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Dear...

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Dear...,

by
Tiffany McKinney

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Music in Composition
in the School of Music, Jordan College of Fine Arts of Butler University

Thesis Defense: December 8, 2017

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Advisor:



For my thesis project, I wanted to compose a piece that was based on my time in therapy. The piece *Dear...*, is based upon a series of letters written during my time in therapy while at Butler University. Each letter contains a brutally honest and potentially upsetting message to its recipient. The messages contained in these letters are never meant to see the light of day, thus the recipient will never see the contents of the letter. The moods of each letter vary; emotions range from anger to grief to forgiveness. These letters had a profound effect on me and I knew that I needed to use them as a basis for a piece.

After attempting a symphonic piece and a guitar concerto, I determined that acoustic music did not seem to do what my thesis piece needed to do which was capture the emotion of the letters while still leaving room for the listener's interpretation. Even though electronic music was not my first choice for conveying the letters, it ultimately fit the best for what I wanted to do. So, I decided to record myself reading the letters using the words from the letters as the sound samples for the electronic piece. Electronic music allows manipulation of sounds and a fixed performance that acoustic music could not, a difference which became important as I conceptualized the piece.

The five letters that makeup of the basis of the piece range in emotional context, centering around the question, "If you could write a letter to anyone that said anything you wanted it to, without any kind of repercussion or consequence, what would that letter say?" The question is the basis for which I wrote all the letters. The emotional content of each letter varies; most of the letters contain anger while others are forgiveness, grief, frustration, and questioning. The text is very sensitive material and does not appear fully in the piece nor will it be a part of the program notes. This allows the message of the letters to come across without hurting the intended recipient and without imposing too much of my own interpretation on the listener.

1. Form

The form of *Dear...*, was condensed from five movements to three movements. Originally, each movement represented a specific letter, but as the piece came together, each emotion did not need a separate movement nor was there a need for pause between movements, creating an *attaca* three movement piece. The movements do not have hard breaks in the material, allowing a flow without pause and a seamless conveyance of the material itself.

Each movement has its individualized goal within the context of the piece. The first movement sets up the atmosphere and develops the central question to the piece. The second movement is a type of response to that question. It does not blatantly respond but mulls over the question and forms responses that a listener might have before the final movement conveys forgiveness and harmonious resolution.

The tick of a clock, a bell like figure and a drone also help set the atmosphere of the piece by providing the perfect setting to pose a question. The question does not appear all at once, but is broken into segments with interjections of other vocal samples like the word “dear.” The beginning sound samples set the mood but still allow the question to be the focus so that the other movements can respond. The piece proceeds to the next movement without pause.

The second movement begins after the static answer to the central question around 1:25. The bass drone begins at a higher pitch and the clock comes back in as well, with interjections of vocal samples. I wanted the listener to begin/continue thinking about the question and come up with their own answers, so this movement is more tumultuous and unsettled. I did not want it to be an obvious representation of any certain emotion, but I want it to feel unsettled. This movement ends with a build to the statement “...and I can’t breathe.”

The middle movement is the longest of the three movements allowing the listener to ponder the question and decide on a response. At the same time, my letters and the associated emotions are conveyed as well. This movement mixes individual perception with a conveyance of my own letters and responses, so the turbulent nature does not elicit one specific emotion.

The final movement begins with a harp figure. This portion of the piece has sound sources including preset instruments from the E-MU Virtuoso 2000 and Roland JP 8080 as an ostinato to create motion and propel the movement forward. The ostinato I use in this movement is a harp figure (called “Magic Harps”) that lasts throughout the entire movement. Forgiveness and coming to terms are the themes of this section of the piece. The second movement was the response to the question and the feelings that come from that movement are resolved in the final movement, allowing the listener to feel like the piece is coming full circle.

All three movements have elements in common; one element that all three movements use an ostinato or drone in some manner. Drones and ostinatos represent something constant which each movement needed amongst the turmoil of the subject matter. The first movement has the clock tick and a bass drone, which is a preset instrument from the E-MU Virtuoso 2000. The second movement has the same drones, but the bass drone takes on a new motivic idea. A new ostinato figure (called “weewoo”) begins around 2:50 and takes over in place of the bass drone, acting as the glue of the movement and a melodic figure. The last movement uses preset instruments from keyboard modules as ostinatos: a harp sounding figure (E-MU Virtuoso 2000) and a phantom lead preset instrument (Roland JP 8080). The ostinatos are move the movement forward but also create a sound world, fitting the thematic material of the movement.

Another common idea amongst the three movements is the use of vocal samples. Some samples are common and occur in each movement, while others only appear in a specific

movement and do not reoccur. “Dear” appears in all three movements; “forgiveness” only appears in the final movement, and is representative of the movement itself as it does not fit in the other movements.

2. Sonic Materials

While recording the central question sound sample, I did not want a voice with emotion so I use a combination of techniques to create the emotionless vocal sound. When recording, I spoke slowly and tried to refrain from any emotion and inflection in my voice. Next, I add a robot voice filter, allowing my voice to be masked, keeping it emotionless.

The sentence that poses the question “If you could write a letter to anyone that said anything you wanted it to, without any kind of repercussion or consequence, what would that letter say?” is broken into fragments to emphasize certain words, with pauses to keep the listener wanting more. The emphasis of the words “repercussion” and “consequence” allow me to bring a dark undertone to what the speaker may say in their letter given that nothing will come of their choices made.

“Dear...,” represents the way a letter normally begins so it feels important to the thematic element of the piece to have the music start like a letter. To create this sample, I took the recording of myself saying “Dear” and use a pitch shifter to shift the pitch deeper, creating a more masculine sounding sample. Since I want my own voice to only be used in certain occasions, this allowed me to use my voice again without it sounding like my own voice or the other voices used throughout the piece. This masculine sounding sample is more impactful than the pitch and color of my own voice as it acts as a reference point throughout the piece, appearing in all three movements.

I also wanted to avoid having too many moments where my vocal sample was not manipulated that way, so that when I did use my voice, it feels more impactful to the listener. This sample has more meaning and impact to the listener because it is my voice unaltered instead of being manipulated. The main samples where my voice is left mostly intact are the main question (and its broken fragments). Examples of this include: “you were never there,” and “...and I can’t breathe.” “You were never there” uses light distortion to muddle my voice; “...and I can’t breathe” is set up in a manner to have a surround sound effect.

“...and I can’t breathe” is separated onto two tracks and slightly offset to create a surround sound effect by panning on track hard left and the other hard right. The text is in the foreground around 5:52, and offset along with an echo-y filter create this surround sound effect. The other time this sample comes in it is similar but with less echo and positioned more in the mid ground. This phrase is a buildup of all the emotions contained in the letters. It is the tipping point for the emotional turmoil of the second movement.

The piece is not entirely “musique concrete” in the sense of only using recorded samples; rather I also use present sounds from various hardware keyboard modules, sending standard midi performance data into those modules to perform using the included instruments. I chose the preset instruments based on what I felt the movement needed, using these instruments as background material rather than foreground material.

One of the first preset instruments I use is a preset legato upright bass instrument from E-MU’s Virtuoso 2000 to create a drone. Wanting a pitched background figure, I chose the bass legato because it creates an even, seamless drone. I play the preset instrument using a keyboard module and record the playback in Digital Performer, any breaks in the drone being intentional.

In the second movement, I use another preset instrument to create a rotary style sound effect. In the appendix, I gave it the name “weewoo.” This takes the place of the clock as the main ostinato in this section. It is a pitched figure, so it creates moments of dissonance which help add to the emotional turmoil I aimed for, making the listener uneasy and pushing the music forward through the second movement. Around the ostinato, more vocal samples come in and create more dissonance in the spoken moments used.

In the last movement of the piece, I used the preset instrument called “Magic Harps.” I wanted more movement but also wanted a particular color added to the texture that was different from the drone/ostinato used in the first two movements. The harp gave me what I set out to achieve by adding rhythmic variety and tone color for the final movement.

The final movement also uses a preset instrument from the Roland JP 8080 called “Phantom Lead” because of the color it produces in comparison to “Magic Harps.” Acting as a glue, “Phantom Lead” replaces the legato bass drone to give the final movement its own identity. The drone (or ostinato depending on the instrument/sound sample) remains as a constant through the piece while the instrument changes each time, individualizing the movements.

3. Motifs and Meanings

The sound samples and preset instruments in this piece represent different motivic ideas. Some are straightforward in meaning while others have a deeper representation, the choice made based on the message I aimed to convey. I manipulate the samples and instruments to create the color and timbre I needed (if it differed from the original sample.)

Figure 1: List of sound samples (see Appendix for specifics)

GROUP	LEVEL	COLOR	TRACK NAME	PLAY SWPT	OUTPUT	TAKE
---	---	Red	~ Clock-2-02-02	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Orange	~ robotintro.2	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Yellow	~ bell-y	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Light Yellow	~ bell-y copy	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Light Green	~ wuub	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Green	~ wuub copy	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Light Blue	~ dear#_6-02-02	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Cyan	~ shower_rhythm	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Light Cyan	~ shower_rhythm copy	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Blue	~ weewoo	▶	Analog 1-2	1
Analog 1-2	---	Dark Blue	~ CANTBREAThe	▶	Analog 1-2	1
Analog 1-2	---	Dark Blue	~ CANTBREAThe copy	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Teal	~ Master-1	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Red	~ MIDI-1	▶	Vitioso 2000-1	1
Analog 1-2	---	Red	~ Audio-3	▶	Analog 1-2	1
Analog 3-4	---	Pink	~ highhatsound	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Orange	~ MIDI-2	▶	Vitioso 2000-2	1
Analog 1-2	---	Orange	~ Audio-1	▶	Analog 1-2	1
---	---	Red	~ MIDI-3	▶	JP-8080-1	1
Analog 1-2	---	Red	~ Audio-2	▶	Analog 1-2	1
Analog 1	---	Purple	~ forgiveness	▶	Analog 1-2	1

The clock is the most persistent of all the drones/ostinatos used. The tick of the clock was chosen to keep the idea of time passing in the listener’s mind, providing a constant familiar sound in the mixture of unfamiliar sounds. The clock also represents the time it takes to process and come to terms with what the question asks. It took time to write, process, and come to terms with the material of the letters, and I want the listener to have a similar journey through the duration of the piece.

The bell sample (“Bell-y”) represents simplicity and innocence. The letters were easy to write in a time of anger and pain. The simplicity of writing a letter in such a dark setting and how easy it is to say anything without having consequences weighing over your head. The simplicity of the bell sample is meant to remind the listener how easy it is to say anything you want without consequences. The bell sound keeps this same theme as well, but becomes more twisted in the second movement.

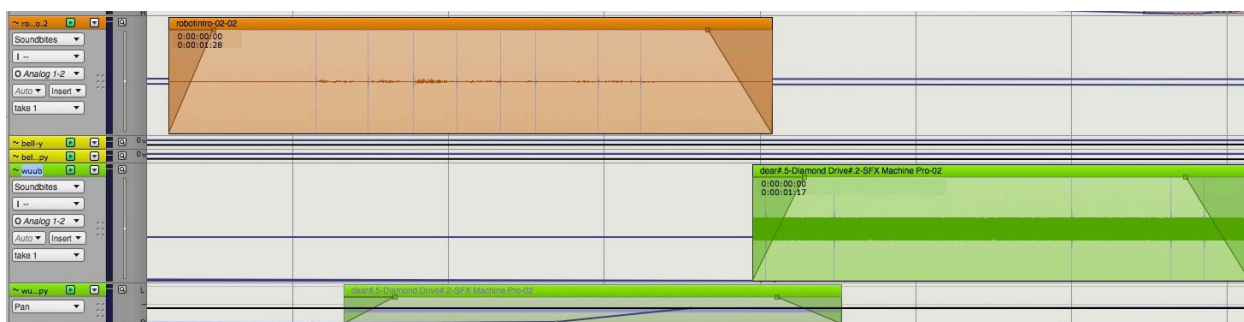
The bass drone that begins in the first movement helps set an ominous atmosphere, acting like a glue in the first movement. I continue to use it in the second movement twisting the bass drone and to become a voice in the foreground rather than a background glue. Drones are one of

my favorite musical techniques to use. I enjoy how a drone can set a tonal center or muddle it. When I use drones, I draw inspiration from sacred chants from the Middle Ages and in the step wise, melodic nature in which chant moves. This is what I try to accomplish in my usage of drones in the context of my piece.

In the second movement, the dissonance created by this drone relays the turmoil of the movement to the listener. This is where the step like movement mimics that of sacred chant from the Middle Ages. I wanted it to be chant-like, but also provide dissonance and disorder. Just like the turmoil of the movement, the listener should be feeling emotion turmoil as to what their own letter might say.

The static is an interrupting, palette cleanser, wanting noise as an eye opener. The filter I used created echo, while the dynamics I added helped move seamlessly between the two overlapping samples used to create the length of the static (see figure 2). This interacts with the main question posed, acting as a break from the emotional heaviness of the question.

Figure 2 Static Overlap – The bottom two boxes show the overlap of the static sample underneath the question.



I used an ebbing figure as a call and response type figure, following the word or phrase as if the sample is responding to it. The figure usually starts before the word ends to create unease. I wanted this sample to be used as the obvious ominous drone. In horror movies, the music helps

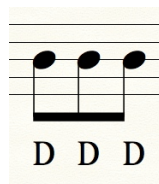
lead us to certain conclusions about what is to happen next. I used this concept in my piece as well, but whether it follows the exact model of predicting the future is uncertain on purpose. I did not want to necessarily create a doom association with the ebbing drone.

I was inspired by leitmotifs in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* while choosing the samples for my piece. A leitmotif usually represents a person, place, or idea so that is what the samples do. The samples I use are my motifs and I want them to connect to something extramusical, my motifs representing concepts rather than people or places.

4. Rhythm

I used several more rhythmic motifs to help create a sense of motion through the piece. One sample I use is a recording of a shower starting; I like the color and effect it creates in the context of the piece. Another way I created rhythm was by breaking apart the syllables from the words, taking a syllable and repeating it to create a rhythmic pattern. First, I take the "D" from "Dear" and create an eighth note rhythmic figure (see figure 3).

Figure 3 Rhythmic figure from "Dear"



I did the same thing with "con" of "consequence" and "s" in "say" (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4 Rhythmic figure from "Consequence"



Figure 5 Rhythmic figure from “Say”



Consonants create sharper rhythmic figures than vowels. The vowels produce a smooth overall sound, relating to that of a drone. The consonants allowed me to have sharp edges and create percussive sounds. When the “S” is separated from “Say,” it can create a high hat like sound when the sample is repeated in close succession.

The “Magic Harps” preset instrument was specifically used in the last movement to perform a rhythmic figure. When recording the instrument, I played eighth notes on the keyboard module, using a tool in Digital Performer to keep the eighth notes even and consistent. It was created by using the keyboard module EMU Virtuoso 2000. I wanted the last movement to have forward motion. The other movements have movement, but nothing super rhythmic to create forward motion, so I use “Magic Harps” to drive the last movement forward. This allows the last movement to contrast with the other movements.

5. Methodology

To create *Dear...*, I gathered sound samples using a few different methods. Most of the samples were recorded using my iPhone. I downloaded an app that allows me to record sounds and send the recordings to my email. The other method I used to record the samples is by setting up a microphone. The microphone allowed more clarity for speech recordings. From the recording, I email the samples to myself and made sure there were in mp3 format.

To edit the samples, I use two main programs: Amadeus and Audacity. I imported the mp3 into the program and then edited as needed from there. Audacity allowed me to edit the recordings outside of working in the lab. Audacity is somewhat limited on filtering effects,

which is where Amadeus comes in. Amadeus is the main editor I used while in the lab at Butler University. There are some filtering effects that I could apply to the samples before loading the sounds into the digital audio workstation I use.

After editing the recordings and getting the sound samples to where I wanted them, I imported them into the digital audio workstation I used: Digital Performer. This program is where the sound samples are put together to create the piece. Besides putting the piece together, I could add filtering effects to the individual samples and the overall piece as needed. Also, I used Digital Performer to put the finishing touches on the piece and export the finished product as an audio file.

6. Technical Aspects

Digital Performer was used to put the pieces together. I chose it specifically for its ability to mix audio samples and preset instrument samples (using midi for playback control). This project was intended to be a mixture of audio samples and samples from preset instruments. Digital Performer handles inputting and manipulating both types of samples well. I also like the user interface, the way the samples are laid out across the screen with a grid that shows time was helpful in keeping track of when things happened and at what time. Also, making each sample a different color kept them separate in my stream of vision and it looked colorful.

Audacity and Amadeus allow me to manipulate and edit the individual recordings as needed. Before putting the samples into Digital Performer, I use one of the programs to normalize and edit the sound for clarity. In Amadeus, I could add filter effects before even putting the sample into Digital Performer, just in case the filter effect needed could not be found in the effect bank in Digital Performer.

I use preset instruments from different modules to create some of my samples in Digital Performer. These are labelled as “midi” in the list of samples. The machines used are E-MU’s Virtuoso 2000 and Roland’s JP 8080. The Virtuoso 2000 contains a nice selection of orchestral and individual instrument playing styles samples, which I use for my drones/ostinatos. The JP 8080 had effects like synth pads and other noise effects, which contrast the instruments of the Virtuoso 2000.

I also use techniques such as panning and the automation of dynamics to create the desired effect. I use panning to move the sounds from the left to right in the listener’s ears, not wanting all the sound to be directed from one place. Plus, moving the sounds around through the stereo spectrum creates clarity of the samples and an addition sense of motion. At some points, I move one sample to the left ear and another sample to the right ear so that both samples are heard equally. Other times, I use the panning to create interest like how the clock tends to pan left and right rarely staying in one spot except when its needed.

I use automation within Digital Performer to create dynamic interest. The audio soundbites containing static are a good example of this; I start it off softly in the background behind the question. Towards the end, the static comes up and takes over in the foreground as it’s the loudest sample at that point, causing an interruption of the question without entirely drowning the text.

Some of the effects I produced were based on the overlapping of the samples. For instance, I start a sample before another one is finished playing, helping to create unease in sections where it was needed. Other times samples play at the same time, but one on the far left stereo spectrum and the other on the far right stereo spectrum making both samples are clear, but causing overlap in a more unsettling way.

Panning and the automation of dynamics provide much needed interest in my piece; employing only two channels to perform *Dear....*. By channels, I mean the number of speaker outputs. I could have created a larger channel piece, but two channels make the piece more accessible for more performances. It is easier to get performances of two channel left and right stereo spectrum pieces than it is for eight channel pieces.

7. Putting It All Together

Electronic music allows me more creative control over the process of making and performing the piece. Other genres/ensembles of music (choral, orchestral, etc) do not allow the same amount of control especially when it comes to performance. With acoustic genres of music, each performance may not sound the same. With this medium, the piece will sound exactly the same each time, removing performer/performance error in the playing of the piece. I do not need anyone to perform anything; all I need is a push of a button, giving a performance that sounds exactly how I want it to every single time. No parts of the piece will be missed or forgotten by a performer, all parts being in their exact place.

The sounds I create and use for this project are not able to be created in a live setting. The piece has a specific sound world which allows me to create a specific atmosphere. The sounds I use have filters and effects that were chosen with the atmosphere in mind. It would be difficult for a live performer to pan and shift the sounds. Also, some of the sounds would not be able to be created by an instrument like static. An instrument can create “noise” but it cannot replicate the sound of static. The clock tick could be replicated, but it would be hard to create a consistent ticking. The performance would have a difficult time replicating the panning I used to shift the sound from one ear to the other. The atmosphere and sounds can only be created by the filtering and effects I used.

I want the listener to create their own letter throughout the piece. I use my letters as the basis, but I want to create a context in which the listener could contemplate the question and come up with their own letters. The phrases and words I use are meant to convey my letter, also provoking the listener's thoughts and give them a push into thinking about their own letters.

The piece *Dear...*, allows me to express a set of letters that I created in a manner that allows the listener to create their own letters. This attacca three movement piece allows me to create an atmospheric world with natural and unnatural sounds. I use electronic music and techniques associated with it to build the atmosphere and convey the message of my letters.

Appendix of Instruments/presets patches used: (list by module itself)

E-MU Virtuoso 2000

1. bas: 6 Legato
2. hrp: Margic Harps

Roland JP 8080

1. Phantom Lead

Appendix of recorded samples:

1. Clock tick
2. Main Question Vocal Sample
3. Bell-like Previous Recorded and Manipulated Sample
4. “Wuub” – static sample with filter
5. “Dear”
6. “Shower_rhythm” – recording of a shower starting; effects added for rhythmic changes
7. “Weewoo” – Originally a preset instrument converted to an audio sample
8. “...and I can’t breathe”
9. “S-S-S...” – highhat sound created from vocal sample
10. “Foregiveness” – vocal sample

---All sounds recorded by me---

Software titles used:

MOTU – MAS plug-ins

Digital Performer 8.04

Amadeus Pro 2.31

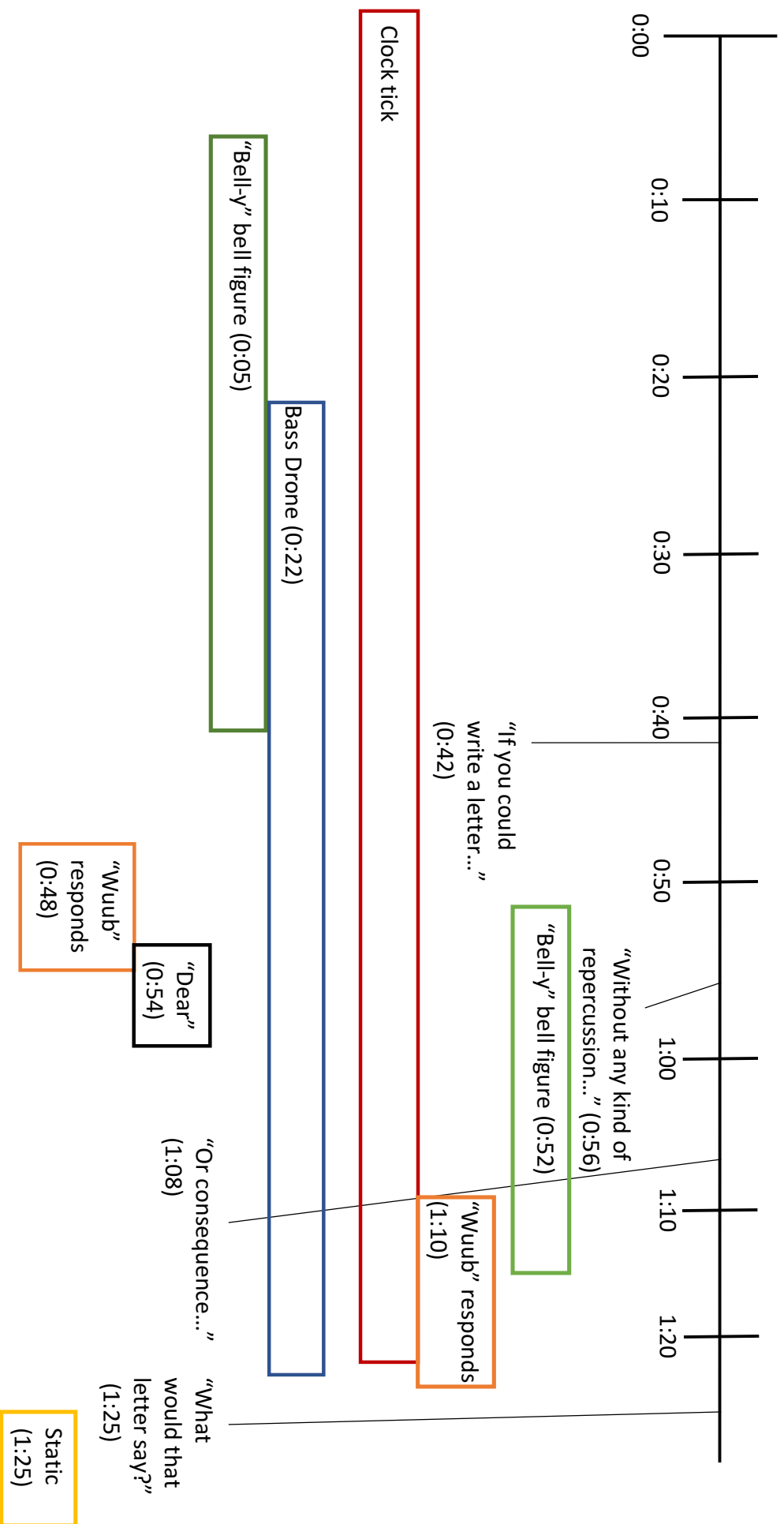
Audacity 2.1.2

SFX Machine Pro

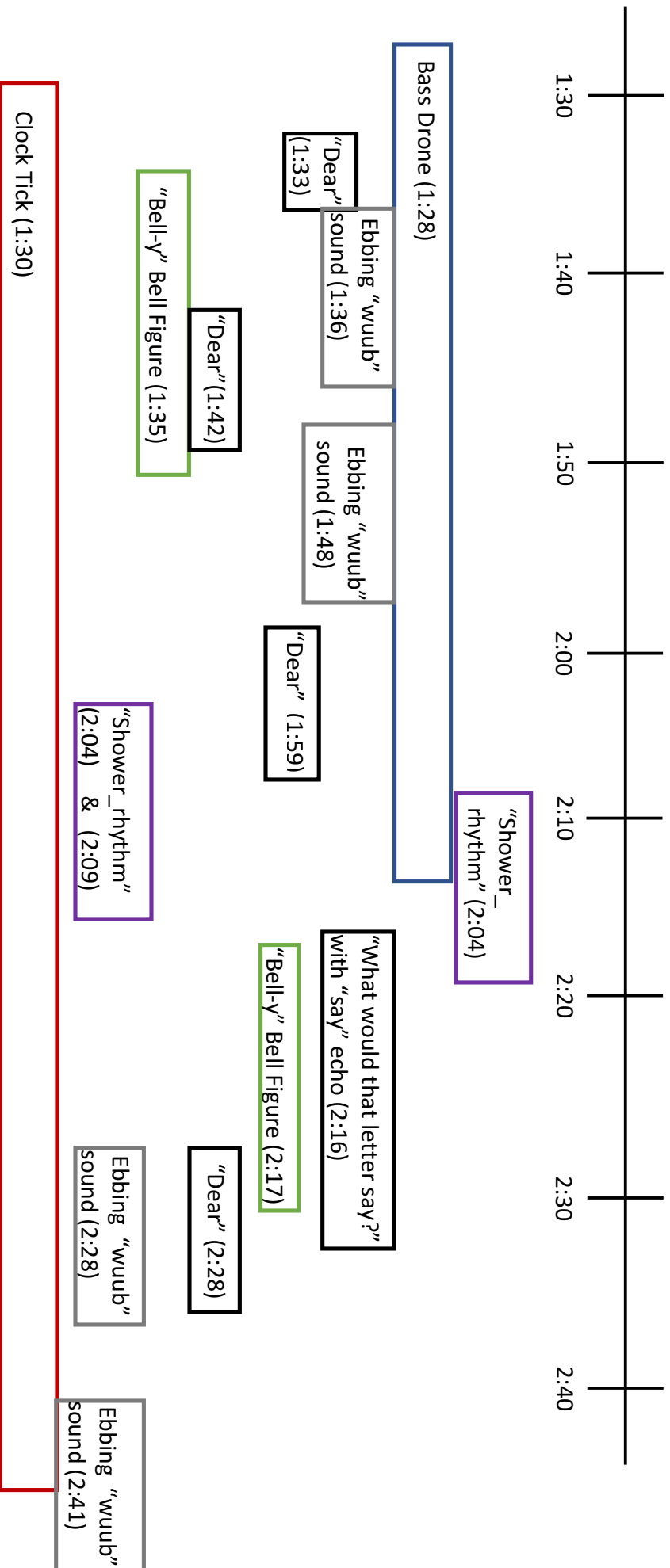
Apple Audio Units

Universal Audio

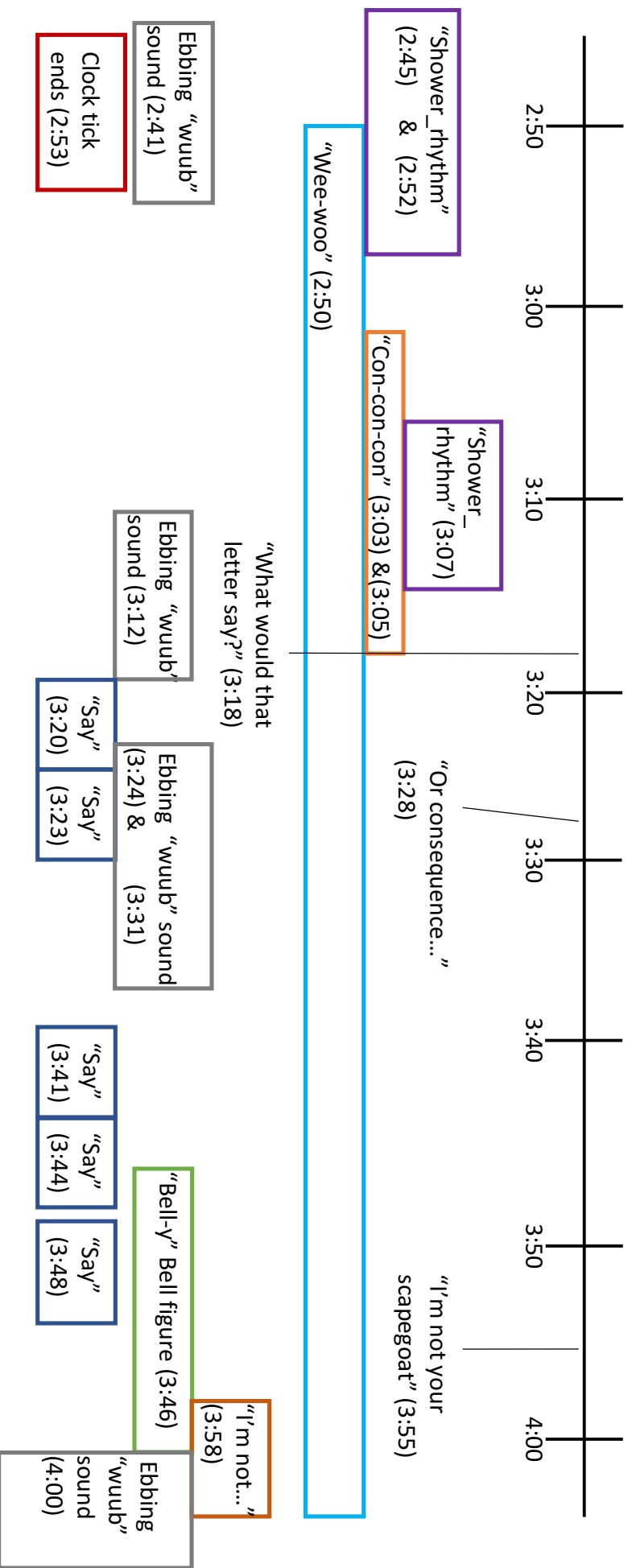
Movement 1



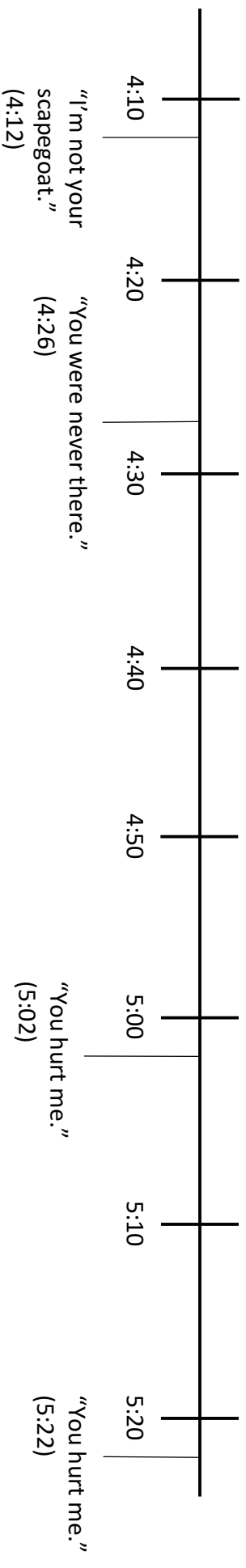
Movement 2



Movement 2 (cont.)



Movement 2 (cont.)



Ebbing "wuub" sound (4:14) (4:26)

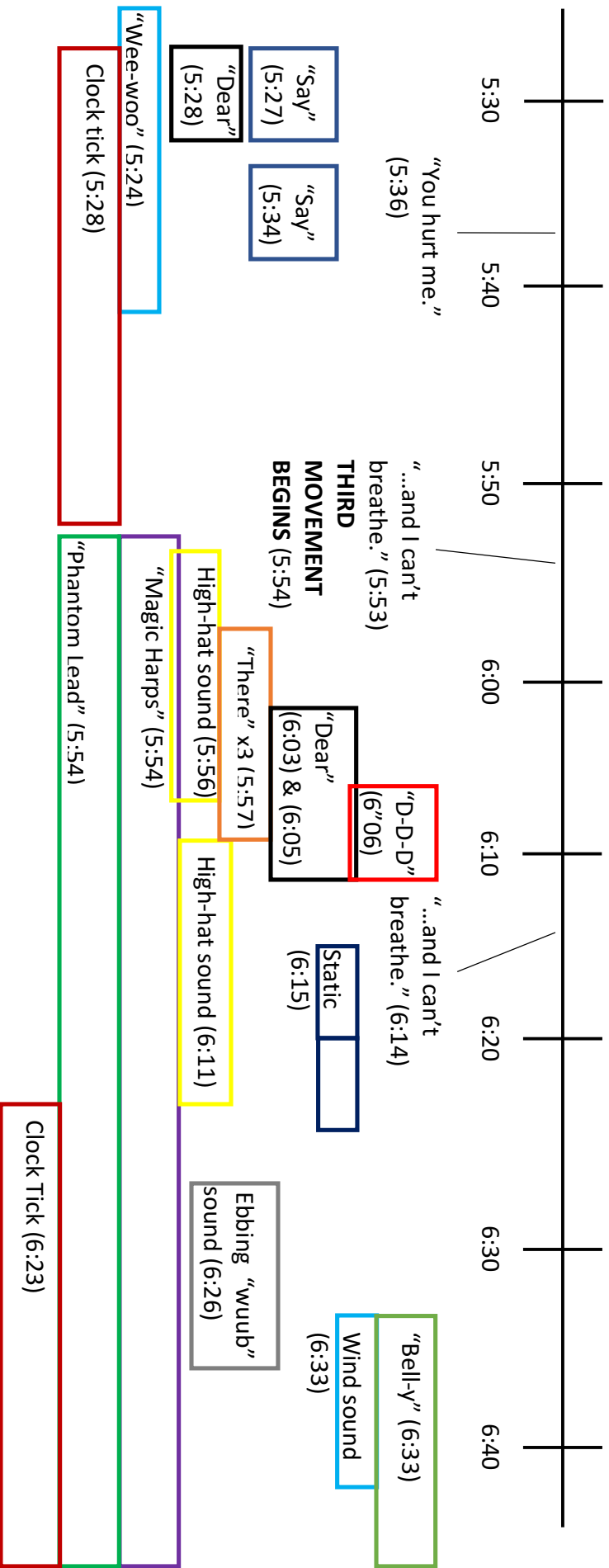
Ebbing "wuub" sound (4:42)

"Bell-y" Bell figure (5:00)

Chime figure (5:11)

"Wee-woo" (con't) to 4:28
Clock tick (4:28)

Movement 2 (cont.) & Movement 3



Movement 3

