

MA Term 3 - Final Project Proposition

My time at Tileyard has been the first time in my life where I have been clear about what I want to do. Having only started studying music production during this year, I want to take the opportunity this final project has given me to show what I have learnt over this period. Even though I don't feel ready as of yet to do a fully conceptualised album of tracks in a singular style, through the variety of styles I will present I am going to base it around the idea of Englishness. I've always identified very strongly with the pride of being English and often find myself advocating this to others. In my assignment I wish to do this via music as I want listeners to feel the same pride. When I came to Tileyard one of my goals was to hit upon a style that I wanted to write in. While I may not have achieved this as of yet for my pop writing I have realised that going forward I want to utilise my piano skill to create ambient, soundscape like tracks, that I have demonstrated in previous assignments. This style of track is of course very popular on Youtube via study and sleep music channels, however, I feel that my combination of piano, with strings and other cinematic/ambient effects and instruments makes it quite a unique style, a cross between classical and cinematic music. With this assignment I want to develop this further and add in an English aspect/feel to this. I will also demonstrate this via pop tracks, written with Madeleine from the songwriting course. I am going to use English hallmarks from both genres, for example the use of harmony by composers such as Elgar for the piano tracks and the current English pop trend; Afroswing. This coupled with Madeleine's distinctively London vocals will juxtapose the modern sound of England with the traditional. This assignment will hopefully be an amalgamation of my musical knowledge as well as my personal passions and demonstrate solo and collaborative development.

The majority of my assignment will be made up of piano tracks, approximately thirty minutes of the allocated forty five, as I feel these are the best medium for expressing what I want to express and also to continue my development for the solo music I want to write going forward. In these piano tracks I want to capture the natural freedom that composers such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams captured in their music. In listening to pieces by these composers the listener gets an innate sense of patriotism. However, music and the idea of Englishness is not defined by the political situation of the state, though this is unfortunately often the case, but goes beyond that to what we are as a country, or the image of it. The feeling of alienation that some people feel from the various governments that England have had means that there are blinkers on when it comes to a pride of being English. History, Nature etc, is what makes us the country we are and the association of pastoral scenes and England's natural landscape should instil our national pride, not the political state. '[N]ationalism is an ideology of the nation, not the state',¹ (Smith, 1991). In this respect my pieces could be considered nationalist as nationalism is not just a flag waving in the present but also the national identity of the past. There is a common misconception that English music lags behind nations such as Germany and Italy in this regard, however this is not the case. The problem that England has had is in my opinion what makes it most effective, that it has very rarely been about the 'present' and rather looks to the past. German and Italian music has at one time been national as well as being nationalist (national looks for sound of the nation while nationalist contracts into itself). English music has only ever been nationalistic, using a historical image of the nation rather than the current.

¹ Smith, A.D. (1991). *National Identity*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press. pp.91.

A case in point is Elgar. “One of the more serious charges that can be brought against Elgar is that his art is escapist. This criticism can be targeted in several ways. Most obviously, Elgar was committed to a late-Romantic expressive idiom, to overall monotonality (his works usually begin and end in the same key), and to diatonicism as a basic point of tonal reference. These factors meant that during the first two decades of the twentieth century Elgar’s music began to lag behind “progressive” developments in European music,”² (Riley, 2007). I must interrupt the quote here to say that ‘progressive developments’ in my opinion are snobby classical music fanatics trying to salvage experimental ideologies which were becoming progressively less and less relevant due to the emergence of Cabaret and jazz. Elgar’s music on the other hand bore a humane quality that was needed after the horror of the war, where as European classical music no longer represented people. Elgar’s rejection of societal and musical conventions meant he was dubbed as an ‘escapist’, unfortunately a misguidedly negative term, turned positive by Matthew Riley saying that escape does not mean run away here, rather he escaped conventions he did not like and found solace in his music. In my opinion he offered escape to listeners to find themselves in the traditional image of England’s ‘green and pleasant land’.³ ‘A national music, of course, does not exist. What is considered as such is the distillation of contrasting conventions into a fresh essence of greater or lesser palatability or distinction,’⁴ (Young, 1967).

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. Indeed pieces by Vaughan Williams and Elgar are often set to such scenes in movies and videos and therefore the combination of the Romantic idea of nature and Nationalism is perfect for my project. ‘[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),’⁵ (Goddard, 1862). I would further this and say that the ‘imagination of man’ looks back onto the first period and thus music history is cyclical. But these two if linked form a powerful national identity. For example, Beethoven is a German composer, but his music isn’t the sound of Germany, Elgar is ‘the’ English composer and his music characterises a nation. This is why I believe that the dismissal of England as a musical powerhouse is unfounded, looking to the past is no bad thing. “Let us follow our own path . . . let all men speak well or ill of our nation, our literature, our language: they are ours, they are ourselves, and let that be enough,”⁶ (Smith, 1991). The pieces I will write will hopefully pay respect to English composers of old and show that English music should be regarded in the same sentence as German and Italian counterparts. I will portray nature by using found sound of natural sounds and

² Riley, M. Elgar the Escapist?. (2007). *Edward Elgar and His World*. Princeton University Press. pp.39.

³ Lyric from Jerusalem

⁴ Young, P.M. (1967). *A History of British Music*. Ernest Benn Ltd. pp.418.

⁵ Goddard, J. (1862). *The Philosophy of Music*. London: Boosey & Sons. pp.142-3.

⁶ Smith, A.D. (1991). *National Identity*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press. pp.75.

combine them with the Romantic style of Elgar from his piece, Nimrod, often used as the archetype musical representation of England.

‘The music of every nation has certain characteristics of its own. The progression of intervals, the modulations, embellishments, rhythmical effects’,⁷ (Engel, 1874). If we take Nimrod as the case study we can see the ‘characteristics’ I will be adhering to in my assignment. Daniel Mason explains how in the piece Elgar uses simple diatonic harmony and triads, seventh chords and a restless bass to create his unmistakable style. On top of this he utilises frequent melodic leaps, and perhaps most importantly, rhythmical flexibility,⁸ (Mason, 1917). These are the characteristics I will use in my piano pieces including for one of the pieces in this section of the assignment which will be a response to a brief, one of the things I have learnt at Tileyard. The brief is to write a track celebrating nature and the combination I spoke of earlier of nature and nationalism is perfect for answering this brief. It also demonstrates collaborative working and is an example of me using my own style for collaborative benefit. For this track I want to see how the human voice can be used to complement a piano track to depict nature. “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”,⁹ (Apel, 1969). Flowering is the key word here. In the same way Elgar’s music represented a world born anew, a blossoming of a new time, we also want to express the world blooming and breathing again in our piece, the planet ‘born anew’ after the current coronavirus crisis. Therefore, it will be a very reflective piece and will be designed to stimulate self reflection. Even though we are using the human voice, we will not use lyrics. Wagner believed that music couldn’t be expressive without the medium of words, however, words cannot always express our exact feelings. This though doesn’t mean that the voice can’t be used. It is not just for articulating but also to add a human aspect. Michael Jackson’s Earth Song is an example of this; the chorus is like an outcry and does more for the meaning of the song than any lyric could. This combined with a piano soundscape could create a very effective, modernised take on the English pastoral scene in music form.

The idea of a piece without words is backed up by Mendelssohn with his composition ‘songs without words’. “If you ask me what I had in mind when I wrote it, I would say: just the song as it is. And if I happen to have certain words in mind for one or another of these songs, I would never want to tell them to anyone, because the same words never mean the same things to others. Only the song can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another, a feeling that is not expressed, however, by the same words,”¹⁰ (Schwarm). No critique is required here as these are Mendelssohn’s own words. Often words are inadequate to express therefore they are not needed. The story is personal and should be left to the interpretation of the listener.

⁷ Engel, C. (1874). *Music. Notes and Queries on Anthropology, For the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands*. [Drawn up by a Committee appointed by the British Association for the Advancement of Science]. London: Edward Stanford. pp.110.

⁸ Mason, D. (1917). A Study of Elgar. *The Musical Quarterly*, 3(2). Oxford University Press. pp.291.

⁹ Apel, W. (1969). *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press. pp.292.

¹⁰ Schwarm, Betsy. Songs Without Words. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Songs-Without-Words> [Accessed 21 May. 2020].

Mendelssohn also goes on to say that words to him seem so 'vague' and 'easily misunderstood' whereas music fills the soul, also stating; 'What the music I love expresses to me, is not thought too indefinite to put in to words, but on the contrary, too definite'.¹¹ The popularity of Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words means they are undervalued by a lot of critics, but they are popular because of how they made people feel - listening is a personal experience and they clearly are of universal quality to this day - People often mistake popularity for a bad thing but often it means that it is something people relate to - the problem is these days people relate to very trivial matters in the grand scheme of things as opposed to in the past when listeners were looking for artistic quality and personal meaning as opposed to political statements and glorified sexuality. '[I]ndeed one of the reasons the Songs Without Words are still alive is their pianistic importance. They are "the most perfect studies for the development of a singing tone and a subtle, most highly differentiated feeling for touch and pleasure",¹² (Tischler, 1947). Songs without words combine pianistic romantic tonality with song. They are the perfect piano piece harking back to a Romantic ideology. Their immense beauty and musical quality is why they are still popular. As Mendelssohn's pieces are purely piano I am using the voice to adapt this by using Ruby as a one woman choir, using vocal harmonies to add the human aspect found in 'Earth Song'. This, coupled with the pianistic beauty in Mendelssohn's pieces will create a modernised homage as it were to the Romantic idea of nature

The final section to this assignment will be a collection of pop songs written with Madeleine to show the modern voice of English music. Mendelssohn's songs without words are an example of the human spoken word often being inadequate to express what we truly feel. Obviously with pop songs we have to use words but within them we are using a story personal to her but with real life issues and insecurities that anyone can relate to. "Songs apparently say what some listeners want to say anyway, literally putting the words into their mouths as they sing along. The fact that the 'I' in the song has no name makes it easier for the listener to appropriate the words,"¹³ (Murphey, 1992). First person narrative often make the listener indirectly think the song is about them, even though we know it's not possible. By singing along we are forced to identify with the character in the song, and therefore do. In mine and Madeleine's tracks we will bring in 3rd person narrative, 'she' for example, as it gives the listener more freedom over what they relate to, no song ever expresses exactly the listener's state of mind just a rough guideline.

As explained in previous assignment tracks I have submitted, my favourite style is Afroswing, the current trend in British music, rooted in African and Jamaican cultures. The songs will be an amalgamation of both mine and Madeleine's specific styles as we will combine Afroswing with her distinct London Urban vibe. The songs will be written in such a way as to adhere to my English concept, but also universally relatable without being forceful. We want the listener to have a completely personal reaction. Within these songs Madeleine's focus is on storytelling. In my opinion art exists to show off more than just the

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Tischler, H, and Tischler, L. (1947). Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words". *The Musical Quarterly*, 33(1). Oxford University Press.

¹³ Murphey, T. (1992). The Discourse of Pop songs. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(4).

artist's ego. It is our duty as songwriters and producers to make sense of the world around us in a profound manner. Writers such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen succeed in this as their songs explore humanity. While writing our tracks we will emulate to make sure that the stories coming across will not just feed an ego but represent profound truths. Of course, using Afroswing to do this could be seen as problematic due to its apparent lack of authenticity and consideration for its reggae/dancehall roots,¹⁴ (Mn2s, 2018). However, that, in my opinion, is the beauty of England's music, and indeed artistic scene. We are hugely multicultural and adopt them to feed our own culture. I personally don't listen to reggae or dancehall, and don't really like either genre. I also don't identify with the culture of the majority of people writing it. However, I do appreciate it's sound and how it makes me feel when listening to it which is all that matters with music. This is just another example of me wanting to tap into English music. England is a centre of cultural assimilation and I believe through these pop tracks I can represent England's modern popular music and stand it up alongside my piano tracks as a showcase of English styled music throughout history. I personally don't think it matters where it comes from when listening to it unless you identify with that culture. What matters is how it makes the listener feel and how reflective it forces us to be.

There is no real conclusion to be had here as there is no argument against anything. so I will end with a quote; 'in their songs the people express generally their innermost feelings and aspirations, national music . . . exhibits the true character of a nation . . . [and] displays the character and temperament of different races, and the relation they bear to one another,'¹⁵ (Engel, 1864). Even though the tracks in this assignment are not all the same style they will all express the hallmarks of Englishness. In this assignment I hope to lay out what makes English music so special.

¹⁴ (2018). The birth of Afroswing; storming the UK music scene. Mn2s. [online]. Available at: <https://mn2s.com/news/news/birth-afro-swing/> [Accessed 20 May. 2019].

¹⁵ Engel, C. (1864). *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations*. London: John Murray. pp.4–5; 12.

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