

Research and Preparation for the Gesamtkunstwerk Piece

-Mae Jackson

With the motif of 'stories' as a guidance for the CCIFF Gesamtkunstwerk Exhibition, I decided to choose one of the oldest and best-selling books around the globe as my inspiration, a book that sells over 100 million copies every year worldwide (1). That book would be the Holy Bible, or rather its teachings and the concept of faith as it applies to people of the 21st century.

My relationship with faith has always been complex. I was raised in the Salvation Army meanwhile attending a Catholic Primary school. Today however, I can appreciate the Bible as a literary work and for its moral teachings but would consider myself an atheist. Despite this, I have long been fascinated with faith in the broader sense ; faith in each other. This task has provided me the opportunity to explore this as a lyrical motif as well as stripping back my production style and deepening my knowledge of music in the church so I may reach beyond my comfort zone in regard to musicality as well.

Recently I have had time to reflect upon my earliest influences, one of which being my Grandad who once held the esteemed title of Commissioner and Territorial Leader for the London division of the Salvation Army. As a child I spent hours reading, writing and sharing poetry with him which ultimately lay the foundation for my love of song writing. As one of our favourite poets Maya Angelou said, "Poetry is music written for the human voice"(2). My Grandad is also a poet and, still preaching at 92, he is one of the greatest minds I know.

A few weeks ago, after I shared some lyrics with him, he attempted to write in my 'style' which resulted in a comical interpretation of modern pop lyrics. It did however, inspire me to return the favour using religion as a motif as he does. I would not presume to match his flair for words and inspiration when sharing his love for God so I approached the subject as it applied to me and it took a more cynical turn – something he has critiqued me for a few times now.

In addition to reflecting on my own relationship with faith, I also wanted to research how the rest of the population regards religion in a world where a glass screen is more of a commodity than a stained-glass window. As it turns out, the Britain that was not so long ago a kingdom of Christianity is now 53% atheist which is a 5% increase in the last 2 years (3). This made me consider a correlation between atheism and how we act, perhaps it has some relation to the increase in crime rates in the past 5 years (4). Has our lack of faith hindered our morals or is it in fact our morals that hindered our faith? I found a 2012 study with an interesting take on this claiming that 'belief in Hell decreases crime rates but belief in Heaven increases them' (5). So perhaps religion has nothing to do with it but selective teachings in how to treat the earth and its' beings could be isolated from the bible and other religious texts when teaching generations to come. I - though a sceptic - can still appreciate the morals and parables imbedded into my childhood by both the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church.

When you take away the religious aspect behind the Salvation Army, you would find a charitable organisation that has provided for and supported many. William Booth founded the Church of England organisation in 1865 as the first to welcome any and all people off the street to join him in prayer (6) regardless of class, gender or race. As it happens, he also had quite the enlightened view on music, believing it “is to the soul what wind is to the ship”.

Music has long been a controversy in the church which is why I wanted to restrict my piece somewhat to the limitations that the church has been enforcing upon musicians since the middle ages (7) when people decided that extended chords, augmentations and more specifically tritones were the Devil’s music (8). Again however, I was pleased to find that William Booth believed, “Every note and every strain and every harmony is divine and belongs to us” (7).

My research into the Church’s approach to music gave me much to be grateful for in the way we as musicians are able to practice today but as a pianist and a lover of jazz and blues, I thought it might be interesting to limit my composition style for my Gesamtkunstwerk entry. I often implement modulation, 7ths and the “Devils interval” (8) in my playing, so when writing the piano for this song, I found myself having to stop from straying as I often do. I then turned to the Music Theory Academy website in an attempt to map out a simpler chord progression, back to basics you could say. A useful suggestion was to begin and end the progression with a primary chord (9). With this set as a strict rule, I was able to tame my jazz tendencies, something I never thought I would be seeking out.

As for the lyrics, my research and reflection lead me to run with the concept of faith in people and the way they act. Whilst exploring metaphors using ‘purgatory’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘hell’ and ‘grace’ as they relate to our personal lives, the main motivation behind my lyrics was to take on faithlessness in each other and learning to ‘overdose on something more like love’, in other words to love each other as so many preach the Lord loves us.

There are many great literary works and songs inspired by this same motif, another of my influences being Dante’s Inferno. Rossetti speaks of the struggle for an atheist at their most thankful with no one to thank (10). This has always resonated with me and was certainly present in my mind when writing the line “we don’t pray anymore”.

In respect to the musicality of my piece, I took quite the romantic tone, the Bible is – to me at least – a story of love. It is love for thy neighbour (11), love for the earth and its creatures and love for your body; your temple. So, in a typical ballad style, the foundation of the track is piano and swelling strings. When it came to the bridge however, I thought I would juxtapose my cynical observations on faith with a dramatic turn in musicality that emits the traditional traits of church music. I created a 10-part choral vocal to develop as the piano shifts to an organ. Organs weren’t originally invented for the church to use, it was not until a Venetian Monk was tasked with including the construction of them in his curriculum and by 900AD the organ was a statement piece in most churches (12). The MIDI organ however is a much more recent invention that served me well in this project. Though I had not much experience incorporating such an abrasive instrument into a track, I managed to adjust the EQ and attach so that it fit nicely into the mix.

To be perfectly honest, I never thought I would spend this much time researching and reflecting on the idea of faith or even thinking about it this much again but I am glad to have explored it in both my past and influences and present inspirations. I have also had a chance to reflect on my poetic roots from which my affinity for music was conceived. The result of this project was wildly different from anything I have produced before, both in subject matter, musicality and a rather stripped back production. I have learnt to appreciate the luxury of freedom in how we write out music and lyrics by taking that away. It is a piece I am proud of and has been both therapeutic and enjoyable to create. I have always believed in the power of lyrics and the absurdity of meaningless ones, but these in particular will always hold meaning with me and the journey I have taken into my complex relationship with faith.

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