

Berklee College of Music

The Write of Spring

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Master of Music in Scoring for Films, Television and Video Games

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Abstract

This thesis is based on the process of composing and recording a three minute piece of music for a short film. In my paper I outline the stages of my compositional process and describe how the music changed over the course of the project. I also reflect on the process of writing and recording the music, the challenges I faced as well as on the most to me noteworthy moments, positive and negative. This project has helped me develop my technical and artistic skills and has made me aware of ways to improve my compositional process on many different aspects. Through this project I have also increased my understanding of the creative decisions that go into composing music for film.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

I was introduced to music composition at an early age, when I as an 11-year old had to compose solos for my saxophone class. At the time I had to be put under slight duress, but I quickly came around to enjoy the process of composing. Writing music became something elementary for me, I simply wrote the music that I felt like writing and I was happy with it. Now, twelve years later, even after having spent more than eight consecutive years studying music full time, writing music is a constant struggle for me. Not knowing what I want to write or not believing in the quality of it, is my normal state. I am not entirely sure of the reason behind this, but it is certainly not for lack of trying. When I wrote my bachelor thesis *Computer Generated Recordings*, I touched on this problem, and came to the conclusion that learning about various music theory practices and concepts, while being very interesting and opening up for many new possibilities, can be limiting unless you can be conscious enough to disregard everything you have learnt. Throughout my process of working on the bachelor thesis, and continuing through my past year at Berklee, I have felt a slow but clear improvement in my composition process.

Entering into my final project at Berklee, I sought to tackle these problems and hopefully take another step towards being able to once again compose music, with more confidence and joy.

1.2 Preparing for the project

This chapter describes the premise for the project and the process leading up to the composition process.

The premise of the Culminating Experience (CE) was to score three-minute scene, story or other media. Initially I was very excited for the opportunity to work with a director from my home country, and write an original score. After trying to get in contact with several film schools and directors however, I realized that the time limit along with the short time frame could be a little deterring for directors. I eventually decided that I would rescore an existing scene, and I was quite overwhelmed with the many great suggestions from my advisor (Lucio Godoy), fellow students and simply the wide range of options available online. I debated the decision for a long time, and eventually I came to the conclusion that I needed to select a scene that I really enjoy watching, but also a scene that allows me to write the kind of music that I actually want to write. Blender Animation Studio released a short film called “Spring” only days before I made my selection. The film really resonated with me for many different reasons. For one, it is set mostly in a wintery landscape much similar to the one I grew up in. Secondly it is a cheerful story, with many expertly animated powerful landscape shots and thus I felt that it would allow my composition to go completely in the direction I was hoping for. Most importantly, I have been following the Blender Animation Studio for a long time, and as an avid user of the Blender software I really appreciate the work they do, and the idea of rescoring their work felt like a pleasure. These reasons eventually convinced me that Spring was the short film I wanted to use for my CE. Sadly the length of the film was 7 minutes, which was more than double the recording time I have. Selecting just a single scene to score felt like an anti-climactic end to my final project, so in order to have at least one self-contained story to show for my degree, I decided to try to edit the film down to 3 minutes. It

was not a simple task, and even after I tried to shave seconds and frames off of any shot I felt I could, the film was still more than 1 minute too long. Naturally, the quality of the editing fell greatly with every cut I made, and at some point I found that the film was much less enjoyable than the original. To be able to clear the time limit, I decided to cut a major plot point. A quite dramatic chasing scene. I was really debating this decision, as it was the only really dramatic and action-filled part of the film. I was concerned my score would be all too cheerful and boring. But I realized that if I wanted the film to stay as a self-contained story, it was my only option. Eventually I managed to meet the time limit of three minutes, and even though the story was not completely intact, I still feel like I ended up with something that can be put on display without giving much context about the setting or story. After finishing my edit, I was ready to begin composing.

2. Method

In this chapter I recount my workflow and technical process chronologically, with as little opinionated comments and reflection as possible. I also describe the methods and external materials used to complete my project, and touch on the evolution of the music from the start of the project, until the final result, using notated and sounding examples.

2.1 Starting the process

My compositional process leading up to the recording was very similar to the previous recordings at Berklee. Throughout the process of editing my video I had become quite familiar with the scene and watched it all the way through multiple times. So when I was about to start the composition I immediately started setting up my Digital Performer (DP) session with markers for my own musical notes and major sync points. With all my markers in place, using DP's built in function to set a tempo I created a basic bar structure, leaving me with very

few tempo changes. Because I had some issues getting started with writing my music, I decided to create a temp track, which is something I would not normally do. I created my temp track using music by Howard Shore, John Powell, Harry Gregson-Williams and Kōhei Tanaka. When I had finished my temp track, I started my composition from the very beginning, working my way forward chronologically.

2.2 First Draft & Theme

The first draft of my score was a rough sketch and outline, which I composed in a quite short amount of time. I developed the melodic and harmonic material first. I then proceeded to make a rough orchestration, using mostly strings, and finally added some embellishments in woodwinds and percussion. Most if not all of the material was closely related to what eventually made its way into the final product, although there was still a lot of work to be done.

When discussing the first draft with Lucio, he confirmed many of my suspicions, but he also agreed with many of the choices I had made which made me more confident in the music.

The music in bars 10 through 15, is practically identical to the final version, even though the orchestration is slightly refined. The melodic material evolved from here to become the main theme of the entire piece, and after my first draft looked like this.

Fig. 1



At this early stage in the composition however, I intended the melody more as a variation of the main theme. In the next figure you can see the main theme I had written for the first draft.

Fig. 2



2.3 Second Draft

In my second draft I mainly focused on the playful introduction, but I also started sketching out what kind of character I wanted to have in the part of the score I had not yet completed in my first draft. The most notable issue I had in the second draft was that I chose not to make some tempo alterations, even though I was not entirely satisfied with the state of the tempo map. Even though it was not entirely conscious, my main reasoning for avoiding the tempo changes was because I was concerned about my ability to conduct the piece later. After discussing the draft with Lucio, he presented me with the option to ask a classmate or one of the faculty members to conduct, something that had been mentioned before but I had not really considered. After realizing that possibility, I no longer had any reasonable motivation not to make my tempo changes and I eventually made the changes with the notion that in a worst case scenario I could have the piece conducted by someone else.

2.4 Third Draft

My third draft is where the majority of the piece came together. After creating the third draft most of the piece was already almost identical to the final version in terms of musical material, with the exception of bars 37 through 40 which originally had a very light orchestration.

(See Example 1 and 2 for comparison) The third draft had the most straightforward process, as I did not spend a lot of time debating every single choice. At this point I had gotten a lot of time to both discuss the direction with Lucio and contemplate it by myself. This along with the sense of urgency that came with the approaching deadline, helped me stay productive in my writing sessions.

[Audio] “Example1.wav” - (Third draft, corresponds to bars 37 through 40 in the score)

[Audio] “Example2.wav” - (Final recording, bars 37 through 40 in the score)

2.5 Final Draft

Creating what would become the final draft was a two part process. I already considered most of the musical material as completed, but I knew I wanted to do more in terms of orchestration. The only real musical change that I made, was changing bars 38 through 40 from their previous light and cheerful mood into a thicker, more bittersweet mood. After completing my music I changed my workflow for the first time in this project. I found that when working in DP, I had trouble fully utilizing the full orchestra. I will expand more on this in Chapter 4.3.1. Since all of the music was written and synced to the picture, I decided that I would make my final orchestration decisions in my notation software, Sibelius. I exported all of the midi from my DP session and imported it into Sibelius, and I immediately found it easier to make use of the instruments. I added all of the brass parts from bars 15 through 24 and many of the woodwinds in bars 28 through 31. Finally I proceeded to double many string parts in the brass and woodwinds, especially from bar 37 through the end of the piece. After I was completely content with my orchestration I exported the midi from Sibelius and imported it back into my DP session to create the final mockup.

2.6 Recording Prep.

Since the recording studio were using Pro Tools, I had to prepare a Pro Tools session with my tempo map and a click track. The process of preparing the session was the same as previous assignments, and the whole process was covered by Pablo Schuller early on in the program. After my session I received a comment from the Pro Tools recordist Laurence Anslow, where he mentioned that the session start time should be zeroed as 00:00:00:00, and then the song start should be 01:00:00:00, but in my case I only knew about the song start which resulted in that my audio files would end up with the wrong timecode.

2.7 Recording & Mixing

I was the second to last person to record my piece which meant I had a lot of time to watch and learn from my classmates' sessions. My main insight from the experience was to keep my comments concise to avoid unnecessary time loss and trust the producers sitting in the booth, which I did end up doing. When my turn came I was still very concerned about my conducting, but no problems really arose. My session went smoothly without any major problems and I think my conducting was acceptable.

3. Reflection

3.1 General

The common phrase that stayed with me throughout my compositional process was to not overthink it. Overthinking and second guessing my choices has been one of my main issues for the past few years, and it sometimes gets in the way of my creativity and my intentions. In this piece, I was mainly trying to stay focused on what music I wanted to write, and whether or not I thought the music fit the picture. My initial plan for the piece was very simple. I

knew I wanted a playful beginning that would evolve into a more ominous and uncertain string harmony. I then wanted to add a brief but dramatic section matching up to some of the important sync points in the film, and finally I wanted to have a very big romantic ending. Throughout the process, I never veered away from this intention which is probably the reason why, as I stated previously, the first draft is somewhat closely related to the final product. When working on harmony and melody, I also made an effort not to be too critical with my choices, and I think it turned out very well in this case. I also think the fact that I created a temp track for this project was a very impactful decision. Even though my temp track for the most part was just muted, I think just the act of creating it really helped me flesh out what music I think would fit the scene, and also alleviated some of the pressure that I tend to put on myself. I had selected music that clearly fit the picture, and maybe I did not have to try to be completely original and invent a new way of scoring a specific kind of scene. By making the temp, I also gave myself the chance to immediately become more familiar with what music would work well in a certain scenario, which I could then build on top of in order to create my own score, and in that sense, making the temp track functioned similarly to the way that a score analysis would.

3.2 Notable Moments

In this section I list and briefly reflect on the most notable moments that I think either came out problematic, or that I was initially concerned about, but that subsequently turned out better than expected. Throughout the section I will be referring to bar numbers found in the full score of the piece.

3.2.1 Brass in Bar 7-8

The brass crescendo was probably the last musical change that I did before the recording, and out of the problematic moments I will list, it is also the one I consider least so. I decided to

add the brass in mainly because I wanted to make a bigger distinction between the different rhythm patterns in the strings and woodwinds. I am still confident in general about the choice to add it, but I do not think I necessarily needed both the bass trombone and tuba. In the final recording, I ended up with something with just a tad more unstable low end than what I had intended. I think a better choice would have been to let the bass trombone and perhaps also second trombone rest, and if necessary using a mute on trumpets and first trombone.

Fig. 3

The image shows a musical score for four brass instruments: Trombone 1, Trombone 2, Bass Trombone, and Tuba. The score is divided into two measures. In the first measure, all four instruments play a half note. The dynamics are marked *pp* (pianissimo) for Trombone 1, Trombone 2, and Bass Trombone, and *mp* (mezzo-piano) for the Tuba. In the second measure, the dynamics are marked *mp* for all four instruments. The Trombone 1 and Trombone 2 parts have a fermata over the first measure and a slur over the second measure. The Bass Trombone part has a fermata over the first measure and a slur over the second measure. The Tuba part has a fermata over the first measure and a slur over the second measure.

3.2.2 Tutti in Bar 25

The hits in most of the orchestra are also a moment which I cannot say that I dislike, but in hindsight I feel that I could have made it even better with just some tiny adjustments. First of all, I think my biggest mistake was underestimating how much power I actually wanted in the hits. When I wrote the score I was not really intending for these hits to be of a full, tutti tone, but rather very short and percussive one. But when I heard it played I immediately realized that it was sounding more like an in-between case, and in fact I really liked the big and full character that we were close to achieving. In the score I had written forte for all musicians,

but in the session, I immediately felt that I wanted to raise the dynamic overall, because I found it too weak. This was the first time I have ever written a staccato hit for orchestra, so I am very glad I got to experience the result of what I wrote. Besides the overall dynamics, the only change I would have liked to do is to add a bass drum on each hit. I made a very conscious decision not to use the bass drum in my piece, partly to the risk of it bleeding into other microphones and causing troubles in the mixing stage, and also because of the fact that bass drum is one of the easiest instruments to reproduce well using midi. However, after hearing the bass drum in Air Studios, played on my classmates' pieces, I immediately started to second guess my decision. Over the course of my education I have used many different orchestral bass drums in multiple different rooms, but I have never heard such a powerful bass drum as the one at Air Studios.

3.2.3 Brass in Bar 42

The tone I was looking for in this moment was really big and full chords, but while still leaving more room to grow for the final climax. Before my recording I was very worried about which octave I should have put the trombones in. In orchestration class we had been reminded multiple times about the fact that trombones compactly voiced can still produce a clear and enjoyable tone, but I was nevertheless worried that I would introduce a problem in the low end, which would have been very problematic since this part of the music to be the most clear and consonant part in the piece. I decided to use the trombones in the higher octave, but I was concerned that I would completely lose the big low end that I also was looking for, but after my recording I was delighted to find that the section came out even better than I had expected.

Fig. 4

The image shows a musical score for three tuba parts: Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2, and B. Tbn. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. In the first measure, Tbn. 1 plays a half note G4 (one ledger line above the staff), Tbn. 2 plays a half note F4 (two ledger lines above the staff), and B. Tbn. plays a half note E4 (three ledger lines above the staff). In the second measure, Tbn. 1 plays a half note G4 (one ledger line above the staff), Tbn. 2 plays a half note F4 (two ledger lines above the staff), and B. Tbn. plays a half note E4 (three ledger lines above the staff). A slur is placed over the B. Tbn. part, spanning both measures. The dynamic marking *ff* is present in the first measure of each part.

3.2.4 Strings in Bar 50

Upon listening to my final mix, I am very happy with my the tutti I have as my big finish.

But somehow it feels like there is some minor thing that I could have improved, to really make it shine. One of my favourite things in the piece is the relation between the celli and basses in bar 50 through 54. Still, I cannot help myself but wondering if I should have tried having the celli double the basses completely. When I wrote these bars I desperately wanted to keep the line and thus the voicing, and if I had chosen to double the bass one octave higher I was convinced that the close intervals between the bass and the celli line would cause too much instability in the bass. Finally I decided to keep the line and I decided to keep the the root notes in all parts in the same octave as the double bass.

Fig. 5

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Violin (Vc.) and Cello (Cb.). Both parts are marked with a fortissimo (*fff*) dynamic. The Vc. part consists of a series of notes: a half note G2 (one flat), a quarter note A2 (one flat), a quarter note B2 (one flat), a quarter note C3 (one flat), a quarter note D3 (one flat), a quarter note E3 (one flat), a quarter note F3 (one flat), a quarter note G3 (one flat), a quarter note A3 (one flat), a quarter note B3 (one flat), a quarter note C4 (one flat), a quarter note D4 (one flat), a quarter note E4 (one flat), a quarter note F4 (one flat), a quarter note G4 (one flat), a quarter note A4 (one flat), a quarter note B4 (one flat), a quarter note C5 (one flat), a quarter note D5 (one flat), a quarter note E5 (one flat), a quarter note F5 (one flat), a quarter note G5 (one flat), a quarter note A5 (one flat), a quarter note B5 (one flat), and a quarter note C6 (one flat). The Cb. part consists of a series of notes: a half note G2 (one flat), a quarter note A2 (one flat), a quarter note B2 (one flat), a quarter note C3 (one flat), a quarter note D3 (one flat), a quarter note E3 (one flat), a quarter note F3 (one flat), a quarter note G3 (one flat), a quarter note A3 (one flat), a quarter note B3 (one flat), a quarter note C4 (one flat), a quarter note D4 (one flat), a quarter note E4 (one flat), a quarter note F4 (one flat), a quarter note G4 (one flat), a quarter note A4 (one flat), a quarter note B4 (one flat), a quarter note C5 (one flat), a quarter note D5 (one flat), a quarter note E5 (one flat), a quarter note F5 (one flat), a quarter note G5 (one flat), a quarter note A5 (one flat), a quarter note B5 (one flat), and a quarter note C6 (one flat). The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

3.3 Workflow Reflection

In this section I try to reflect on noteworthy moments in my workflow. My conclusions are as such more of a technical nature, and I hope that they can be useful for avoiding mistakes and saving time when working with the tools I have used during the course of the project.

3.3.1 Digital Performer Workflow

Due to the size of my DP session, my computer did not have enough memory to maintain all of the sample tracks enabled. My workaround was to divide the project into instrument sections and freezing the sections I was not using before proceeding to work on the next section. Overall I found this to work well. Of course it is not the optimal solution since I would have to wait for some tracks to load if I wanted to make a change, but it was definitely a workable solution. Upon reflecting on the orchestration process however, I think that there is a very real possibility that some of my choices were influenced by the fact that not every instrument was immediately accessible. I do not remember consciously choosing not to use a certain instrument, but I clearly remember having the feeling that I did not want to add anything else, which later turned out not to be true. If I had been able to keep every track enabled at all times, I would certainly have been more prone to just trying something out for myself. Instead, rather than giving room to every single idea I found myself to be a little too critical on

every single choice, trying to think it through beforehand and eventually perhaps wasting more time than what it would have taken to simply implement the idea. If I had not gone on to finish my orchestration in Sibelius, this could have been a big problem for me.

3.3.2 Sibelius Workflow

I have been using Sibelius as my main notation software for about five years now, but this project was the first time I used a pre-made template. There are many benefits to using a template, but above all the fact that it saves an enormous amount of time when making the layout for the score and parts. There are a couple of things that worked very well in my Sibelius workflow, but also a few improvements that I could have done. First of all, when creating the individual parts Sibelius has a function called copy part layout, which essentially makes two parts look identical except for the musical information on them. I made a lot of use of this function, but in my final proof reading I discovered that it had caused me some problems. I discovered that some tempo markings and dynamics instructions were oddly placed and in some cases ambiguous. My mistake was not spending enough time proof reading in the first part I edited, meaning that any mistakes I made would carry over to the parts I copied the layout into. When I eventually discovered the mistakes, I had already gone through each part and made all of the layout changes for each individual part, to make the parts look nice and readable. Because of that I could not copy the layout again because I would then have lost my progress. Something else that I found myself doing, was not giving enough space for the parts. In the first stages of part creation, I constantly found myself trying to fit as much as possible on a single page, when it really should have been a two page part. Before I finally printed, I did end up correcting this problem, but I do not think there is any value in having a

single page that is dense and hard to read, when you could just as easily have a readable part divided on two pages.

3.3.3 ProTools Workflow

Working with ProTools was definitely the most straightforward part of my entire workflow. I would say my preparation of the session was a very fast process, without anything worth to note but even still I learned about an improvement to my workflow by Jake Jackson at Air Studios. When making a pre-click for a new tempo change for instance, you can just copy and paste the amount of clicks you need from the target tempo, and then use the Command and K-keys which moves the pre-click right into place.

The mixing process went equally smooth. Setting up for the mix was very easy using the mix-template we had the opportunity to create earlier in the program. Since I was already very happy with the balance we achieved in the recording there was not a lot of changes that I felt the need to make. and after a short mixing session with Pablo Schuller, he advised me to make some small adjustments, such as finding a good reverb for the stems I wanted to include, and boosting the very low and very high frequencies for a more cinematic sound.

3.4 Recording Reflection

The recording session went very smoothly despite my concern for the conducting. Just like previous recording sessions in the program, I became more and more comfortable the longer I stayed on the podium, and although I cannot say that I was acting outwardly, I definitely felt that I had an impact on the music. I was not expecting the musicians to be paying much attention to me, but despite my very safe and crude conducting I could very much feel and hear small differences corresponding to the minor changes I had in my conducting between each

take. I am not sure if I was imagining things, but I also felt a sense of gratitude from the musicians each time I gave a cue. I am glad that I took the opportunity to try the conducting, and even though I think that I will always prefer to stay in the booth for my recordings, I have a sense that I will be much more comfortable conducting in the future. Even though I have just been conducting occasionally over the course of the past year I feel a very clear improvement, albeit small, both in terms of confidence but also in my technical skill.

In my short time on the podium I received three questions about whether I had written the wrong notes, all of which were highly stressful to answer. For the first question I decided to have the questioned bar played, because I was fairly certain that I had written the correct note, but I wanted to be completely sure that it sounded like I had intended. I think that was the best choice for me at the time, since I know that due to my level of stress at the time, it would have been almost impossible for me to think clearly and decipher the written music. The second time I received the question I was able to respond very quickly because it was in the most dissonant section and I almost anticipated beforehand that I would get a question there. The final question came from the timpani, and was the only one out of the three that actually was a mistake. This one was the most stressful to me and really stumped me. I was surprised that I had a mistake since I spent a lot of time working on the timpani part in particular, but I immediately recognized that it had to be a mistake.

4. Conclusion

What a long, stressful and time consuming task it has been, but I have certainly learned a lot from it. I have had an excellent opportunity to practice my technical skills and I have found new ways to improve my workflow. I have managed to become increasingly appreciative of

my own music, and I have gained some confidence in my abilities across every aspect of the process. I have developed my sense of writing for linear media, and I have explored, however briefly, writing music in an unfamiliar style.

I have found the process to be refreshing and I felt that my composition process was a very realistic preview on what my process will be in the future. I am very happy with the outcome of my piece, and I am equally happy with the work I put into it. Upon completing the recording session I was not underwhelmed nor overwhelmed, but I think my outcome was very close to what I expected. Although it can be easy to point out what could have been improved in hindsight, I knew before I started that my piece was not going to be completely perfect. And with that in mind, I sincerely believe I can say that most of the choices I made were the best choices I could have made with the given circumstances.

5. Acknowledgements

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