GRIEF: SUITE FOR RHYTHM SECTION

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Essay on *Grief: Suite for Rhythm Section* ................................................................. 1

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 13

Appendix: Score of *Grief: Suite for Rhythm Section* ..................................................... 14
An Essay on Grief: Suite for Rhythm Section

I have written a one-movement suite titled Grief for four-piece rock band consisting of electric guitar, piano, electric bass, and drum set. It is programmatic, with each section representing a different stage of the grieving process, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.¹ A few musical motives are present throughout the work to create a sense of unity, although each section has its own character. The instrumentation I have chosen is a very common type of ensemble, and exists at both an amateur and a professional level. My intention with this piece is to create something that both is accessible to the public and amateur musicians, and also is appropriate for the concert hall and can be performed by classically-trained musicians. This type of piece, which falls into both the rock and the new-music worlds, is not uncommon, especially over the last few decades.

There are many instances of classical composers borrowing ideas from rock music, and vice versa. Minimalism and rock music of the 1960s shared a lot of similar traits such as repetition and simple harmonies. Composers such as Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass and bands such as The Who and The Velvet Underground shared these common traits, and often a common audience.² In the 1970s, rock groups such as Pink Floyd and Emerson, Lake & Palmer created rock songs with the same sort of experimentation that was common in new music of that time. Rock music became more of a significant influence on new music in the 1980s. Peter Gordon’s Love of Life Orchestra, or LOLO, performed a variety of music influenced by pop, rock, or jazz. Another important composer of the 70s and 80s is Laurie Anderson. She made

use of new technology and rock instruments, and also collaborated with rock musicians such as Peter Gabriel.³ Heavy metal is one form of rock music that has especially been influenced by classical music. Not only have metal musicians borrowed techniques from composers such as Bach and Vivaldi, but many of them began as classical musicians. Both Eddie Van Halen and Swedish guitarist Yngwie J. Malmsteen, known in the United States for albums such as Rising Force and Odyssey, were given classical music training as children before becoming award-winning guitarists. Malmsteen’s inspiration comes from composers such as Paganini and Vivaldi, while Van Halen is inspired by Debussy and Bach.⁴

Contemporary new music ensembles such as Bang on a Can and post-minimalist composers such as Louis Andriessen use techniques similar to those of rock music, and often use the same instruments as well. The composers of Bang on a Can are Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang. Michael Gordon especially has a large body of works for electronics and amplified instruments. Trance is a piece written for the group Icebreaker that uses electric guitar and electric bass as well as winds and percussion. Trance is minimalistic in nature, and includes sections of very idiomatic solos for the guitar and bass, similar to those in rock pieces.

Andriessen has a number of works using electric guitars, including Orpheus, De Materie, De Staat, and Hout. De Staat blends traditional orchestral instruments with contemporary ones in a large ensemble, including winds, electric guitar, bass guitar, and amplified voices. The text used in De Staat comes from Plato’s Republic. Much of Andriessen’s music is influenced by minimalism, including sections of De Staat. Andriessen uses the church modes, namely Phrygian and Lydian in De Staat, which is something that I have picked up as a composer. The piece begins with driving chords in the winds, reminiscent of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, then

transitions into a new section with electric guitar and vocals. Throughout the piece, there is a juxtaposition of different material that seems to have varying influences. Sections with the electric guitar sound both minimalistic and rock-influenced. *De Staat* is definitely a concert work, but includes elements of rock music as well, which I believe makes it very accessible.

It is my intention that *Grief* should be both accessible to the average listener, and a challenge for an ensemble of trained musicians. I think composing music like this is important because electric instruments are very prevalent right now, and I believe they could come to form a standard chamber ensemble in the future. Some of my own influences for *Grief* have been rock bands that I enjoy listening to. A few bands that have had a specific influence on *Grief* are Black Sabbath, System of a Down, and Papa Roach. In my analysis, I will discuss places in the music where I have alluded to pieces by these bands.

The form of *Grief* is a five-part suite in one movement. Each section is based on a stage of the grieving process as described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Rather than creating five separate movements, I chose to connect them. While the same effect could have been created by simply instructing the movements be played *attacca*, I did not wish them to be playable as separate movements. Because grieving is a process, it seems appropriate to make the sections inseparable. Admittedly, I refer to them alternately as “sections” and “movements” when rehearsing. Similarities between *Grief* and a traditional suite include alternation of tempos, and a different overall character in each section. *Grief* consists of five sections, following the five stages of grief. Kübler-Ross outlines these stages as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

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Denial manifests itself in the form of shock, and disbelief that something bad could have happened. The first section of the piece, “Denial,” begins with a slow and steady pulse, signifying an unwillingness to accept change. The melodic lines of this section feature pitch bends to represent uncertainty. This first section is brief, and grows into the next section, “Anger.” According to Kübler-Ross, anger can be turned toward anyone, or can manifest itself in the form of guilt. This second section of the piece is the fastest and loudest section of the piece because anger is a very obvious emotion. The end of the second section comes to a sudden halt with sustained chords and a slow melodic fragment in the piano. “Bargaining” is the third section, and features the drum set with interruptions by the rest of the ensemble. Bargaining as a stage of the grieving process involves considering what could have been changed and wishing there was still a way to fix the situation. The conversation created between the drum set and other instruments signifies someone attempting to fix the situation but receiving the same answer each time. The third section ends in silence, leading into the fourth section, “Depression.” The fourth section is the slowest and revolves around a dark, fully-diminished 7th chord. As a stage of the grieving process, depression is the full realization of loss, and manifests itself in lethargy, withdrawal, and extreme sadness. Rhythmically, “Depression” is unstable, featuring polyrhythms between the piano and drum set as well as actual breaks in the sound. The slow tempo and occasional stops represents someone feeling hopeless and trudging through the day without really enjoying it. Acceptance is about coming to terms with loss and deciding to live with it. It is not about being happy, but about continuing on with life. “Acceptance,” the fifth and final section, grows out of the last sustained note of the previous section. It begins slowly,
with a melodic fragment that has been used before, and eventually grows into a somewhat
optimistic-sounding theme. This final section brings back themes from before while retaining a
lighter mood. “Acceptance” is happier, but not too happy. While the mood is lighter, the process
of grieving is not forgotten, and the final chord of the piece is a dominant 7th chord rather than a
stable tonic triad. Having discussed the overall form and its connections to the grieving process, I
will now go into greater detail about each section.

“Denial” begins with a steady pulse from the bass drum followed by a pitch bend
downward, similar to the beginning of Black Sabbath’s “Iron Man.” The similarity doesn’t
continue throughout the section, but it is a noticeable allusion to the famous rock piece. This
section is a slow 60 beats per minute (bpm) and in A Phrygian. The first three sections will be in
the Phrygian mode, which I have chosen instead of minor to create a mood appropriate to
grieving. The guitar comes in at the pickup to m. 5 with a fragment of the Denial theme, but the
first full statement of the theme occurs in mm. 16–19 between the guitar and piano (Example 1).
While this theme is usually fragmented rather than stated fully, the triplets alternating scale
degrees 1 and 5 become a major feature in the accompaniment throughout the entire piece. In
fact, the polyrhythm created by the triplets against the sixteenth notes in the drum also becomes a
major feature in all sections of the piece. The steadiness of the bass drum in this first section
represents someone being unwilling to accept change, while the pitch bends in the guitar
represent instability. The “Denial” section of the piece gradually builds in speed and loudness,
signifying that it is impossible to continue denying or ignoring something that has happened.
Example 1: Denial theme, mm. 16–19, electric guitar and piano

“Anger” begins loudly at twice the tempo of the previous section, 120 bpm, because anger is not an emotion that is usually hidden. The key is F Phrygian. A second allusion to a famous rock song occurs in the drum set part at m. 30. On the surface, it sounds similar to the rhythm used in System of a Down’s “Chop Suey.” I use sixteenth notes in the bass drum, which requires the drummer to have two pedals, representing the adrenaline which usually accompanies anger. The Anger theme is stated in the guitar in mm. 28–30 (Example 2), while another theme is stated in the bass in mm. 32–35. The theme in the bass is actually a fragment of the Acceptance theme from the fifth section, which will be discussed in detail later. The one-measure motive in the piano at m. 36 is only present in the “Anger” section, and is derived from the Fibonacci sequence by assigning each number to a pitch (Example 3). In this case, 0 is E natural, 1 is F natural, and so forth. While this process creates a repeating pattern, I only use a fragment of the sequence to add interest to the music. The Fibonacci motive is not a theme in itself, but is a feature of the “Anger” section. At m. 37, the bass takes the melody and becomes the featured instrument of the second section while the other instruments take on an accompanying role. The guitar periodically plays a loud, dissonant chord, signifying an angry outburst while the piano alternates between triplets and eighth notes in a low register. In mm. 40–44, the melody is a long
descent subdivided into triplets, while the drum set plays a commonly used pattern which rotates by a sixteenth note every measure. The bass part returns to the Anger theme at m. 46, and continues until m. 55, where another fragment of the Acceptance theme occurs. The other instruments join in, creating an orchestrated crescendo through m. 61. At m. 66, the guitar and piano drop out completely, leaving the bass to develop the second section theme. The piano returns with its one-measure motive at m. 77, and in m. 78 the melody returns to the guitar. In mm. 80–82 there is a long spiral downward representing anger subsiding, followed by five measures of quieter, sustained notes. The piano plays a fragment of the Acceptance theme slowly and in the lowest register of the instrument.

Example 2: Anger theme, mm. 28–30, electric guitar

Example 3: motive using Fibonacci sequence, m. 36, piano

“Bargaining” is slightly slower than the previous section at 100 bpm and begins quietly. Rhythmically, this section is inspired by a whispered line in Papa Roach’s “Getting Away With Murder,” the vocal part of which uses groups of three sixteenth notes to throw off the meter. “Bargaining” uses groups of three as a motive, not just sixteenth notes, but also eighth notes and
triplets. The key is D Phrygian, although the featured instrument is drum set. This section includes long drum solos with interjections by the ensemble, representing someone trying to make a situation right, but being met with the same answer. That answer is the same every time, signifying an inability to change a past event. The melodic material in “Bargaining” is not a separate theme, but rather an adaptation of the Acceptance theme which will be heard later. The beginning of the section is quiet and sticks to the thematic material. The first drum solo lasts from m. 98 to m. 109, and grows in loudness. It is met with a loud and fast version of the fifth section material. The second drum solo begins loudly, but drops to a subito piano at m. 120 as if restarting the argument. The solo crescendos to a mezzo forte and continues with various groupings of three attacks until in mm. 135–138 where it plays two cymbal rolls and grows to a fortissimo, as if concluding an argument with a good point. This argument is met with silence, leading to the next section.

“Depression” is the darkest and slowest section, at half the tempo of “Bargaining,” 50 bpm, and in B Locrian. Within this darkest of modes, I introduce the pitch Ab, in order to create fully diminished 7th chords, which is the harmonic basis of this section. The piano is the featured instrument in this section, and begins with a statement of the Depression theme in mm. 139–141 (Example 4). This theme is very similar to the Anger theme in contour, and could be viewed as another version of that theme (see guitar mm. 28–31). The Depression theme ends with grace notes dropping to a pitch a half step below, representing tears. Descending half steps are a very traditional and common representation of sadness in music. While this section is slow, the melody features running sixteenth notes over a waltz pattern in the drum set. This is the same polyrhythm I have used throughout the piece, but the instruments have swapped roles. In other sections, the drum set has had sixteenth notes while the melody has included triplets. This
rhythmic conflict represents the imbalance that someone feels when depressed. In mm. 144–145, the piano plays a motive meant to represent a sigh. This motive will recur throughout the “Depression” section. At m. 151 the bass and guitar take over the accompaniment, filling out the chords slightly. Mm. 156–157 come to a stop, representing the fatigue associated with depression. The music picks back up, but slows again in mm. 167–170, leaving a sustained D in the lowest octave of the piano.

Example 4: Depression theme, mm. 139–141, piano

“Acceptance” begins with the sustained D from the previous section and gradually grows. The tempo is back to 100 bpm, but the key is uncertain at first. Mm. 180–183 slow down and repeat five notes, which will come to act in a dominant function throughout this section. Finally, in mm. 184–188, the guitar states the Acceptance theme (Example 5), and the key of E is established. The mode is mostly Mixolydian, but with the addition of a flat scale degree 6, which creates a scale that is major at the bottom and minor at the top. The theme does not end on the tonic, and a lack of real resolution is representative of not being able to get back what was lost. “Acceptance” is not meant to be a happily ever after or a forgetting of grief, but an acceptance of the past and a decision to move forward. The section grows in complexity and loudness until m. 200 where all instruments play an E-major chord loudly. To represent acceptance of the past, this final section includes material from all the others, while staying in a brighter mode. Starting at m. 197, the drum begins to play groups of three attacks, similar to the third section, this time not
interrupting the meter. At m. 206, the guitar plays a fragment of the Denial theme. At m. 214, the guitar plays three descending chords reminiscent of the sighing motive in the fourth section. Finally, at m. 217, the piano states the Anger theme. From m. 231–234, there is a gradual crescendo to fortissimo, at which point there is a final drum set solo which lasts until m. 245. From m. 245–249, the piano combines the Denial and Acceptance themes into one melodic line (Example 6), as representations of all themes are brought together until at m. 258, the guitar plays one final statement of the Acceptance theme and in the last three measures, the ensemble settles on an E dominant 7th chord with an added flat 6th. The final chord is meant to ring indefinitely rather than be cut off, symbolizing that the past is not meant to be forgotten, but emotional pain fades with time.

Example 5: Acceptance theme, mm. 184–188, electric guitar

![Electric Guitar](image)

Example 6: Combination of Denial and Acceptance themes, mm. 245–249, piano

![Piano](image)

I put together a band to perform the piece on October 28, 2014, on the Student Composers Forum concert in Sursa Hall on Ball State University’s campus. Practicing with an ensemble has been incredibly helpful in editing the music, because I have been able to hear the
piece on real instruments. In the first few rehearsals, we actually started with practicing the last section, and gradually, we have worked our way back to the first section. Some difficulties with the music have been the polyrhythms, and the key signature and tempo of the second section. These have been getting better with practice, while there are other problems that required changes to the music. Some of the edits I needed to make dealt with balance and guitar chords. For these decisions, having an ensemble to practice with was crucial.

Performer input has been very important in working on this piece. By practicing with the band, I have been able to make changes to the music to achieve the right balance. In the beginning section of the piece, I had written a lot of pitch bends, and my performers helped me to use the best notation for the sound I wanted. There were also some pitch bends that had to be cut because of the speed or difficulty of the music. In the second section, which features the bass guitar, the piano ended up overpowering the bass, so I decreased the volume of the piano and also transposed the two instruments either up or down an octave at different points throughout that section. This helps the balance and also makes that section more interesting. The third section is tricky, because drum set is not usually notated for the player. Drum solos are similar to cadenzas, in that the player usually will improvise for the length of the solo and then signal to the rest of the ensemble when the solo is over. I recognize that of the four instruments, the drum set part is the strangest because of the non-standardized notation, and the fact that I am notating it at all. In the fourth section, where the piano is featured and guitars are playing accompaniment, we ended up experimenting with some different chords in the guitar part because my original plan of taking over the piano’s chords was not working. A few other things that were decided in rehearsal were where to use distortion, and where to put effective rehearsal letters. By taking
advice from my ensemble, I have been able to create a finished piece that will be easier and more idiomatic for future performers.

In composing *Grief*, I have learned quite a bit about writing for electric guitar, electric bass, and drum set, which I was previously unfamiliar with. I hope that this knowledge allows me to write future works using the same ensemble. I believe that it is very possible that the rock band may become a standard chamber ensemble in the future, and that works being written now could become part of that ensemble’s standard repertoire. I hope that this piece fulfills my purpose of creating an accessible work for classically trained musicians or talented amateurs, and I hope that it will eventually receive performances at various venues.


Grief

Elysia Arntzen

Approx. 12'15"
Instrumentation:
Electric Guitar
Piano
Electric Bass
Drum Set

Program Note:
*Grief* is a programmatic one-movement suite for four-piece rock band. Each section of the piece represents a different stage of the grieving process, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. First is "Denial," with a slow and steady pulse which quickens into "Anger," which is fast and loud. "Bargaining" consists of a few drum set solos which are interrupted by the rest of the ensemble, creating a musical conversation. "Depression" is the slowest section in the dark locrian mode, but once it ends, "Acceptance" changes the mood and grows in volume and texture until the end. *Grief* is meant to be both a concert piece and a rock piece that can be played and enjoyed by both classically-trained musicians and amateurs alike.
Score

**Grief**

Suite for Rhythm Section

Elysia Arntzen

"Denial" \( \frac{\text{d}}{\text{r}} = 60 \)

with distortion

**Electric Guitar**

start with pitch bent upward with distortion

**Piano**

**Electric Bass**

with distortion

**Drum Set**

\( \text{mp} \)

E.Gtr.

start with pitch bent upward

Pno.

\( \text{mp} \)

E.B.

D. S.

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16
Grief
Grief
Grief
Grief

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.
Grief

let ring indefinitely

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.
Grief

let ring indefinitely

E.Gtr.

E.B.

D. S.

Pno.

let ring indefinitely

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.
Grief

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.
Grief
Grief
Grief

E.Gtr.
Pno.
E.B.
D. S.

E.Gtr.
Pno.
E.B.
D. S.
Grief
Grief

E.Gtr.

Pno.

E.B.

D. S.