

/anatomy of a track

electro-house

Introduction

Fat pumping basslines, searing synth leads and chunky beats are the key ingredients of an electro-house bomb. Putting them together into a workable arrangement requires a knack for creating memorable riffs, chopping up hooks and considering the effect of an arrangement on the dancefloor.

In contrast to the more linear arrangement typical of tech/minimal, electro-house and fidget tracks are made up of clear 'sections', usually based on a synth line or chord progression, that turn around every four, eight or, very occasionally, 16 bars. As the song progresses, these sections are repeated and modified by using different combinations of synth and drum elements.

A good technique is to perfect an eight or 16 bar segment of the hook first, with all drums and edits locked down, before laying out the rest of the track.

There's no need for massively long intros or outros for DJs: the days of the three minute build are long gone: 16 or 32 bars is usually enough.

In detail

1 The kick and snare are combined with glitchy percussion for a unique intro groove. It's boring to open with just a kick and snare – add an additional unique percussive element so that people can recognise the track before the hook comes in.

2 Off-beat hi-hats pick up the pace in the second half of the intro. At the same time, a filtered and tweaked version of the bassline creeps into the mix, its volume increasing with automation.

3 The first of the main musical elements are these reversed synth chord stabs, originated from a sliced bounce of the lead synth line. The stabs do a nice job of pre-empting what is to come. They are treated to generous amounts of triplet delays and automated reverbs. Play around with filters and chorus effects in the intro, while remembering that at this stage in the track less is definitely more.

4 The first hook is a four-bar chord progression, reinforced with a pumping sidechained pad and filthy chord stabs at the end of each phrase. A reverse crash half way through the section introduces a stripped version of the forthcoming bassline, which follows the chord progression using a simple 8th-note pattern.

5 The build to the first drop features a range of effects, including a long reverse build (a reversed and down-pitched version of the 'Smash Eko'), a dirtier 'Noise Rise' and then, immediately before the drop, a huge pitch riser, adding a final layer of intensity as the track drops.

6 The track kicks back in with a huge reverbed white noise burst and the signature bassline, which creates a call and response groove with the lead synth line. Keep the beats around it stripped down and chunky for this initial exposition – the dancefloor will be on fire, and there's plenty of time to add additional elements later.

7 The lead synth starts playing a simpler version of the main hook to create room in the arrangement for a new melody line generated by a different synth.

8 A more subtle use of reverse echo and noise risers leads into the second breakdown.

9 This breakdown is almost identical to the one at bar 33, with the introduction of a filtered percussion line and a much longer riser for added intensity. Additional interest is generated by a new lead line – Wild Lead – which is slowly eased into the mix throughout the break. Various parameters are automated as its volume increases, the sound getting ever wilder as it climaxes towards the drop.

10 A big smash echo brings the track back in with impact. All the key track elements are in now: bass, synth and top melody hook.

11 After two cycles with everything in, it's time to mess with the lead elements, cutting up the synth lines and bass to create new rhythmic and melodic takes of the original lead riff, while still adhering to the original chord sequence. The introduction of a 16th note hi-hat part ratchets up the interest and keeps the dancefloor stimulated.

12 Another long, rising pitcher leads the track into the next section.

13 After all the experimental craziness of section 11, it's time to bring the track back down a notch. The melody line and 16th note hats are dropped while a heavily reverbed noise hit fills the sonic space they inhabited, making the change in

tension more natural. This strip-back signposts the forthcoming main breakdown.

14 Heading into this main break, the kick drops out, lowering the track's energy further. The snare and hi-hat are left to maintain the rhythm.

15 The sidechained pump pad is slowly eased in, along with the filtered loop, supplying additional mid and high-end energy as the track nears breakdown. Immediately before the break, the pad and filtered loop are sent to a delay, where a dub-style setting echoes them into the break, creating a natural transition as the mood changes.

16 Aside from the echoing remnants of the pad and filter, there's nothing in the mix now except the lead synth sitting loud and up-front.

17 The bassline doubles the lead line, giving a huge, multi-octave recapitulation of the main hook. An automated high-pass filter slowly lifts the bass to add to the tension. All the rising effects are combined in the final big lift of the song.

18 Just when everyone is expecting the drop, an extra bar is added, teasing out the tension with a nifty drum fill that has not been heard before.

19 And then the track drops again. It's the same mix as at bar 97, but with a new shaker line. The bass and melody loops have some simple edits, like in section 11, but are less crazy than before.

20 Note the one-bar kick mutes here, stripping the beat anchor before throwing it back into the mix – a great way of maintaining interest.

21 A final smash echo coincides with the muting of most of the hook elements, leaving just the synth, filter line and bass filter. These drop out over the next cycles leaving just the glitches and stripped beat, giving the DJ time and space to introduce the next track.