted to reveal aspects of the musical activities of a young producer who identifies as a tracker/producer. I have showed how the agency of the tracker/producer is formed through a combination of composing, arranging, programming, vocal coaching and engineering. The idea of being a tracker clarifies the agency of the producer's role, which is present in the top-line songwrit-

ing model introduced by earlier research. Therefore this study sharpened ideas about the role and agency of a producer in this model.

In the light of my findings, the noun “tracker” and the verb “tracking” appear to be concepts that are commonly used in the context of contemporary pop production. Despite the wide use of the terms they have not yet been strongly conceptualized nor have they been used in writings about music production in meanings that are similar to the ones I’ve used here. In light of my findings the use of the term tracker as a facet of the role of the producer is limited to contemporary “urban pop”. Furthermore, it is possible that the term “tracker” is only a new piece of terminology applied to an old role or agency, which is the producer of urban pop.

Furthermore, I have attempted to examine how the tracker/producer works in the home studio, how the home studio as a cultural space contributes to the agency of the producer in question and how the tracker/producer’s agency is defined by the possibilities afforded by digital music production platforms. By studying the work of a young producer in the digital age I have attempted to provide a peek into the present and future of music production. This study, however, is not an all-encompassing account of all producers in similar situations. I therefore call for further comparative research on the role and agency of the tracker/producer and her/his relationship to other creative agents, studio spaces and digital technologies.

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- Auvinen, Tuomas (2016e) Video clip shot at Vepsäläinen's home studio. 15.2.2016. Footage in the possession of the author.

**Photos**

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016f) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: singing booth. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016g) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: singing booth. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016h) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: digital audio workstation. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016i) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: digital audio workstation. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016j) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: panoramic photo of Vepsäläinen's home studio. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016k) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: panoramic photo of Vepsäläinen's home studio. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

Auvinen, Tuomas (2016l) Photo from Vepsäläinen's studio: living room/control room. 15.2.2016. Photo in the possession of the author.

**Interviews**

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