

## Using Presets to Aid Creativity and Workflow in a Session by James Stanley (Quench Arts' Wavelength Music Leader)

As part of the Wavelength project, many of my sessions - both one-to-one and group sessions - have been based around using Music Production/Technology to aid the songwriting process. I'm going to share some tips on how I've done that. In this blog post, I'll specifically be talking about 'Presets.'

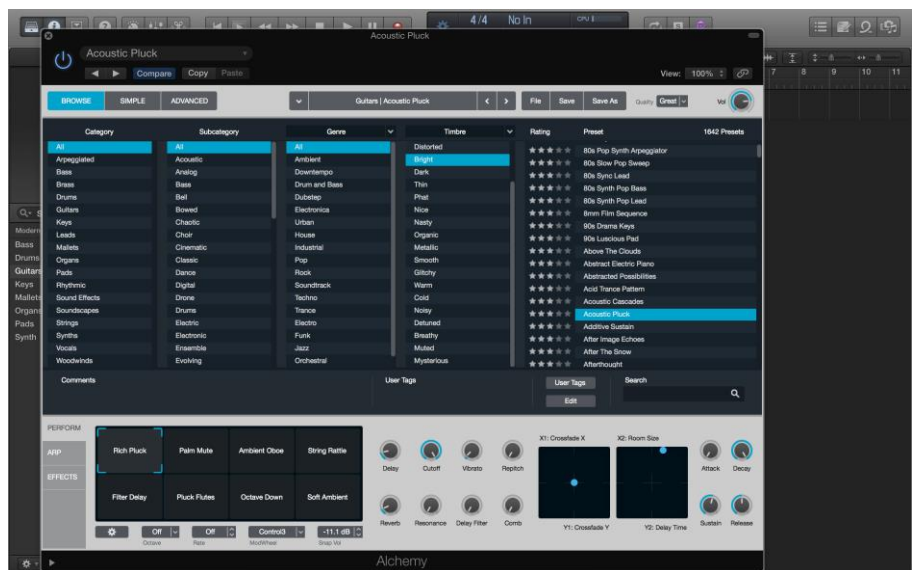
Presets are found inside all DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations). They are essentially sounds that have been created, named and categorised for your use! They can be both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, you have enough choices of sounds to fulfil your wildest dreams! On the other hand, all that choice can be overwhelming - particularly for a nervous, inexperienced participant. So, how do we use them to our advantage?



*(I'll be demonstrating my techniques using Logic Pro X. Although, the same can be applied to whatever DAW you are using.)*

I have opened up a track with the built-in software synthesizer, Alchemy. You'll see that from this main screen, all of our Presets are well categorised. Let's focus on the 'Timbre' column for now. Listed here are

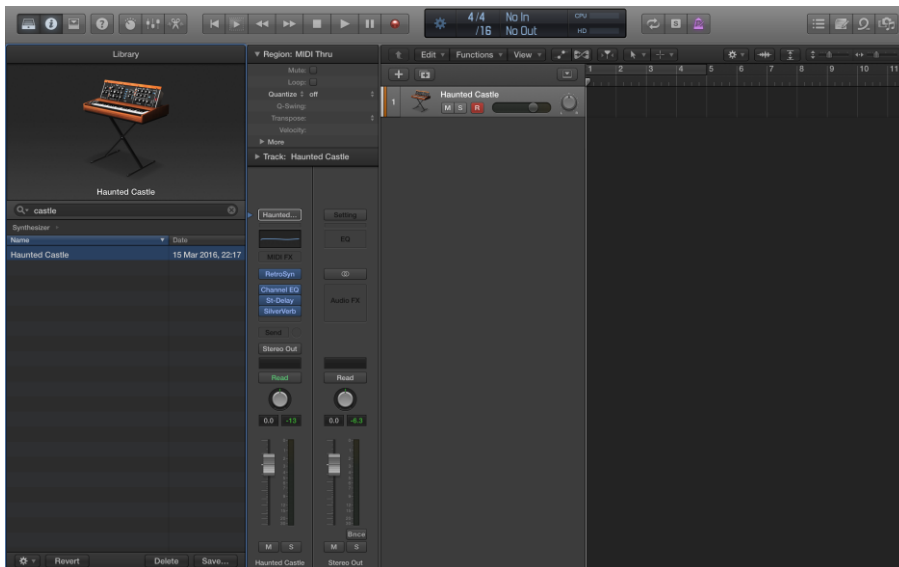
different descriptions of how each Preset sounds. I have a discussion with my participant about the type of song they want to make. Whether it sounds happy, sad etc. This leads nicely to us 'filtering' sounds by the descriptors we feel are appropriate. For example - if a participant wanted to create something that sounded happy and positive, I would choose 'Bright' rather than 'Dark' in the Timbre section. As we do so, it narrows down the options that we have in the far right hand column and hopefully alleviates some of that pressure that can be felt from having 15,000 options of sounds built into your software. Now it's time to go through and choose your participant's favourite sound from this list. Of course, use your own musical knowledge and teaching methods to help them with what kind of thing they could play on the keyboard (single notes or simple chords will often work well with



presets). Once you've chosen a sound and recorded a piece of music in using it, always make a note of the name of the preset. It could seriously help with lyric writing somewhere down the line.

For example, the name “After The Snow” found in this screenshot is conjuring up lots of lyrical ideas in my head and could be a good discussion point for you and your participant.

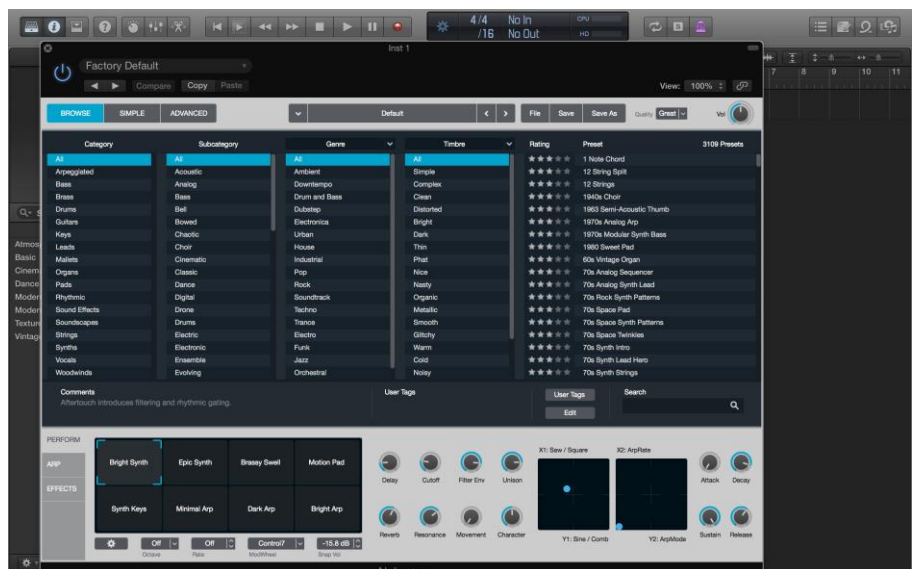
On the subject of lyric writing - what if you have already written a few ideas for topics? Even some specific lines or words? Presets can be super helpful if you want to quickly find a sound. Inside your software synthesiser (like Alchemy) or on the Library Tab of your DAW (found on the far left of the screen in Logic) you will find a search function that will filter your sounds by name. For



example, one of my Wavelength participants wanted to write a song about fairy-tales so we wrote down a few words connected to it: castle, knight, dragon, journey etc. We then searched for presets filed under these words. By typing in 'castle,' we were able to find a preset called 'Haunted Castle' which ended up being a synth pad that we used for the basis of our song. This is just a way of initially sparking inspiration and increasing the speed of

our workflow so that we can start creating music as quickly as possible rather than spending half the session choosing sounds that might work. I tend to run my sessions in this way because I find that once we've got started, ideas start to flow naturally. On this occasion, the participant said, "I can hear violins on that" so we typed in 'violin' to the search bar and recorded the next part. Organically, a song will start to appear as you keep adding layers. Once the music is there, it's often easier to flesh out the ideas we had for lyrics earlier on - perhaps by adding in some ideas from the names of the presets we've used or perhaps by just listening to the music and describing what we picture in our heads.

Let's head back to your software synthesiser (in my case Alchemy). So often I find that a young person will create a piece of music and get to the point where they say 'it's finished!' but as musicians we know that it's not quite ready. Often, what the young person is saying is, 'I don't know what else to do!' Here, presets can help us once again. This time, focus on the column on the far left entitled 'Category.' Here we have a list of groups, such as Keys, Drums, Bass and Pads. We know that for a song to



sound full and finished it needs to have a combination of these sounds - some short sounds, longer sounds, higher pitched or lower pitched, melodic, rhythmic etc. So, we can use this section of our presets as a sort of 'checklist' to give the participant more ideas about what could complete their song. For example - is there no bass in the song? Does the young person know what bass is? This could be a good learning opportunity and lead to a more professional, creative sounding track.

These are just a few techniques that I've used to add to your arsenal! If you start to find it useful, here's a list of some third party software synthesizers that have an excellent 'preset and search' facility to expand your sound libraries!

- Output Sounds - Signal
- Dmitry Sches - Diversion
- Native Instruments - Absynth
- Roli - Equator
- Native Instruments - Massive

