

MA Commercial Music Production Assignment

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Tilleyard Education,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

C2b - Reflective Commentary

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In a conversation with another producer through the course of creating this piece the discussion turned towards a book called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* by Robert M. Pirsig (1974). In the novel we see two characters differing attitudes towards how they choose to care for their respective vehicles. One chooses to rely on a more “*romantic*” notion of maintenance and decides to enjoy riding his vehicle while relying on others for the knowledge on how to maintain his bike whereas the other takes a more “*classical*” methodical approach, learning the knowledge of maintenance for himself but disconnecting from the experience of riding. The novel ultimately concludes that although both methods have their merits; the perfect approach to maintenance and ultimately any personal pursuit is to find the balance between the two methodologies.

It seemed apparent in our conversation that an analogy could therefore be drawn between the methods a producer and ultimately myself on this project employs to complete work. Through the course of this project I found that I could successfully implement either methodology singular but struggled to maintain a balance between the two. This in turn began to inform how the piece adapted from being a traditionally recorded piece, working with musicians in the studio, to a more computer based and technologically reliant way of creating music in the *bedroom producer* sense. Here I would suggest that the studio recordings to be the “*romantic*” method to me considering that I had the guiding hands of both an engineer and the additional theory knowledge of the performers. Alternatively, the *bedroom producer* period where I developed the piece on my own aided only by my computer to be the “*classical*” as I had to learn new techniques in a rather oblique and methodical way as I became fairly isolated. The piece changed from being what I would consider to be a *song cycle* into something reflective of a *dance mix* or having the pretentious title of a *sound painting*. Ideally I would have found a marriage between the two, taking what I recorded in session home to work on personally to then further advance its progress by once again returning to the studio and having it critiqued by peers to then better understand what could be added to meet the proposal I had set out for myself. Although I do feel somewhat content with what I ended up creating I do believe it to be different from my original intent. That isn't to say though that it has strayed too far from what we define to be a *song cycle*.

In fact defining what one is has been an issue for many musicians. “*Unlike the sonata or symphony, it can boast no conventional pattern of movements; there need only be more than two songs.*” (Tunbridge, L., 2010, p.1). With this nebulous criteria as guidance I could theoretically exaggerate to the highest degree about how successful my project is as there are certainly more than two songs. However that would be too simple a reflection and not an entirely thorough investigation of my skills as a producer. What most likely separates a *song cycle* from other grand musical forms is how “*It encourages experimentations with notions of self expression and what might be called constructions of the subject...*” (Tunbridge, L., 2010, p.5). Here we begin to elucidate the meaning of what one is, although other forms are certainly acts of self expression for the composer; it is by its very loose definition that a *song cycle* is distinct in that it allows the composer to exert their most verbose and grand ambitions.

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This is most likely why the format is still popular today as Tunbridge goes on to suggest the *song cycle* has inspired artists in modern pop from *Serge Gainsbourg* on *Historie de Melody Nelson* (1971) to *Mike Skinner* with his project *The Streets on a Grand Don't Come for Free* (2004). Here both pushed themselves beyond the bounds of the simple album format and produce works that seem like true progression as well as deep insights into themselves personally. Whether that be through the incorporation of more experimental recording techniques such *musique concrete* with *Gainsbourg* or the grand orchestration on what would have otherwise been a mainly sample based album with *Skinner*. Although personally my own achievements on this project are more modest I would certainly say that the intentions were deeply self exploratory and that I have advanced my understanding of constructing music with the aid of a computer far further than I would ever have without this task being set.

Using *Holst's The Planets* (Holst, 1981) was an ambitious influence and the scale of such a piece may have been outside of the bounds of both my current technical and creative abilities. To replicate this classic piece most exactly would most likely require years of education and creative development that I do not feel I have the capacity for and certainly couldn't have obtained considering the time frame of this assignment. I have replicated his intentions spiritually though by taking the concept of having a piece that represents each planet within the solar system and reappropriating it to apply to each country in the G8. Unfortunately though, I do not feel that enough thought was applied in the initial conception of the piece. I tend towards having grand ideas with lofty conceits rather than what is possible for me to complete with the greatest ease. I do not mean this as a boast though as it often leads me down a path of either immense frustration or struggle and can often mean that I do not complete pieces or ideas. Generally the only way I tend to actually see my ideas through to their end is through collaboration or by being a contributor to someone else's project.

Whether there is true cohesion between all of the tracks and that they have a narrative on their current order is entirely up for debate. Not only are there just six tracks rather than eight to wholly see the concept through to its conclusion; tracks towards the end of the piece have a much looser connection to their respective country than at the beginning of the whole piece. I believe that a consistent musical style and overall sound to all the tracks was achieved and that a listener with prior knowledge to what the piece is attempting to portray could intuit a basic narrative. As the philosopher *Roland Barthes* suggests in *Death of the Author* in regards to literature "*Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost starting with the very identity of the body writing.*" (2001 p.3). I could therefore argue that as the piece has been "completed" in a sense, and my "*identity is lost*" that as long as a listener interprets their own personal "*subject*" on what the piece is trying to infer that my own personal definitions of intent do not entirely matter.

Although in truth it would be wrong to say that this piece has been completed in a manner I would have hoped. Large portions of the arrangement are missing in the sections, mixing is to a safe standard but nothing truly ambitious and sections of songs have been repeated beyond what I would consider to be a stylistic choice, which on some tracks borders on tedium, in order to fill the time requirements of the assignment put forward. At points I felt like a computer

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producing music rather than a person. In a *ISMIR* conference of 2017 it was suggested that now computers are able to produce melodically complex music when given a large enough quantity of samples but ultimately saw that “...*musical structure typically exceeds the scope of statistical models...the music produced by recurrent models tend to lack a sense of direction and becomes boring after a short while*” (Roy, Pachet and Papadopoulos, 2017, p.167). Perhaps this is all too negative a view to adopt considering this the first time I have embarked on such a project of this scale, primarily on my own. There is a place for this detailed criticism but it isn't particularly constructive either. I set myself intensely challenging goals and I do believe that this is the only means by which anyone can truly develop their overall capabilities.

I would also posit that the methods I would employ to see this piece through to a more satisfying end artistically are not too dissimilar from how *Holst* constructed and refined his magnum opus. *Holst* developed his piece over the course of many years, arguably beginning work as early as 1914 and staged various performances of the work in progress before a full complete staging was produced in 1920 at the *Queen's Hall* (Greene, 1995 p.25). I only had two months to produce work comparable to that of a musical genius and with that caveat in mind I would say at this stage what I have produced is a strong body of work. There are definitely *movements* and *motifs* that although embryonic are comparable to a *classical* work and the aim for each piece to have its own distinct character while also relating to each other as whole is apparent.

Doubting my own work and abilities is a habit I tend to have. Throughout the writing of this piece I worried often about whether I had the capacity to match my aims and attain the majestic accomplishments of *Holst's* work. Something that put me at ease after completion though was realising that his work “...*is formally quite simple - to be construed ambiguously, the composer creates the tension needed to propel the movement forward without resorting to conventional grammar.*” (Greene, 1995 p.22) So although I may feel my work is in areas simplistic that isn't to say it isn't good or worthy.

The very fact I pushed myself to try new techniques and attempt genre conventions I hadn't previously is also comparable to *Holst*. Greene states that “... *he continually sought to allow the musical material of each composition to inspire his formal principles and large-scale structure. So, in looking for precedents for The Planets, ...goes against one of the basic principles of the composer's working method.*” (1995 p.20) Here we see that although I veered away from the same structural components of the *Planets* that the nature in which I worked is actually comparable. By using it as a basic framework but ultimately constructing my own I was able to experiment and better understand my personal process which as we have discussed is a goal that is put forward for any artist while creating a *song cycle*. There are still “...*certain structural features which demonstrate the interaction between accepted formal conventions...*” (Greene, 1995 p.20) but I have both modernised and personalised the form to suit my own tastes through the instrumentation as well certain structural elements. It is also comforting to note that there are “*Accounts of his being called on to acknowledge applause after performances of his works describe him as seeming embarrassed and ill-at ease.*” (Greene, 1995 p.29) so perhaps I shouldn't worry to a great extent about feeling discomfort with the final product as even someone as significant as *Holst* had difficulty accepting the merits of his work.

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What I have now in this form is music that I would argue is more similar to genres such as: *Doom Metal, House, Hip-hop and Techno*. If we make the initial comparison to *Doom Metal* there are clearly sections where I was intentionally “...leaving a bare-bones structure of primal catharsis. Chords that last a full half-hour, a maelstrom of feedback...” (Sword, 2021, p.3). I did so mainly as a challenge to myself for two reasons. Firstly I became interested in aiming to infer as complex emotions as possible from the simplest arrangements in a theory sense with the aim of seeing that “...complex progressions are rendered redundant.” (Sword, 2021, p.6). I have always been inspired by the sonics and mood of music rather than how technically accomplished a piece may be. To me music is best when it invigorates emotional or thoughtfully inspiring responses than how much of a virtuoso the performers are on a recording. At least in scope I believe my piece has achieved this goal, its repetitive qualities induce a meditative state for me. While I can now see these qualities as a strength I would say that even in these final arrangements I still feel that there would be room for adding more to the arrangement at least instrumentally.

The second, probably most significant reason the piece has repetitive qualities is through my burgeoning interest in using loops and samples. The reliance on these and my own in depth knowledge of the electric guitar is what most informed how the piece eventually sounded rather than the concepts I had envisioned. As I began this project it became apparent that while I had planned to leave slots of time in my schedule to allow for a less hurried work rate, that plan quickly devolved with the earlier uncertainty of coronavirus moving a lot of my former commitments as a live performer into these slots. It would have been prudent to have anticipated this, but with dates for performances not being entirely established until a couple weeks or so before I was due to play them it was difficult to schedule in firm times for recording with other musicians. This combined with the fact that it took a couple days to edit the already 6 hours in length of drum tracks that I had recorded in the session I did get in the studio forced me into re-strategising. Fortunately at this point, it occurred to me that many artists that work in the genres associated with *Dance Music* regularly build mixes of equivalent lengths to this project on a regular basis. The possibility of then getting this work completed began to become more lucid whereas before it had been fairly opaque. With samples I could in essence “work with” a wide variety of artists as well as expand the range of sounds sonically available to me.

As this was a fairly foreign way of working for me I began to research artists whose methods were comparable. The most noteworthy reference soon became the work of *Kieran Hebden* or as he is more popularly known as *Four Tet*. I was mainly drawn to him because of a recent collaborative project between himself and the artist *Madlib* called *Sound Ancestors* (2021). *Hebden* has described how this piece was “... assembled... from “hundreds of pieces of music” that *Madlib* sent him over a period of two years.” (Ruiz, 2021) and how “There were no stems, mostly minute-long clips and some were just MP3s...” (Herlihy, 2021) a process that he had similarly gone through while working with *Caribou* on *Suddenly* (Dan Snaith, 2020). What could practically be achieved now seemed endless but with this new methodology in place a host of new challenges were present.

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In terms of the sampled drums I had to find examples that either sounded akin to or at the very least were easily transformable into matching the sound of the drums I had already recorded. I felt this was best for tonal consistency across the whole piece as although each track was intended to have their own distinct sound if we take the *Sound Ancestors* (2021) album as whole there is still an impression of one guiding vision sonically. This meant that drums and guitars that were sampled had to either have been recorded in similar ways initially or at least felt like they were texturally cognisant with what I had already written.

A formality of technique with my approach to production came into play as the very nature of working with loops tends one towards working with science of the sound waves themselves more than anything else. Here I saw myself now as working in the same way as *Hebden*, he also believes he works in two ways at the sametime stating *“the first is in that more modern electronic music sense of remixing and creating the sound for a project, and the other is more old school, working with a band and engineers and giving direction on how to capture this thing.”* (Herlihy, 2021). The same process as *Hebden* uses *“... weird mixture of editing and what people think of as mastering”* (Herlihy, 2021) started to take place as often the transposing of tracks creates its own texture which then required me to have to mix them to balance the new elements. This was especially apparent as I was mainly using an online converter to extract audio files from *Youtube* videos, all of varying quality, to *MP3* files that I could then load into a *DAW* and edit.

For a while a lot of elements really sounded like they weren't in sync with one another both in terms of tempo and sonically. I was forced to then do further research that I had perhaps not intended to or had previously neglected. Consequently I learnt deal and was able to adjust my work accordingly and in some cases like in track 1 and 5 of piece play around with concept of “mistakes” in this process to add meaning to the piece by intentionally using the sound of hard cuts and the breaking down of drum loops to draw attention to how the music has become reliant on technology and how although it has been processed this way a person is still behind the controls. Although some may view this explanation for these faults as pretentious excuses or laziness and in truth there are still definitely some mistakes that I would correct with further revisions.

The first step in fixing some of the issues was learning that *“... the human ear is capable of detecting very subtle rhythmic variations in music... , a timing difference of only 12 milliseconds ...Consequently, many artists prefer to write drum loops using drum samplers that feature their own sequencers to avoid any potential timing problems.”* (Snoman, 2004, p.19). So in many instance I had made loops too short or had not matched the tempo to the grids of my *DAW* precisely enough, this had led to a lot of elements sounding initially like they were synced but as loops continued on ad infinitum they would start to lose that relationship with each other. A way that I corrected this was to extend the length of certain loops to lessen the impression that it was the same thing playing on repeat infinitely as that can draw the human ear to notice the lack of cohesion (Howell, 2005). To lessen this effect even further I took care to ensure that I *“... set loop points on zero-crossing points, because there won't then be any amplitude changes at the*

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edit points" (Howell, 2005) this is also noticeable in terms of the frequency as poor crossfades between loops can change a timbre of a track (Snoman, 2004, p.77). As a general rule this was an arduous and tedious process as I was learning this new skill but once I got my head around some of the initial potential pitfalls I found my confidence to use these techniques grew. Whereas at first I was making adjustments on whim I began to understand that too extreme an adjustment can lose the sound of the original source (Snoman, 2004, p.76), a fact that occasionally led to disadvantages in terms of time loss to readjustment but also had an advantage of broadening the textural possibilities on occasion adding unusual and sonically pleasing harmonies that I wouldn't have discovered through conventional recording of traditional instruments.

Once these adjustments had been made a few issues still remained. Most of my channels were all in the "red" and this was due to improper *gain staging*. Through further reading I understood that "...many of the input gains are too high, the final mix will clip;..." and in some cases "...all the input gains are too low, the final mix will be faint and contain large amounts of noise." (Cafaro, A. and Arneson, C., 2020). I knew that a wholesale remix to balance out the near 200 plus elements was required but my ability to turn around an effective and organised version of this would lose a considerable amount of time, which I still felt would be best utilised through additional arranging. I decided to solve this issue by outsourcing this specific task to a more experienced and efficient producer friend who was able to do this in a few hours. Ideally I would have done so myself but I believe an integral skill to being a producer is understanding yours and others strengths and weaknesses and utilising them best to create a piece to a deadline.

With these events in mind I noticed that my approach to work was becoming similar to that of Cybernetic *Theory* by which one takes a more analytical and methodical approach to the creation of art (Steenstra, 2010 p.7-8). It is an approach that was effectively employed in the late 70s and early 80s through the work of the *Talking Heads* and *David Byrne* while they had *Brian Eno* in as producer. Not only did it force me to question the role the computer was now playing in the creation of my piece, as *Eno* did with the studio, but with this balanced mixed I decided to question what roles each element should play in the track. Steenstra states that "...*Remain In Light* (1980), *Talking Heads* welcomed *Eno's* idea that a fixed hierarchy of instruments in rock should be abandoned." (2010). The traditional set up of drums and bass being at the bottom of a tracks mix to then have additional instrumentation sitting in the middle with vocals eventually being the dominant focus. I too sought to negate traditional roles of instrumentation and this ultimately led to the bass becoming the most prominent instrument throughout the piece. Occasionally I would say this still causes some balance issues in the mix but the broody, intense mood that is brought to the piece is so satisfying to me that I feel the changes I would make would be moderate.

In terms of traditional recording in the couple of sessions I was able to schedule I was able to experiment with some different micing techniques. Guided by my tutor James Yates and an additional engineer in later sessions we utilised a variety of drum micing that aimed to expand the stereo spacing of the kit with the aim to maximise the size of the sound. Eventually I settled on the texture that is created through a Glyn Johns set up. To my own personal surprise this

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technique is one that can require only a few mics rather than the multitudinous array I was anticipating. The variety in textures also surprised me, incredibly slight movements completely changed the tone of the sound. We were also fairly lucky in the recording space as the audio treatment for the new studio had clearly been done to quite a professional level. It almost seemed impossible to record poor audio.

In both these instances a peculiar challenge presented itself as I suddenly had to explain my relatively limited ideas to individuals who were prepared to do whatever I instructed them to do yet had to also provide their own creative input when they may not have been expecting to. Fortunately, I found them to not only provide additional technical skill and insight into how the specific studio we recorded in functioned but they were also keen to implement that skill in creative ways to expand the scope of the project. This was mainly through certain suggestions about mic placement where the focus was altered to focus on the ambient nature of the room and connecting corridors to be the basis of which we initially mixed the sound of the drums around. It seemed logically that considering that the size of the concept was to encompass entire countries' histories that sonically the sound should sound as expansive as possible.

With regards to guitar I paid particular attention to techniques utilised on one of my favourite albums *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* (Mangum, 1998). Mainly because I learnt that frontman *Jeff Mangum* "...devoted considerable time to making tape loops inspired by *musique concrète* composers like *Pierre Henry*." (Cooper, 2005, p.48-49) to create the basic demos of his tracks and I felt that this proved similar to my own method here. Working closely with *Mangum* producer *Robert Schneider* was able to create a distortion and compression technique that relied solely on the minimal equipment he had in the studio to create a guitar sound that although clearly electric, sounded like it was organic; produced by nature. Having now limited myself to a home studio and feeling that most of the instrumentation sounded a little too computer generated or synthetic I was keen to add a more obviously human element to the soundscape. To do this I opted to incorporate both in-line and mic distortion as *Schneider* did. He states that he would aim to capture guitars "...acoustically, into a mic rather than straight into the board, that both he and Jeff would be happy with. So while occasionally Jeff would resort to the line-in approach, or use it in tandem with ambient recording,..." (Cooper, 2005, p.64). My approach differs here as I didn't use acoustic guitars and also chose an approach more similar to doubling up rather than recording the guitar from multiple inputs at once. I feel this achieves the same effect, especially in the final track, as the "*line-distortion sounds punchy*" and the "*microphone distortion sounds round and thick*" (Cooper, 2005, p.65) but perhaps not as effectively as I was once again only allowed a small amount of time comparatively to experiment with getting this right and I lost time to ensuring the multitudinous guitar tracks were not phasing and cancelling each other out.

At this point I have reflected enough on the reasons as to why my piece sounds the way it does but the most effective reflection would be to look personally at my skills and how I would wish to further develop them through the implementation of the SMART method.

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Firstly, we need to define some specific goals. Ostensibly these will focus on creating a clear schedule and maintaining it with an aim to allow time to work with more peers. Although a soft skill, we have seen just how crucial it is for me to define clear periods of time for me to know I am focusing on work and to break it down into specific areas of work before I start the project. I procrastinate and tend to panic under pressure and although in some ways I feel it motivates me to create some of my better work musically or it forces me to have to complete projects, in some cases the lack of preparation can lead to faults. This can tend towards a vicious work cycle as I will then panic about these faults as I lose time in trying to correct them and will then become fairly dejected which will lead to a slower workflow. The majority of production choices become fairly standardised as I have run out of time to develop my own sound or what is best required to service the piece. *Steve Albini* believes that “*A producer is someone who is completely responsible for a session...*” (Tingen, 2005). I think this also extends to everything outside of the session, the process as a whole. I am entirely responsible for agreeing to an unruly workload of commitments outside of the assignment.

My main passion as I have progressed in the music industry is to be a live performer so when opportunities arise that are going to advance me toward my goals in that realm it is difficult for me to turn them down. That being said, in the current climate of the industry one has to be a multi-disciplined individual in order to be successful and I should work harder to find the balance between the two different skill sets that I now have. As a consequence of this I denied myself further opportunities for collaboration. “*Players inevitably add things that the songwriter might not have thought of, so you often end up with something very different from what a solo musician would have arrived at on his own.*” (Byrne, 2013, p.190) I denied myself the opportunity to see this out of ill advised hubris, a belief that “If I can’t do something properly, then why bother to do any other way?”. I find this dismissal of trying to find others ways to record musicians and have their input without the aid of a professional recording studio poignantly ironic when I consider the fact that I started my course in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns prevented our lessons and first project from having the luxury of the studio to learn the recording process. If you wished to collaborate with others it had to be done via home studios or over the internet. I was finally presented with the opportunity of the full professional experience, and anything lesser than that seemed like it would be doing a disservice to the skills I had acquired through the course. In some ways I wanted to prove to myself that I was still capable of completing an entire body of work by myself. I have so often relied on others that I saw it as detrimental to include them on my personal course.

In terms of measuring this scheduling skill I am going to be more prudent and manage through the aid of calendars, a skill I have neglected for life. I am also aiming to create at least a new track a month working with someone else. I know these are achievable and realistic goals as I used to constantly write with others in teenage bands and was, surprisingly, the organiser of most of our commitments. As I got older I tended to avoid the responsibilities feeling I would advance quicker as a gun for hire in other people’s projects. Considering that I have already agreed to a tour and a few recording dates before the end of the year I think I’ll be able to achieve them within the next three months.

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Going from a fairly limited understanding of the minutiae of recording at the beginning of this course I feel vastly more confident in knowing how to correct my own mistakes if I organise myself effectively. Previously I would say that as a producer; quite frankly I wasn't one. If we were to take the meaning as simply that a producer produces work then yes that was something I was doing but I wouldn't want to subscribe to *Albini's* belief that "*Now, all that's required to be a full-fledged "producer" is the gall it takes to claim to be one.*" (as cited in Cateforis, 2007, p 289) As much as I feel that actually having that gall is the first step to becoming a producer, I certainly felt that while applying, that now I am able to fully realise the ideas technically of both myself and others. I have never been in a position that is quite the same as this. Nor have I ever had the knowledge that I now possess. I think the best skill I now have is to understand when I don't understand something and most importantly why which in turn motivates me to learn more, continually developing my skills.

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