

Berklee College of Music

# The Versatile Violinist: From Bach to R&B

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of  
Master of Music in Contemporary Performance (Production Concentration)

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Valencia Campus, Spain  
July 2018

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## Abstract

My culminating experience project is a portfolio of artistic identity and growth as a violinist learning to play various contemporary genres and improvisation while maintaining classical repertoire and techniques. The violin is in high demand across a wide variety of musical genres in today's industry, making it essential to achieve high levels of proficiency in styles outside of classical music. My goal with this project was to prepare myself with the performance, recording, and compositional and arranging skills to enter the music industry feeling well-equipped to work as a freelance musician in various genres and settings. My steps included creating a practice regimen that incorporated classical repertoire and technique as well as contemporary exercises and improvisatory techniques, composing and recording four original songs, collaborating with classmates on various projects of different styles, preparing for auditions, and creating a personal website. As a result, I have grown exponentially in all aspects of my artistry, come closer to discovering my own artistic identity, and feel prepared to enter the Los Angeles music industry with confidence.

*Keywords: Violin, classical, contemporary, improvisation, artist identity*

## Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to all of the following people who helped me and guided me throughout my year at Berklee Valencia: professors Casey Driessen and Federico Nathan, all of my fellow students and musicians who contributed their talents to my songs and allowed me to contribute to theirs, my roommates Sarah Martinson, Nan Macmillan, and Ali Mcleod who made Valencia feel like home, engineers Gracie Hays, Lalo Marine, Mason Paul, and Srikar MN who truly brought my songs to life. I am so fortunate to have met all of you and I hope to keep in contact and continue to work with you in the years to come!

Thank you to the incredible teachers who have passed on their musical knowledge to me since I was five years old: Sonya Louis, Betty and Katy Lawrence, Omid Zoufonoun, India Cooke, Danielle Taylor, Dean Anderson, Andrea Byers, Moni Simeonov.

A special thank you to my amazing parents, my siblings, and my niece who have loved and supported me in every way all my life and from across the world as I embarked on this journey. To my best friends Nick and Hannah, and to Ivory, who brought me peace every day and was the inspiration for all of my songs.

Thank you all for believing in my dream! This is dedicated to you.

## 1. Introduction

In one of my very first classes here at Berklee Valencia, we discussed artistic identity; what it means, how we identify ourselves, and how to effectively describe and display our musical style and abilities. When asked what kind of music they play, many musicians will respond with “A little bit everything” – a response that is both extremely vague and incredibly boring. I am one of the many musicians guilty of delivering this response on countless occasions; often followed by a brief list of genres I play (e.g. “Classical, hip-hop, some fiddle tunes...you know.”). While this non-committal response felt like my truth, each time I delivered it, I felt as if I were missing out on an opportunity to display my artistry to the inquirer. It often would end a conversation that could have potentially gained me a gig, a performance opportunity, or an artistic connection. I am now aware that this is horrible networking and was only harmful to my career as a free-lance musician. The truth is, I am a classically trained musician with experience in pop, folk, indie, hip-hop, gospel, and film music. I have some experience in fiddle tunes and very little experience in jazz. My original music can be placed in the R&B/Soul category, with obvious classical influence.

When I came to Berklee, I felt an unexpected amount of guilt for switching from classical music into a more contemporary education system. While I truly believed that it was what I wanted to do, I felt as if I was tearing myself away from an important part of myself that I was not ready to let go of. I missed classical lessons, string quartet rehearsals, orchestra performances and even the very tedious audition preparations.

As an African-American woman, I have experienced a great deal of racism in the classical music world. Fellow players, their parents, and conductors would make jokes about the way I looked, complain about me sitting in front because my hair would block their vision, and even tell me I should not be there. For years, I felt ashamed of the way I stood out in the typical orchestra setting and even had a few conductors ask me to “tame” my curly hair for concert days. But I continued to work hard and fight for my seats in the orchestra for the love of classical music. So when I stopped practicing my classical repertoire and even shifted my career focus away from classical music, I felt that I was

abandoning something that I have fought very hard for throughout my life and it made the fight feel as if it were for nothing. This made me realize that I do not want to stop playing classical music, nor do I have to remove it from my career plan in order to play contemporary music.

It was from this realization that this project was born. I decided that I wanted to gain the necessary skills to play professionally as a contemporary violinist without letting go of my classical roots. When I graduate with my Master's degree from Berklee, I want to feel prepared to re-enter the music industry with a more defined and confident artistic identity, and to be ready to apply and audition for jobs and gigs in all of the genres that I feel I identify with most.

## **2. Background and Objectives**

When I was five years old, I began taking private violin lessons by way of the Suzuki Method, a teaching method developed by Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki which applies the same basic principles of learning a language to learning music. Coming from a non-musical family, it took a several months of begging before my parents were convinced that their five year old was truly interested in what they assumed would be a short-lived hobby. After a few years of classical lessons, I joined a local ensemble that focused on fiddle tunes and Irish jigs, began playing in classical competitions, and taking exams through the California Music Teacher's Association Certificate of Merit program. As I continued through my violin lessons, I was taught a very strict practice regimen which followed all of the "rules" of playing the violin, but left little space for creativity.

As I progressed, I joined youth orchestras and honors orchestras through which I would meet other violin players from all over California, it was in youth orchestra that I started to notice that I stood out from everyone else. Growing up in a multicultural household and a multicultural neighborhood, I had never had the color of my skin or the texture of my hair be brought to my attention in a negative manner. But it was here, in a youth orchestra, that people who look like me are seldom seen in the classical music world.

When I was thirteen years old, I saw a music video of a song titled “Overnight Celebrity” by Twista<sup>1</sup>, an American rapper from Chicago. The introduction to this song is a violin melody played by Israeli-American violinist Miri Ben-Ari, who was then known as the “the hip-hop violinist”. In opening scene of this music video, Ben-Ari is playing a beautiful melody on her violin before the beat comes in. Seeing a woman of color on the television playing violin in a non-classical style of music, especially hip-hop, was something of a shock to my thirteen year old mind. I immediately learned the song and began thinking about other ways in which I could play the violin outside of practicing for my lessons and orchestra rehearsals.

Ever since then, I started to play non-classical music on my own for fun. I recorded covers of pop and hip-hop songs, I performed hip-hop medleys in multiple talent shows, and I eventually played in a string quartet that specialized in pop covers for weddings. But I never studied contemporary violin playing in real way. I never learned about chord changes or how to improvise or how to adjust my playing to a specific style of music.

My intention through the creation of this project was to find a way to keep my classical violin playing skills and technique in tact while simultaneously learning new contemporary playing skills and techniques. Despite the high demand for string players across all genres in the music industry, it is generally frowned upon in the classical music world to stray into other styles of music, usually out of fear of disrupting your hard-earned technique. In fact, many violin instructors who teach jazz or other contemporary styles on the violin insist that their students completely disengage from classical music for several years during their contemporary studies, in order to truly transform their technique and sound to adjust to the style of music they are learning. This radical approach to contemporary violin playing was not the right option for me. The mere thought of discontinuing classical music altogether was disheartening – it felt like abandoning a part of me that I have worked incredibly hard to build for most of

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<sup>1</sup> Twista, “Overnight Celebrity”, *Kamikaze* (Atlantic, 2003).

my life. Following this realization, I decided to create a practice regimen for myself in order to keep my classical violin playing in tact during my time studying contemporary violin styles here at Berklee.

Another aspect of this project was composing, arranging, and recording four original songs of my own. Prior to attending Berklee, I had never been a songwriter. My original music consisted of a few simple, classical style duets for violin and viola. Throughout this new songwriting and composition process, my intention was to compose instrumental songs fusing classical violin and R&B, the two styles of music that I feel the most connected to. I originally wanted to use the violin as the lead melody instead of a vocal line. However, after completing my first song in this style, the following song idea came to me in the form of lyrics. This is where my project and my musical interests took a turn: I decided to write a full song with lyrics and to sing it myself, another brand new musical venture. I had never sung in front of anyone, let alone into a microphone. But even with the addition of vocals and lyrics, I still wanted my songs to emphasize strings and feature myself as a violinist, not a singer. Each of my songs still focus heavily on the string section and include a violin solo.

Another part of my project was focused on collaboration. I performed, recorded, composed and/or arranged string parts for a total of 37 songs for other people's projects throughout this school year. Working on so many projects allowed me opportunities to practice various styles of music and in many cases, opportunities to compose or improvise string parts. The genres of music I was able to collaborate on covered a very broad spectrum of musical styles from pop to American folk to tango to musical theatre. In each case, I found myself learning more about how to perform, record, compose, or improvise in non-classical settings. I also got to learn more about recording strings in the studio (what microphones to use for specific sounds, styles, instruments, etc.) and sometimes taking on the role of a section leader when working with other string players. These collaborations turned out to be the most effective way for me to apply the contemporary and improvisatory techniques that I was learning in my private lessons.

The final section of my project was focused on career preparation – preparing to apply or audition for jobs and promote myself as a freelance artist and music teacher. This included preparing a full music resume, maintaining familiarity with audition repertoire, and creating a personal website. My intention in



this section of the project was to ensure that upon graduating from Berklee, I will be prepared to begin my career and avoid the confusion that countless graduates experience immediately following the completion of their degree programs. Having been a freelance performer and teacher in the Los Angeles area for a few years already, I recall the feeling of being unprepared and lacking promotional materials to send out for jobs and as a result, being overlooked by contractors and missing out on gig opportunities.

Each of these categories were executed with the same objective in mind: to help me to become a more versatile and experienced violinist in preparation for my career after Berklee. All of the actions I took in each area were selected with intention and were very fruitful in their results.

### **3. Methodology**

The methods I chose to achieve the goals of this project fit into four categories: classical, contemporary, songwriting/compositions, and collaborations. Each of these categories provided me with different outlets through which to manifest my versatility as a violinist. Whether it be through personal practice, listening and research, or performing and creating music with others, each and every action was a learning experience in one way or another.

One month prior to beginning my graduate studies, I purchased a 5-string acoustic-electric violin made by The Realist Violin. This violin was designated for non-classical music while my original 4-string violin remained for classical use only. Having separate instruments for the different roles allowed me to have a physical association to specific techniques, styles, and mindsets.

#### **3.1 Classical**

For the classical music portion of my project, I selected specific exercises, orchestra excerpts, and pieces of music for my daily practice that would help me to maintain a high level of musicianship according to classical music standards. I found this portion of my practice regimen to be the easiest to implement as an everyday practice because this is the type of practicing that I was already accustomed to prior to attending Berklee.

### 3.11 Exercises

Since I began playing the violin, daily warm-ups and exercises have been engrained into my practice habits. One of my former teachers used to tell me, “Scales, arpeggios, and etudes are like fruits and vegetables for your violin playing.” For this project, I selected one key each week for each week of the school year. When I got through all twelve keys, I started back at the beginning. Every day of the week, with occasional exceptions, I would practice three octave scales (major, minor, melodic minor, harmonic minor) and arpeggios (major, minor, minor 6, major 4, minor 4, diminished, dominant 7) in whichever key I assigned myself for the week, using the Carl Flesch Scale System<sup>2</sup> book as a reference. In addition, I practiced etudes in the same key which I would use to practice sight reading, various bow techniques, and left hand dexterity. The etude books I used were “42 Studies for Violin” by Kreutzer<sup>3</sup> and “Seventy-Five Melodious and Progressive Studies” by Mazas<sup>4</sup>. This entire warm-up regimen typically took between 45 to 60 minutes to complete.

### 3.12 Orchestra Excerpts

Another healthy practice habit in the realm of classical music is maintaining a regular practice routine of orchestra excerpts. Excerpts are specific sections, the particularly difficult or important sections, of major symphonies or chamber music works. When auditioning for an orchestra or chamber music ensemble, the audition committee will decide on several excerpts that are to be prepared by the candidates and performed solo to demonstrate their technique and musicianship. Excerpts are expected to be played perfectly in tune and perfectly in time, with little room for artistic interpretation. Excerpt selections vary widely, but there are several that appear very frequently in audition requirements for orchestras around the world. At the beginning of this project, I researched the top 10 most popular orchestra excerpts, using the most recent audition requirement lists from six of the most relevant orchestras in the United States and Europe today: Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic,

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Flesch, *Scale System: Scale Exercises in All Major and Minor Keys for Daily Study*, (Carl Fischer, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Rodolphe Kreutzer, *42 Studies or Caprices for the Violin*, (Singer, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Féréol Mazas, *75 Melodious and Progressive Studies, Op. 36 – Book 1*, (Herrmann, 1986).

Chicago Symphony, London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertbouw Orchestra, and Berlin Philharmonic. Here is the list that I came up with from this research:

1. R. Strauss – Don Juan Overture – first violin, measures 1-62
2. Schumann – Symphony No. 2 – Scherzo – first violin, measures 1-52
3. Mendelssohn – Midsummer Night’s Dream – Scherzo – first violin, measures 6-81
4. Mozart – Symphony No. 39 – second movement – first violin, measures 96-126
5. Mozart – Symphony No. 39 – fourth movement – first violin, beginning – Rehearsal B
6. Brahms – Symphony No. 1 – first movement – first violin, entire first page
7. Brahms – Symphony No. 4 – third movement – first violin, beginning – Rehearsal B
8. Mendelssohn – Symphony No. 4 – first movement – first violin, measures 1-110
9. Beethoven – Symphony No. 3 - Scherzo – first violin, beginning – second ending
10. Beethoven – Symphony No. 9 – third movement – first violin, measures 99-114

I assigned myself one of these excerpts per week as a part of my practice regimen. Following my exercises, I would practice an excerpt for about 30 minutes per day, focusing on intonation, rhythm, phrasing, dynamics, and technique. I practiced these excerpts slowly using a metronome and gradually increasing the tempo by about 5 clicks at a time until I arrived comfortably at the intended tempo (which I determined by listening to several different recordings of each piece). At the end of the 30 minutes, I would play along with the recording so I could practice playing it in context, measure my progress, and take notes to refer to during my practice the following day.

### **3.13 Repertoire**

Unaccompanied violin repertoire is a major part of standard practice for classical violinists, and perhaps the most challenging. The six sonatas and partitas by J.S. Bach and the 24 caprices by Paganini are among the most common repertoire in this category. I selected one Bach sonata, one Paganini caprice,

and a Tango Etude by Astor Piazzolla to keep up a regular practice of unaccompanied repertoire in case of future auditions. I selected the following pieces for this portion of my practice:

1. Partita No. 1 in B Minor – J.S. Bach
2. Caprice No. 24 – Paganini
3. Tango Etude No. 1 – Piazzolla

Alternating between these three pieces helped me maintain technical skills and dexterity in a way that allows for more creative freedom, unlike the exercises and excerpts. All of these pieces are acceptable repertoire for auditions and when played well, display a high level of technique, intonation, and unique musical interpretation.

### **3.2 Contemporary**

For the contemporary portion of my practice regimen, I selected specific exercises including scales and arpeggios, bow techniques, rhythmic patterns, and improvisation patterns. I found this portion of the practice to be more challenging to implement as a routine because it was very different from the way in which I was accustomed to practicing.

#### **3.21 Scales**

I focused on practicing three different contemporary scale patterns: pentatonic, blues, and octatonic. I chose them because I thought the knowledge of these three scale styles would assist me in my improvisation practice. I aligned these with the classical portion of my regimen by choosing the same key that I practiced classical exercises in each week and spending an equal amount of time on these scales as I did on the others. I found that practicing the classical style scales before getting into contemporary scales gave me a better understanding for the relationship between the two, both mentally and physically, on the fingerboard.

#### **3.22 Technique**

The very first things that were discussed in my private lessons here at Berklee with Federico Nathan were bow technique, rhythm, and vibrato. In my experience with classical lessons, bow technique was always at the forefront of the lesson priorities. From that classical training, I had created the habit of

using very smooth, connected, full bows ingrained into my playing, causing my improvisation to sound “too classical”. I was also taught to use vibrato constantly, another habit that needed to be broken for contemporary playing. Learning how to swing rhythms and play without any vibrato may have been one of the most challenging aspects of this process because it had been so deeply rooted in my playing that I pulled it purely out of habit. Now I focus on playing with intention by carefully selecting specific notes and phrases in which to use vibrato and when to use straight rhythmic patterns versus where to use more of a swing pattern.

### **3.23 Improvisation**

Before attending Berklee, my approach to improvisation was very disorganized, contained little variation and lacked general knowledge of chord progressions. I thought as long as I played notes within the key, whatever I played would sound acceptable. I always felt nervous when I improvised because I never had a plan or any specific patterns or “licks” in my vocabulary that I could go to when I felt stuck. I did not understand how to follow chord progression or any effective ways to practice improvisation to help me improve. Studying improvisation became one of the main focus points in my private instruction with Federico Nathan. In these lessons, I learned how to select each note with intention to fit in each chord, occasionally use non-chord tones, follow chord progressions, use rhythmic variation and interval variation, and allow space between phrases. One vital point I learned from Professor Nathan about improvisation is trying to tell a story with the music: starting off sparsely, allowing a lot of space, and building on the phrases using larger intervals and going up higher in range as the solo progresses. This way, the intensity of the performance increases and the audience remains engaged throughout the solo.

Practicing improvisation on my own required a style of practice that I found difficult to get accustomed to. I frequently felt stuck or confused in the practice room for the first several weeks, not quite grasping exactly how to rehearse something that was supposed to be spontaneous and different each time. I started to play along with backing tracks during my practice and choose short phrases to play each time a specific chord appeared - changing it slightly each time, until it was a brand new phrase. I also learned several different melodic lines – or licks – to play over specific types of chords. I would practice

these licks in every key and when I played with a backing track, I would rehearse placing the lick over chord progressions where it made sense rhythmically, then improvise around the lick while then still placing it over the same chord each time it came around in the progression. This exercise helped me learn how to keep track of my location in a chord progression and create a habit of having something pre-planned to return to in a specific place of each progression, to ensure that I do not lose track of my place in the song or of the story I am trying to tell.

Another improvisation tool I learned was writing out solos before a recording or performance. Having a partially or fully written out solo as a guide was very helpful for me in the learning process. It was also much more time efficient in studio settings and helped me create ideas that I would use later in live improvisation situations.

After several months of practicing improvisation, I now feel much more confident in my ability to follow chord progressions and create solos that makes musical sense, contain melodic and rhythmic variation, display good technique, and remain interesting throughout.

### **3.3 Songwriting/Composition**

The next section of my project was songwriting and composition. Prior to attending Berklee, my only experience in songwriting was composing a few classical style duets for violin and viola. I decided to compose, arrange, and record 4 original songs during my time at Berklee. I wanted to use this time to find my own unique style and learn about how to approach songwriting in ways that make sense for me creatively.

#### **3.31 Song 1 – “IV”**

The first song I wrote is titled “IV”. It is an instrumental, R&B/soul style song in which I used the violin in the place of a vocal line. The inspiration behind this song was not derived from any specific song or artist, but just from the styles of music that I listen to frequently. Some examples of artist that I was listening to at the time are Kirby, Lalah Hathaway, Leon Bridges, and Jose James.

Since this was the first non-classical song I have ever written, I found the initial creation process to be challenging at first, as I had no idea how to approach the songwriting process. I decided to begin with a very simple blues progression, just plucking the chords on my violin to accompany a very simple melody. After adding more instruments – piano, bass, drums, string section – the song grew in length as well as complexity. With the help of my band members, the chord progression morphed over time from a standard I-IV-V progression to something that better encompassed my intentions with the style and even added a bit of a gospel flare to the song.

The composition method of this song became a collaborative process in many ways. The full writing and recording process of this song stretched over the entire first semester (as I was using this song for my recording projects for production class) so the song took many forms

throughout the semester. Without the help of my band members, I would have had a much more difficult time coming up with this chord progression and with the rubato piano introduction that became a part of the final recording (played by Davis West). I was very pleased with the final result of this composition and enjoyed discovering a songwriting process that worked well for me. I felt that with this first song, I was able to achieve the certain style that I was going for – classical violin meets R&B/soul – and felt much closer to my own unique sound and style.





After the lyrics and melody, I came up with a very simple groove and chord progression that I used for the introduction as well as the verses. The simplicity of the chord progression was intended to be in alignment with the simplicity and cheerful nature of the verse lyrics to further contribute of my intention of the song:



For the choruses and the instrumental section, I changed the chord progression and rhythm to reflect the feeling described in the chorus lyrics: the feeling of missing someone you love. I gave the choruses more of a minor feel to embody the feeling of longing before returning back to the upbeat nature of the verses.



Writing the string parts was a much longer process than the chords and lyrics. My first draft of this song ended up sounding very classical in the section parts as well as the solo violin part. In order to change the parts to help them fit better with my intended style of the song, I drew inspiration from the style of horn parts that often appear in R&B/soul music. I drew inspiration from several D'Angelo songs and edited the string parts to embody the style of horn parts - using fills in between the vocal lines and more rhythms that have more of a swing feel to complement the groove of the song (i.e. starting a phrase on the second 16<sup>th</sup> note of a beat rather than the first).

I was not aiming for musical complexity in the composition of this song. Since many aspects of this songwriting process were new for me, I used it as a learning opportunity in many ways, such as how to write lyrics, how to write string parts to embody the spirit of the song melodically, and how to sing and record my own voice with confidence. I was pleased with the final result of this song in terms of how much I learned as a songwriter as well as a recording artist. It is not a song that I would want to release,

but the project of creating this piece of music was extremely helpful in the creation of my songs to follow.

### 3.33 Song 3 – “Water”

My third song was inspired by three different songs: “Spanish Joint” by D’Angelo<sup>5</sup>, “Space of You” by Ntjam Rosie<sup>6</sup>, and “January December” by TOBi<sup>7</sup>. “Space of You” was the inspiration for using a 4-bar bass line as the dominant melody which repeats throughout the song. The bass line that I came up with for this song essentially sounds like a derivative of the bass line Ntjam Rosie wrote, but it is simpler, in a different key, and in a 4/4 meter rather than 6/8. Here is the bass line I came up with that became the melodic theme of this entire song:



I used this same melody to compose a solo 5-string violin introduction to this song which is meant to sound like a free improvisation based on this theme and based on the theme of water. This composition is about 2 minutes long. I decided not to record this solo because I intend to use it as a prelude to the full song in live performance settings only and I did not feel that it was necessary to record for this project.

In both “Space of You” and “Spanish Joint”, I was inspired by the use of congas and other hand percussion in a soulful context. This aided me in selecting the instrumentation for this song: guitar, bass, drums, congas, solo violin, and voice. The arrangement of this song was heavily inspired by “January December”. Listening to this song inspired me create a Latin-style groove in an R&B context, to begin the song with percussion hits, and to feature the electric guitar in multiple different ways (an instrument I had not yet incorporated into my music). I also used “January December” as a reference for the

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<sup>5</sup> D’Angelo, “Spanish Joint”, *Voodoo* (Cheeba Sound, Virgin Records, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Ntjam Rosie, “Space of You”, *Elle* (Ntja Music, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> TOBi & Take A Daytrip, “January December”, *January December –Single* (2018)

arrangement of the song - adding instruments throughout the song rather than starting with the full band in.

When writing the lyrics for this song, I came up with the imagery of water as a representation of a person or as a representation of love. I first came up with the lyric “Let me be your water” or “I need you like I need water” which later turned into “You remind me of water”. When composing the lyrics, I wanted to keep the words pretty minimal while using imagery this time rather than bring as literal as I was in the previous song. I also decided to make the three choruses all slightly different, the third chorus being a combination of chorus one and chorus two. Feeling more confident and aware of my singing voice than I had felt in my previous song, I chose the key of this song and wrote the melody to fit my voice specifically, so I would be more comfortable and be able to really practice using my voice as an instrument. Here are the final lyrics of this song:

***Verse 1***

*Speak to me with your silence*

*Words say less than your energy*

*In fact don't say a thing at all*

*Tell it all in the way that you look at me*

***Chorus 1***

*You remind me of water*

*Peaceful yet powerful*

*Could drown me in your captivating waves*

*Instead you cleanse my soul*

***Verse 2***

*I knew you before I even met you*

*'Cause our souls have met before*

*Something happened along the way*

*That left us wanting more*

***Chorus 2***

*So let's flow like water*

*Gentle yet dangerous*

*Dive into the depths of one another*

*Let the currents take us*

***Instrumental/Bass Solo/Violin Solo***

***Chorus 3***

*So let's flow like water*

*Gentle yet dangerous*

*Dive into the depths of one another*

*Let the currents take us*

*'Cause you remind me of water*

*Peaceful yet powerful*

*Could drown me in your captivating waves*

*Instead you cleanse my soul*

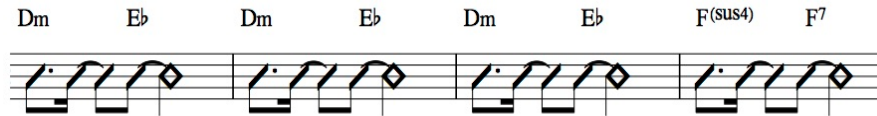
For the instrumental section of this song, I decided to include a 16 bar bass solo followed by a 32 bar violin solo. I really wanted this song to remain very much instrumental and have the feeling of a “jam” even though it has lyrics. This 32 bar space for violin improvisation was an enormous challenge for me, which later became a milestone in my improvisation practice. I finally felt confident enough to be able to improvise for a this length of time and build an interesting, storytelling solo using both chord tones and non-chord tones with intention, space, rhythmic variation, and various licks at the ends of phrases. In order to be more organized and time efficient in the recording session for this song, I partially composed a solo for this section, so I had various reference points planned out about every four measures just in case I got stuck or lost my place in the progression. I found this to be very helpful in the learning process because I came up with my own patterns and licks that I will continue to use and build upon in my future improvisations.

Overall, I was very pleased with the final outcome of this song. I learned many things in the process and I grew artistically in various ways, particularly in improvisation and singing. I also learned a lot about arranging and felt much more confident in leading a band and communicating my ideas with the other players. This is a song that I would love to perform live or to release a recording of in the future.

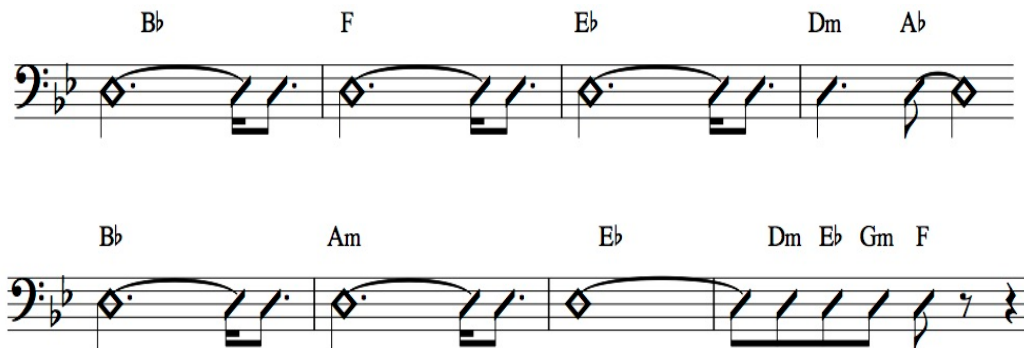
### **3.34 Song 4 – “Your Love”**

For my fourth and final song, I took a different writing approach: I decided I wanted to write a song in the style of R&B from the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. This specific time period birthed one of my favorite styles of R&B because it is what I grew up listening to and I think there is a very unique yet simple charm to it. The artists I drew the most inspiration from for this song were Brandy, Tamia, Angie Stone, and Janet Jackson. As I listened to various songs by these artists, I thought about what I liked about this style and what I need to include in my song in order for it to fit in with this specific sound. A few of the components that I found in many of the songs I used as references were a repetitive chord progression, a focus on bass and drums, and very simple and relatable lyrics. I selected an ensemble for this song that I believed would embody the R&B sound very well: keyboard, electric guitar, electric bass, drums, string section, solo violin, and vocals.

For the introduction of this song, I referred to the song “I Want to Make it With You” by Bobbie Houston<sup>8</sup> and decided to use almost the exact same rhythmic pattern that was used in this song as the introduction. I wanted to begin the song with unison hits from the full band before the groove begins in order to capture listeners’ attention immediately. Following those hits, the first verse begins right away with a simple vocal melody over a repetitive chord progression:



Following a similar writing style as my second song “I Wish”, I changed the chords during the choruses to complement the message of the lyrics. The final chorus chords became this progression:



I decided to add string section parts starting in the instrumental section after the first chorus – the same place I entered the string section in my two previous songs as well. I wrote a simple string part for two violins and one viola just to add more texture to the background of the song. Staying true to my newfound songwriting and arrangement style, I included a violin solo after the second chorus in the place of a bridge.

When writing lyrics for this song, I referred to a few specific songs for inspiration in lyrical content, rhythmic patterns, singing style, and the use of space. A few of these songs were “So Into You”

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<sup>8</sup> Bobbie Houston, “I Want to Make it With You”, (Action, 1974).

by Tamia<sup>9</sup>, “Almost Doesn’t Count” by Brandy<sup>10</sup>, and “Bottles and Cans” by Angie Stone<sup>11</sup>. As for lyrical content, I knew I wanted to stick with the most common theme of R&B music: love! I decided to make this song a and lighthearted, catchy, relatable love song, and I was not afraid to make it a bit cheesy as well. Here are the lyrics for the chorus of this song:

<i>Your love is like a cool breeze</i>	<i>Your love is like a warm embrace</i>
<i>On a summer day</i>	<i>When I’m feeling blue</i>
<i>A ray of light</i>	<i>Fresh flowers</i>
<i>When the skies are gray</i>	<i>Just because you wanted to</i>
<i>Could be a thousand miles apart</i>	<i>I fall a little more</i>
<i>But you’d still take my breath away</i>	<i>With everything you do</i>
	<i>That’s what your love is like to me</i>

Unfortunately, I was not able to fully complete this song prior to the submission of this project. I have recorded the full band, overdubbed the string section and some guitar sounds, and a scratch vocal. I still need to record the final vocals, background vocals, violin solo, and edit and mix the song. Although I did not meet my deadline for this song, I learned more about my process as a songwriter, the different kinds of approaches I can take to creating a new piece of work, and how to utilize reference tracks for many different aspects of a song. This song is something I plan to continue working on in the near future and hopefully build it into a finished piece of music that I can perform and potentially release online.

#### **4. Collaborations**

Collaboration was a very important part of my final project. Working on other students’ projects allowed me opportunities to utilize the new skills I was working on in the practice room and apply them in a realistic setting, whether it be recording in the studio, playing in rehearsals and performances, or

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<sup>9</sup> Tamia, “So Into You”, *Tamia* (Quest, Warner Bros. 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Brandy, “Almost Doesn’t Count”, *Never Say Never* (Atlantic, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Angie Stone, “Bottles and Cans”, *Mahogany Soul* (J, 2001).

composing string parts. Over the course of this school year, I have collaborated on a total of 37 projects outside of my own work, most of which were in various different styles of music that were very different from what I was accustomed to playing. Some of the genres covered in these projects included American folk, pop, disco, fiddle tunes, musical theater, tango, and many more. Three examples of the projects I worked on this year are “Sapling for August” by Nan Macmillan, “Free as the Wind” by Nehir Akansu, and “We Should Stick Together” by Sarah Martinson. I selected these examples specifically because I played very different roles in each of them and these are three projects that represent various ways that I have been able to prepare myself for my career through such collaborations.

“Sapling for August” is an American folk style song by Nan Macmillan. My role in this song was multifaceted: I composed the violin part, arranged some of the song, and had an improvised solo in the instrumental section. There were multiple different versions of this song throughout the school year and we recorded it several different times with new ideas in mind. We have also performed it several times with different ensembles each time, but the instrumentation for the final recorded version turned out to be guitar, mandolin, violin, and voice. My experience working on this song helped me become more familiar with American folk style violin playing, in both improvisation and composition. I have grown more comfortable playing in this style and being able to create music that complements the nature of this genre of music.

“Free as the Wind” is a tango song written by Nehir Akansu. The form of this particular song is that of many tangos as well as jazz standards: a melody to be played in unison in the beginning followed by improvisatory solos by each instrument in the ensemble then retuning back to the written melody at the end. This song was not rehearsed prior to the recording session so upon arrival at the session, I had about 15 minutes to look over the chord progression before we began recording and I had a 16 bar improvised solo. Although I do not play tango music often, I had enough knowledge of tango playing that I felt quite comfortable in this context and to create a solo that generally fit into the style of this song. This situation was a great opportunity to test my new improvisatory skills in a live setting and was great practice for situations I am likely to encounter in future gigs or studio sessions.

“We Should Stick Together” is a disco style song by Sarah Martinson. My role in the recording of this song was simply as a session musician. This song was fully composed and when I arrived at the studio for this recording session, I had about 20 minutes to look over the part before we recorded and it took about one hour to record all of the violin parts. My experience with this song was the kind of experience I have had very often for studio jobs doing freelance work, and I know I will have many more like this in the future. Playing as a session musician requires timeliness, proficient sight-reading skills, great intonation, and the ability to respond quickly and effectively to feedback. These are all skills that I have worked on throughout this year and the recording of this song, in addition to several others, allowed me to better prepare for professional work of this nature.

## **5. Professional Plan**

Following graduation, I am returning to Los Angeles to work as a freelance performer, arranger, session musician, and music instructor. All of the skills I have learned or improved upon throughout this program will be used regularly as I go forward in my career. Another step I plan to take with this project is incorporating my new knowledge of contemporary violin playing into my teaching. I plan on creating a lesson plan that very closely resembles the practice regimen that I created for myself throughout this project. I would like for my students to learn proper classical technique and repertoire while simultaneously learning how to follow chord progressions and how to adjust their violin playing to various styles of music. These are all things I wish I had learned in my early violin lessons as a child, so I would like to teach my students these skills so they have more versatility in their playing to prepare them for whatever musical path they may choose.

## **6. Conclusion**

The process of this project was very eye-opening for me. I discovered many aspects of my artistry that I had never expressed and I created and collaborated more than I ever have before. I learned a plethora of new skills while exercising old ones and challenged myself to be more versatile, professional, and creative in every aspect of my artistry. I feel much more comfortable and confident in my violin playing and do not feel confined by any specific genre. Although I still have learning and growing to do, I



have a brand new approach to violin playing and I have opened my mind to other forms of musical expression. For the first time in my 20 years of playing music, I have finally identified myself as an individual artist with a unique sound and style. Now, when asked what kind of music I play, I can confidently respond with something like, "I am a classically trained violinist, but my original music is more in the R&B category." I feel confident in my artistic identity and I am prepared to enter the music industry to work and continue to grow as an artist. I know the journey of this project will not end here, as this is only the beginning.

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