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Composition Project Reflection

My composition assignment was based on a the *Aragonaise* movement from the opera-suite Carmen, by French composer Georges Bizet. The piece possesses a colorful, slightly eccentric personality, exhibiting grandiose orchestral statements, a lamenting oboe soloist, and a delicate “gypsy”-style waltz (gypsy referring to the melodic tonality and use of non-standard harmonies). From the onset of listening and glancing at the score, it was clear that this piece would serve a plethora of material to utilize in both my improvisation and composition assignments.

I began my compositional process by selecting elements from the *Aragonaise* to employ as foundational allusion. I first chose to reference the “gypsy” waltz feel, using background ostinati to support a modal soloist to float atop. The *Aragonaise* features an intriguing tonality, which I observed when creating the harmonic center of my piece. I then took the liberty to create extended, alternative harmonic phrases both preceding and following the main section, resulting in a three-subsection “through”-composed piece (*through* because no material was evidently shared between sections). I also chose to personalize the composition by adding an improvised solo to the final section, venturing to reference the improvisation project we had completed in previous weeks during the term.

Before composing, I had to consider instrumentation as a main characteristic of my chamber piece. The four-instrument group presented interesting challenges in volume and texture, though I was pleased with the resulting collection of voices (noted, I believe I struck a

bit of luck as my group was comprised of a nice array of ranges and timbres in the double bass, trombone, trumpet and clarinet). I used the double bass to establish the waltz feel and to direct the harmony. Trombone and trumpet are mostly color and inner textural voices, with the exception of the final section where trumpet and clarinet switch during the improvisation. The voice of the clarinet mimics the oboe solo in Bizet's piece, though with added energy and, at times, flair.

Additionally, consideration of the form of a prototypical waltz also had an effect on my writing, as I came to realize that harmonic meter and harmonic phrasing are best kept clear and somewhat restrained. I learned that effective waltzes should be chiefly about the dance-like feel, not as much in exploring manifolds of extended harmonies.

My piece benefitted from the input of my peers, as well as from observations made by high school students. My ensemble offered suggestions to make elements of my writing and notation more clear and playable. The bassist assisted me with textural ideas regarding arco/pizzicato use, as well as string double-stop feasibility. Collectively, they submitted the question of how my composition relates to my earlier selected piece, initiating a discussion on how to highlight more salient qualities from it. Presenting the piece to high school composition and arranging students was also insightful, as I gained valuable feedback about the effectiveness of my contrasting sections, the various textures I achieved, and the overall mood. I was pleasantly surprised by their command of musical language, as well as their astute aural awareness from just one singular listen.

Rehearsals, especially during early drafts, were especially helpful in the development of my composition. I experienced a titanic difference in hearing the piece played by actual

musicians, as opposed to mock playback on a computer. That difference became a valuable measure in improving elements of dynamics, texture, and tempo. In fact, we were able to tinker with expression and phrasing, varying tempi and experimenting on extremes within the opening rubato section. I also asked the ensemble leading questions that correlated to my piece's brief narrative of a gypsy nomad, synthesizing imagery that improved their performances. One example was the clarinet soloist, whose melody is featured in a very stylized way. When the player imagined this melody sung alongside the narrative, it took on a reinvigorated life of its own.

The most difficult aspect of this composition project was the amount of time I could dedicate to the work. In college, I formed an affinity for composing; I was privileged to be admitted to UCLA's composition program and study with exceptional teachers. I am, however (and unfortunate for my productivity), an exceedingly slow-paced composer. When I sit down to write, I find that time hurries by with very little progress, as I am forged between frustrating deliberation and waning confidence in my decisions. Notwithstanding that by the same token, composing offers me an escape. Where I may have otherwise been downtrodden by the mundanity of schoolwork and other responsibilities, this project allowed me to activate my creativity and expression.

I believe this project is easily adaptable into middle school and high school concert bands, orchestras, and even jazz ensembles. In my experience, the most difficult part of composition, like many creative workings, is beginning the piece. This approach offers an entry point. I can foresee a project alike to this being extremely valuable in generating creativity in the school ensemble settings. Just as the improvisation project allows exposure to improvising for

non-jazz musicians, this composition project can engage deeper musicianship and encourage creative avenues of expression for all music students.