

5000 Word Commentary

For my final project I wanted to do a representation on what I have learnt and achieved this year. Going into my Masters at Tileyard I was very inexperienced when it came to anything to do with production, indeed the only composing I had done were the tracks for the application. A year later and I believe I have achieved all that I wanted to, set out in my personal development plan (PDP) at the start of the year, something I will discuss in detail throughout this essay. Whilst many people I imagine have gone down the concept album route for this assignment, I wanted to present my year at Tileyard and exhibit the styles, tips and tricks I have learnt during the course. Due to this fact my commentary will be split into two parts; a reflective piece on the year as a whole and the goals set out for the final project, and a commentary on the final pieces themselves, with the last section given over to the question; how successful has this project been in making me feel as though I have achieved my goals?

“For the short term goals, I will measure my success when they're accomplished, which they will be. I am however not going to do a target date. I've never liked personal review dates as I've always found things just get done. I've never failed in any of my important goals/deadlines where I have control over the outcome. I know that everything in this PDP will get done and I look forward to in a years time looking back over this and realising that I have achieved everything I want to over this year.”

This was the the final conclusion in my PDP at the start of the year and now that the year in question is about to come to an end, this commentary provides the perfect opportunity to sit and reflect on the aims set out in the PDP. We were told to be ambitious in our goals, and as a person who is naturally quite ambitious this wasn't a problem. However, what I hoped this year would help with is transforming ambition into belief. Therefore the success of this project will be determined by how confident I feel in achieving the aims set out in my PDP now. As I stated in my PDP, I don't like to set dates and many short term goals. This is because I much prefer to have a series of longer term goals and don't like to be fixed/limited in how I achieve them and how long it takes me to get there. This allows me to be able to adapt to situations if I feel they will help me. Due to this I prepared for the fact that what I initially intended for this project wouldn't necessarily be what I ended up with. I originally wanted this assignment to be focused around an English theme. I succeeded with this with the pop side of the project due to Madeleine's distinctly London sounding vocals. The music also adhered to my idea of using the UK 'Afroswing' style, taking inspiration from artists such as JHus and WSTRN. With the piano tracks however I didn't stick to what I thought I would. At the start of the course my main goal for the year was firstly to learn the skills of a producer and to hone my compositional skill with the hope in creating a style unique to me. To create an original style is something I feel is very important to do in order to be successful in the music industry. There is, in my opinion, a lack of truly unique artists coming through in the mainstream, with only a few; Kygo and JHus namely, in my recent memory that really presented something completely new in terms of genre and style. I thought I was on the way to doing this via the ambient piano music I submitted in the previous assignments and for the final project I wanted to adapt this to be closer to English styled classical music, to composers such as Elgar and Vaughan-Williams and the English nationalist school. “Elgar wrote in a rich, emotional style with strong native English associations. Though sometimes tending to be ostentatious, his music ushered in the modern flowering of English music”,¹ (Apel, 1969). This was the inspiration for the pieces as I

¹ Apel, W. (1969). Harvard Dictionary of Music. Belknap Press. pp.292.

wanted to emulate the 'emotional flowering' that Apel talks about. However, I wanted to hear what they'd sound like with a vocal and, upon hearing what my friend Hannah did with them, now believe that we have hit upon a style that is different from a lot of music released today. Though we did take some vocal inspiration from Sarah McLachlan, in particular the songs 'Possession' and 'Building a Mystery', the style of the songs as a whole have no influence from any other artists. For the hand-in I am presenting two of these songs, with two other piano tracks which will eventually have vocals on. I want to show the process from piano track to song.

One of the other aims for this year was narrowing down what I wanted to do. I trialed a lot of things over the MA course and realised that one of the main commercial avenues for a music producer is writing for briefs. This doesn't sit right with me due to the fact that artists should always write their own music in my opinion. Therefore the most important measure as to how successful my project has been personally is the authenticity of it. I wanted it to all be me. Everything in it from production techniques to melodies come from me as I wanted to feel as though I have real ownership of the project. However, going into the music production industry I need to become more comfortable producing and writing other people's music and therefore I have also submitted a track I wrote with, and for, Ruby Sewell. This wasn't done in a style I would use myself so it presented an interesting challenge as well as adhering to the main theme of my assignment of showcasing what I have learnt this year.

Coming into this project I had to weigh up my strengths and weaknesses so as to make sure I am presenting the best version of myself. The simple aims of the year was to start to learn the craft of being a producer. I always wanted to try my hand at composing and thought this course would be the best opportunity to do that, to be around like minded people, and an environment where everyone could contribute with their own specific skill set. That being said I knew that the transition from classical to pop would be a challenging one. I decided then to make use out of my melody writing ability, gained from years of experience with improvisation around classical melodies, my skill on piano and my knowledge of music theory to create interesting chords. This I had to balance with the fact that before this year I had never used any music software, never produced/worked with songwriters, and never done any composing, and so it was all very new to me to work on these songs in this fashion. Sticking to genres and people I was comfortable with, that didn't experiment with overly complex production was crucial to the success of this project. There were of course other aims I had going into this year that I wanted to achieve in my final assignment. Below is what I included in my PDP;

- *Make the most out of the learning environment at Tileyard to learn the skills behind what makes a unique producer*
- *Build a network of friends and people that I want to work with after the MA and who I can learn from and influence myself*
- *To learn what it takes to work well with people in a studio and to build 'a process' that I will go through whenever I work in a studio in the future - this can also be linked to building the confidence that when I work in a studio I know how to get the best out of people and myself*
- *Start trying to find my own sound as an artist and to begin building a library of songs - by the end of this year at Tileyard I want to have produced 10 songs at least that I am proud of*
- *To learn to be stronger in saying no - throughout my life I've always tried to seek acceptance and in doing so have often found myself doing something I'm not that keen to do to appease other people - when it comes to music this can be very harmful for creative motivation and by the end of this year I want to be much stronger and more confident in saying what I want to do and when I'm not 'feeling' a piece of music*

In my view, when I leave Tileyard I will feel as though I have achieved all of these aims. However, like I said at the start of this essay, it is important to adapt. To this end, 'the process', that I mentioned in my PDP I have realised needs altering depending on the type of person I am working with. Part of learning the skills of a producer is learning how to deal with different people. This project is a representation of my learning of how to work with a variety of different people and how to achieve the best results with each of them. In addition to this, strangely, in order to achieve the aims I set out at the beginning of the year I found that some of them went in the opposite direction. I have indeed got better at saying no and by extension got better at making sure that both myself and the person I'm writing with at a given time are happy with the music we're writing and are both on the same page. However, this has also meant that I haven't built as big a network as I maybe would have liked due to being very selective with the type of person I want to work with and, perhaps more importantly, their musical taste and style. The next step for this then is to perhaps be willing to take more risks with people. I make snap judgements too quickly and don't give people enough of a chance to work with me as I assume they want to stay in their style rather than arrive at a compromise, or maybe open my mind to the style that they like to write in. There are many things to learn and improve on, but the most important thing for me is that at the end of this year, I now feel as though what I originally thought of as lofty ambitions now seem to be more achievable.

Onto the music itself. The first section to this assignment will be the tracks I wrote with Madeleine Dunbar from the songwriting course. The aim of these tracks were to to create English style pop music combining both our musical tastes. For me this meant incorporating elements of Afroswing, tropical house and funk music and for Madeleine to incorporate features of 80's music and dancehall. Our inspiration was a mix of JHus, WSTRN and other modern London artists of the same ilk, as well as other genres that suited Madleine's music taste, for example, 'Bring it Back' by Moloko and 'La Madrague' by Bridgette Bardo, remixed by Antis. In addition to this we tried to vary this style in all the tracks to prevent too much similarity. To this end we incorporated elements from other artists. To give a few examples; in 'Do it' I kept the music English in style but we decided it might suit a Cardi B type rap vocal, hence the fragmented rap at the beginning, a very prevalent feature of Cardi B's music. In Vanilla Musk we used a 'The Weeknd' style synth, influenced from his recent album 'After Hours' in particular the song 'Blinding Lights'. This fit into Madeleine's love of 80's music as well, as the concept of the album is modernising 80's synth pop.

In my proposal for this project I talked about the importance of storytelling and removing the ego, in turn making it universal. Storytelling is a very important part of Madeleine's lyrics due to her acting background and the fact that she listens to a lot of older music from the 50's and 60's where storytelling was more of an important feature. In this way she is harking back to a previous generation. Because of this we didn't adhere to the idea of using 3rd person narrative as we felt that with the colloquialism of her lyrics the songs are quite unique in their sound. Rather than talking about vague emotions Madeleine talks about specific situations we all find ourselves in. By being more specific it makes it more universal in our view. A lot of songs these days give a fantastical idea of love and/or relationships, which are wholly unrealistic, whereas in these songs there is a lot of honesty. I won't do an in depth analysis of the lyrics as I didn't have much to do with those and it would come better from Madeleine herself, as only she knows why she wrote them the way she did.

Even though each song is fairly different from the other, I have used consistent sounds so as to create stylistic motifs. Among these sounds are marimba and reverse cymbal, to capture the sounds of tropical house (influenced by Kygo and Jonas Blue). The marimba is also a feature of

JHus' music, for example in 'Did you see'. Likewise the shakers, kicks and toppers are the same in each piece. We also experimented in the last stages of the project with vocal chopping to get over our difficulties in writing suitable choruses. This is something that I have always wanted to do, and Logic's new Sampler plug-in, released as part of the new update during the making of these tracks, has made this much easier to achieve. On top of this I have added frequent strings and a saxophone, as well as using similar rhythms in all the tracks, in particular the 'tresillo rhythm', which is the hallmark of afrobeats, was the most commonly used due to our main influence of Afroswing music.

Both Madeleine and I really like the idea of a 'translation of cultures', a phrase coined by Martin Connors that explains the use of a variety of different styles in a track of a genre.² I spoke in my first essay this year about fusion and how it was the chords that allowed for this fusion. The addition of the 7th note in a chord allowed for what Steel Banglez calls 'Happy Dark chords'. The fusion then comes from using this 7th, and other notes, for example a 9th or indeed suspensions, and ordering them in a way akin to that of another genre. With this project I have taken this further. Most genres have specific drum beats, for afroswing; "it's the snare that comes on the third. In hip-hop it comes on the fourth".³ For these tracks I wanted to create unique drum beats as I like the endless syncopation that overly complex drum lines can bring. This is utilised especially in 'Who Knows'. However, it is the focus on melody that really interests me in Afroswing. Ian McQuaid highlights this when he says afroswing is "[l]argely defined by melody rather than specific tempo".⁴ This is probably why it appeals to me due to my list of strengths in my PDP including melody writing. Afroswing presented an opportunity for me to utilise my melody writing skills as well as learn how to create drum beats and interesting grooves. J Hus, as already stated my main musical influence for these pieces, is very melody driven; for the track; 'Did you see', he had the main chorus two line vocal ('Did you see what I done, came in a black Benz left in a white one') done for ages, but it wasn't until he heard the marimba melody from his producer, Jae 5, that the track became complete. Madeleine's rap style suits this. These tracks represent me playing to my strengths rather than exposing weaknesses. I don't own any expensive plugins but I feel that they are often used to compensate for a lack of musicality anyway. I do need better string samples and brass but they'll come. In all the tracks I have attempted to place a big focus on melody.

The final question then is with these tracks have we succeeded in representing England's musical style? I believe we have, and I feel the assimilation of cultures, something I spoke on in my very first essay this year, is a very common feature of English music, and indeed English culture. We used the sound of current English producers and artists to successfully fulfil our aims. We could have maybe been more focused on it, but in terms of overall project aims the idea of creating our own style outweighed the idea of an English theme. By combining all of our favourite music we feel we have done that.

² Alemoru, Kemi. (2018). Why African and Caribbean sounds are dominating British music right now. *Dazed*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/40165/1/afroswing-african-and-caribbean-s-dominating-british-music> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

³ The FADER. (2018). Steel Banglez is the London producer bringing U.K. rap to the pop charts. [online]. Available at: <https://www.thefader.com/2018/03/30/steel-banglez-beat-construction-interview-mist-mostack>. [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

⁴ McQuaid, I. (2017). Why is this such an exciting time for the afrobeats scene in the uk. *I.D.*, [online]. Available at: https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/xwddaq/why-this-is-such-an-exciting-time-for-the-afrobeats-scene-in-the-uk [Accessed 10 Dec. 2019].

- The second part of my assignment are the ambient piano tracks, two of which with added vocals from my friend Hannah Koski. Initially these were intended to be for just piano. Instead I am submitting four for this section of my project, two with vocals and two without to show the process from piano track to song. The idea with these pieces is that the piano is less of an accompaniment rather than another piece of music working in tandem with the vocals. Again, just like the tracks with Madeleine, these pieces are furthered from an idea in my first assignment this year. Howard Goodall talks about the emotive experience of a song, invented by Schubert. "Most pop songs are based on a dozen or so of the most familiar chord sequences that were "discovered" in the late 18th century".⁵ In the 18th century the aim was to create an enjoyable and emotional experience for the listener and that hasn't changed today. I wanted to explore that further in these pieces by using more complex chord progressions and by the additions of vocals that I didn't use for the first assignment. To this end the pieces were initially intended to be English, Mendelssohn inspired, 'Song[s] without words'. However, when Hannah asked to put a vocal over one of them to trial it I changed them to actual songs as I loved what she did with them. This is why I have re-submitted a track from the previous assignment as I want to show how I have adapted my style to create a brand new one.

At the start of the year I never envisaged writing music such as this. I was originally single minded in my desire to write pop tracks in the same vein as Kygo, Jonas Blue and/or Charlie Puth. But during this year I managed to achieve one of the hardest things, in my opinion, in music and the creative arts in general; a satisfaction with my own skill set. People often focus more on their own failures and for that reason never enjoy as much what they can do for want of what they can't. Though this is still an issue that bothers me daily I have become much more confident and happy with my strengths, the biggest ones, as already stated, being my ability to play piano and my musicality. These pieces try and make use of my knowledge of theory and piano playing, often using up to 15-20 different piano layers at the same time. On top of this I have been quite experimental with chord changes and progressions. Something I have been trying to explain to people this year is the importance of good chord selections and how by changing one note you can change the nature of a chord. I'd like to believe I have demonstrated this in these pieces and that one chord can become ambiguous in that by changing one note in the arrangement it can evoke a completely different emotional response. This is why, upon hearing them, listeners will notice that the second half of each track often makes use of altered chords in comparison to the first half.

I feel as though it's via these pieces that I/we have achieved the most important thing on my PDP at the start of the year; to create a unique musical style. There isn't much inspiration for these pieces which is always a good sign as it shows organic creation as opposed to copying or pastiches. I am not saying that inspiration isn't important, it definitely is, but it's always good when music arises from a place of emotion as opposed to someone else's ideas. Having said this, with the addition of the vocals we feel as though it's similar in style to Sarah McLachlan's music and when it comes to final mixing and mastering I will process her vocals in a similar way. There are also elements of Billie Eilish in there as well.

Going forward we're going to change the style for a couple of songs for our planned album as we don't want an entirely ambient piano album, there needs to be some variety. For the purpose of this project though I am submitting the piano ones to show how I have adapted from the original purpose of this section of my project.

⁵ Tilden, I. (2013). What pop music owes to the classical masters. *The Guardian*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jan/24/what-pop-music-owes-classical-masters> [Accessed 11 Dec. 2019].

One of these piano tracks is an example of writing for a brief. It was written for the Wakefield Sculpture Park's 'Tune into Nature' competition where we had to write a piece inspired by nature. I haven't done many briefs this year due to the fact that for most of them it involves giving away music I have written to someone else, a concept I don't and will never understand. It is also an issue I wish to fight going forward in my life as I don't agree with artists not writing their own music and relying on image, social media more than songwriting ability.

The idea of a collaboration between music (and the arts as a whole) and nature is something that has filled the minds of composers and writers for centuries. '[A]ll music history is divided between an earlier period in which art derives from nature (and presumably musical nationhood is born), and a later one in which music derives from the imagination of man (and gives rise to advanced national identity)'⁶. I believe I have combined these two ideas and paid homage to the past via the music and also the present via the use of natural samples. More importantly however, in order to fuse these two 'periods' together I placed the man in nature. The title of this piece is 'The Wanderer', taken from Caspar David Friedrich's 'Wanderer Over a Sea of Fog'. The idea of the painting was to show the Romantic ideal of awe and wonder, the size and grandeur of nature in comparison to humans. In my piece I wanted to explore the human's state of mind whilst in nature, in specific, what he hears. To write it I went for a walk myself and noted everything I heard. I want the listener to be as engrossed as I was in the sounds around us and want to inspire people to listen more to what's around them. Whereas the painting is a statement on humans vs nature, my piece is a study of humans in nature whilst also attempting to capture our inadequacy in comparison to the natural world.

As I said in my previous essay, 'In the 19th century people were obsessed with the idea that music begins with nature. This, to the most basic extent, is where Romanticism comes from. Not just music, but also literature and art. Nature represented the sublime, the awe and wonder of something greater than ourselves. England's national image feeds into this, as it is of rolling hills and pastoral scenes.'

This can be heard in the music of Vaughan Williams', a huge influence for my piece being 'Lark Ascending', where I got the idea of the rising strings at the beginning, also used the Lark's melodic fragment just before the start of the 'verse' as an imitative, musical version of the real bird song samples that I used. Vaughan Williams' piece known for its genius capture of the Lark's ascension. Due to the fact my piece was based on the journey up the mountain of the Wanderer in Friedrich's painting I also tried to capture this ascension, hence the use of the melody from Lark Ascending. To do this I added the sound of breathing later on in the piece as well as a moment of release just before the lyric 'I Wanna Feel' by using risers and collective birdsong to give the effect of a larger breath being taken the higher the wanderer got, as well as admittedly being quite a clichéd portrayal of a stunning view. The addition of more and more strings also were there to add weight to the piece the further it went on. I felt the addition of more strings also captured this sense of ascension. The addition of real samples created a sense of nature's enormity. This, combined with the choice of chords, which I would describe as distinctly English due to the use of added 7ths and 9ths prevalent in the music of both Vaughan-Williams and Elgar among many others, created in my view a sense of modern day English romanticism. The difficulty I had was in setting it in Germany and still retaining a sense of an English pastoral scene. I got around this by using nature samples taken from English sources, all the water sounds, birdsong and rustling trees are from areas in England. In the bridge however, I used the sounds of cicadas, cowbells and of course the monastery bells which are all very European sounds. The bells though posed a further problem as they had to sound enough times to give an accurate time of day for a walk up the mountain, hence the presence of 3 of them.

⁶ Goddard, J. (1862). *The Philosophy of Music*. London: Boosey & Sons. pp.142-3.

This piece also wasn't originally intended for vocals but I gave it to Hannah to see what she could do with it. Once again I was blown away by the vocals for it. They perfectly fit the brief and as the piece became more about the idea of a human in nature the vocals just enhanced this.

I am hoping there is a clear progression to be seen from the first assignment to the last from this year. All the knowledge I have gained this year, in my first venture into music production, is on display in this project. With these new skills I am now hoping to take this forward into finding a job in the music industry as well as releasing my first tracks with Madeleine and Hannah, of which these assignment tracks will be a part of once they've been properly mixed and mastered. Hannah and I have planned to do an album of tracks like the ones I have submitted and have already set a date for the end of October to get all the melodies/tracks written and ready to be mixed. Madeleine and I also want to do an EP, on the advice of my mentor Sean Hargreaves, including and building on the tracks submitted for this assignment. The long term aim for this is to start to gig with them as we all want to play the tracks live. On top of this, from a personal standpoint, I want to get more comfortable with the business side of the industry so I am more confident in knowing where to send tracks and who to reach out to for anything of that ilk. I am confident in saying the whereas before, when I initially laid out my short and long term goals for this year, the lofty ambitions that I outlined now feel achievable. This project has given me a great opportunity to realise what I have learnt this year. Whilst there is a long way to go and lot more to learn, reflecting on my PDP from the start of the course, I do feel as though I have 'achieved all of what I wanted this year'.

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Music Used

- Billie Eilish - 'Ocean Eyes'
- Bridgette Bardo - 'La Madrague'; Antis Remix
- Burna Boy - 'Ye'
- Charlie Puth - 'Attention'
- Clean Bandit - 'Playboy Style'
- JHus - 'Did you see'
- JHus - 'Must Be'
- JHus - 'Play Play'
- Jonas Blue - 'Perfect Strangers'
- Jonas Blue - 'Mama'
- Jonas Blue - 'Naked'
- Kygo - 'Broken Glass'
- Moloko - 'Bring it Back'
- Sarah McLachlan - 'Building a Mystery'
- Sarah McLachlan - 'Possession'
- Vaughan-Williams - Lark Ascending
- WSTRN - '4Ya'
- WSTRN - 'My Way'
- WSTRN - 'Social'