

Mum's Kitchen: Scoring Loss in a Contemporary New Zealand Musical

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Wintec

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Mum's Kitchen

History

- Creative collaboration between Kyle Chuen (book), Nick Braae (lyricist-composer), David Sidwell (composer), Jeremy Mayall (orchestrator)
- Premiered in February 2021, The Meteor Theatre, Hamilton.
- Paper as an exegesis: “looking outwards to the established field of research, exemplars and theories, and inwards to the methodologies, processes and outcomes of the practice” (Hamilton and Jaaniste, 2010)



Mum's Kitchen

History

- Developed in 2019 courtesy of a Wintec Visiting Fellow Research Grant to bring Nic Kyle (expat-NZ performer in US) to Hamilton from Canada, alongside Kyle Chuen, Scot Hall, Julia Booth
- Three brothers who return to their family farm after their Mum passes away, and they must settle the estate, while processing their various states of grief for their childhood home and family
- Collaborative processes leading to workshop performances of first act only in August 2019; continued writing in 2020 leading to successful premiere season in February 2021



Mum's Kitchen

Process

- Defined roles within group: libretto (Kyle Chuen); lyric writing (Nick Braae with Kyle Chuen); composers (Nick Braae, David Sidwell); orchestrations (Jeremy Mayall)
- Asynchronous collaborative approach between Braae and Chuen; demarcation approach between other collaborators (Bennett, 2011)
- Leads to possibility of reflection of choices made by composers



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Scoring Loss

- Many songs dealing with themes of nostalgia, loss, grief, and related emotions
- How are these emotions “scored”? Use of consistent musical devices to support an emotive tone (Murphy, 2014a; see also Murphy, 2014b; Heine, 2018; Osborn, 2020)
- Broad discussions as a collective about direction/plot/scenes, etc.; but also, then, a desire for individuals to have “free rein”; borne out of initial process with short timeframe and also high levels of expertise/experience.



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Scoring Loss – Pastiche

- Use of pastiche by Sidwell
- At times for comical effect: the “out-of-place” hymn setting of Martin’s earnest and misguided attempt at a eulogy
- A lazy country blues for the brothers to remember their childhood on the farm “We’re Gonna Miss This Place”; a Frank Wildhorn “megamusical” ballad for Martin and Missy looking back on their marriage “When I Need You”; interludes with lush harmonic sonorities and flowing rhythmic patterns recalling Marvin Hamlisch’s “At the Ballet” (“Who Writes the Eulogy?”)
- Overall use of anachronistic styles, which evoke the sentiment of looking back at a time past and no longer accessible (Moore, 2005)

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Scoring Loss – Contemporary Harmonic Style

- Use of contemporary harmonic devices by Braae
- Repeating “pedal” chords in right-hand of tonic and fifth; also with broken-chord motion; moving bass note provides implication of harmonic progression with chords partially filled in
- Add4 sonority (e.g. triad of G–B–D, with C added, as opposed to suspended); often formed by the tonic and fifth of the first harmonic device being heard against a V chord (e.g. D with G added) or a V/V chord (e.g. A with D added)
- These techniques consistently used in the songs of Jason Robert Brown and Pasek & Paul generally; but specifically, when characters are on the verge of an emotional breakdown/turning point – high emotional stakes moments; potentially because of apparent emptiness of gestures, as well as harmonic ambiguity: “Words Fail” (*Dear Evan Hansen*); “Pretty Funny” (*Dogfight*); “Still Hurting” (*The Last Five Years*)

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Conclusions: Orchestrating Loss and a Common Musical Language

- Scored for a seven-piece ensemble: piano, bass, guitar, drums, flute, bassoon, cello; orchestration as a unifying thread between different compositional voices (as opposed to different *disciplinary* voices merging into a *gesamtkunstwerk*; e.g. Grill-Childers 2016; Mallet 2018)
- Orchestration contributions to tone of loss through Celtic feel and...the bassoon?
- Unusual chamber musical instrument taking listeners into an unfamiliar world away from the present?
- “What road do we take to find the voice of the New Zealand musical?” (di Somma, 2016)
- The tenor of *Mum's Kitchen* is similar to a long tradition of New Zealand *literature* and *plays* that are concerned with Pakēha masculinity and intra-familial relationships; but bringing together many different (offshore) voices to tell these stories.