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BGJI Graduate Program Reflection Paper

1. How did you decide on your topic?

A few ideas led me to my Culminating Experience topic. The first was my curiosity for classical music, which can be traced back to my relationship with my Grandfather. An avid classical admirer, he used to mail me cassette tapes of movements of symphonies, ballets, etc. and write me letters talking about some of the great composers, Stravinsky and Shostakovich in particular. I didn't yet understand the music, but the music was introduced into my environment, and I listened to these cassette tapes with curiosity and wonder. What did this music mean?

Fast forward to my undergraduate studies at the Eastman School of Music, where classical music was being performed and studied all around me. A pivotal moment for me was listening to the school orchestra play Mahler 2. Time stood still as I witnessed a masterful combination of raw musical elements come to life onstage. I became closer to this music through studies with Professors Dariusz Terefenko and Bill Dobbins. These studies laid the specific groundwork for my CE thesis. Dariusz exposed us to the richly chromatic music of Bartok, Stravinsky, Debussy, Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. He dissected compositional procedures, showed us the importance of scholarly research articles for further reading, and encouraged us to write tunes for jazz configurations using the techniques mentioned in class, like 12 tone rows and fugue. Most importantly, Dariusz presented the two "genres" of classical and jazz in tandem with each other, and showed how a classical approach could organize and inform our jazz playing.

Bill Dobbins offered a holistic view of music that came from years of experience, study, curiosity, and thought. He conveyed how jazz and classical music shared a common language, the chromatic scale, and included these and many more musics under the blanket term of "chromatic tonality." After hearing this term, I began to rethink my classification of music. I reconsidered the defining elements of jazz and classical music, as well as their underlying

cultural roots. The following curiosities emerged: if Western harmony is using the same chromatic scale as jazz, then can't we blend the two? What does jazz improvisation sound like mixed with "classical" harmonic and formal palettes? What role does form and thematic development play in composition? Thanks to Bill's observations, my project began to take shape.

"The challenge which is presented to the composer of modern music who has been traditionally educated is that of either refining and reshaping his traditionally learned techniques, or constructing new techniques that will enable him to capture and enhance the vital improvisational forces so abundantly inherent in much of the good music of today. To impose old orders and old techniques upon vigorous and willful young music is to burden and stifle it rather than to channel and lead it and be led by it."

-George Russell (Cerra).

The above quote helped clarify my mindset: to write new music, I had to figure out new techniques. To do this, I had to learn about the classic techniques first, the time tested elements of music. I decided to focus on music from the 20th century, in keeping with interests born in Dariusz's class. I was also interested in the chronological overlap between jazz of the 1940s and 50s with classical music. For example, John Coltrane practiced along to Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra (Thomas 105). I was particularly interested in Stravinsky, a favorite of Coltrane and Parker. He borrowed from the past and innovated new techniques to compose future music, which was the directive behind my CE project.

2. How did you form your initial plan?

Initially, my CE plan was nebulous. I wanted to somehow study classical music and write "hybrid works," but I had not settled on an instrumentation or a core repertoire of pieces. Danilo Perez helped shape this project during an advising session in my first semester. He remarked how my idea was too vague and too broad in scope, and most importantly that if I was trying to blend classical in jazz in Boston, I had to research Third Stream music and its roots. We decided it would be best to 1) select a handful of composers and pieces and narrow

the scope to a time period that interested me, 2) decide on a core instrumentation derived from that of one of the pieces I was studying, and 3) write new music using a movement of a piece as a formal model. The pieces “Acceptance” and “Today’s Chorale” are two model pieces built on Aaron Copland’s Clarinet Concerto and Shostakovich 5 movement 3, respectively.

Danilo brought to my attention how Boston was the hotbed of Third Stream music, initially conceived as a blend of classical and jazz. (Perez). As I decided to focus on classical music from 1901-2000, I also found some important third stream music from the 1950s by George Russell, Gunther Schuller, and John Lewis. This helped provide a point of departure by documenting what third stream music was and what it potentially could be. Further glimpses into the conception of Third Stream music showed how Gunther Schuller was selective on what to include from jazz and classical music in his new blend. The following quote solidified some thoughts on the matter:

- It is not jazz with strings.
- It is not jazz played on "classical" instruments.
- It is not classical music played by jazz players.
- It is not inserting a bit of Ravel or Schoenberg between bebop changes—nor the reverse.
- It is not jazz in fugal form.
- It is not a fugue played by jazz players.
- It is not designed to do away with jazz or classical music; it is just another option amongst many for today's creative musicians.

- Gunther Schuller (Schuller 120).

Danilo also highlighted the importance of related thematic improvisation in each of my new works. He remarked how he didn’t like when a composer/performer would write a piece for strings or winds, spend all the time fleshing out specific harmony and thematic material, then revert to regular bebop-related playing over solo forms. Danilo wanted me to explore “comprovisation”, an idea utilized by the Wayne Shorter Quartet. The term alludes to how performers improvise within the specific language of a piece, generating thematically and

harmonically related material in their improvisations. After this meeting, the groundwork was set for my project.

3. What were your stages for creating these pieces?

My research included gathering JSTOR articles on some of the composers I was interested in, narrowing my listening list down to 20th century works, constantly listening to recordings, and holding phone conversations with old teachers. I talked to Professor Dobbins and Terefenko, as well as Professor Dave Rivello, a jazz composition professor at Eastman. I admired the piece “Pegasus” composed by Wayne Shorter for wind quintet and jazz quartet. This instrumentation inspired me, and I decided to add a bass clarinet to the ensemble and make a woodwind sextet. As committee member Shannon LeClaire observed in an advising session, the wind sextet is what best supports the third stream influence in my music (LeClaire).

I engaged in analysis methods using unconventional techniques, taking traditional models and sculpting them to fit my own comprehension. For example, I created form chart drawings that detailed orchestration and motivic use throughout formal sections, but did so through sketches rather than typical music theory form charts. I had to understand the music in a personal way if I wanted to create any new material at all for this project. I found as many music history texts as I could, from biographies to music theory texts to publications by the composers themselves to dissertations, etc. Seeking out prose written by the composers proved to be most descriptive and helpful in order to redirect my analytical mind to a more creative and looser state. I wanted to come away from this project with a deeper appreciation of musical form and I was constantly considering the use and re-use of material in the pieces I analyzed. Professor Dariusz Terefenko suggested to me the idea of writing character pieces built on the form of existing pieces, and tailoring these new pieces to the specific musical environment of the model (Terefenko). Later on, Danilo Perez would reference this as “comprovising,” extending the use of source material into improvisation.

I realized the importance of building a mission statement, goals, and creating a narrower focus to better absorb musical details. With the basic knowledge that the 12 notes were the same, I could extract new forms, writing techniques, and uses of rhythm. The following were musical observations I made that directed my composition process:

1. The tritone can serve tonic function.
2. Chromaticism and diatonicism work in tandem with each other.
 - 2a. Harmonize diatonic melody with chromatic harmony, chromatic melody with diatonic harmony, etc. explore all mixtures of these elements
3. The octatonic (diminished) scale use creates a sense of motion through destabilizing the tonic.
 - 3a. It works great as connective material.
4. Strong outer voice (able to be inverted) counterpoint creates strong lines and unconventional harmonies.
 - 4a. This also resulted from my studies with Dariusz Terefenko and analysis of Bach's tonal procedures.
5. Thematic development helps generate long-form composition.
 - 5a. Improvisers have the GIFT of endless development at their disposal
 - 5b. Consider variation, imitation, sequence, augmentation, diminution, etc.
6. Improvisation sections should utilize source material from the composition
 - 6a. Improvising within specific language of the piece
 - b. "Comprovisation" - etudes to focus a piece on a certain musical device.
7. The greatest composers can express the human experience through manipulation of musical materials.

The composition process became a daily occurrence. I had to make adequate time in the day to sketch ideas out, sit at the piano and explore, and eventually copy music into the computer. Thankfully, I had been in the habit of writing my musical ideas down on paper, and so this served as the source material for many of the pieces. Once I had a feeling for the piece I wanted to write, I would sort through these written musical fragments to see if anything fit.

This project helped me appreciate the small detail work necessary to become an effective composer. Organization was necessary at every step of the process, and this constant re-evaluation of progress helped me finish pieces in an adequate time frame. My adviser Allan Chase was also very helpful in keeping me on track, asking me each week how the music was coming along and when the pieces should be finished by. He suggested approaching this writing project as one would approach a commission, with the idea that the pieces had to be finished in a timely fashion. 'Composing' music really became writing, editing, copying, and rehearsing. Editing was the most important realization. I edited my pieces as one would edit a paper, removing material that wasn't thematically relevant. The copying process took the longest, entering parts into Sibelius from scraps of paper I gathered throughout my writing. Copying revealed sections that needed more writing or more editing.

4. How did the day of the session go?

I found classical players from the greater Boston music student community - BoCo, NEC, and Berklee. I made sure to send parts ahead of time, as well as MIDI mockups. I scheduled one reading session and two rehearsals and recorded all of them for reference. This was very important especially after the first reading session, in order to better tailor rehearsals to work on key sections and to give the players the right verbal direction for what to work on. I formatted, printed and taped parts which was a lengthy process, but I learned that the more organized and concise the sheet music, the more effective the performance results. I drafted rehearsal plans, recording day plans, rehearsal notes, all to promote the right level of workflow while in rehearsal. I felt I provided my ensemble with enough information to clarify any grey area in the music or the rehearsing/recording plans, and this is reflected in the recordings. I think the 21st century musician must find new organizational methods to convey their artistic vision, ones that fit their personality and organizational tendencies in an honest way.

5. What are some key observations from your writing?

In preparation for my final presentation, I applied my analytical observations to my writing, especially the pieces "Acceptance", "Today's Chorale", "Orchids", and "Birdsong".

“Acceptance” displayed the use of the octatonic scale as connective material. I derived background material from this scale and then continued it into a sendoff, a musical climax. The inherent dissonance within the octatonic scale destabilizes the tonic and promotes modulation and texture change in the music. Also, by writing a unison line and orchestrating it throughout the ensemble, I achieved a composite line effect, sustaining certain pitches to suggest tonal clusters.

“Today’s Chorale” utilized different species of counterpoint to promote motion at a slow tempo. Moving note against note with different rhythmic values and displacements freed each voice up to express the main theme of the piece. This also broke up the homophonic nature present in the chorale-like sections. I wanted to use compositional devices to access different emotions, as I perceived in Shostakovich’s 5th Symphony movement 3.

“Birdsong” utilized a improvisational approach. The first open section was over a pedal C, and instead of playing free, the soloist played through a re-ordering of the major modes from bright to dark. Instead of the usual Ionian-Dorian-Phrygian-Lydian-Mixolydian-Aeolian-Locrian, I used Lydian-Ionian-Mixolydian-Dorian-Aeolian-Phrygian-Locrian. This free exploration of the modes encouraged the soloist to strike a mood for each color change. I developed thematically related cues for the soloists to arrive at, which helped the band proceed into the next occurrence of written material.

“Orchids” displayed odd phrase lengths and the strength of the melodic line. Harmony was generated after writing long melody lines, highlighting key arrival points through chord sequences and unconventional progressions. I also realized how lines written through progressions create a sense of motion, and how lines can diverge or converge to suggest a more or less compact sonority.

6. What’s a potential future plan?

This project has exposed me to the common musical language shared between classical and jazz. As for next steps, Danilo Perez suggested a deeper study of Latin American rhythms and folkloric music. Folk music played a huge part in the lives of Stravinsky and

Bartok and came to direct their compositional processes. I think exposure and study would benefit me and my music. I think one weakness of my project is a lack of rhythmic variety. A further study of the 6/8 and 12/8 studies from Danilo Perez's performance labs would greatly clarify the rhythmic aspect of my writing and playing. Also, consideration of Latin American composers would give me yet another inspiration on how to incorporate clave rhythms into extended compositions. I am planning to dive deeper into the music of Piazzolla, Ginastera, and Villa-Lobos.

I envision the project being played in different venues, like concert halls and colleges or universities. I would like to form a working iteration of the group and tour around to high schools, presenting my music and composition process in hopes of inspiring music students to dig into the richness of musical history. I also imagine a collegiate residency project, where I bring a core ensemble around to different colleges and universities with music programs to both play and clinic the music. For example, my concrete plan would be to submit a piece to the Eastman School of Music's student run new music ensemble, Ossia, in hopes of getting it programmed. If selected, I might travel there with a few members of the ensemble, or utilize the musicians at Eastman. Then, I would try to give a composition presentation to Dariusz Terefenko's jazz theory class, where he is already discussing the connections between jazz and contemporary classical music. This focus on "Third Stream" combination will also serve as a directive for the rest of my musical career, as I will constantly be gathering more information and inspiration to create a richer musical blend in my composition and improvisation.

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