

Modern Folk Music Composition:
A Self-Reflective Exploration

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN MUSIC
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

November 2017

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts: six recorded original compositions and this paper, which includes an autobiographical survey of my musical influences and an analysis of the compositions. The compositions are all instrumental, written in a modern folk/bluegrass style. This paper discusses my influences and how they affect my writing. In the analysis section, I discuss how each composition has been directly influenced, and how modern recording has become part of the compositional process. The thesis also considers my personal creative experience in writing and recording in a modern studio and live performance context.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support I have received over the time it has taken to complete this degree. The guidance from Michael Coghlan, Tere Tilban-Rios and Matt Vander Woude and the support and encouragement from Clara McGregor, Ellen Manney and Ken Whiteley, and my extended musical family is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the musicians that played on the record and helped me realize my musical visions: Dan Whiteley, Daryl Poulson, Rob Fenton, John Showman, Frank Evans, Mara Pellerin, Shaun Brodie, Ken Whiteley, and Nik Tjelios, who engineered the record.

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Chapter 1

Thesis Rationale

This thesis is comprised of two parts: six original compositions and this paper, which includes an autobiographical survey of my musical influences and an analysis of the compositions. The writing of this thesis has been a tool for my professional growth and has helped me to develop as a composer and performer. Since my research and creative process represents my personal creative engagement with folk music and folk traditions, I have written this thesis in a colloquial first person writing style, which best represents the folk traditions that are my inspiration.

Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ As an artist, I can relate. The practise of self-examination that I went through in writing this thesis has enriched my understanding of my own creative process, and has helped me to create art in a more meaningful and effective way. The value of self-reflection and self-knowledge is clearly articulated by British philosopher Robert George Collingwood, who wrote that “Without some knowledge of himself, [man’s] knowledge of other things is imperfect.”² This statement exemplifies the impact that writing this thesis had on me. Collingwood offers a fuller explanation of this statement:

Man, who desires to know everything, desires to know himself. Nor is he only one even if, to himself, perhaps the most interesting among the things he desires to know. Without some knowledge of himself, his knowledge of other things is imperfect; for to know something without knowing that one knows it is only a half-knowing, and to know that one knows is to know oneself. Self-knowledge is desirable and important to man, not only for its own sake, but as a condition without which no other knowledge can be critically justified and securely based.

Self-knowledge, here, means.... a knowledge of his knowing faculties, his thought or understanding, or reason.³

¹ In Harvey Goldman, “Traditional Forms of Wisdom and Politics in Plato's Apology,” *The Classical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (December 2009): 59

² Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 205.

³ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 205.

Professional Influences

I began playing music with friends at school and with my family at age 13. By age 18, I was touring extensively at folk festivals across North America. Since then, I have developed a career playing both upright and electric bass, predominantly accompanying contemporary folk singer/songwriters. These personal and professional experiences have played important roles in my development as a composer.

The origins of most of the modern folk music I perform come from Irish, English, Appalachian and urban American folk traditions. In each of these traditions, music serves a function. Whether to tell stories, to accompany dances, to practice religious devotion, for political protest, or for entertainment, folk music has developed distinct musical devices that give each style of folk music its own distinct sound.⁴ My compositions draw on many characteristics from these varied traditions.

The folk traditions of bluegrass and country music have played particularly important roles in my musical career. In my early childhood, I was exposed to these genres through my cousins, Jenny Whiteley and Dan Whiteley – both folk musicians who have had a big impact on my knowledge of the bluegrass and country repertoires and styles. It was Jenny and Dan who introduced me to artists such as Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, Jim and Jesse, Flatt and Scruggs, as well as more contemporary artists, such as Tony Rice, Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas and Bela Fleck.

In February of 2009, John Showman, a bluegrass fiddler who had performed with my cousins, asked me to join his new band, New Country Rehab. The band borrowed classic country and bluegrass repertoire from artists such as Hank Williams, Jimmy Rodgers, Doc Watson, and

⁴ David Kingman, *American Music: A Panorama*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 86.

Jonny Cash, and re-arranged their music, drawing on modern rock, progressive rock, funk, and pop music. While performing with New Country Rehab, as well as participating in their re-arranging process, I studied a lot of the source material, absorbed the melodies and structures of classic country and bluegrass songs, and learned to combine these classic elements with modern influences; this approach has become a large part of my own compositional style.

My father, Ken Whiteley, is an accomplished professional music producer who maintained a recording studio in my childhood home. This allowed me to have many personal experiences with the recording process. As my career developed through session work in a variety of studios with different producers, my exposure to different studio environments and methods of recording broadened. Nevertheless, recording the compositions for this thesis involved two significant firsts in my career: the first time I recorded music composed entirely by me, and the first time I took the role of producer. I was able to draw on my childhood in recording studios and my background as a session musician to manage the technical aspects of recording and articulate what I wanted from the musicians, making it possible to achieve my vision of how the compositions would be recorded. The analysis portion of this thesis will discuss these aspects in considerable detail.

Before starting the recording process, I set as my personal goals for the experience: to maintain perspective on each composition as a whole, to not get lost in the minutiae, to create a relaxed environment so the players would feel that they could take musical risks and contribute to the process, and to make the most efficient use of limited studio time by providing players with tools, such as charts and pre-production demos, prior to the rehearsals and recording sessions.

Academic Influences

While at the University of Toronto for my undergraduate degree in music education, I had diverse musical experiences that influenced my compositional style and process. The most significant of these experiences was participating in a small jazz ensemble taught by Toronto bassist Andrew Downing. Downing wanted to push the boundaries of the typical be-bop/modern jazz ensemble, and this idea interested me. Our group included violin, clarinet, trumpet, guitar, upright bass and drums. And, since one of Downing's professional ensembles, The Great Uncles of the Revolution, includes upright bass, slide guitar, fiddle and trumpet, he was comfortable with our unique combination of instruments. Downing arranged a repertoire for our ensemble that he had performed with the Great Uncles,⁵ a repertoire that combined traditional jazz, improvisation, and folk genres. It was a combination of influences that worked beautifully.

In addition to the arrangements that Downing wrote, members of our ensemble contributed original compositions, which we wrote specifically for this group. In all of my other ensemble experiences at university, we were confined to writing our original compositions using traditional jazz instrumentation (e.g. two horns, guitar, piano, bass, drums and sometimes a vocalist,) and were encouraged to use traditional jazz forms. Downing's ensemble was an opportunity to compose for a combination of instruments that was new to me, and this encouraged me to generate musical structures that did not exploit the common 32 bar, AABA jazz forms. These original compositions often combined freely improvised sections with complex fully notated ones. Downing also encouraged us to experiment with different melodic approaches. For example, instead of giving the melody to an instrument that would typically play

⁵ This repertoire most closely followed *Blow The House Down*, the Great Uncles' 2003 album (Black Hen Music, CD).

the melody, such as the trumpet, we would experiment with giving the melody to the bass and having the horn section provide harmonic support. Experimenting in this open environment with an interesting combination of instruments to create different tones and textures has had a lasting impact on my writing and arranging. For example, when arranging some of the background parts for the song “Up at Round Lake,” I used french horn and flugelhorn - not uncommon choices for a jazz piece – but then I added pedal steel, which is more uncommon. Many of the techniques and instrumentation choices for my thesis compositions are directly linked to my experience with Downing’s ensemble.

While at the University of Toronto, I also played in the bass section in the university’s orchestra. It was in this symphony that I built my musical relationship with classical composers such as Mahler, Stravinsky, and Brahms. It was an eye-opening experience to be part of a large ensemble working together to perform pieces that were so musically complex. This experience enhanced what I was learning at the same time in Downing’s jazz ensemble, giving me a better understanding of the range and possibility of each instrument in the orchestra. For example, the french horn would not have made an appearance on “Up at Round Lake” if it were not for my experience in the symphony.

Influential Musical Artists

Being a part of Toronto's thriving music scene offers a lot of opportunities for artistic inspiration. Two Toronto musicians who have particularly influenced my compositions are Christine Bougie and Andrew Downing, who was also the jazz ensemble instructor, mentioned above. A strong characteristic of the compositional style that both Bougie and Downing share is the juxtaposition of one simple component that is rhythmic, harmonic, or melodic with a contrasting complicated element.

With Downing, often a simple element will support a more complex idea. For example, Downing's composition "Danger, Danger" features a simple rhythmic ostinato that contrasts with the angular melody. See bars 5-11 below in the sheet music I used in my ensemble in 2012, for the root-fifth bass motion, which is idiomatic of country and folk music and is quite a simple part. This gives the listener a musical touchstone to counter the unusual melodic content.

6

Score $\text{♩} = 240$ **Danger, Danger** Andrew Downing

intro - open
D7#9

The sheet music for "Danger, Danger" by Andrew Downing is presented in a score format. It includes parts for Bass/Guitar (Bs/Gtr), B♭ Trumpet (B♭ Tpt.), and Violin (Vlc.). The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 240. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The piece begins with an "intro - open" section in the key of D major, featuring a D7#9 chord. The bass line (Bs/Gtr) plays a simple root-fifth ostinato pattern (D-F-A) throughout the section. The B♭ Trumpet and Violin parts feature more complex, angular melodic lines. The score is divided into two systems, with bar numbers 5, 9, and 9 indicating the start of each system.

⁶ Andrew Downing, score, nd.

The second Toronto influence I want to focus on is Christine Bougie, is a guitarist and lap steel player, who, together with keyboard player Dafydd Hughes, performed a weekly show at Toronto's Tranzac Club for several years. The interplay between Bougie and Hughes, in both their improvising and composition styles, influenced my taste for music with minimal instrumentation. In the performance context, the focus could shift easily, and the lead instrument could instantly become the support instrument. The shifts were seamless and could make it difficult to decipher what was improvised and what was arranged. You can hear this on their record, *This is Awesome*.⁷ This approach appeals to me, and so I've employed it in the repeat of the introduction section of my composition, "Firehouse."

A more significant influence, Bill Frisell, became an inspiration to me after Bougie and Downing each cited him as an influence on their work. Two things that attract me to Bill Frisell are his guitar tones and his ability to choose when to play many notes and when to leave space in his melodic lines. Because the timbre and tone of Bill Frisell's guitar is sonically perceived as warm or full, a single note can occupy a large frequency space within a performance. This in turn affords him the opportunity to play melodies that move rhythmically more slowly. An example of this is the composition "Family" from the album *Nashville*.⁸ My own compositions, such as "Slow Melt" and "Round Lake" follow melodic approaches similar to that of Frisell.

In grade seven, I experienced true fandom for the first time with the Toronto band By Divine Right. What drew me to this band was that their music conveyed a positive energy, both lyrically and musically. I internalized many of their melodic and chord progressions during my formative stages of musical development. This early influence permeates my instrumental

⁷ Listen particularly to "Hammy's Secret Life," (Christine Bougie, with Dafydd Hughes, track 4 on *This Is Awesome*, self released, 2008, CD).

⁸ Bill Frisell, *Nashville*, Nonesuch, 1997, CD.

writing. By Divine Right often employs simple guitar chord voicings such as on the song “Twisted Crystalline,” from their record *Bless This Mess*.⁹ The guitar plays the interval of a root and sixth and moves the voicing up and down the low E string throughout the song. This kind of simple chord-voicing, containing only two notes, can provide a flexible basis for different melody options and create a feeling of openness and sonic space.

At the age of fourteen, I saw the bluegrass band Nickel Creek perform at the Owen Sound Summer Folk Music Festival, and experienced a pivotal moment. The band was comprised of Sean Watkins, Sarah Watkins and Chris Thile, who were all only a few years older than me. Thile’s technique and charisma, his interpretation of bluegrass music, and his original compositions all seemed to possess a youthful energy, one that resonated with me and inspired me. In fact, he inspired me so much that I learned to play the mandolin, which has become a significant writing tool.

A more recent influence is the band Wilco. They incorporate folk, alt country and rock into their music. Their recordings are great examples of how to support simple songs with creative orchestration and production. For example, on their record *Being There*, the opening track of the second disk, “Sunken Treasure,”¹⁰ is led by Jeff Tweedy’s vocals and acoustic guitar melody. Wilco uses delay effects on the voice and incorporates pianos and electric guitars, which then take turns supporting the main melodies. The voice and acoustic guitar never compete for the attention of the listener but instead beautifully balance each other. Wilco’s sense of balance has been a reference point for me, particularly during the mixing process.

⁹ By Divine Right, “Twisted Caroline,” track 4 on *Bless This Mess*, produced by Brendan McGuire and Jose Miguel Contreras, Nettwerk, 1999, CD.

¹⁰ Wilco, “Sunken Treasure,” track 1 on *Being There*, disc 2, Reprise, 1996, CD.

Sometimes one song can have as big an impact as the entire catalogue of a band. The song “Walk Don’t Run” by the Ventures is that song for me.¹¹ The kitschy and playful melody appeals to my sense of humour. Not long after my father played me that song, my high school rock band wrote an instrumental surf rock song inspired by “Walk Don’t Run,” which became one of our favourites to perform. Recently, I rediscovered the Ventures, and found a record I hadn’t know before: *Ventures in Space*.¹² On *Ventures in Space*, the band uses newer technologies, and finds creative ways to incorporate these technologies into their music. My composition “Slow Melt” was inspired by these the Ventures ballads.

¹¹ The Ventures, “Walk, Don’t Run,” single LP, *Walk, Don't Run/The McCoy*, Dolton Records, 1960, Vinyl recording.

¹² The Ventures, *The Ventures In Space*, Dolton Records, 1964, LP.

Notes About The Scores.

The charts in my thesis are not full scores but rather lead sheets, i.e., music that contains the melody chord symbols and instructions about the form. I chose to do this because folk music is sustained most naturally through oral traditions, and when sheet music is used, it is usually written in this style. The musicians who performed this music were most comfortable reading these lead sheets.

Chapter 2: Fire House Waltz

Fire House Waltz

Swung Country Waltz Ben Whiteley

68= G D A Bm

6 G A G A G

11 D A Bm G

15 A G A D

rit.

While accompanying Ontario fiddler Pierre Shyer in 2008, we slowed down a number of fiddle tunes that were normally played in fast tempos. The subtleties of the melody, which are often lost when performed at a faster tempo, were easier to hear at a slower tempo. I wrote “Fire House Waltz” to sound like an up-tempo fiddle tune that was being performed at a slower tempo. With the intent of using this tune as the opening track for my collection of compositions, the listener’s perception of tempo becomes slower, which makes the next tune, “Blue Skies Reel,” seem much faster than it actually is. The form could have been expanded, but I decided to keep it concise for maximum impact and for variety since there were several other waltzes on the recording. I wrote this song at the same time as “Firehouse Reel,” so it was difficult at first to imagine the different pieces of music as part of the same collection; when I re-imagined the tune as a vignette, I found that it worked much better.

2.1 Harmonic Vocabulary

This composition employs strictly diatonic harmony. By focusing the tonal centres around the IV and V chords, the feeling of the song is less resolved. The I chord is only used once and the VI chord is substituted for the I chord in bars 5 and 13 to preserve the unsettled feeling. The chords also change on beat 1 of every bar, which allows the accompanying guitar to emphasize beat 1 of the 3/4 time signature.

2.2 Melodic Content

The decorative melodic context employs the "hammer on" technique, an embellishment specific to string instruments, that helps to accentuate certain melodic phrases. I wanted to keep a

lot of space in this melody to contrast with the next composition on the album. Shorter melodic lines and phrases were exploited to achieve this effect.

2.3 Arrangement

To convey a sense of calm to the listener, I used simple instrumentation, just mandolin and guitar. In the context of the sequence, having two instruments perform a short song section makes the next track feel larger and more exciting. The mandolin and guitar prominently feature in every successive composition. By beginning the recording with a showcase of the two instruments featured throughout the compositions I create a thread of continuity.

2.4 Process: Composition To Realization

This was the last piece of music written and recorded. As I have learned through my previous recording experience, sometimes spontaneity is a key element of capturing great moments in the studio. When a piece of music is being recorded as a bonus or without much planning, the performance can be a little more relaxed because the players can feel less pressure to perform. The performance captured in this instance was gentle and relaxed, which suited the desired mood. No click track was used, which allowed for a rubato tempo.

2.5 Production Aesthetic

This number was recorded with only one ribbon mic on each instrument. There is no isolation between the mandolin and guitar parts, and this natural sonic image helped to create an intimate, live feel. Reverbs with shorter decays were selected to imply a smaller physical space and increase the feeling of intimacy.

Chapter 3: Blue Skies Reel

Blue Skies Reel

Fast Reel

♩ = 210

Ben Whiteley

A

D Em A

5 D G D/F# Em A

B

9 Bm G A

13 D Bm G A 1. D 2. D

I began attending the Blue Skies Music Festival in Clarendon, Ontario in 2007 with my partner, who has been a faithful attendee her whole life and is now a festival organizer. During the first few years I attended, she played in the fiddle orchestra and encouraged me to join. Instead of playing bass, I played mandolin to give myself the challenge of sight-reading on mandolin - something I had never done before. Over the course of the weekend, I sat around the campsite improvising on the mandolin and came up with the A section of this tune. Several months later, I finished the B section,¹³ and “Blue Skies Reel” was born, taking the name of the Blue Skies Festival. The fiddle orchestra has written another tune called “Blue Skies Waltz,” so I thought if I called it “Blue Skies Reel,” the fiddle orchestra might play it in the future.

3.1 Harmonic Structure

The harmonic structure of this composition utilizes practices primarily found in Irish fiddle traditions. For example, the song favours II minor chords as predominant chords, as opposed to in a bluegrass or Appalachian tradition, where the harmony would favour a IV major chord as the predominant chord of choice. I have learned these differences through professional participation in both traditions. In most fiddle-based music, the melody dictates the chord changes while the accompaniment often has several harmonic choices, as the melodies are primarily diatonic. In the A section of the tune, a II - V cadence is used to generate the feeling of an Irish fiddle tune instead of the IV - V cadence, which is more commonly found in bluegrass music. I chose to base the B section medley around the six minor chords to help differentiate between the sections.

¹³ Bar 9- 16/17, see score

3.2 Melodic Content

This composition was written on the mandolin, which encouraged the use of arpeggio climbs to begin many of the melodic phrases. The fingering for a D Major arpeggio is simple on a mandolin or fiddle, and much of the melody can be played in first hand position on both instruments. However, a few of the extensions have pushed my skill level. Dan Whiteley, one of Canada's best mandolin players, who played mandolin on this recording, expressed the opinion that the melody felt natural and satisfying to perform. To properly articulate the melody at the beginning of the B section, one has to employ a hammer-on technique. When playing a hammer-on, the tendency is to play at a slightly lower volume, which helps to shape the dynamics of the B section. This builds tension, which is then released at the end of the section when the melody returns to the contrast created by the major key.

3.3 Arrangement

The AABB or rondo form of 8 bar sections used in this composition is a common pattern for a reel. Depending on the style of the performance, a fiddle tune can feature the melody alone, or the player can improvise over chords and melody. In more traditional contexts, such as Appalachian or Irish fiddle music, the melody is repeated and there is generally no melodic improvisation. In a bluegrass context, players will often improvise after the written melody has been performed, similar to what happens in the jazz tradition. Each melody instrument (mandolin, dobro, banjo and guitar) on the recording of "Blue Skies Reel" takes a turn being the melodic focus. I instructed the guitar and mandolin players to stick closer to the melody and directed the dobro and banjo to improvise without straying too far from the melody. I also staggered the introduction of the different instruments to help shape the performance and create

interest for the listener. If this reel was being played at a folk dance, it would be common for all of the instruments to come in together to create excitement and climax.

3.4 Process: Composition to Realization

This tune was originally written at 120 beats per minute, but we collectively decided on a slower tempo of 100 beats per minute during rehearsals because we found the melody was more “singable” and sounded less like a wall of notes. As stated earlier, I wrote this tune on the mandolin, so I knew that it was possible to perform it from a fingering standpoint. The guitar player and banjo player also commented that the fingering was logical on their instruments. However, the dobro player found it extremely challenging and a lot of shifting was required to play the melody. In order to play the B section melody, he had to come up with a picking pattern that felt unnatural to him. He ended up coming back the day after the first session to overdub a new solo because he was unsatisfied with the one he had played on the bed track. In order for this overdub to sound seamless, an additional guitar part was then recorded, because the dobro bled into the guitar track. The solution involved copying the original guitar part for the dobro solo and then adding an additional guitar part for the whole tune. The result of all this problem-solving was positive, however. Some of the room sound from the original guitar track was lost and the dobro solo in turn had less reverb, which meant that the solo had its own unique feel compared with the other solos, which exhibited more room sound.

3.5 Production Aesthetic

With this piece, I aimed to emulate recording aesthetics found in 1960s and 1970s folk music. One of the main differences between the older style and more modern recording is the

acoustic guitar sound, which often sounds brittle and bright in modern recordings. We achieved a rounder, fuller tone by using a ribbon microphone and running it through Neve 1073 preamps, which coloured the sound by accentuating certain low and mid-range frequencies to create sonic warmth. I did, however, use a click track, which would not have been used during the 1960s, but which simplified the editing process. The banjo player only had 45 minutes to record, so I anticipated some editing would be necessary. For example, his solo was comprised of two separate takes which are edited together to create a whole.

Chapter 4: Sunbird

Sunbird

Form:
 Head A B AB C
 Solo's A B AB AB
 Head Out C AB

Ben Whiteley

$\text{♩} = 160$

A

B

C

Only on time before last head

This composition is another example of inspiration found through casual improvisation. I started writing the melody on a mandocello, which is tuned in fifths like the cello, but features double strings like a mandolin. The scale length is similar to that of an electric bass, which gives the mandocello a somber tone. The particular instrument I was playing was nearly a century old, which influenced my gentle approach to playing the instrument.

4.1 Harmonic Structure

The harmonic structure of “Sunbird” was influenced by many modern chord progressions found in bluegrass, as for example in many of Chris Thile’s compositions. The chord movement from a VI chord to a IV chord is quite common in modern bluegrass. For example, you can find it in the A section of Thile’s composition “Song for a Young Queen,” from his record *Not All Who Wander are Lost*.¹⁴ In “Sunbird,” all of the chord changes in the A and B sections are diatonic and a chromatic chord movement was used near the end of the C section to add new information, create harmonic contrast, and keep the interest of the listener. Thile uses a similar device in “Song for a Young Queen” to end his A section.

4.2 Melodic Content

The mandocello’s range is similar to a cello, though because of its lower pitch, the notes speak more slowly, which invited my improvising to be at a slower tempo. To me, the focus of the opening phrase is based on the back and forth semi-tone movement around the G-major seven chord. I am fond of music that has a looping quality. This effect can be achieved by

¹⁴ Chris Thile. “Song for a Young Queen,” track 1 on *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*, Sugar Hill Records, 2001, CD.

starting phrases with a pick-up, and by eliminating any real temporal space before the A melody starts again.

The B section continues to exploit the use of semitones. When the melody reaches a high point, the mandolin player's hand moves out of first position to produce the higher notes that help create an arc of excitement. The melody was written so that the mandolin player could utilize a technique called "cross picking." The G note, which is the lowest note on the mandolin, is used to make this section seem bigger. My experience as a bass player has taught me that an instrument's lowest note always adds an element of excitement.

Sections A and B were completed before section C was written. The melody in the C section is based on a simple cross-picking pattern over a series of new chord changes. Positioning it after the solos has a similar effect to a bridge in popular music. This creates new interest for the listener by introducing new melodic and harmonic information before returning to a familiar theme.

4.3 Arrangement

The idea for the arrangement was in place before the ensemble met for the first rehearsal and did not change significantly throughout the rehearsal process. I wanted the tune to start with solo mandolin and build from there. Unlike the concepts developed in "Blue Skies Reel," I decided to encourage the soloists to explore their improvisation skills. They were instructed to keep the solos short in order to shift the focus more frequently, thereby constantly changing the overall timbre of the ensemble. This helps to maintain audience interest, particularly among listeners not as familiar with the genre.

4.4 Process: Composition To Realization

My intent was always for the composition to start with the solo mandolin, but I did not anticipate that Darryl, the guitar player, would learn the melody as well. When I was notating the tune, I had written the melody of the B section incorrectly and, as a result, Darryl ended up learning the “wrong” part. Dan, who was playing mandolin, learned the tune by ear from the recorded demo I had sent out, in which the B section was played as intended. Surprisingly, the incorrect B section worked in conjunction with correct B section, which is how the guitar counter-melody developed. I learned that when other people enter the creative process and the composer is open to accepting new ideas, interesting compositional developments can occur.

4.5 Production Aesthetic

I used the same microphone technique as “Blue Skies Reel” because I wanted to achieve a similar production aesthetic. See Section 3.5 for further details on that process.

Chapter 5: Firehouse

Firehouse

Celtic Reel

♩ = 176

Ben Whiteley

Intro

3

5 1. 3 3 2. 3 A

8 A Bm D A Bm

12 G D A A[♯] Bm A

16 G D A/C[♯] Bm A G

22 B A Bm G D A

26 A Bm G D A

37 Intro (Band Stop) Bm 3 Fine

2 A- SOLO's - Guitar/Mandolin

36 Bm D A Bm

40 G D A A^{2o} Bm A

44 G D C[#]/A Bm A G

50 A Bm G D A

54 A Bm G D A

This is the second last tune that I wrote for this project. At this point I had written mostly slower songs in 3/4 and 6/8 time. In order to have a balanced group of compositions I felt I needed to write an up-tempo song in 4/4 time. I initially felt that “Firehouse” was too derivative of many bluegrass instrumentals because I was rigidly focused on the reel form (AABB). However, as we worked through the recording process, we expanded the intro section of the song into its own stand-alone section, which helped the composition develop its own identity.

5.1 Harmonic Structure

Harmonically, “Firehouse” stays within a diatonic framework using mainly VI, IV and V chords. In the second half of the A section, chromatic motion is echoed in the melody from the V chord up to the VI, a technique that is used to help create tension. I have noticed that this harmonic movement, common in Irish fiddle music, has been adopted by more modern bluegrass musicians. The tension is then released in the B section which starts on the IV chord and helps establish the “major feel” of the section. That “major feel” is meant to contrast the tension that is created by the introduction phrase. I used quick chord changes, almost like shots, in the 3rd and 7th bar of the B section to help break up the groove.

5.2 Melodic Content

The melody draws predominately on chord tones. One technique I used to build excitement through the A section was to start with half notes and quarter notes and then increase the number of 8th notes as the melody climbs higher in pitch, to where it peaks at the 8th bar of the A section. Playing the B section with a legato feel then helps to express openness and lightness, since it works as a contrast to the introduction and the A section.

This melody lends itself to many mandolin-specific embellishments because of the fingering and picking style of this instrument. One such embellishment can be read in the 3rd bar of the A section where an E is repeated. The original intent was for the first of the two notes of this section to slide into the A string and then repeat the note on the open string, creating new interest even though the notes are being repeated. However, since the fiddle ultimately played the melody, this simply turned into a repeated note.

5.3 Arrangement

The arrangement of this composition was completed before entering the recording session. The initial concept was that everybody would play the intro line, the mandolin would perform the A section, and then the fiddle would play the B section.

It was important for me that my cousin Dan play mandolin on this tune, as I had looked up to him as a musical role model. However, he was unable to learn this tune before the session and we had no rehearsal for this song. Fortunately, the fiddler on the session, John Showman, was able to take over the lead role. We ended up over-dubbing the mandolin's descending line for the interlude sections. The end result was positive as the fiddle provided melodic variety within the collection of tunes, as the mandolin is heavily featured over the course of the other songs. Drawing on previous recording experiences, I was able to manage this unexpected change smoothly. When recording the bed-track the guitar performed the intro and the fiddle performed the lead melody. The mandolin played background and then we over-dubbed the mandolin performing the introduction.

5.4 Process: Composition To Realization

The extended intro section in the middle of this tune was a misreading of the chart during the first read-through, which turned out to be a happy accident. I wanted a breakdown featuring repetitions of the introduction passage after the last solo, but the players and I had not discussed how many times it would happen. As a result, we kept repeating the part until I visually cued the beginning of the next section for everyone. The fiddler then started to play an ascending counter line and I reacted by playing descending bass notes underneath. The effect created a swirling, chaotic feel that helps build excitement before the last time through the melody. As it turned out, recording on the computer instead of straight to tape allowed for more risk taking and improvisation, because editing on computer is simpler and the materials are inexpensive.

5.5 Production Aesthetic

To maintain continuity with the other recording sessions, I used similar mic and preamp choices for this tune. In my opinion, many modern acoustic music recordings sound clinical and lack authentic emotion because the playing and recording are so precise and the recordings are too clean sounding. During my recording, the fiddle sounded a bit scratchy which provides a juxtaposition to the modern bluegrass writing techniques that influenced me. After listening to the bed tracks, I wanted to fill out some of the lower mid-frequency range so I overdubbed piano on this tune. The piano played lower middle register chords to help create this effect. This is a recording technique that is commonly used in pop music.

Chapter 6: The Slow Melt

The Slow Melt

Form as written
Guitar play's A's
Dobro/Steel play's B's

Surf Rocker Ballad

Ben Whiteley

$\text{♩} = 66$
2

Intro

3 Gb^7 Gm^7 F^7

A

3 $\text{B}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ $\text{D}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ Gm^7 F^7 Am^7 $\text{B}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ $\text{A}^{\flat}7$ F^7 [2.]

7 Gm^7 $\text{D}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ Gb^7 $\text{D}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ Gm^7 F^7 $\text{B}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ $\text{B}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7/6$

12 *rit.* Am^7 $\text{A}^{\flat}7$ Gm^7

16 $\text{D}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ Gm^7 $\text{F}^{\sharp}7$

B

19 $\text{B}^{\sharp}\text{maj}^7$ $\text{G}^{\sharp}7$

23 $\text{C}^{\sharp}\text{m}^7$ C^7

27 $\text{B}^{\sharp}\text{maj}^7$ $\text{G}^{\sharp}7$

31 $\text{C}^{\sharp}\text{m}^7$ C^7 Cm^7 B^7

A2

35 $\text{B}^{\flat}\text{maj}^7$ Am^7 $\text{A}^{\flat}7$

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This song developed while I was listening to a lot of surf rock, particularly the The Ventures album, *Ventures in Space*. Many of the slower songs on their records are in a 6/8-time signature and are evocative of a dance scene for a black-and-white romantic movie.

6.1 Harmonic Structure

Many of the classic pop chord changes from the 1950s and 1960s resonate with my creative side, so this song, following that mid-twentieth-century method, begins with a major 7 chord to establish a "floating feel" before descending chromatically through a series of minor 7 chords. A simple II-V cadence facilitates the return to the beginning of the section. The bridge features a I-VI-II-V chord progression used in many surf rock ballads.

Key changes are a technique used to create the feeling of excitement in a song, but they are often considered cheesy. In this tune though, I wanted to highlight that feeling and evoke nostalgia for 1960s pop songs. Harmonically, this tune assumes many elements of the surf rock style. Surf rock is almost always instrumental, but draws primarily on harmonic and melodic content found in songs from the same era. Because there are no lyrics, the dynamic chord changes in surf rock music carry more weight than they would in a traditional pop song. In "The Slow Melt," a descending bass motion begins the A section and then the Db Major 7 chord serves as a point of interest. I used a similar technique in the B section by chromatically altering the sub-mediante chord to major before descending chromatically from the supertonic chord to tonic to complete the first phrase.

6.2 Melodic Content

I wrote this song on the guitar. When writing on guitar, I tend to pick melodies out of chords, largely due to the fact that, as a bass player, chords and harmonic structures are generally the first element of a composition that I consider. Major 7 chords are a personal favourite of mine and so I decided to use the Major 7 as the melody note. Another technique that has resonated with me as a bass player is when the melody remains static and the bass notes move below it. I used this method in bars 17 and 18, where the melody holds an F while the chords change below.

6.3 Arrangement

I knew how I would arrange this piece from the moment the melody first came to me. I wanted the acoustic guitar to play the A section and the pedal steel to play the B section. Prior to writing this tune, nothing that I had written for this thesis featured the acoustic guitar or pedal steel, and I was excited to work with these instruments.

Because this is a slow song, I did not feel it was necessary to repeat the whole form many times. A common way to perform a jazz ballad is, after performing an AABA form, a solo instrument will improvise over the A sections and the main-melody instrument or singer will come back at the B section and perform the melody as written. I arranged this song in this way.

I wrote this melody imagining it performed on an electric guitar with a whammy bar. Although it was ultimately recorded on acoustic guitar, my vision of the electric guitar influenced my phrasing. The pedal steel plays the B section to incorporate glissandos which create that woozy feeling. The melodic lines are short to allow for the whammy bar to bend the last notes and to allow the performer to improvise.

6.4 Process: Composition To Realization

My inspiration for this song was to imagine what would happen if Bill Frissell were to cover a *Ventures* song on an acoustic guitar album. With this idea in mind, this became one of the more straightforward pieces of this project for me to bring to life.

6.5 Production Aesthetic

The treatment of “Slow Melt” is a fusion of acoustic instruments (upright bass, guitar, and mandolin) with electric instruments (pedal steel and Hammond Organ). The acoustic guitar was a Martin D18 and was recorded using ribbon mics. Rob Fenton ran his pedal steel through a reproduction of a 1960s Fender Bassman tube amp, which is known for having a warm sound. I encouraged Rob to use a delay pedal on his pedal steel in the style of *The Ventures*, who were early adopters of this effect. During the mixing process, I added more delay, soft-panned the delay to one side, and put the dry steel sound on the other side to create a wider stereo image. This effect is particularly apparent when listening to the song on headphones. I also put a short, 0.33 millisecond delay on the mandolin, a delay style also known as slap back, which is popular in surf rock. Without drums, the mandolin functions like a snare drum playing on beat two and four of each bar.

Chapter 7: Up at Round Lake

Up at Round Lake

Country/Jazz Waltz

Ben Whiteley

Intro ♩ = 84

Am G D Am G D

Vs

9 G

13 Am F C

17 G

21 Am p(omit) C G

CH

27 C(omit) G C⁵ Em C⁵

32 G Em⁷ Bm C

Mandolin Solo

37 G Am F

44 C G

49 Am p(omit) C G

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of several systems of music. The first system is an 8-measure introduction with a tempo marking of ♩ = 84. The second system, marked 'Vs', contains measures 9-12. The third system contains measures 13-16. The fourth system contains measures 17-20. The fifth system contains measures 21-24. The sixth system, marked 'CH', contains measures 27-31. The seventh system contains measures 32-36. The eighth system, marked 'Mandolin Solo', contains measures 37-43. The ninth system contains measures 44-48. The final system contains measures 49-52. Chord symbols are placed above the notes. Some notes are marked with 'p(omit)'.

2

CH 55 C(omit3) G C⁵ Em C⁵

60 G Em⁷ Bm C

Intro 65 Am G D Am G D

Vs 73 G

77 Am F C G

rit.

Detailed description: The image shows a page of musical notation for guitar. It consists of five staves of music in the key of G major. The first staff (measures 55-59) is marked 'CH' and contains chords C(omit3), G, C5, Em, and C5. The second staff (measures 60-61) contains chords G, Em7, Bm, and C. The third staff (measures 65-66) is marked 'Intro' and contains chords Am, G, D, Am, G, and D. The fourth staff (measures 73-74) is marked 'Vs' and contains the chord G. The fifth staff (measures 77-78) contains chords Am, F, C, and G, with a 'rit.' (ritardando) marking below the staff.

"Up at Round Lake" was inspired by two bodies of water, both called Round Lake. One of them is a natural lake north of Kingston, Ontario where my partner liked to swim while she was a student at Queen's University. The other Round Lake is the affectionate nickname of the aboveground swimming pool at the home of my partner's parents. In this song I attempt to capture the feeling of peace and freedom that one feels while swimming and connecting to nature.

7.1 Harmonic Structure

From a harmonic standpoint, I wanted to use slow harmonic motion to communicate a calm feeling. At the beginning of the C part, or chorus, I wanted the mood of the song to lift so I used a IV chord to begin the section. This is a common technique used in a number of pop and folk songs. I also find that, on the guitar, there are certain intervals in the melody relating to the chord root that on another instrument might sound somewhat dissonant, but which on the guitar, because of the voicing of the chord and the timbre of the guitar, can sound pleasing. In my opinion, this is why the "Lydian fourth" F# in the melody above the C in the bass at the start of the chorus works well.

7.2 Melodic Content

The melody of this tune is an example of how my compositional style has been influenced by my experience playing with singer-songwriters. Words could easily be set to the guitar melodies as it uses simple intervals and simple rhythms which help achieve the "singable" quality of this song.

7.3 Arrangement

When arranging “Up at Round Lake” I wanted to add some different textures than I used on the other songs on the record. I took a cue from the band the Great Uncles of the Revolution by combining horns and brass instruments with acoustic instruments. Because the song opens with the trumpet playing the lead melody, rather than with a string instrument, the listeners of the record get to experience something new. Shaun Brodie’s trumpet performance here is evocative of a Mexican or Western feel, which I find provides a pleasant contrast to the sombre guitar.

The form of this tune is similar to that of a pop song: intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, intro, chorus. In the second verse I asked the mandolin player to take a solo based on the melody, to mimic a common technique that singers use; namely adding embellishments the second time through a melody.

7.4 Process: Composition To Realization

“Up at Round Lake” almost did not make it onto the recording. I wrote the verse melody many months before completing the piece, and I initially felt it was not strong enough. However, when I eventually added the chorus, there was fresh context and direction for the verse melody. It was after watching a Western movie that I got the idea to have the trumpet play the introduction line, and evoke a Mariachi/Western flavour.

I had not anticipated how well the pedal steel and the french horn would blend together, and this was a happy surprise in the studio. At times during the recording process I could not tell the instruments apart due to their similar timbre.

7.5 Production Aesthetic

I wanted “Up at Round Lake” to sound like a big finale built up on all of the other tunes. To do this, I kept the warm acoustic sounds that were established in the earliest tracks, overdubbed the pedal steel to connect with the jazzier “Slow Melt,” and finally, added horns for a big finish. Unlike classical music recordings, which generally do not use compression and thus allow for extremes in dynamic range, I mixed and mastered my recording employing pop music studio techniques. I used different “FX” techniques such as compression, reverb, and panning to create the illusion of dynamics without significant volume changes. For example, the stereo spread of the horns and pedal steel in the choruses of this song helps create this effect.

Conclusion

Writing, rehearsing, recording, editing, mixing and mastering my own compositions has been an important learning process. Because I work primarily as a freelance accompanist, I am good at taking direction and helping others realize their artistic goals, but as this project took shape, I realized that I was not used to being in charge, and I would need to develop my musical leadership skills. I was surprised at my initial discomfort in this leadership role, but I had to learn quickly nonetheless. I learned to effectively count in songs, choose tempos, and provide performance feedback.

In addition to musical management, I had to take on administrative roles such as scheduling rehearsals and booking studio time. During the actual recording sessions, I had to manage time and decide if we had recorded all the material needed to mix each piece properly and to best advantage.

Finally, I gained valuable insight into what it is like to be a lead artist and to hire musicians to help achieve a creative vision. I initially felt vulnerable, but then I noticed the contracted musicians were making positive comments similar to what I sometimes say to the lead artist when I am hired as an accompanist. This was an eye-opening role reversal, and it has helped give me confidence and energy as an artist.

Since recording this project, I have co-produced a record and taken on a musical-director role in a number of touring ensembles. The leadership skills that I developed while doing this master's thesis have been a big part of my success in many projects since.

At this time, I predominately accompany musicians that are creating music that resonates with me and that I find creatively fulfilling. As such, I have no strong desire to form a band, book gigs, or market this project as a full time career. However, I do hope to make

reproductions and release this record creatively. I have performed some of these songs when playing small instrumental gigs with different groups of musicians, with different instrumentation and, in these contexts, I continue to explore and enjoy the different possibilities of these compositions.

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