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Honors Thesis
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Analysis of Original Compositions

I am Scott Blanke, an instrumental performance major and music education minor. My primary instrument is trombone, but I also study the violin. I am pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching Music Education (MAT).

My honors thesis is comprised of various compositions that I have written during my time at the University of the Arts. Each song chosen was from a specific year, and two additional compositions were written for this project specifically, and they encompass many elements that I have learned throughout the four years. Although the first four songs from my freshman to senior year do not build upon each other, they do, however, reflect an increased knowledge of elements of form, harmony, melody, and rhythm.

My goal with this thesis is to explore and analyze the ways my compositions have changed and evolved, as well recognize the factors that have influenced these pieces. I recorded each yearly piece exactly as I had written it, in order to accurately highlight the evolution of my writing process. These pieces are *44 Fathoms Below* (freshman year), *Practice Room Blues* (sophomore year), *Groundswell* (junior year), and *Under Sail* (senior year). The additional two pieces, entitled *The Tea Room* and *In Different Spaces*, reflect a compilation of all I have learned and reflect the changes in my compositional style.

44 Fathoms Below

The first piece that I will play today was written during my freshman year at The University of the Arts for a theory class with David Bennet Thomas. At this point in my musical career, I had never written any full original piece of music, and did not know too much about common techniques that many composers use, including form, which is the structure of the music, as well as ways to connect chords together in a seamless manner.

Throughout high school, I was inspired by the writing and performance of world-renowned jazz pianist Bill Evans. There are many recordings of Evans playing solo piano arrangements, and one of the most influential albums that showcased his virtuosity is *The Solo Sessions, Volumes 1 and 2*. The way Evans approached his songs on this record was to take complex melodies and break them down into a reserved style, which influenced me to paint a picture or scene in my mind based on the track. When starting my freshman year at UArts, those albums were always on repeat throughout the day, and became a part of me, which is shown in my writing and performance of my composition, which is entitled *44 Fathoms Below*.

This song was inspired creating an image of what I imagine could be the feeling of being safely on the ocean floor, looking up at the sky as the sun reflects off of the surface. The melody was written to evoke images of rippling water and aquatic animals swimming around their habitats. In order to achieve this, I tried to keep the melody simple, slow, and calm, much like the recordings on the Bill Evans albums.

Being new to writing, I tried to make this piece as musical as possible, so I limited myself to the form of 16 measures. In doing this, I wanted listeners to be pulled to the soloists and

their individualistic styles rather than focusing on the melody. The chords of this song reflect the topics discussed in the freshman theory course, specifically dominant chords and how they resolve to the root chords, and the use of diminished chords to help move the melody along.

Practice Room Blues

The next piece I wanted to showcase is called Practice Room Blues, and was written in a Merriam practice room during my sophomore year. By this point, I had become more familiar with the concept of musical forms and harmony, and wanted to write a song that used the chord changes of the blues progression. The blues is a 12 measure form that uses dominant chords and the most popular chord sequence in jazz music, the ii-V-I, which uses a minor and a dominant chord to return to the root.

A common technique of the blues is to use riffs, which are short repeated phrases that serve as the basis for the melody, and is played by the trombone and the saxophone. The melody also utilizes the blues scale, which is a hexatonic scale, or six note scale, based on the pentatonic scale, with added chromatic “blue” notes, which are the flat 3rd and sharp 4th. The drums play a shuffle feel during the melody sections, and switch to a hard hitting swing for each soloist, which helps differentiate the sections of the tune.

This song was inspired by various artists’ rendition of the blues, such as Clifford Brown’s *Sandu*, Thelonius Monk’s *Blue Monk*, and John Coltrane’s *Mr. P.C.*, but perhaps the most influential recording that helped to shape this tune is a song called *Kindred Spirits* by Gary Urwin’s Jazz Orchestra. The tune features two amazing musicians, trombonist Bill Watrous and tenor sax player Pete Christlieb. The arrangement of the song is so well orchestrated, and as a result, the song really grooves. I even took some inspiration from some of the soloists’ licks and added them as a part of the melody of my own piece.

Groundswell

This next song is an original tune that I wrote in my junior year for vibraphonist Tony Miceli’s Arranged Standards ensemble at UArts. This tune is entitled *Groundswell*, and was originally performed by everyone on this recording besides one player, which made it really fun to revisit to record and hear how much we have all progressed as performers. By this point, I was familiar with different musical forms, such as the AABA form, in which the A sections are composed with the same melody, and the B section introduces a different melody, referred to as the bridge, as well as the ABAC form, which has two A sections, a bridge, and a C section that is usually altered from the rest, just to name a few. This specific tune uses an ABAC form, with the ABA sections repeating before moving on to the C section.

For *Groundswell*, I really wanted to try and write a piece that used straight 8ths as the primary sound without writing a ballad. In order to do this, I really dove into some listening of various different compositions, two of the most influential being Joe Henderson’s *Afro-Centric* and Herbie Hancock’s *Maiden Voyage*. Both of these tunes served as great inspirations for *Groundswell*, both from the groove and the melodies that lay over the top as if they float above the rhythm section. For my tune, however, I wanted to try and avoid the modal jazz style, which both of these tunes incorporate, and write a piece where the chord progression is the most important part of the piece.

To achieve this, I started by writing a melody that would not obstruct the chords. I wanted the melody to sit on top of the chords and compliment the rhythm section. After this, I began to write chords, utilizing the concept of slash chords, which are compound chords where the bass note or chord inversion is indicated by a slash, and the letter below the slash is the root note. For example if the normal chord is an A dominant 7, the root would be the note A. If the chord was an A dominant 7 slash C sharp, then the chord would be in first inversion, and the bass note would be a C sharp. In *Groundswell*, the slash chord is used to help create an interesting sound of the bassline moving by a whole step or half step, while the actual chords jump around, creating great harmonies. I also used this concept in the C section of the piece to create a pedal point in which the only moving part of the section is the harmony.

Under Sail

My next composition, which is called *Under Sail*, is a jazz waltz that I wrote in my senior year for my Creative Composition course. At this point in my writing, I wanted to try and incorporate as many new and old ideas that I could, while still creating a musical piece. Ideas that I worked into this piece focus on the rhythm, melody, and chord progression.

Firstly, I wanted to return to the time signature of the last tune, which was in 3/4. This time, however, I wanted to write a tune with swing eighth notes as opposed to straight eights. My goal was to write a jazz waltz that had some interest to the note values besides just consistent strings of eighth notes, so I began listening to as many jazz waltzes that I could. One tune that really stood out to me was UArts alumni Tal Shtul's *Snowscape*. Tal incorporated the concept of playing a pattern of notes in 4/4 over the 3/4 time signature, which helps create a really nice polyrhythm that makes the jazz waltz feel more interesting. To help accent this in my tune, I had the drums hit those figures with the melody instruments on brushes.

Another recording that really inspired my choice of chords was Bill Evans' rendition of Johnny Mandel's *Seascope*. In this recording, Evans ends most of his phrases with altered dominant chords. Altered chords replace notes from the diatonic scale with a neighboring pitch from the chromatic scale, which helps to create a chord that really wants to resolve to the next chord. In the bridge of my tune, I wanted to incorporate these chords in a similar way to tenor saxophonist John Coltrane in that I group these chords together without resolving them until the end of the bridge, creating a strong pull towards the resolution, which adds lots of great harmony to the piece. In order to highlight these chords, I wrote the bridge to specifically accent the chromatic neighboring tones from the altered dominant chords.

For the melody of this piece, I wanted to try and create a relaxed and calming sound. To do this, I had my trumpet player play on flugelhorn, the bass play on an acoustic bass, and the drummer use brushes. I also used vibraphone on this tune to create a percussive, yet full tone, had guitar play low on the instrument, and use violin rather than trombone. The combination of violin, guitar, and flugelhorn complimented by the brushes, vibes, and bass created a really unique sound that I will definitely utilize in the future.

The Tea Room

The last two pieces of this album were tunes that I wrote specifically for this project, using some of the ideas from previous songs, as well as new ideas that I wanted to explore. This first tune, called *The Tea Room* is heavily inspired by big band literature. While this is just

recorded with four musicians, while writing, I was thinking about how the melody would sound orchestrated out for saxophones, and how the brass would accentuate the chord changes with pads and stabs, which I aimed to convey in my melody.

This tune is a contrafact of one of my favorite big band compositions of all time, which is called *G'Day Mates*, by trombonist Scott Whitfield. A contrafact is a musical composition consisting of a new melody constructed over chords from another tune. Some of the most famous jazz contrafacts include Charlie Parker's *Donna Lee*, which is a contrafact of *Back Home in Indiana*, and Thelonious Monk's *Evidence*, which is a contrafact of *Just You, Just Me*. What I love about Whitfield's piece is how hard it swings, and the intricate soli sections played by the whole band.

For the melody of this piece, I wanted to try and highlight the chord changes as much as possible, without directly outlining them. To achieve this, I wrote most of the sustained notes as chord tones, which are the 3rd, 5th, and 7th notes of the chord. These chord tones determine the mode of the chord that is being played. The melody is also written to help keep the energy of the swing feel and keep the tune moving forward.

In Different Spaces

The last tune of my album is a song that I had partially written for my junior year improv class. At the time, I had written a melody over modal changes. Modal jazz is usually based on very few chords that last for an extended period of time, allowing for the player to create interest and expand the piece through their rhythm, timbre, and emotion.

There are many modal tunes that helped me to compose my melody, which is called *In Different Spaces*, including Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, Wayne Shorter's *Footprints* and Miles Davis' *So What*, but one of the most influential tunes for my piece was written by one of my all-time favorite jazz pianists, McCoy Tyner. Tyner's composition *Passion Dance* inspired me to avoid scale-like passages, and create a melody where the notes are not strung together. The melody of *In Different Spaces* is based on the circle of 4ths, which is a sequence of notes separated by the interval of perfect fourths. What makes this so interesting is that though the notes are not based on scales or chromatic passages, the perfect 4ths still create a musical melody that fits nicely over the modal section.

Though I wrote this tune in my junior year, it never quite found its way into my repertoire of tunes. I struggled to make the solo section sound interesting, since my tune was only based around one chord. After revisiting this tune for this project, I wanted to experiment with completely changing the form for the solo section, separating the modal melodic section from the solo section. For *In Different Spaces*, I used the minor blues progression for the solo section. I chose this specific progression because it closely related to the chord I used in the modal section.

Expanding upon the ideas of *The Tea Room*, I wanted to write a melodic passage that was separate from the melody, but is based on the chord changes of the minor blues. This concept is called a soli, which is when the entire section is playing written out parts, and is very common in big band and small ensemble writing. The soli section helps break up the solo sections, keeps the energy of the piece flowing, and serves as a sendoff into the trombone solo.