

Berklee College of Music



Footpath to the Summit:

The creative process and recording at AIR Studios

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Television and Video Games

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Introduction

Through all the Berklee experience one of the best things that this master program has is the varied recording we have with different types of ensemble culminating in a recording in one of the best recording stages for film music in the industry with top A professional musicians, that by itself convey a very challenging and demanding experience.

As a composer for media and in general I feel quite new doing this, although I had an undergrad preparation including composition and knowing for several years that this is what I wanted to do professionally, it took me a while to actually start dedicating myself to composition and starting to put my music out there, I feel very privileged to had the experience to had my music play by ensembles in my undergrad which by itself I an advantage that I had for this experience, the fact that had composed for orchestra and large ensembles beforehand (been my first performed piece one for orchestra and chorus)came really in handy for know how to approach the different ensembles that we worked with in Berklee through all the year and made me very confident at working with big ensembles, the challenge her was not to write for a big ensemble, but how to write, prepare the score and parts and the conducting for being in front of a world-class ensemble in that breathtaking hall.

The compositional process.

To talk about my composition process, I need to go back to my first experiences. I have always considered myself a slow writing composer, not because how fast or not the composition process goes, but I need a lot of time to plan my music in my head before actually put in on paper (or in the DAW in this case).

Although it is true that every creative process is different from the rest and every project has its own demands, that, for me, is a common factor, I need time to plan the music in my head, do at least one or two versions that I know are not going to end up being the final result and then get the correct one. I have to also mention that this process has got better after this year, even I still feel that I can improve my speed of writing I got so much faster compared to my speed before Berklee, I have never imagined I would be able to start composing two minutes of music, making a mock-up, and mixing a piece on the same day.

This process was similar in my process, I actually wrote an entirely different piece before getting to this one.

My inspiration for this piece actually came from two things, in the beginning, I wanted to work with a script but I ended up using a time lapse footage from the Dolomites mountains in Italy. The idea of using that footage came from an old idea that I had, before starting the master's program I was more involved in composing for concert music, and I was planning to write my first symphony using as an inspiration the volcano and mountains landscape that surrounds the valley of Mexico city and Puebla city from where I am, but I never concreted that idea, so I had this idea in the back of my head of writing something that portrays those magnificent landscapes, I couldn't find footage that I liked of that landscape so I ended up using the Dolomites one as a visual reference but though it caught my visual attention I still needed to ground my inspiration into something more tangible, something that I could be more familiarized with, so I decided to inspire my music on the historical chapter of one of the first or at least of the ones that have records of, explorers of the Popocatepetl volcano in Mexico, who was Diego de Ordás one of the Spanish conquerors that came in the expeditions with Hernan Cortés, as related in the *"Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva*

*España*¹ by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, in 1519 a group of to three Spanish soldiers including Diego de Ordás and accompanied by some indigenous people of the surroundings dabbled in exploring and climbing the volcano under the command of Hernan Cortes who requested looking for sulfur in the volcano's peak for making more gun powder. The group of three Spanish under prepared for the weather conditions without proper equipment and proper experience adventured in to the mountains being the one to get almost to the summit Diego de Ordás himself what made him famous between the Spanish army the indigenous people and his story med it to the Spanish court itself. This "tale" to call it somehow make me wonder the first impressions of being so frightened in an unexplored territory, poorly prepared and under the power of nature itself, with all the majesty of the natural landscapes, the breathtaking image of the volcano and the great view of the Mexico city valley which at the same time Diego de Ordás discovered having one of the first sightseeing of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish which led to trace a better route to the city.

This story got. Me involved and somehow I can relate to even though I haven't been to the summit of the volcano, given that nowadays is a restricted area, but I had the opportunity of being at the area called "*Paso de Cortés*" which translate to "way of Cortés" in honor of the way which is located right at the foothills of Popocatepetl volcano that they walked to get to the city of Tenochtitlan. So, combining this to "creative triggers" (the tale and the time-lapse) I got to start my process of composition.

¹ Bernal Diaz del Castillo. *La Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid: Imp. Don Benito Cano, 1795)

Footpath to the Summit

The piece is a narrative piece almost in the form of a Tondichtung (a symphonic poem or tone poem) which is a musical genre that portrays or describe a non-musical source, in this case, the natural landscapes and feelings of the explorers. As I mentioned before I always plane the whole piece in my head or by playing at the piano before starting to writing on the DAW or notation program. Before Berklee I used to work only in notation software (when it came to writing for orchestra) even though I used logic pro for some years before the master program I was not very skilled in working that way, through all the year I change my way of working and I switched to working directly on the DAW for most of the cases, when it comes for the final “touches” on a big orchestral piece I always prefer to do them in the notation software, which was the case for this piece.

My first draft of the piece was more inspired by the time lapse that I used as a visual reference (the original one with the Dolomites landscapes which I later changed because I was able to find more accurate footage of what I wanted which was the Mexico city’s valley landscape) the first draft, which by the way was an almost completed piece was more textural driven using different combinations of orchestration movements mostly between woodwinds textures with melodies on the strings and vice versa, but even though the textures portrayed the air and cold on the mountains the piece was lacking a musical motif development and a recognizable melody, that is why I discharged that piece and started from scratch the one that ended up the final one.

My compositional process has always involved the use of a kind of temp track, not in the sense of locking a track to the visual and trying to emulate the same piece, but in the sense

of using different musical pieces analyze them and dissecting the parts that resemble the feeling that I want to transmit to the audience with my music.

Several times I have encountered people that criticize the fact of openly accepting the influence of preexisting pieces in one's music, but I have always thought that that is the most humble and educational process that one as a composer could have, we have to keep in mind that even though our music is intended to serve the visual as film score composers the music have its own voice and the music legacy that we have inherited is going to be always there. Our musical tastes are always part of our musical languages the same way for a literature writer the books that they read are part of their literate language. As Sir Isaac Newtown said:

“If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”

That quote has always been one of the reasons to have this creative process, the most learning full process is to study the masters of the past make their knowledge as your own and then from that construct your own musical language.

For this piece I had three main inspirations: Richard Strauss – *Eine Alpensinfonie*², Claude Debussy – *La Mer*³, John Williams- *Jurassic Park*⁴ and various other of his scores. From you can find clear quotes of the way of orchestrating in my piece.

This process of “Temp tracking myself” have thought me a lot specially in my orchestration skills of which I am quite proud of, I know I have a long way ahead to be a great orchestrator

² Richard Strauss. *Eine Alpensinfonie* (Leipzig: F.E.C. Leuckart, 1915)

³ Claude Debussy. *La Mer* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

⁴ John Williams. *Jurassic Park* (Wisconsin: MCA, 1994)

and I even know there are more skilled people out there and in this master program but I have to say that I had acquired a diverse musical language and at this point I think my own musical expression.

My own musical tastes had always been part of how I conceptualize music and how I express it in my way of writing. The fact that my musical background (as a professional) is mainly influenced by academic repertoire (classical music as some would refer) film score music, progressive rock and jazz can be found in my compositions. It has been a personal journey to be able to say that now I can start to recognize an identifying sound in my music, which I think is one of the best outcomes that I have after this year at Berklee.

Even though as I mentioned previously, I have very clear musical references when it comes to what I wanted to portray through my music I also can show very clear patterns in my own “style”. From the beginning I aimed to portray two feelings, the uncertainty of the journey from the explorer’s perspective, the breathtaking landscapes that they observed, in the other hand from the more descriptive approach I had the power of the roaring of the volcano, the cold breeze of the mountain and the low temperatures of the snow on the peak.

Piece description

My piece starts in a pianissimo dynamic (see *Figure 1*) with a very textural idea which I use to represent the breeze of the air, a slow repetitive motif with also a very mysterious character, then after a bar I introduce the low brass section beginning with the tuba then adding the trombones and the trumpets in their lower register, this first part I use it as an introductory section, the use of the brass in that lower register in a very soft dynamic I use it to represent that uncertainty of the journey ahead, with a chordal progression changing between minor chord and major chord always going up in the scale like announcing

something and then opening to a dominant chord resulting in a very common V-i cadence which leads to the introduction of my thematic element.

This introductory part is clearly inspired by the piece that I mentioned above, Richard Strauss – *Eine Alpensinfonie* (Figure 2) the use of the brass in that specific manner, and the slowly growing texture is definitely a reference to it, but also, I have encountered that this is a very common pattern through my orchestral pieces, the use of a soft texture in an ostinato manner under a slowly growing motif is as well a resource that I commonly use (see Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5).

The image displays a musical score for an orchestral piece, labeled as Figure 1. The score is organized into two systems of staves. The top system includes Horns in F (1&2), Trumpet in Bb (1&2), Trombone 1&2, Bass Trombone, Tuba, and Timpani. The bottom system includes Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is marked 'Misterioso' with a tempo of quarter note = 56. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The time signature is 4/4. The score shows a 7-measure phrase with a repeat sign at the end. The first measure is marked 'ppp' and 'ritardando'. The second measure is marked 'pp' and 'ritardando'. The third measure is marked 'pp'. The fourth measure is marked 'p'. The fifth measure is marked 'p'. The sixth measure is marked 'p'. The seventh measure is marked 'p'. The score is numbered 1 through 7 at the bottom.

Figure 1

(B) I.
 II.
 4 Tenortuben
 (F) III.
 IV.
 4 Trpt.
 (C)
 4 Pos.
 2 Baßtuben.

This musical score is for a brass section. It includes parts for 4 Tenor Tubas (Tenortuben) in B-flat and F, 4 Trumpets (Trpt.) in C, 4 Poses (likely Horns), and 2 Basses (Baßtuben). The notation is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The Tenor Tuba parts are mostly rests. The Trumpet and Poses parts feature melodic lines with slurs and accents. The Basses play a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and accents.

Figure 2

TIMPANI
 PERCUSSION
 TAIKO
 SURDO ENSEMBLE
 ELECTRIC GUITAR
 HARP
 KEYBOARD
 VIOLIN I
 VIOLIN II
 VIOLA
 CELLO
 CONTRABASS

This is a full orchestral score. The instruments listed are Timpani, Percussion, Taiko, Surdo Ensemble, Electric Guitar, Harp, Keyboard, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Contrabass. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The Timpani part has a melodic line with dynamics *p*, *pp*, and *mp*. The Percussion, Taiko, and Surdo Ensemble parts are mostly rests. The Electric Guitar, Harp, and Keyboard parts are also mostly rests. The Violin I and II parts play a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamics *p*. The Viola, Cello, and Contrabass parts are mostly rests.

Figure 3

Musical score for Figure 3. The score includes parts for Organ, Diapason, Sali (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass), Chorus (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass), Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The tempo is Moderato (♩ = c. 95). The Cello part includes markings for pizz. p and arco mp. The Double Bass part includes markings for p and mp.

Figure 4

Musical score for Figure 4. The score includes parts for Trompeta en Bb, Trompeta en Bb 2&3, Trombón 1&2, Trombón 3, Tímboles, Percusión 1, Percusión 2, Arpa, Violín I, Violín II, Viola, Celso, and Contrabajo. The tempo is Andante (♩ = 75). The Trombón 1&2 part includes a marking for pp. The Celso part includes a marking for pp. The Contrabajo part includes a marking for p.

Figure 5

The presentation of the melodic theme is made in a chorale way, with a very homophonic writing with the brass and horns as the main character of the scene, a solo horn carrying the

melody accompanied by the lower brass and then doubled by a solo trumpet, this specific textural resource I used it to represent the solemnity of the journey, given the fact that the ancient cultures that lived in that area considered the volcano as a sacred place, as well the fact of the imponent sightsee of the landscape.

As a compositional resource the repetition of the thematic idea is a must to get the audience into remember the melody, after analyzing several scores in particular John Williams ones I got into the conclusion that independently how memorable the melody can be, the fact that it is displayed at least three times in its complete form through the piece is a must to ensure the audience will remember, so I tried to emulate the same formula, a first statement of the thematic material, a repetition with a different orchestration, and the grand finale. After the presentation of the thematic material the same melody is played in a bigger orchestration with some minor changes in the harmony, an ostinato in the upper woodwinds (flutes) combined with glockenspiel and then the same group playing a countermelodic line.

The next section of the piece is a descriptive passage trying to mimic the mighty wind on the path to the summit of the volcano, the orchestration of this part is clearly mimicking Debussy's *La Mer* (Figure 6 and 7) then using as a bridge an imitative section between the brass instruments which I find as a very common resource that I use and I feel that is related with my constant listening of baroque music and I always implement one texture in an imitative passage, after that part I get to a lighter version of the theme trying to represent the first sight of the Tenochtitlan's valley and then going in to the final section.

Figure 6 is a musical score for a section of a piece. It features several staves of music. The top section consists of four staves with complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, with dynamic markings of *p* and *pp*. Below this, there are two staves with the instruction "2^o et 3^o" and dynamic markings of *pp*. The next section has two staves with the instruction "très soutenu" and dynamic markings of *mf* and *pp*. This is followed by two staves with dynamic markings of *sf* and *p*. The final section includes staves for "cu 3 parties" and "3 parties", with dynamic markings of *sf*, *p*, and *pp*. The bottom section has staves for "BCCU" and "BCCU", with dynamic markings of *pp*.

Figure 6

Figure 7 is a full orchestral score. The instruments listed on the left are: Fl. 1, Fl. 2, Ob. 1, Ob. 2, Cl. 1, Cl. 2, Bassoon, Horn 1, Horn 2, Horn 3, Horn 4, Tuba, Trombone, Trumpet, Trumpet, Clarinet, Gong, Harp, Cello, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score shows complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *mf*, *pp*, and *f* across all instruments.

Figure 7

The last presentation of the theme is in a fanfare style using all the brass and horns to play the melody and using the rest of the orchestra to make an accompaniment texture and instead of presenting the whole melodic material I present the first half and the second one I substituted it for a more cadential part using all the power of the brass section supported by the percussion, using the woodwinds and strings to draw the harmony using musical motifs presented before thorough the piece.

Music prep. and Conducting

After the piece being finished the next step into the process was do all the music preparation which by the way was one of the highlights of this experience, have to tape all parts and scores, have to print them when usually we were used to only send digital formats of them, it makes me realize all the work that has to be putted on that step prior the recording sessions.

After all that the only remaining step was to prepare the conducting of the piece, I have been confident with my conducting skills given that I took lessons in my undergrad as well sometimes a little bit too much and some of the last session I only sight read the score while conducting but this time I prepare the conducting in advance and very intensive, which actually helped me not only to do a good job in the podium and been able to work with the orchestra all the things that I was hearing and made me not to rely on the production booth, but it also improved my conducting skills in general, I have always considered pursuing a career as an orchestral conductor as well but after seeing my recording video, I am sure I have potential.

Mixing process

Before Berklee I had not much experience in the technological aspect of composing for film, I used to work only in logic pro and I was not very experienced in it, this whole year was a challenge to learn new DAWs such as Digital Performer and Pro Tools, as well as learn the mixing process of a piece or song, for me it is still one of my weakest sides as a film composer, I have to be honest with myself I have improved a lot but I have still a long path to walk to get to a very good level. This mixing session giving the quality of the studio, the players and the recording it was way more easier compared to the previous ones through all

the year, so it was an easy mix on the balance and the cleaning of the tracks, I think the only more challenging part was that it is the biggest session that, at least I, have work on, but still is it was a very learning full process, and mostly at trying to make sound better something that is already in a really good level, so the “trick” here was at least for my piece try not to over do anything for leaving it as clean as possible.

Conclusion

This creative process not only meant a professional challenge in the way of how to craft it but also it was a personal one, although we know this is not meant to be our best piece ever, or our most complicated piece, still the symbolism that this experience has at least in my life, it is not only the culminating experience of my master degree, or an opportunity to record in a high-end studio, but it is the beginning of my career out there so this opportunity led into wanting to compose a piece that kind of represent me, my style as a composer an my musicality as a person, not something that hast to define me but something that kind of sums up what is my way to do music, so in that way the whole experience was a very introspective process as a person and as an artist.

The whole experience was definitely the “summit” of the Berklee master’s degree not only for the pressure of being in front of musicians of that level or being in one of the top world class recording studios, but also because made me realize the distance that I have walk to be there, the process that we all have had, how much we all have improved ourselves as composers and artist in general and how humbling and inspirational is this experience too push me forward too not leave it as one in a life time experience but as the begging of more experiences of the same level through all the rest of my career. I am humbled by this

experience, not only this recording but the opportunity of studying at Berklee College of Music, and getting to meet amazing people and artist through the year spent here, that is one of the best outcomes of this master program to get to share the classroom with people that you also learn from.