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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

A Musician's Lament: A Creative Piece Resulting from the Interaction of Grief and Music

Honors Thesis
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I am a musician. That is relevant in a couple of ways, but to fully explain my research and then my creative piece to this thesis, explaining what it means to me to be a musician is relevant. Being a musician means that every day I wake up knowing that I will have to practice for at least three to four hours. It means that there will never be a day where I don't think about my pieces or feel guilty about not working as hard as I should be. My practice and performance is so engrained in my life that everything that happens outside of my practice has to become secondary. When I close the door to my practice room, everything else has to dissipate and my focus has to only be on my work. Until it doesn't. Until something outside of those doors affects me so deeply that what goes on inside can't be separated from my feelings about what is happening outside, and within my own being. It's in those moments where real music is made in my opinion. My thesis begins with one of those moments.

On September 20, 2015, my best friend was in a car accident that took her life. Nothing has reached to the core of my being like this did and for months I wasn't able to separate the feeling of loss from anything that I did, but especially my music. I struggled with my grief and how to manage it or deal with it in a way that was moderately healthy to my wellbeing. In my bereaved period, I looked to others who had experienced loss and tried to find a model of what I should be doing, but there is no cookie cutter model on how to grieve. I found myself behind those doors again knowing that I had to keep practicing, I had to keep working, but my grief was stifling. So, I decided to take who I was, a musician, and deal with my grief as a musician. As I said before, the moments where I allow pain, happiness, joy, from the outside into my practice room, that is when real music is created. Once I allowed my grief into that room, I was able to express and feel in a way that allowed me to say exactly what I felt without saying anything. I felt my pain being released into a Chopin Nocturne, a Debussy Prelude, and I began to wonder if

other musicians could work through their own pain in a way similar to what I was figuring out I could do.

My research questions began forming around the idea of how our brain interacts with grief on a biological level. Why do we grieve in the first place, and why is the emotional reaction that we have in losing someone so intense? Without knowing this question, we can't begin to know how or why people get through their own grieving period. The next question is how do our brains interact with music? Why, when I played music in my period of grief, was I able to feel emotional relief when I was playing? Then, I wondered how other musicians dealt with their own periods of bereavement. It was through the research of my last question that brought me to the decision of composing an elegy for my friend.

At the beginning, my research largely consisted of how our brain interacts with grief and how our brain interacts with music as separate subjects. Grief can be explained as a reaction to Attachment Theory (Mikulincer, Mario, Shaver, 87-112). In reaction to our instinct to attach to figures whom we deem will contribute to our survival, we grieve for them as a necessity to stay alive. For example, a baby cries when it is away from its mother to call her back because without her the baby will have no food source and will not be able to survive. Obviously, for most people grief is not as primitive as that explanation; however, that understanding lends itself to the inevitability of grieving for those close to us. With grieving at its simplest being an instinctual and universal process, there then becomes a necessity to deal with it. Just as grieving is a necessary process it also hinders daily functionality and avoidance or passivity can lead to further psychological issues. It is also worth noting that while grieving itself is a universal occurrence, there is not a single way to grieve. Every person will have a different interaction to

their grief based on their attachment style, personality, childhood, confrontation and resolution styles.

There have been numerous studies on how our brain interacts with music. The overwhelming conclusions are that music is not only limited to the auditory processors in the brain. In fact, studies have shown that the regions of the brain that control movement, attention, planning and memory are frequently engaged while listening to music in addition to areas involved in auditory processing. (Landau). This shows the complexity of how our brain processes music and science has not yet been able to fully understand the extent of which the music and brain interact. However, there has been research that suggests that music, specifically in how it is processed and interacted with in the brain, is fairly universal. Dr. Daniel Abrams from the Stanford University School of Medicine states, "Despite our idiosyncrasies in listening, the brain experiences music in a very consistent fashion across subjects,"(Landau). This suggests that like grieving there is a commonality in that a healthy brain will process both events, at a basic level, in a consistent way. There has been a lot of research that has been done on music as a tool to be used in psychiatric medicine. Ruth Bright, the founding president of the Australian Music Therapy Association, has even suggested that music therapy could be used in grief counseling (Bright). While this relevant connection has already been made, I wanted to use myself as an example to see how my grieving was effected by going through a musical process.

To answer the last question, I began to search for music that was inspired by the death of a loved one, and what I found is that there is no shortage of material that was either inspired by or written for people who had died. In addition, there was a whole genre of music that dealt with the idea of death even if it was not directly for or to someone. The fascination with, and questioning/dealing with the idea of death is very prevalent throughout all music. For this

project, I centered around western music written from the beginning of the common practice period. This is mainly because of my familiarity with this section of musical history and theoretical practices of this time. My main goal in listening and analyzing this music was to try and find commonalities amongst these pieces to serve as some sort of model as I set out to write my own. My conclusion is that there are no such commonalities. While there may be some characteristics that are the same for some pieces, another may sound nothing like the two that sound alike; however, this does not mean that it is any less of a successful elegiac work than the similar two. Writing these types of pieces, like grieving itself, is completely personal to who the person is and is affected by the time period it was written and the personal style of the individual. There is no formula to writing an elegiac piece. Still, as I researched it aided me to great lengths to listen to many different pieces and listen to the grief and contemplation of so many great musicians and composers. What follows are my findings of the general genre of elegiac Western music written since the beginning of the common practice period (1650-present).

There tend to be four large categories of music involving death. First with have the elegy. This is the musical equivalent to the elegy in literature which is usually a poem expressing sadness or lamentation for someone, especially for the dead (Merriam-Webster). These tend to be one movement pieces, but other than that style, instrumentation, mood, and tone can vary widely. Generally, they are slower and more typical of what we would think of as a lament. Gabriel Fauré wrote *Élégie Op. 24*, which is a slow, gorgeous lament written for the cello with piano accompaniment. In contrast, Béla Bartók wrote *Two Elegies Op. 8b* which vary wildly from Fauré's. Bartók's reflect his personal style moving away from a more romantic approach and towards heavy chromaticism and a vague sense of tonality.

The second genre of music that centers around death is the Requiem. This is the Catholic Mass for the dead based off of the Ordinary of the Mass. Many composers have written requiems, but arguably the most famous is *Requiem in d minor K 626*. Although there is much speculation around the purpose of this mass, it is accepted by most musicologists that it was a commissioned work by a patron.

Another work is called a Threnody. This is defined as a song, hymn, or poem of mourning (Meriam-Webster). Much like the definition of an elegy, this genre does not differ much from any other elegiac piece. The only large difference is that arguably the most famous example of a threnody varies wildly from what most would think of as a work lamenting the dead. This work is Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. To many this work is a bit disturbing. It is not only written for the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima, but it is supposed to be a literal depiction of the scene in Hiroshima on that day. It is scored for strings and is solidly placed in the genre of Avant-Garde music. Alternative techniques are used to created musical effects of buildings falling, people screaming, and the general chaos and horror of what must have been on that day.

Then there is a large group of compositions that aren't necessarily dedicated to anyone or are written for someone specifically, but are those compositions that contemplate death or question it in some way. An example of one of these compositions is Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*, "*The Resurrection Symphony*". Mahler was fascinated with death, including how he would come to his own death, and this symphony is famously one where he deals with the concept of death throughout.

There are also many works that are not explicitly said to be about a certain person, and are not labeled to be an elegy of any sort, but through study, can be inferred to be heavily

influenced by the loss of someone close to them. For further study, I wanted to sample some works that were directly influenced by a loss in the life of the composer, as these works would be most like the one that I intended to write. I will give four examples that influenced the writing of my piece the most.

Ein Deutsches Requiem by Johannes Brahms is the most celebrated Requiem of German Origin. His first biographer, Max Kalbeck, insisted that it was written solely in response to the death of his mother, but later critics think that there had to have been some influence of the death of his dear friend Robert Schumann as well. In letters written to Schumann's wife, Clara, he even mentioned wanting to write something specifically for him (Thuleen). Even though he says it is for all humanity, we cannot ignore the significant deaths of those close to him in completing this masterwork. Brahms also used some material that was written much earlier than the other material that was used in the Requiem. These musical fragments were composed at a time that coincided with the mental collapse of Schumann, further alluding to his influence on the writing of the Requiem (Steinberg). Scored for full orchestra with choir and soloists, this work was a huge success and represents the height of German conservative romanticism.

Metamorphosen by Richard Strauss is scored for 23 string players exactly, which is not necessarily significant other than his attention to detail in getting the exact proportion correct in the piece. The title is reminiscent of an ancient Roman poem by Ovid that describes the creation of the world, but in contrast this piece was a general reaction to the destruction of culture and cultural history that occurred during World War II (Castillo). The Nazis were systematically closing theatres and opera houses and he was especially affected by the destruction of the Munich Opera House. He began sketches of *Metamorphosen* in 1944, but only completed it in the wake of the bombing of Dresden (Castillo). Even though he did not mourn a person

specifically, we can equate the attachment theory because of the role that music and these cultural buildings and centers represented to him. His grief was valid as if he were grieving a person, and a similar reaction in the brain can be assumed. He famously quotes the funeral march from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4 "Eroica"* which was originally dedicated to Napoleon; however, upon hearing that he had crowned himself Emperor, it is reported that Beethoven angrily scratched out the dedication. The quotation of this motive by Strauss can be assumed to infer a similar disillusion of Strauss towards Hitler in the early days of the Nazi party (Castillo). It is an extremely emotional work characterized by the sweeping tone of 23 strings.

The next piece is a less known work that was written by not as popular of a composer. The work is titled *Symphony No. 2* by Franz Schmidt. It is inspired by the death of his daughter during childbirth (Keller). He was an Austrian cellist and composer and wrote this piece as an elegy to her. The music implies that he was clearly overcome by grief, and there is a brooding quality to the music that is quite sad if you know why it was being written. It is written as a four movement work all played attacca, and the second movement is written as a threnody directly to his daughter. He uses his own instrument, the cello in a solo almost as if he were speaking directly to her through this work.

The last work I will discuss is especially interesting because it came to fruition as a result of the moment that he began grieving. This work is a direct product of the composer's grief. Sergei Prokofiev began sketches of *Piano Concerto No. 2* in 1913 after the suicide of his classmate and friend, Maximilian Schmidthof (Steinberg, 344). He wrote the composer a note that was informing him that by the time he would receive the note, he would already be dead. What can only be assumed to be unimaginable pain and grief overtook him and it is said that he began sketches of what would become the piano concerto immediately after hearing the news.

The concerto was not completed until sometime after, but the dedication to his friend remained. The piece, like the previously stated pieces did not wander from the style and characteristics typical of each composer, rather this piece represents a heightened emotional capacity along with the style, chromaticism, percussive qualities, and interesting orchestration that is typical of his other compositions.

After my research into many different genres of elegiac music, analyzing the styles that different composers employed, and trying to find commonalities between them all, what I found was that there wasn't such a commonality between all of them other than each of them seemed to be a heightened sense of themselves. Each composition seems to be amongst the composers most well-known and celebrated works because of both the great emotional capacity and the musical expression that is allowed through a period of great emotional activity. So, when I began sketches of my own piece I tried not to emulate the great composers that came before me, but to define what it meant to be Katie Noelker, the musician, and then use the grief that I felt to elevate my musicianship to a greater place.

I realized early on how difficult writing this elegy for Miranda would be, not because I didn't have a lot of inspiration or ideas about what I wanted to do, but simply because I am not, nor ever have been a composer, and composing is a difficult feat. What follows is a rational and a bit of a written analysis of the piece to better understand the process and hopefully to understand the piece without having heard it performed.

I chose to compose a piece for cello and piano because those are my two instruments and the ones that I feel I know the best to write for and most connected to. The form is ABCA' which doesn't conform to any common classical form. It is mostly through composed with no material from the previous section returning in the next section except for the A' section which is a

recapitulation of the first A section, but it is placed in retrograde. This means that the reiteration of A, which is a binary section, is presented with the second half of the binary played first and the first follows ending the piece in the exact way that it started. The piece is a programmatic setting of a day on Lake Cumberland fishing and is titled *Elegy on Lake Cumberland*. Each section represents a different part of the day.

We would get up at four o'clock in the morning, drive from Danville to Russel Springs, and put the boat in at a dock called Alligator Two. We would arrive around 5:45, well before first light, and that would be the time to catch bait. This moment is where the piece starts. The water would be so still and there was this anticipation that the sun would soon rise and the world would begin to wake up. The piece begins with large chords that contain open intervals reminiscent of tolling bells. The chords are sustained while the cello has sustained chord tones over the piano as well. The second half of the binary in A is labeled A' because it has the exact same harmonic progression as A, but the piano changes this time. This represents the waking up of the world. The sun begins to shimmer over the still water, and you begin to hear bird calls in the distance. The bass of the piano continues to sustain the bell tolls as if waking the world up to the start of the day, and the soprano voice has a slow, but very sonorous melody that represents first light and the awakening of the world. The melody, although slow and very tonal is syncopated at times which makes it seem a little off balance. Through the whole piece there is a sense of nostalgia, that the day can't be quite right because she is gone. The syncopation alludes to this.

The B section is in complete contrast to the previous section. It begins with a driving rocking octave presented in eighth notes in the bass of the piano that acts as an ostinato throughout this whole section. It represents the first run of the boat and that initial moment when

you go from idling out through the no wake zone to the first run into the main lake to begin fishing. What comes next in this section is a bit of a call and response between the soprano voice of the piano and the cello. The melody takes turns going from a sustained pitch to moving notes in each voice and then the melody repeats, but alternated which melody each voice gets. This section is quite a bit faster than the beginning and has the continuous ostinato that represents the boat and the excitement of the day of fishing. The two melodies represent me and Miranda. The constant banter between us about who was going to catch the bigger fish, and the team work that it took once a fish was on to get it into the boat. It's a more upbeat, celebratory section that I hope reflects the joy that those days brought to me. This section is concluded with two measures of eighth struck chords. There is a ritard through these two measures that signifies the slowing of the boat and are reminiscent of the bell tolls at the beginning signifying the return to the dock.

The C section is different in that it is a setting of a poem that I wrote that is inspired by her. It was written while I was visiting her grave one day. It was winter and very cold, but while I was sitting by her I saw a robin flying around in the cemetery. I took this as a sign of hope that life can be present where pain is- that even in the dead of winter when things are bleak, there is hope that warmer days are coming. The text of the poem is as follows:

Breathe me life,	Suddenly I can't see my breath.
Speak into me,	
I've not found the season of harmony.	Birds are singing,
	We'll keep dancing,
White long road,	Until the spring, and hand in hand.
Grey days underneath,	
Ships of time are fleeting right over me.	I will keep my spirit strong,
	You just keep the light on for me,
Look around me,	A light in the dark,
Winter's ending,	Robins in the Graveyard.

Breathe me life,
Speak into me,
It's not time to give to despondency.

Pain carries over,
Older and older,
Robins in the Graveyard.
-Katie Noelker

I wanted to use this poem as inspiration for the C section which for me represented the drive back home. This was the time of the day when we talked about what happened, laughed about the bad knots that came undone, the fish that broke line, and argued about who's fish was bigger. This is also the section though that is a general reflection of our time together as those car rides would be of the day. We took time to reflect on everything that had happened and this section is my reflection of our friendship together as a whole as well as a reminder to myself that warmer days will come. The piano contains the open intervals that still reflect on the bell toll motive presented in the A section. Generally, in this section the cello has the melody and the piano is accompanying with a prevalent countermelody and harmony as well.

The C section leads right in with an elision from the last cadence of the C section into the recap of the A section. This section reflects on the end of the day. When we get home and go our separate ways as the sun goes down. I placed these two sections in retrograde to end the piece in the way that we started. A' first to signify the sun setting on the day and the world going to sleep. Then, we hear what we heard at the very beginning, but this time the dynamic is much louder and instead of quiet tolling bells, these are heard as if you were in the room as they were being hit. These bells are at this dynamic because it will be the last time they are heard. With this last statement, we are not only ending the day, but ending the chapter of my life with Miranda

physically in it. It goes back to every still morning because that is where I felt closest to her and that is how I want to remember our time together.

In reflection on this project I tried to see if this process felt like a beneficial way to work through my grief. The process of writing the music at times felt as if I was trying to create something that just sounded good instead of trying to capture what I felt about Miranda and translate that into music. It wasn't until after performing this piece for the first time that I realized the real value of what I had done. Performing the piece allowed me to see just how much of Miranda was in it and how much of myself was in it to. When I play this piece, I am transported to being on the lake in my dad's boat with her and I feel the grief that I have being expressed in a way that I can't really say. It is a way of honoring her and her memory that was very healing to me. I can imagine that those who came before me and have written elegies, threnodies, or any piece trying to explain some emotional joy or pain experienced something similar. As the research continues to grow with how music affects the brain and connects that with grief and bereavement, my expectation is that music will continue to serve as a part of the healing journey for many people in the future.

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