

Will Harrison: MA Foundation Assignment - 3294 words

As someone who has been a classical musician for the best part of fifteen years and who hasn't had much experience in production, this assignment represents an opportunity for me to explore the different production techniques in composing three tracks of differing styles. Within these three tracks I have attempted to apply my burgeoning production skills to incorporate elements from my favourite genres of music so I can begin to form a unique style I can take forward in my music. Though this is a goal of every music producer, I believe that my classical background can help to form something truly original. In this essay I will explain the choices I have made in the creation of each track, staying true to my classical roots, while also borrowing elements from other musical genres to create stylistic fusion. I will also discuss how I have related this to other existing tracks in the same genres.

My first track is based on an idea that Tokio Myers made successful when he won the 2017 edition of Britain's Got Talent. He shot to fame with the track; 'Bloodstream', where he fused Debussy's 'Claire de Lune', and Ed Sheeran's 'Bloodstream'. Though it can be referred to as a 'remix', the idea to combine two tracks of hugely contrasting styles, and adding to this a mix of new melodies and harmonies, shows creativity akin to that of the use of samples in modern hip-hop/R&B tracks. To this end I have taken this concept for my track, 'La Campanella', where I have merged Liszt's 'La Campanella', with The Weeknd's 'Call out my name'. Though both tracks are in the same key, they have a great deal more in common than one might think and combine to achieve a great deal of symbolic significance and emotional ambiguity.

'Call out my name', from the album 'My Dear Melancholy', is characterised as an alternative R&B, R&B and electropop project.¹ The mix of styles here help escape what Frank Ocean calls the 'limiting' term of 'R&B'.² 'Alternative R&B' solves this issue as the fusion helps create the ambiguity in the track. This fusion can be heard in the drums with the combination of gritty kicks and booming snares, very electronic in style, with the Hi-Hat's, very prevalent in R&B, (though the swing removes it somewhat from artists such as Drake where they are central to the track). However, by using La Campanella the ambiguity that the Weeknd creates is enhanced, showing that the choice of instrumentation is just a starting point.

Where the two tracks find synergy is in drugs and sexuality. Perhaps unsurprisingly in 'The Weeknd's' case but hugely surprising in the case of Liszt, in something so innocent as 'Little Bell' ('La Campanella'). In order to explain this I

¹ Meadow, Matthew. (2018). *BREAKING: The Weeknd Calls on Skrillex, Daft Punk, Gesaffelstein & More For New EP [MUST LISTEN]*. [online] Your EDM. Available at: <https://www.youredm.com/2018/03/29/weeknd-skrillex-gesaffelstein-dear-melancholy/> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

² Bradshaw, M. (2011). Imagery, And A Little Bit Of Satire: An Interview With Frank Ocean. *The Quietist*, [online]. Available at: <https://thequietist.com/articles/07450-frank-ocean-interview> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

will first look at the use of the word ‘melancholy’ in the oxymoronic album title ‘My Dear Melancholy’. Melancholy is a feeling of ‘pensive sadness’, typically with no obvious cause. The combination of using that with ‘dear’ creates an unusual image of sadness, but being happy about it. This juxtaposition is the hallmark of the Weeknd’s musical and vocal style. Every track is characterised by very dark production, and are soaked in production techniques (reverb, delay/echo, doubling of instruments) designed to evoke a trance like state. The vocals however, cut through this, adding an almost majestic/celebratory tone. Hermione Hoby describes the Weeknd’s songs as ‘narcotised slow jams’. “Partying is an existential experience, sex is fraught with alienation, and everything registers as unreal and unsettling”. She goes on to say that the description would sound like a ‘massive downer’ were it not for his compelling voice.³ The vocals represent the drugged state, high and full of sexual tension and hope that is then crushed by the dark production underneath.

The issue arises that in my track the vocals are removed meaning the whole idea of ‘dear melancholy’ is lost. La Campanella fits perfectly into this however, via the concept of the virtuoso. La Campanella was based on the last movement of Paganini’s 3rd violin concerto, a highly virtuosic work and Liszt wanted to capture this on piano. The piece centers around the ‘bell theme’ which can be heard throughout. It was not the only thing Liszt used of Paganini’s however. Liszt took the Paganini idea of ‘artist as celebrity’ and used it to distinguish himself from all other composers in the 19th century. Walker’s biography of Liszt depicts images of fainting women, flowers tossed on stage, stage invaders at his concerts.⁴ His music is a representation of the reverence that virtuosos received at the time, and an extension of himself, the first sexualised pop star as it were. Liszt uses three elements to form his style and create the perfect virtuoso: the ‘bel canto’ of Italian Opera,⁵ a rich harmonic language heavy with chromaticism and a sense of the dramatic,⁶ all combine to show him off, in particular his hands. This emphasis on his hands feed into the 19th century focus on what made a virtuoso. A description of Paganini portrayed him as being grotesque with one shoulder larger than the other and this unorthodox image contributed to the marvel of his virtuosity.⁷ To this list of contributing characteristics Liszt added ‘fantastique’⁸ which had two meanings; firstly in the Romantic ideal that virtuosity represented the sublime, and secondly in that it was linked to a medical condition called ‘monomania’ which, according to

³ Hoby, H. (2012). The Weeknd ‘Sound and Sensibility’. *The Guardian*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/08/the-weeknd-sense-and-sensibility> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

⁴ Walker, A. (1988). *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847: v.1*. Cornell University Press. pp.372-375.

⁵ Italian arias in opera are full of soaring lyrical lines, referred to as ‘bel canto’

⁶ Classic FM. (2019). Franz Liszt as an Early Sex-Symbol Celebrity. [online] Available at: <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/liszt/guides/liszt-early-sex-symbol-celebrity/> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

⁷ Kregor, J. (2013). Forging “Paganinis of the Piano” in the 1830’s. *Studia Musicologica*, 54(2). pp.115-133.

⁸ Ibid. p.130.

Francesca Brittan, meant a “mingling of physical and imaginary selves”,⁹ akin to the ‘dear melancholy’ of the Weeknd; differing physical and mental state. This description is very similar to Anupa Mistry’s review of the Weeknd’s lyrics: “cast of supine, stoned zombie-women...whose legs willingly part after being plied with substances and who morph into threats only when [he is] coming down and feeling vulnerable”.¹⁰ The lyrics then, like the idea of the virtuoso, are a combination of the physical and imaginary, brought on in a drug induced state. If this needs any more weight, in the 4th movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique* by Berlioz, the protagonist ‘poisons himself’ with Opium which, instead of killing him, conjures a horrific vision where he witnesses his own death after killing the woman whom he loves. Opium “has a benign effect on mood and emotional tone. Anxieties melt away, black moods lift temporarily...”.¹¹ The ‘black moods’ that are talked about is what the Weeknd captures in his song. Though he is singing in a drugged state he is writing from a conscious one, therefore the ‘black mood’ engulfs/is the music without being the subject. This is why in my track I have layered 4 different piano sounds on top of one another to create a ‘trance piano’ that engulfs the music.

In the track I have combined the virtuosity of Liszt with the Weeknd’s dark production style to achieve a heightened version of what the Weeknd originally created. The virtuosity replaces the vocals via the ‘three hand effect’ which is what ‘La Campanella’ is a study of.¹² This is done throughout as I have layered the alternating d sharps (bell theme) on top of the ‘trance piano’. It was the virtuosity that made Liszt a ‘sex symbol’ and it replaces the voice without losing any of the sensuality of the pieces meaning. It keeps the same high register therefore the mood remains ambiguous. After the chorus I have also added a reharmonised version of the ‘bell theme’ so, like the weeknd, there is both high virtuosity and a mirky harmony. The reharmonisation corrupts the ‘little bell’ adding to the ‘dear melancholy’ as it alters the original version heard in the first minute of the track without removing the high register. In the end, both tracks, though innocent sounding one a study on a handbell, the other a seemingly forlorn love song, combine to achieve emotional ambiguity.

⁹ Brittan, F. (2006). Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania and Romantic Autobiography. *19th century music*, 29(3). pp.234.

¹⁰ Mistry, A. (2012). Daily Disc: The Weeknd’s Echoes of Silence. *Toronto Standard, MeshSquared Ventures*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.torontostandard.com/culture/daily-disc-the-weeknds-echoes-of-silence/> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

¹¹ Jay, M. (2002). Opium And The *Symphonie Fantastique*. [online]. Available at: <https://mikejay.net/opium-and-the-symphonie-fantastique/> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019]. - Opium is basically used to guard against nervousness and anxiety and to allow the subject to dream and feel in a state of reverie. Until, as Anupa Mistry states, there is a come down and that which is guarded against become ‘threats’ once again.

¹² Bomberger, D. (1991). The Thalberg Effect: Playing the Violin on the Piano. *The Musical Quarterly*, 75(2). pp.198-208. - The three hand effect was often used in Liszt’s time to showcase extreme virtuosity. Sigismund Thalberg gained great success in this period by utilising the three hand technique. “Thalberg has come to represent the excesses of the Romantic period, when bigger was better and two hands could sound like three.” (Bomberger, 1991).

As I stated in my introduction, the concept of fusion is something I want to take into my music going forward. For my second track I explored the idea of fusion to suit a brief, namely the end credits song for the upcoming Fast and Furious film. Most of the films use music that is latin in style, for example, 'Danza Kuduro' and 'Bandoleros' by Don Omar, the latter featuring Tego Calderón. However, the films are always searching for trends, whether that be hip-hop from the earlier films, or classic pop tracks featuring rap vocals from the more recent instalments. These trends are usually combined with the latin style mentioned before, for example, 'Hey Ma' by J Balvin and Pitbull ft. Camila Cabello from Fast and Furious 8. One of the biggest trends in music at the moment is UK 'afroswing', with artists such as J Hus and Geko populating the charts. To this end, I have attempted to combine this with Reggaetón, a style that characterises the Fast and Furious franchise.

Though the drums/rhythm are a key element in both styles, the first thing to deal with is the emphasis on melody. As Ian McQuaid states, afroswing is "[l]argely defined by melody rather than specific tempo".¹³ Producer Steel Banglez discusses how the key elements are happy dark chords that "make you feel a certain way".¹⁴ The chords are an area though that allows for creativity as it is here that I can infuse other styles. I have kept the idea of using 'happy dark chords' as this is done by adding a 7th note, but I have ordered them in a distinctly Spanish progression. This has to be done in relation to the drum beat however as, in slight counterpoint to McQuaid, the drums underpin the entire track. This can't be too mono-stylistic as there is a danger of making it sound too like a Reggaetón track. The fusion comes via the link up between chords and drum beat. Once again Steel Banglez explains what differentiates afroswing; "it's the snare that comes on the third. In hip-hop it comes on the fourth. Coming off the third beat comes from afrobeats."¹⁵ Matin Connor calls this a "translation of cultures".¹⁶ The inspiration comes from Jamaican music but it has a bass kick that Jamaican style doesn't have, 'that's hip hop'.¹⁷ The style is Jamaican but the instrumentation, and the lyrics, I where the cultural assimilation

¹³ 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].

¹⁴ 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 10 Dec. 2019].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 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 10 Dec. 2019].

¹⁷ Ibid.

comes from. This all stems from a slow acceptance of African derived sounds in UK music. In the early 2010's, artists such as Fuse ODG started to gain recognition from their infused afrobeats sound while at the same time Sneakbo and Timbo were incorporating melodic rap. This gave the large black population in London a platform on which to embrace their African heritage.

Dan Hancox explores this shift from Jamaican to African discussing how black British music used to be dominated by the sounds imported by post-war migrants from the Caribbean who came to the UK to work, and who were heavily influenced by Reggae. The changes in migration patterns gradually came to create an African majority in 'Britain's black diaspora', the result being music nowadays combining "elements of thriving Ghanaian and Nigerian "Afrobeats", Jamaican dancehall and different United States rap styles, including southern "trap" and the new, nihilistic (and onomatopoeic) Chicago "drill" sound."¹⁸ What to call this new genre caused a problem therefore as there are so many influences. Austin Daboh calls it Afro-bashment, while others go with "Afro-trap", "UK Afrobeats" or "Afro-swing".¹⁹ The first artist to bring this genre into mainstream media was J Hus who combined afrobeats with melodic rap. The melody is the most recognisable element but it is driven by the afrobeat. This has become more and more common where now artists such as WSTRN and Geko have emerged making use of the same techniques.²⁰

The issue of genre is still there however as it is hugely culturally diverse meaning, therefore, that labelling it under a specific term is complicated as it can miss out on a huge element to the genre. Another huge pioneer of the style is Kojo Funds, who has explicitly stated that he is not an 'afrobeats artist' and instead refers to his music as 'afroswing',²¹ fusing 'afro', from afrobeats, and a mixture of drums derived from R&B and dancehall which the genre 'swings between' (swing not about the rhythm but rather the cultural/stylistic shifting from one to another). The idea of this trend is to allow creative freedom while sticking to the principles of the origins of

¹⁸ Hancox, Dan. (2017). London's new cool: how UK Afrobeats could take over the world. *The National*. [online]. Available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/london-s-new-cool-how-uk-afrobeats-could-take-over-the-world-1.69520> [Accessed 10 Dec. 2019].

¹⁹ Austin Daboh is Spotify's playlist developer which is where the term 'Afro-bashment' originates, while 'Afroswing' was coined by Kojo Funds and is the name of Apple Music's playlist of the same genre.

²⁰ J Hus was very unique as he was the first artist to really combine the genres to any great effect and reception. J Hus is very much aided by his producer; 'Jae5' who creates the beats for J Hus to rap/sing over. In an interview with April Welsh 2018 the duo detail how they made hit track 'Did you see'. J Hus states "I had a two bar in my head, 'did you see what I done came in a black benz left in a white one,'"". He took the track to Jae5 who added the marimbas. "Once I heard that sound, the whole track was already done in my head". It is clear here that the melodic element is what distinguishes the style. Even artists such as Drake have made use of it in tracks such as 'Won't be late' where both he and Swae Lee, the main songwriter, rap and sing.

²¹ Abiade, Yemi. (2019). Kojo Funds is the King of Afroswing. *Crack magazine*, [online]. Available at: <https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/kojo-funds-king-afroswing/> [Accessed 10 Dec. 2019].

the beat, so by combining Reggaetón elements it stays true to the ‘trend’ as they are not so far apart.

Reggaetón originated in Puerto Rico in 1991 and is characterised by the ‘dembow beat’.²² In order to fuse the two ‘genres’ there has to be an underpinning element between both. This is the ‘tresillo’ rhythm (3+3+2 complemented by a 4/4 bass drum), the core of the ‘dembow beat’, present in both ‘Afroswing’ and Reggaetón. Dembow consists of a kick drum, kick down drum, plait, snare drum, timbal and timballroll²³, all of which can be found in my track. In the track you will hear elements from both these styles as well as additional features from each. I have used steel drums, heard often in Spanish music, as well as the Trumpet, another distinguishing feature of Spanish music, for example in Cardi B’s ‘I like it’. I have also used the marimba from J Hus’s track ‘Did you see’ and Fastlane Wez’s track ‘Likin’. The production techniques are very minimalistic in fragments as the tracks are made up of separate parts/styles. It’s all based around the tresillo rhythm, with added melodic inflections akin to that heard in ‘Afroswing’. There are two bass sounds, one in the intro where it is complementary as it is in Reggaetón and one in the verse/chorus where it adds melodic interest as it does in ‘Afroswing’.

One thing I have tried to present in this essay is that music is an expression of the self. Whether that be music from the 19th century or music from today, embracing its heritage. The reason for this is that we still live in a Romantic age, whether people choose to believe it or not. People still search for ways in which to express their innermost thoughts and beliefs. In an interview with Imogen Tilden, musicologist Howard Goodall states that Schubert invented the 3 minute pop song. “He wrote 600 songs, and, like today’s songwriters, his intention was to write music that would be instantly enjoyable. There’s not a moment where he is trying to catch you out or where you have to listen 10 times before you get your head around a song...there’s verse-chorus, voice and piano underneath”.²⁴ Songwriters today such as Bruno Mars or Adele are using chord progressions that have been around a very long time. In Goodall’s words; “[m]ost pop songs are based on a dozen or so of the most familiar chord sequences that were “discovered” in the late 18th century.”²⁵ These progressions combine to form an emotive experience for both performer and listener, as powerful now as it was 200 years ago.

For my final track I have tried to emulate what Goodall means by an ‘emotive experience’. The reference track for this is Bruno Mars’ ‘When I was your man’. This

²² Marshall, W. (2006). The Rise of Reggaeton. *Boston Phoenix*.

²³ Marshall, W. (2008). Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton. Lied und populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture. *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Volksliedarchivs*, (53). pp.131-51.

²⁴ 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].

²⁵ Ibid.

is Mars at his most vulnerable, saying he had “never been this nervous” to release a song.²⁶ Producer and co-writer Philip Lawrence stated about the creation of it; “We always loved those moments where you can sit at the piano and emote. Those intimate moments when an artist is so naked and vulnerable...[t]he subject matter was real life; Bruno had experienced that, so we tried to say it in as best and catchiest way we could.”²⁷ Comparing the two statements, Goodall and Lawrence’s, we find the musical intentions are very similar. The vulnerability in putting one’s emotions into the public eye is a Romantic concept.

But where did the idea of the modern pop ballad come from? The answer is the Piano Ballade, invented by Fredryck Chopin in the 19th century. Ballade’s are one long narrative; “[musical] parts [that] succeed one another in a determined order... their succession is governed by the relationships of causing and resulting by necessity or probability.”²⁸ In other words they are a stream of consciousness with no obvious structure. To stay true to the ballade’s origins I am adding a piano solo in place of a middle 8. The structure however wasn’t finalised until the the rise in popularity of the Lied. The addition of words requiring greater formal constraint than the freer instrumental ballade. This fits into an interesting debate about programme (pre-determined programme) vs absolute (no programme, pure expression) music. Bruno Mars states that “[m]usic, to me, is all about feeling. Before lyrics, and beats, and the new drum sounds”.²⁹ But is it possible to capture the same feeling that Chopin captured with the formal constraints of lyrics?

Wagner described Beethoven’s 9th symphony as the watershed moment for Romantic expression as the addition of the choir in the last movement moved it from ‘indecisive’ expression of preceding movements (by extension all preceding music) to a ‘decision’ that can only be achieved in the human language.³⁰ Wagner believed realisation couldn’t be achieved with absolute music as it is too ‘indecisive’. Poetry is the deepest expression of human emotion but requires musical assistance. Music creates abstract feeling which complements poetry in creating realisation.³¹ Higgins suggests that the terms should be switched for ‘formal’ vs ‘representative’ music. The

²⁶ Bruno Mars. (2012). When I Was Your Man. *Bruno Mars Latest News*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.brunomars.com/news/when-i-was-your-man-2103286> [Accessed 11 Dec. 2019].

²⁷ LeDonne, R. (2013). Philip Lawrence: Bruno Mars’ Right Hand Man Goes Solo. *American Songwriter*.

²⁸ Berger, Karol. (1996). The Form of Chopin’s Ballade, Op.23. *19th century music*, 20(1). pp.46.

²⁹ Scott, D. (2016). Bruno Mars Just Wants You to Have a Good Time. *Black Entertainment Television*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.betintl.co.uk> [Accessed 11 Dec. 2019].

³⁰ Pederson, S. (2009). Defining the Term ‘Absolute Music’ Historically’. Oxford University Press.

³¹ Dahlhaus, C. (1970). Wagner and Program music. *Studies in Romanticism*, 9(1). pp.3-20. pp.5

function of music is to “try and present reality”³², the same idea that Lawrence states about “When I was your man”. Higgins goes onto say that “nothing can be expressed without form”.³³ The formal ‘constraints’ actually aid expression. They form a symbiotic relationship.

Programme music can be both music with words and music without, provided there is an accompanying ‘programme’ that describes what the music is about; a film score for example. This is where the ‘song’ has the advantage as the programme is told to us. Micznik states that programme music is only really programmatic if the listener is made aware of the programme.³⁴ But this presents another problem in the case of the 3 minute pop song. Because the artist is ‘telling’ us what it is about, if we remove the artist from the song do the words carry the same meaning? Niecks explains that programme music only exists to give context to the reason behind the music. “[T]he composer produces the best he himself and his art is capable of when he expresses his own subjectivity, his own experiences”.³⁵ In other words, music is most powerful when the choices behind it are made due to the personal feelings of the composer. The beauty comes as the listener is free to relate their own experiences to that, the programme is just an aid.

In the case of the modern pop ballad then, the production is very limited, but this makes it all the more beneficial to achieve raw human emotion. The debate between programme and absolute music is crucial to understanding the construction behind it. The transition from absolute to programme adds personal experience which the listener can relate to. However, I believe it is important in such music to differentiate between music and accompaniment. Schubert’s songs were full of musical inflections in the piano which I believe are sometimes lost in modern pop songs, thus the decision to add a piano solo rather than a middle 8 is to momentarily escape personal experience and add a reflective element, similar to that of the 19th century piano ballade.

³² Higgins, L. (1924). Absolute and Programme Music. *The Musical Times*, 65(981). pp.987-988. - believes that music is “the most comprehensive of all the arts, because it is capable of performing the idea!” - capable of ‘performing the idea’ with the assistance of a programme. Therefore the ideal art form in this regard is opera, song or ballet which combines all arts.

³³ Ibid. p.988

³⁴ Micznik, V. (1999). The Absolute Limitations of Programme Music: The Case of Liszt’s ‘Die Ideale’. *Music & Letters*, 80(2). pp.207-240.

³⁵ Niecks, P. (1994). Programme Music. *The Musical Times*, 45(733). pp.163-165.

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www.youredm.com/2018/03/29/weeknd-skrillex-gesaffelstein-dear-melancholy/ [Accessed 9 Dec. 2019].

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