

El mensaje más claro:

A compositional journey to the root of my voice as a singer-songwriter

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yo soy de los que van a ninguna parte...

yo soy de los que van a ninguna parte,
de los que al sentir amor saben que han llegado.
vengo de dónde me leen, no de dónde me nombran.
estoy buscando, lo mismo que tú: la paz, el amor,
la felicidad de estar con los míos,
de ver crecer a mi hija,
de aprovechar al máximo el tiempo con mis padres.

renuncio, por escrito,
a escalar, a la distancia, a las estrellas.
toda mi fe está puesta en cimentarme
y si pienso en crecer, será siempre hacia abajo,
hasta encontrar la raíz primaria,
el mensaje más claro.

si alguna vez sientes que es a ti a quién me dirijo,
ten la certeza de que así es y no dudes en contradecirme.
estoy contando lo que alcanzo a ver - a sentir -
del universo que habita en nosotros:
no somos tan distintos, sólo a veces estamos lejanos.

que pases por aquí no es casual,
estoy aprendiendo una lección con este encuentro;
no me dejes con el cuaderno en blanco,
no permita Dios que permanezcamos callados.

-Edel Juárez

yo soy de los que van a ninguna parte...
(translation by the author)

i am one of those who are going nowhere,
those who, upon feeling love, know they have arrived.
i come from where they read me, not from where they mention me.
i am searching for the same as you: peace, love,
the happiness of being among my own,
to watch my daughter grow up,
to fully enjoy the time I have with my parents.

i renounce, by writing,
climbing the ladder, distance, the stars.
all of my faith is placed on laying my foundations
and if I think of growing, it will always be downward,
to find the taproot,
the clearest message.

if you ever feel that I am addressing you directly,
be certain that it is so and don't hesitate to contradict me.
i am recounting that which I have just seen – felt –
of the universe that lives within us:
we are not so different, only sometimes distant.

you passing by here is not chance,
i am learning a lesson with this meeting;
don't leave me with a white notebook
God doesn't let us stay silent.



Introduction

“y si pienso en crecer”

An integral part of being an artist is a constant questioning of your identity, your goals, and your desires both within the context of your artistic work and outside of it. This questioning is done in an effort to grow, improve, and eventually produce better art, as well as to live a life in line with your artistic values. These are also the questions Edel Juarez explores in his poem “yo soy de los que van a ninguna parte,” and the questions that guided my Culminating Experience at Berklee Valencia.

I came to Berklee with many goals, all of them involving developing my voice as a singer and songwriter. I was very ambitious in the amount of goals I believed I could pursue, and required many adjustments as I realized the time constraints I had with only a year to work. My original Culminating Experience proposal involved three parts: an extensive research project involving analysis of traditional Serbian vocal music, a series of lectures and workshops sharing the findings of my research, and several recordings of original songs based on this traditional material. As I began my journey at Berklee Valencia, I started learning many small and big things that led me to realize, bit by bit, that this project was much too ambitious. Most importantly, I realized that by pre-emptively planning to write with a certain cultural influence, I was trying to force a certain type of voice on my music, which was not the most honest one. I began to ask myself: what if this culture, although it is the culture I came from, is not the answer to the question “who am I”? I realized that the answer was uncovering the voice that

was already there, the root of my sound and my identity: as Juárez says in his poem, “to find the taproot”. I did not realize this all at once, but rather over time, and in the process I attempted to incorporate Serbian influence in my music in different ways. This paper aims to break down this process in a linear way, though it occurred in a way that was less straightforward.



Revising Goals

“será siempre hacia abajo”

Instead of striving to complete a huge research project and lead workshops, I reoriented my goals to composing, drawing on inspiration that I felt and heard in the moment. Working with Christiane Karam during her visit helped me understand that any cultural influence I express in my music must come from within. A tradition needs to be internalized through deep and exhaustive study before it can come through one’s music in an organic, original way. I realized that I was trying to superimpose cultural traditions that belonged to me, but that I had not internalized, simply because I had not been immersed in them through sufficient musical practise. In the process, I approached composition in several ways, which are the main topic this paper will explore.



Songwriting: The Beginning

“vengo de donde me leen”

The first song I composed at Berklee Valencia was a class assignment and came about in a step-by-step process. My first catalyst for composing the song was a time signature: 7/8 with a 3+2+2 division. This groove is very common in Serbian music, and I have always loved it. My second catalyst came from the lyrical side. It was a close family friend who had just passed away in August of 2013. He was Serbian and he loved to sing and dance to Serbian music, so writing a song inspired by the music he loved seemed appropriate. Research for this composition involved listening to many Serbian songs in 7/8 and analyzing how the melody and harmony were structured within the rhythmic scheme. Out of this listening and analysis came the song “Carried”. The melody and harmony of the bridge to this song are lifted from a Serbian folk song, “Žubor voda žuborila”. Although the bridge is instrumental, it is originally sung with the lyrics “without him there is no youth, affection, or joy,” making a textual connection to the English lyrics in the song.

The image shows a musical score for the bridge of "Carried" from "Žubor voda žuborila". The score is written for Flute (Fl.) and Double Bass (D.B.). It is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of four flats (B-flat major/C minor). The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 41-44) starts with a common time signature 'C' in a box. The second system (measures 45-48) includes a first ending bracket over measures 45-47. The third system (measures 49-52) includes a second ending bracket over measures 49-51. Chord progressions are indicated above the bass line: G^b, A^b, A^b/C, D^b in the first system; G^b, A^b, D^b in the second system; E^bMIN/G^b, F⁷, B^bMIN, D^b in the third system.

Figure 1: Bridge of "Carried". Flute melody and chord progression from "Žubor voda žuborila".

Although Serbian music guided the composition of this song, it also shows the influence of other singer-songwriters, most notably Regina Spektor. Spektor's song "Us" also has an "ooh" chorus, and is in a closely related key.

Developing Serbian Musical Ideas

“toda mi fe está puesta en cimentarme”

The first composition of this project took as its point of departure isolated elements of Serbian music. Once it was completed, I was moved to write a piece that was developed directly from existing Serbian musical material. A traditional Serbian vocal melody served as a point of inspiration, and was developed into a longer song with original material that arose from its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements. Because the melody is traditionally unaccompanied, this composition started with composing harmony for it. I then developed complementary themes, and arranged it for a modern ensemble of bass, piano, percussion, flute, and voice. This tune was rehearsed and performed in the Performance Forum class, where feedback from listeners gave me ideas for how to develop it further. However, I did not end up continuing to work on this piece after the performance: it was an important exercise for me, but it felt inauthentic. It was beneficial in allowing me to identify and eliminate one path that did not lead toward a more authentic voice in my music. Through the composition of this tune, I also developed arranging and rehearsing skills, which would prove incredibly helpful for rehearsing and recording my future compositions.

$\text{♩} = 60$
 Voice *mf* Mi-le mo-je pre-ko re-ke. Pre-ko re-ke, pre-ko re-ke, Mi-le mo-je pre-
 Double Bass arco
 - ko re - ke. — Što me va - raš kad sam de - te?
 D.B.

Figure 2: Excerpt of "Mile moje". Transcription of original melody, with bass playing second voice.

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Fl. *Pre-ko re - ke, pre-ko re - ke, Mi-le mo-je pre - ko re - ke.*

69
D.B. *arco*

73
Fl. *Što me va - raš kad sam de - te? Kad sam de - te, kad sam de - te, što me va - raš kad*

73
Pno. *A*

73
D.B. *Bm B♭aug D/A G♯m7(♭5) Gmaj7 Bm Bm7/A Bm7/F G7 Bm Bm7/A E/G♯ Gmaj7(add9)*

Figure 3: Excerpt of "Mile moje". Traditional melody with newly composed bass line and harmony.

Next Station
St. Clair

Southbound To
Union



DAVISVILLE

EXIT

To Street



Davisville: Taking a New Approach to an Old Song

**“renuncio, por escrito,
a escalar, a la distancia, a las estrellas.”**

My next composition was a musical turning point. After attempts to blend various genres and elements of my identity, I set aside the concept of doing entirely Serbian inspired tunes and developed a song I had written before I came to Berklee. I endeavoured to take the compositional and arranging skills I had learned at Berklee to polish this song further through the recording process. I wrote a cello part for the song. This was an instrument I had never written for before. Afterward, I also collaborated with Ben Cantil, who wrote an electronic soundscape for the song. We performed the song together with the soundscape in the *Innovation ¡En vivo!* concert organized by the MTI program at Berklee Valencia. These re-imaginings of my song helped me see my voice and my music in a new way. They also helped me connect to my original song from my current musical perspective.

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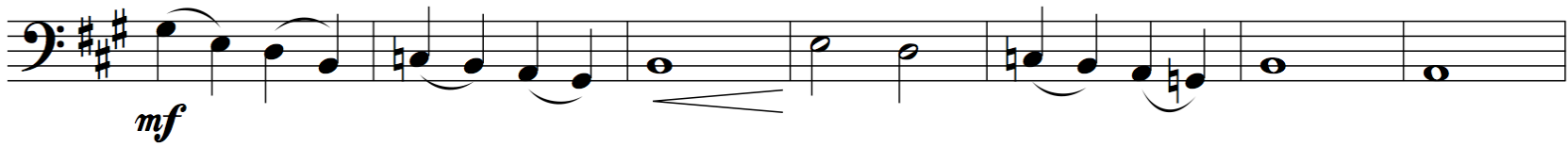


Figure 4: "Davisville" cello part excerpt.



Promised Land: Letting Go of the Need for Perfection

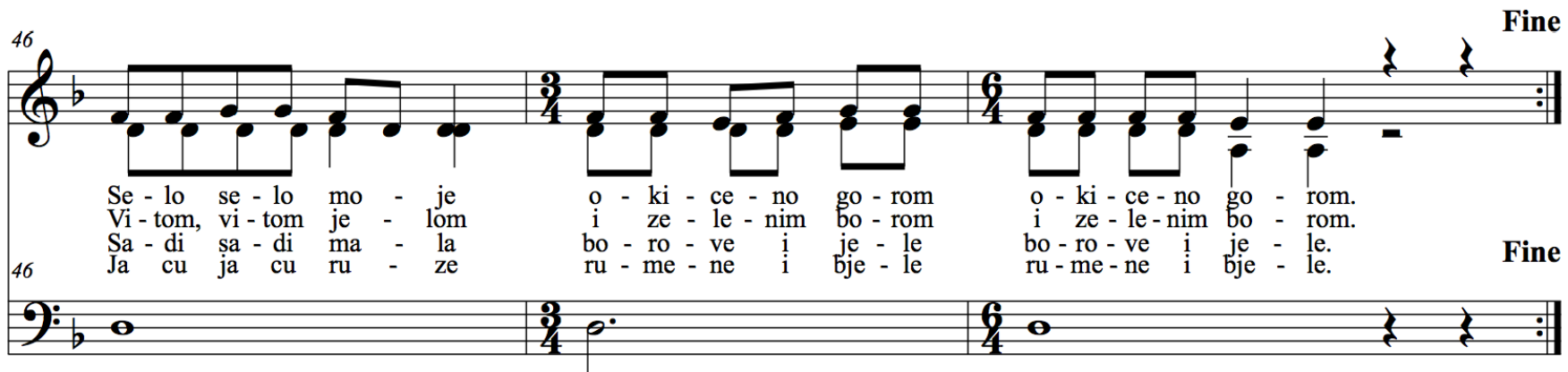
“estoy aprendiendo una lección con este encuentro”

After developing the song “Davisville,” I felt more grounded in my singer-songwriter voice. I decided to make another attempt at writing a Serbian-inspired tune. As in the arrangement of “Mile Moje,” the starting point was a traditional a cappella melody. However, this time, rather than serving as a seed of development, the melody was used to “bookend” an original song. The thematic content of the original Serbian lyrics and the new English lyrics is related, but the musical material of the newly-composed “middle” of the song did not develop out of the traditional melody. This song, “Promised Land,” was my biggest compositional challenge of the project, and I was my own stumbling block. I had a very clear conception of what I wanted the song to sound like. As I wrote, however, I found the piece was not forming in the way I wanted it to at all. My own negative judgement of the song made it difficult for me to share it with the musicians who I had asked to record it and to ask anyone for suggestions on how to develop it. Eventually, I realized that I was not going to love everything I composed. I learned to look at each song as part of a process rather than as a product that had to be absolutely perfect.



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Se - lo se - lo mo - je o - ki - ce - no go - rom o - ki - ce - no go - rom.
 Vi - tom, vi - tom je - lom i ze - le - nim bo - rom i ze - le - nim bo - rom.
 Sa - di sa - di ma - la bo - ro - ve i je - le bo - ro - ve i je - le.
 Ja cu ja cu ru - ze ru - me - ne i bje - le ru - me - ne i bje - le.



46

Se - lo se - lo mo - je o - ki - ce - no go - rom o - ki - ce - no go - rom.
 Vi - tom, vi - tom je - lom i ze - le - nim bo - rom i ze - le - nim bo - rom.
 Sa - di sa - di ma - la bo - ro - ve i je - le bo - ro - ve i je - le.
 Ja cu ja cu ru - ze ru - me - ne i bje - le ru - me - ne i bje - le. **Fine**

Figure 5: "Selo, selo moje" transcription.

Traditional Serbian lyrics:

Selo, selo moje okićeno gorom, okićeno groom.
Vitom, vitom jelom i zelenim borom, i zelenim borom.
Sadi, sadi mala borove i jele, borove i jele.
Ja ću, ja ću ruže, rumene i bjele, rumene i bjele.

Translation:

My village, decorated by the mountain,
by the tall fir and green pine.
Plant, little girl, pines and firs,
I will (plant) roses, red and white.

Original lyrics:

Cradled by the mountains of blood red stone,
Pines stretch their branches over buried bone.
You're only there to visit, but the welcome is warm,
And a party breaks out like the day you were born.

Faces shine brightly lit by burning oak.
This is the promised land, can you see it through the smoke?
Give away the songs you've been clutching in your hands,
They're the waning roses of the promised land.



Green: Developing Clearer Lyrics

“el mensaje más claro”

For a singer-songwriter, the story conveyed by a song is just as important as its musical elements. When the lyrics that carry this story are well crafted, the message is clear and impactful. We were lucky to be visited by lyric-writing guru Pat Pattison at Berklee Valencia this year. Through a workshop led by him, I developed methods for writing clearer, more effective lyrics. The most important influence of this workshop was the lesson to leave space in the music rather than writing lyrics to fill the entire song. The original lyrics to “Green,” my final composition of the second semester, had four lines in each stanza. When reduced to three lines each, there was suddenly space in the song, which drew the listener in.

Original first verse:

Black thumbs, blue hands.
Stuck in a city you can't stand.
Strangers staring in the streets,
Secrets hiding in the sheets.

You rent a room, it's pretty bare,
You're barely ever there.
You go where you are led,
Empty heart or empty bed.

Revised:

Black thumbs, blue hands,
Stuck in a city you can't stand.
Strangers staring in the streets.

You rent a room, the drawers are bare,
You're only ever there
To hide your secrets in the sheets.



Berklee College of Music

Gora ječi: Sharing a Traditional Serbian Song

“hasta encontrar la raíz primaria”

Although I realized quickly that I was no expert in Serbian music, I became more and more confident sharing the songs I did know well with my colleagues. I brought a transcription of a Serbian tune to the Mediterranean ensemble I was a part of in the second semester. We arranged it in rehearsal and it became a very important piece in our repertoire. Hearing non-Serbian musicians play Serbian music was important in my learning process. By observing what elements of the music they had difficulties with, I became more aware of what made the music unique. The irregular time signatures, such as 7/8, were one difficulty that was apparent. Another was unusual phrase length (one song we rehearsed and recorded, “Oj, javore, javore” has six bar phrases rather than the usual four bar, for example). These difficulties were pronounced when musicians soloed over the form much more than when they tried to read the melodies and harmonies in time.

The solos and arrangement suggestions made by non-Serbian musicians opened my mind and ears to new possibilities for songs that I had always heard performed in only one way. I realized that more of these collaborations would help me better understand my own relationship to the music of my heritage: especially what felt authentic and what didn't.

B MIN
COLLA VOCE

1. GO - RA _____ JE - - - -
 2. PO - LJE, _____ SA - - - - MO _____
 3. KA - MEN _____ BE - - - - O _____

A **B MIN** **A/C#**

5
 CI _____ SA - - - - MA PU -
 _____ KO - SO - VO. _____
 _____ O - STA - O. _____

B MIN **D**

ALLEGRO

9
 STA. _____ KA - ZUJ GO - RO PU - STA-RO, _____
 _____ KA - ZUJ PO - LJE KO - SO-VO, _____
 _____ KA - ZUJ PO - LJE KO - SO-VO, _____

Figure 6: Gora ječi transcription.

Arranging Traditional Serbian Music

“no somos tan distintos, sólo a veces estamos lejanos”

During the second term, I hosted two Serbian music jam sessions with friends. These culminated in the decision to record some original arrangements of traditional Serbian songs. I put together a willing ensemble, and we rehearsed and recorded three arrangements. Although this recording happened after all of the central compositions for my Culminating Experience were complete, this was still an important exercise for me. Writing the arrangements and thinking about ways to make the songs interesting and relevant through what I had to say about them as an artist made me think of them in a different way. Also, as I had found whenever sharing Serbian music with non-Serbian musicians, I was inspired by the ideas other musicians brought who were not familiar with the music.



Singer-Songwriter Influence

“estoy contando lo que alcanzo a ver - a sentir -“

Throughout the year, while working on the original music that makes up the central part of my Culminating Experience, I did not neglect to recognize and explore the influence other singer-songwriters have had on me. I arranged some of my favourite Canadian songs, and have integrated them into my repertoire. I organized three concerts on June 14th, 20th, and 27th that showcased my own original music alongside these influences.



Conclusion

**“yo soy de los que van a ninguna parte,
de los que al sentir amor saben que han llegado.”**

I feel that I had achieved the goal of my CE, to develop my voice as a singer-songwriter. That development did not take the form I originally expected. My journey did not end up being an outward one, but rather more inward. I might even say, as Edel Juárez suggested in his poem, a “downward” journey, to discover what my true voice was, with no influence imposed on it. I made it my mission to find the clearest way of expressing this voice. I will continue to pursue this goal through my growth as a musician.

Bibliography

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