

Meditations: Exercising Perspective

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Contemporary Performance (Production Concentration)

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Abstract

Meditations is an attempt to reconcile myself with all that I've learned over the course of this year into a cohesive, expressive project that will continue to grow well-beyond the confines of my time spent at Berklee and propel me towards realizing my lifelong dreams. *Meditations* is a music methodology that repurposes world rhythms played on indigenous drums for arrangement on a scaled instrument. The arrangements themselves are minimalistic, but hold immense potential for further development; various applications of this methodology are investigated throughout this project in the form of multiple objectives, and in doing so I have developed skills that will aid me throughout the duration of my career in music.

Keywords: World Rhythm, Methodology, Potential, Application

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1. Introduction

I grew up knowing that I wanted something more from music, but never having the courage to give myself over to pursuing it completely; I've always been an anxious dreamer. My uncle, a drummer himself and a public defender, set the example that I followed for a long time: as a working, "real world" adult, music was a consummate outlet, a means by which to decompress after a long day at school or the office. Along these same lines, my close friends have always loved music, but in a way that felt a number of degrees removed from the way in which I loved it, or sought to love it as an active participant and creator. This being the case, my musicianship comes from a very DIY background—90% of my learning, playing, producing, etc., was done on my own, performing to imaginary audiences of screaming fans.

Stylistically, my listening pallet is a large one. My personal musical journey began at age 12 listening to 1960's-1980's US and UK punk-rock, progressed into contemporary thrash/progressive/doom metal and 90's era rap as pubescent angst began to set in, expanded itself to let in grooves and traditional sounds from across the world (the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, etc.), and has continued to grow as I've been exposed to the likes of funk, jazz, fusion, folk, classical, electronica, etc. over more recent years of my life. Through listening to such a vast array of genres and being inspired by so many different sounds, my ears

have opened themselves to endless avenues of experimentation in my own playing. All that said, I remained a fearful, nervous musician, all the while questioning whether I had what it takes to realize the dreams of being a professional musician that I'd had since I was a child.

It is through the encouragement of friends, family, and the amazing faculty here on campus that I feel ready to face the fear of owning up to my identity as a musician. My undergraduate background is in creative writing; while I often feel behind my Berklee colleagues in terms of their technical abilities and experience, on the flip side of the coin I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to bring my unique sensibilities and approach to story-telling, song-craft and performance to life in a formal musical education setting. In this way, my informal musical upbringing has proven to be a mixed blessing; while it may take me longer to comprehend and make use of certain conventions, it is through the unconventionality of this journey that I am able to apply these hard-learned lessons and ideas into the development of a distinct sonic signature. In applying to and going through with this Master's program, I now feel it is high-time to set my own example for how I want to define my career: as a creative and a musician.

I've always had a fascination with polyrhythmic drumming and traditional rhythms from the world over, but until this year had invested little time in studying and understanding these unique grooves. Quite fortunately, I've had the opportunity to interact with many new rhythms through the electives and

ensembles I've taken over the course of the year. This experience has changed the ways in which I relate to rhythm and pulse immensely, and has only served to deepen my fascination with polyrhythmic interplay.

The question left to answer, then, is how to incorporate these rhythms into the creative and musical life I seek to create for myself? The answer(s) to that question lie in the project I have chosen to undertake.

2. Project

The project consists of three distinct parts that make up an exploratory whole. Throughout, the various world rhythms have been arranged not on their native instruments, but on a scaled steel-pan drum.

The first of these is a series of demo-recordings (self-produced and recorded) which reimagine the format of an audiobook. I fell in love with audiobooks over a year ago, but have often wondered if, and how, they could be improved to be more expressive and interactive. The solution I've arrived at is to add what could be considered a "soundtrack" to compliment the readings; in the same way that movie scenes are given a mood by carefully crafted soundtracks, a given reading is hereby catapulted to new heights of drama with which a listener can interact on a deeper level. The readings I've chosen are most akin to an autobiography or collection of letters, as they are curated from my personal journal and various correspondences I've had over the year. They have been

paired with arrangements that suit the disposition of each reading, creating a sonic backdrop for the stories to unfold.

Next is an examination of how these rhythms have come to inform my musicianship as a drummer. This cannot be understated; my understanding of the relationship of rhythm to pulse has expanded massively, as has my ear for the re-contextualization of given rhythms. This has manifested itself in two ways: the focal point of my studies has been narrowed to focus on polyrhythmic investigation and development, and the rhythms themselves have massively influenced the way I hear music. This is demonstrated in my practice routines and a live performance showcasing Latin grooves applied to hip-hop songs respectively.

Finally, I have worked alongside fellow students here on campus to exhibit the enormous compositional potential afforded by utilizing these rhythms in the form of a collaborative recording. This is an exemplification of what I have dubbed “maximalism through minimalism”, the idea being that multiple patterns can be applied to note value(s) and set as individual loops for continuous playback; the number of loops playing concurrently drastically alters the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic possibilities and implications that I and other musicians are able to explore, both live and in-studio.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this project are threefold: laying foundational groundwork for the development of my identity as an artist and producer, the furthering of my rhythmic studies and deepening of my relationship to my primary instrument (drum set), and the development of a collaborative framework and network. These objectives have an integral relationship, as each objective is directly advanced by the work done towards the ends of the others. Before expounding on this, it is important to first define what in the title is meant by the words meditation (the act of focused reflection or contemplation, eliciting presence of mind) and perspective (a frame for interpreting and understanding the world, informing how we interface with it). This primary objective of this project, then, is to incorporate the study of traditional world rhythms into a personalized music methodology, and is exercised in three parts that comprise a whole. *Meditations* serves as vehicle for the following: a means to my own artistic expression in the form of a series of recordings, the paving of fresh rhythmic pathways and refinement of my focus as I continue to learn and grow as a musician, and an open-source format for the creation of new music via collaboration.

The artistic goal to which I have employed world rhythm(s) is in the first place to produce a series of recordings which reimagine the format of the standard audiobook. The sub-objective of applying interlocking patterns derived from world rhythms to a scaled instrument (a steel hand-pan drum) is to create

sonic landscapes that are both evocative and, ideally, trance-inducing; combining this with autobiographical readings from my personal journal and intimate letters aims to provide an effective route by which listeners can enter a meditative state and interact with my perspective and thus also provides an example of what the reimagining of the audiobook format makes possible.

A second goal of the study of world rhythms that corresponds to the second part of this project is the development of my musicianship. By meditating on these patterns through my own practice time, the sub-objective has been to incorporate the grammar and syntax of world rhythm into my musical thinking, playing, and plans for ongoing study. In exposing myself to different cultures' traditional rhythms, I have aimed to significantly broaden my perspective as a drummer.

Finally, *Meditations* is intended to serve as a collaborative creative tool. These traditional rhythmic phrases can be parsed out and applied to any number of notes, thereby offering a near endless sea of contextual harmonic and melodic possibilities when used in performance and compositional settings. The sub-objective of this third part is to allow for unbridled and endless collaborative efforts, as each musician will relate to the grooves differently. Joint-meditation on the rhythms with other players allows for perspectives to be shared by players and listeners alike.

4. Methodology

This project employs a mixed methodology to achieve its various objectives and sub-objectives. While the theoretical framework of the project is primarily qualitative, the methodology combines several approaches that correspond, roughly speaking, to the three parts of the project: auto-ethnography, action-research, and a performative approach. The first part of the project, the creation of demo recordings for a re-imagined audio-book relies largely on an auto/self-ethnography approach that combines self-reflection, analysis, and creation. The auto-ethnographic methodology was especially useful for the lyrical component that forms the narrative part of the meditation. The second part of the project, which is tied to the development of my musicianship, employs an action-research methodology. Insofar as action-research is intended to assist the subject performing the action to improve and refine his or her actions, it is a fitting methodology for the self-improvement and development of musicianship that the second part of *Meditations* seeks to accomplish. Finally, the third-part of the project, the creation of a collaborative, creative tool draws on a performative-based methodology. A final caveat here: it's important to note that these methodologies sometimes overlap in the project, especially as the overarching goal of incorporating world-rhythms into artistic creation and formation that informs the three separate parts of the project, draws, in different ways, on all three methodologies.

4.1 Plan of Action

The first step was to take courses that allow me to study and ingest as much material related to world rhythms as possible, which included various ensembles, (Latin and Brazilian), electives (Cross-Cultural Rhythms), and private instruction on my primary instrument of drum set (focused on refining the rhythms learned in the courses above, as well as polyrhythmic development). Next step was distilling the key elements of various cultural rhythmic styles onto the scaled steel hand-pan drum to be recorded, and produced as loops for arrangement. This required implementing the information learned in Production Concepts, both in using the studio hardware and recording software (Pro Tools). Finally came the step of employing these arrangements to fulfill the various objectives outlined in the sections above; recording voice-overs for the audiobook portion, disseminating the arrangements to fellow musicians for compositional and practical use, and exploring how they have developed my fluency with the rhythms on my primary instrument of drum set.

4.2. Resources

The resources required consisted of the personnel teaching and the information disseminated in the courses mentioned above. Additionally, I required practice time and space, instruments (drum set with cymbals, steel

hand-pan), studio time, space, and recording hardware (microphones, cables, stands, computer, recording interfaces, etc.), recording / editing software (Pro Tools), and fellow musicians willing to explore the project. Last but not least, I required my project supervisor to oversee this project and make sure it maintained direction as it runs its course.

4.3. Process

First step involved gathering source information (world rhythms, production know-how) through my classes here at Berklee. After ingesting said information, it was also necessary to digest it; this entailed a process of familiarization with the rhythms—practicing them, attentive listening of musical examples within a given style, etc.—and production materials—becoming comfortable in Pro Tools and in running a studio session—through applied studies. Next came arranging rhythmic sets of chosen styles (Middle Eastern, Cuban, Brazilian, and Uruguayan) onto the hand-pan drum; for compositional ease, I used MIDI renderings of the instrument in Logic Pro to orchestrate the patterns onto notes that fit the steel drum’s C Harmonic Minor tuning. In each of the arrangements, I limited the notes used to allow for maximum potential usage by other musicians to interpret and interact with the material as they heard it. I also tried to pick patterns that were both complimentary and contrasting; this involved trial and error, as a given pattern might sound better (and relate to the

other patterns better) if played on a different note or set of notes. Transferring these arrangements to the instrument itself came next, along with studio-recording and editing the patterns into useable loops. The readings heard in the audiobook recordings were chosen from various texts, emails, journal entries, etc. that I have engaged in over the course of this year, and were chosen based on their ability to capture a given moment or mood experienced over the course of the year. Finally, I studio-recorded all overdubs (voice, drums, and other instruments) and mixed them in Pro Tools to be examined and presented.

5. Results

The results of this project were mixed, however the outcome overall was an immensely positive. A large obstacle presented itself over the course of *Meditations* execution that inhibited it from reaching the heights I believe it has the potential for; during much of the second semester of this year, I had severe injuries that prevented me from playing (or any instrument) entirely...needless to say, this slowed me down drastically. Originally I had intended for this project to be based in developing a live-loop show and to feature world rhythms being played on the drum set. Obviously this changed took on a primarily recording based-direction to make use of the time left over after having healed from my injuries. I wish I could have had more time to practice and play with the rhythms,

but am also glad that a methodology has emerged in the place of a live-act, which can still be developed in the future.

To frame this discussion, it is important to understand the three main objectives of the project as explorations of a newfound concept, rather than standalone works. I believe to this point the applications of the *Meditations* methodology I have exhibited to be successes; I have produced 3 audiobook pieces that demonstrate personal artistry, have 2 collaborative recordings and 2 solo recordings using these arrangements that myself and other musicians have played on demonstrating the open-source applicability, 4 open-source templates in different world music stylings, and have vastly improved my understanding of rhythm. While these can all certainly be improved upon in the future (better mixing, cleaner playing, etc.), what is important to me is that the different ends to which I explored the application of world rhythms all held up as extremely viable options for further investigation; the true takeaway is that the first iteration of this methodology works.

6. Justification

This work contributes to the profession in a number of ways. The creative process and outcome of original material are in and of themselves contributions, but the project also goes beyond that; with further exploration, *Meditations* can be used as a platform for me to interact with creatives across the globe to use

these rhythms to create new and exciting soundscapes, both in-studio and on-stage. Its originality stems from this: it is both a hugely personal journey in its undertaking, as well as the beginnings of a creative community. Additionally, the investigation of various cultural rhythms to use in new musical contexts allows the professional community to interact with and potentially fall in love with these rhythms in a similar manner to how I did, thereby promoting them as cultural fixtures to be preserved and explored, as well as broadening their appeal to use in the contemporary music scene.

7. Professional Plan

This project is in many ways a preparation for utilizing the methodology to formulate a live act to perform in front of live audiences--as such, rehearsing the material to play gigs will be the first step in initiating the growth of a fanbase. In order to gig with this material, I plan to set up a multimedia website must be created where people (venue representatives, potential collaborators, and would-be concert-goers) can interact with the content and myself, the artist. In addition to an artist website, an Instagram account will be set up and updated bi-weekly to peak and maintain interest. The plan is to promote open-source shows; not “jam nights”, but participatory concerts wherein local musicians can add to the song templates however they wish. In this way, every show will ultimately be different. This will again expand the network of collaborators as well as the fan base, who

will grow to expect the unexpected. Ideally, this will lead to the formation of a large collective around the project so that it may be taken to different cities across the world.

8. Conclusion

This CE has been for me has been exactly that—a culminating experience of my year at Berklee. I took information from the numerous classes I was involved in and put it to use in putting together this project. In reflecting on it and the year in its entirety, I've learned a lot more than I thought I did over the course of this program. While there were certainly rough patches and hiccups along the way, ultimately I am very glad with the results of this project, and excited about the potential it holds for continued exploration in the future. For this I am extremely grateful, as it makes the more difficult times a testament to the virtue of perseverance.

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