Sarah Jean Sknerski  
In A Senior Honors Composition Recital  

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)  

By  

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Abstract

A Senior Composition Recital is a requirement of all Music Engineering Technology majors at Ball State University. It demonstrates the development of a student as a composer throughout the duration of the program. It is a culminating event that allows friends, peers, family, and faculty to observe a student's progress while studying music at Ball State. Students are not only required to compose traditional acoustic works, but also electronic music. Electronic compositions involve various methods of sound synthesis, manipulation, and design. Elements such as gesture, texture, and form are part of all types of musical composition.

This thesis contains an extended version of the program notes that were distributed at the concert performance on November 14, 2003. It also contains insight into the compositional process, such as inspiration and technical methods learned. Also included is a reaction by the composer of the works presented and the process of creating a recital.
Program Notes

Introduction

There were a variety of sources that inspired me to compose the pieces I did - the music of other composers, professors, and books. Each piece has its own story. Each piece also was created by the technical knowledge learned each semester by a number of professors.

China Suite

This electronic music piece was created as a final project for Mumet 327 under the instruction of Dr. Keith Kothman, as well as a creative project for Dr. Laurie Lindberg's Honors 189 class. The honors global studies class included the study of China, and I have long been interested in music of the east. To create this piece I manipulated samples of Chinese guitar and percussion in programs such as SoundHack, Peak, and Kontakt. It was sequenced in Digital Performer 3.

This piece is divided into three movements: Little Moon, Wine Mad, and Thunder. They are titled after the folk song that inspired the movement. Although Thunder uses instrument samples native to china, it is actually inspired by Kodo drumming of Japan.

In my years as a Ball State student I have studied eastern culture, especially music. I have done research in several honors classes on the topic, such as western influence on Japanese music and female musicians in Japan. In the global studies class that this piece was used as a creative project for, several non-Western cultures were
studied through literature. In *Women of the Silk*, we studied Chinese culture.

In Mumet 327, we studied several sound synthesis and manipulation techniques that were used in this piece. The foremost is granular synthesis. In programs such as Thonk, Cecilia, and Kontakt this knowledge was turned into application. Cecilia is a front end for Csound in which the composer can use modules to manipulate or create sound. I used granular synthesis modules such as Stretcher and Warper in this program. Kontakt has its own plugins for granular synthesis. These are "Tone Machine" and "Time Machine." Kontakt also allows MIDI control of sounds manipulated. Using Kontakt sounds can be altered over time within the program itself.

These tools were a foundation for composition. With a creative project in mind, and the technical requirements for another class, I feel that this piece was very successful. It is a rather unique combination of traditional Chinese folk music and electronic music.

*Go By*

This acoustic work for Violin and Cello was composed during my second semester of study with Dr. David Stern. It is in ternary form with the "A" sections being in D major and in a fugue-like form, and the "B" section is in A minor. I often listen to film scores as inspiration for my music. The "B" section of this piece was inspired largely by the soundtrack to the film *Pearl Harbor* composed by Hans Zimmer. *Go By* was performed by Tyler Gill on cello and the composer on violin.
Apology

This was my first electronic piece, and was completed as a final project for Dr. Harchanko's Mumet 325 class. It is meant to be somewhat humorous, as the speech samples are examples of the many humorous things said while tracking a CD. "I'm sorry" tends to be the most common thing I caught on tape. The sounds were created and manipulated using Max/MSP, Kontakt, and Peak. It was sequenced in Digital Performer 3 (DP3).

In this class we spent a great deal of time discussing form, texture, and gesture. It was my intention to create a piece that was building in complexity, with sections separated by a specific sound. The "cricket" sounds are the separating force in-between the text. The text gets more complex as the piece progresses, with more density and more phrases.

One

This is the first piece I ever composed at Ball State. It was written under the direction of Dr. David Stern. It begins in Dorian mode, but floats to a variety of keys. As a violinist I wanted to compose a piece similar to a Romantic era violin sonata. As a first try, I feel this piece was a success.

24 Hours

A good friend and former professor of mine, Adrienne Jones, inspired this piece. As a class project for Honors 199, her students were instructed to keep a journal of every technology they interacted with in a 24-hour period. They almost invariably began with an alarm clock. While composing this piece I not only thought of
the technologies we interact with, but the confusing and overwhelming way in which everything we do and hear within a day comes at us. Sometimes the real world seems more like a bad dream.

To create this piece, the sounds that were sampled were manipulated in Kontakt, Peak, SoundHack, and Metasynth. It was sequenced in DP3.

_In My Hands_

This piece is based on text excerpts from the book _In My Hands_ by Irene Gut Opdyke; it was required reading for Dr. Lindberg's Honors 203 in spring 2003. The book is a powerful memoir of a Polish girl who not only survived the Holocaust, but also rescued several people from the Nazi's in Poland. Irene was a nursing student when Germany and Russia simultaneously attacked Poland. She worked in a Russian hospital for a while before escaping back to Poland. Once in her native land once more, the Nazi's took her and her sister to work as waitresses for the high-ranking officials. There she was able to feed people in the nearby Jewish ghetto, as well as overhear the Nazi party's plans for them. She later was housekeeper for Major Rugemer. She smuggled several of the Jews she worked closely with into his basement, and saved their lives. The imagery included in the moving story was inspiration for a piece. The most prevalent was the imagery of a bird, symbolizing freedom and a need to escape. It also was the image she used to replace something much darker. Some of the excerpts I used in the piece are included as follows:
There was a bird flushed up from the wheat fields, disappearing in a blur of wings against the sun, and then a gunshot and it fell to the earth. But it was not a bird. It was not a bird and it was not in the wheat field, but you can't understand what it was yet.

How can I tell you about this war? How can I say these things? If I tell you all at once - first this happened, and then this, and these people died and those people lived and then it was over - you will not believe me. Sometimes I wonder if these things cold have happened. Was it me? Was that girl me? Was I really there? Did I see this happening? In the war, everything was unnatural and unreal. We wore masks and spoke lines that were not our own. This happened to me, and yet I still don't understand how it happened at all.

(Opdyke, 1)

The war was a series of choices made by many people. Some of those choices were as wicked and shameful to humanity as anything in history. But some of us made other choices. I made mine.

(Opdyke, 235)

The text is read by Tiara Wuethrich, and manipulated in Metasynth, Peak, Thonk, and Sound Hack. The piece was then sequenced in DP3. It was composed as a final project for Professor Mike Pounds's Mumet 425 class. We explored the uses of Metasynth. This program uses a unique graphical interface to manipulate and create sounds. For this piece I primarily used the graphical filters to alter sounds.

_El Eria e Mor (A Star Rises Out of Darkness)_

This piece was composed for woodwind quintet while studying with Dr. Eleanor Trawick. It was originally begun as a string quartet, but after discussion about expanding my compositional skills with Dr. Trawick, I
composed it for wind quintet. *El Eria e Mor* is elvish and taken from an excerpt of *Lord of the Rings*. This piece, like the popular stories of Middle-earth, is set in medieval times.

The quintet opens in C minor with a slow melody in the Horn line. After contrapuntal additions of melodies in the upper instruments, a tumultuous middle section begins. This section shifts to G minor, and the melodic line is buried by a continuous rhythm that is shared by all instruments. After this section cadences, a thinner texture begins. The flute and clarinet share a moving two-part melody; the horn re-enters with the dark melody from the opening. This motive is reworked and leads the shift back into the original key of C minor for the final cadence.

**Chaconne for Violin and Tape**

The *Chaconne* was inspired by my many semesters of studying Bach. This "neo-baroque" piece is the result. It was a challenge to create a piece for instrument and tape; Dr. Keith Kothman and Mike Pounds were very helpful in the process as instructors. It uses excerpts from Bach's *Chaconne* from the *D minor Partita* for solo violin. Also I reworked sections of the original Bach piece for the violin part, and manipulated violin recordings and samples for the electronic part.

The most challenging part of composing this piece was working out a way for the violinist to synchronize with the tape part. I discovered that flexibility was in this case the answer. Although there are substantial electronic and acoustic sections, it is more a series of events than exact precision. I wanted to use Bach's technique of allowing
time to be flexible. In my experience performing Bach's violin Sonatas and Partitas, it is much more artistic to slow tempo in portions of the piece. I believe that borrowing this technique worked well for this piece.
Composer's Reactions

Creating music and presenting it in the form of a Composition Recital proved to be a challenging task. When I began the Music Engineering Technology program, I really knew very little about it. The idea that I would be composing was very frightening, as I had never composed before. I believe that over the semesters, composing became a part of my life. Creating music was a worthwhile endeavor, and I feel my skills improved. Three of the last pieces I wrote proved to be my favorites. In My Hands is not only a touching story, but I feel the piece I composed is moving as well. El Eria e Mor was very challenging to write, and I am extremely proud of the result. Quite possibly the piece I worked the most diligently on, however, is the Chaconne for Violin and Tape. This piece combined the skills I learned as a violinist with the skills I learned for composing electronic music. I feel it is the most artistic work I composed.
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Bibliography


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