

The Master's Portfolio:

The Culminating Experience of Austin Corley

The Master's Portfolio is an endeavor to overcome the biggest plateau of my career, which I've been enduring for the past few years, as well as an intensive effort to broaden the scope of my expertise in a massive way. Back in Boston and Austin, I was mostly known for my abilities in crafting recordings for rock-centric bands. Electric guitars, heavy bass, crushing drums, and aggressive vocals were my wheelhouse. It's not that I was extremely uncomfortable when something different came my way, but the scope of my attraction to the overall music scene was somewhat constricted, given my reputation for being a niche producer. The aim for my Culminating Experience was not only to show that I *can* track, mix, and master music from any genre that is presented to me, but that I can do it *expertly* across the spectrum of genres and instrumentation.

In working on a CE for a master's degree in Music Production, Technology, and Innovation, one might ask what is so innovative about cultivating a production and engineering portfolio when the person creating it has already been working in the field for a decade. I came to Valencia intending to go the way of learning Max, creating apps, and becoming a maker, but it became instantly evident that I would inevitably hate it. However, one aspect of this program's aims, as was explained to us early in the year, was that its end goal isn't just about innovation that has never been thought of before and will become a game changer in a certain field. It's also about personal innovation, which is the path I decided to take.

Back in Austin, the music scene and musicians involved in it are not nearly as diversified as the student body here in Valencia. We've got artists from all corners of the world that bring their musical heritages with them and provide a hugely varied pool of talent to work with. Before, I had only worked with musicians from the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Now the list extends to the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, India, South Korea, Switzerland, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. That's three continents and fifteen new countries (or territories in Puerto Rico's case) whose musical influences I've had to understand and become a conduit through which they reach recorded fruition. From having only recorded and mixed punk, metal, rock, indie, reggae, and singer/songwriter material before, I've now added Pop/R&B, Acoustic Country, Latin Jazz, Jazz/Funk fusion, Soul, Dub, Electronic Acid Jazz, and one composition that is so hard to describe that I feel it's almost better not to try, to the list. What do you call a calming arrangement of vibraphone, chromatic harmonica, inuk, electric bass, and nylon-string guitar? I didn't even know what an inuk was before I saw it during setup,

and it was one of three instruments in that session that I had never even recorded before. Yet, I find the end result of the recording to be one of the most pleasing tracks of the entire portfolio.

Of course, the process by which I became adept to handle these new challenges took some research. I spent a significant amount of time in the AKSS with my Radial Gold Digger and Cherry Picker, shooting out a multitude of microphones, as well as every single preamp with every possible setting engaged. These experiments were done in two ways. First, I took the majority of the condenser microphones, as well as a few dynamics, and had Rebecca Liberman sing the same passage into every one of them, while each mic was running through the preamps of the System 5 console, thus ensuring a clean, uncolored signal with a significant amount of headroom, and the results were quite surprising in some cases - basically boiling down to the conclusion that a price tag doesn't ensure the quality of a piece of equipment.

In the second stage of the experiments, I took advantage of the Yamaha grand piano's player-piano function - choosing Eric Clapton's "Layla" as the piece that would repeatedly play for the sake of scientific documentation. The microphone I chose to capture the source was a Sanken CO-100k, due to its ability to capture an extended range of frequencies accurately. As the cyborg piano played its own robotic, yet compelling rendition of Clapton's timeless riffs and melodies, I would switch preamps at every repetition. I auditioned the System 5, Grace, Neve 1073, Rupert Neve Designs 517 (with the "silk" function both engaged and disengaged), and the Universal Audio 710 preamps (with the 710's running both on tube and transistor modes, respectively). The results were a significant revelation to me. I expected each preamp to have its own signature timbre, but what was more eye-opening for me was the issue of headroom, which the Grace and System 5 preamps excelled in, as their dynamic ranges fluctuated significantly more than any of the others.

Formerly my microphone/preamp pairings boiled down to, "This is a really good mic, and this is a really good pre. I'll use them together to record whatever signal needs to be captured, and it will turn out great." However, these experiments turned that dogma on its head. Yes, a lot of the time I chose to use the high-end reserve mics, but it was now from a very informed point of view. Whereas I would blindly reach for my "best microphone" of its category and my "best preamp", I now hear timbral qualities of the microphones, preamps, and most importantly, pairings, in my head before I even start getting signals from the source. More often than not, my informed intuitions are on-point, and it has led to a large jump in the speed and proficiency of my workflow.

On the topic of speed, this was another significantly improved skill that I honed during my time in the Scoring Stage. Having run my own studio, I was accustomed to running at my own speed, but being typically limited to three-hour blocks of time to

setup, run, and tear down a session, I acquired the forethought of preparing layouts, setup sheets, and Pro Tools sessions far ahead of time, and ran the studio at a high level of efficient in all facets once I entered the AKSS, thus ensuring ample amounts of time to record and an environment of comfort and trust between me and the musicians. This resulted in more artists coming to me as their engineer of choice than I could handle, so I also learned when to say “no” to certain projects, as to not compromise my focus and the results of the sessions that were truly important to me.

However, tracking was only one side of the skills I improved on since September. Another side was mixing, and this was the major plateau that I had been trying to overcome for the past few years. With Ian Kagey’s vault of knowledge and master classes with Frank Filipetti and George Massenburg, not only have I expanded my skill sets with equalization, compression, pitch correction, time correction, and ambient effects, but my decision making with signal processing and editing in general has totally evolved, as has my general workflow, therefore making for a much higher level of swiftness, efficiency, and quality as I sculpt a mix.

Finally, learning to use Ableton Live as a new tool in my arsenal was a significant addition to my abilities as an engineer. Though it was only used on one track in my portfolio, it was a game changer for the end result that I was aiming for. Creating a dub version of a reggae song would be a real headache in Pro Tools, and being such, it would greatly hamper my creative process. However, Ableton is basically made for this sort of application, and I not only created a dub that I’m extremely satisfied with, but I actually enjoyed doing it, whereas it would have been incredibly laborious in Pro Tools and most likely would have led to a much less successful and uninspired end product.

Needless to say, my progression through the creation of my CE was not without a few hurtles. First and foremost, I had to learn how to work with, and most importantly, please, a multitude of artists from a multitude of backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities. In one instance, I was running a session in which the only other English speaker beside myself was Will Lydgate, who has somewhat of a grasp on Spanish, but all the other musicians were Valencians who spoke absolutely no English. This being the case, I had to try to communicate with my minimal-aptitude Spanish, as to not have to use Will as a translator for everything that I needed to communicate in order to keep things rolling at an acceptable pace, with everyone happy and comfortable with how the session was progressing. People skills have never been my strength, and though they’re still not, I’ve definitely improved by leaps and bounds, whether it be in the larger aspects of communicating with artists in a positive, reassuring, and constructive manner, to merely knowing never to touch somebody’s instrument without asking.

Getting my ears around new genres and instruments was also an expected learning curve, but with the help of the artists I worked with, as well as independent research I conducted in my own time, I became fairly comfortable working in different musical environments. Through the sheer amount of work I did and time I spent in the AKSS this year, I started to become more confident in trusting my intuitions, and more often than not, the results were exceedingly satisfactory.

The technical side of the challenges I faced were more or less obvious – learning how to operate a new studio, a new digital console, and a new DAW. However, as we all know, Valencia has some issues, including, but not limited to, poor grounding and humidity oxidizing not only the patch bays, but all metal connections in the studios. Learning how to use iZotope RX was an essential step in overcoming these constraints.

Then came the unforeseen challenges that came my way... First, there were instances of musicians leaving the country without advance notice, leaving me high and dry when I absolutely needed them for the completion of a project – in one case leaving me no choice but to alter the trajectory of one facet of my portfolio. Then there were other instances of musicians – mostly vocalists – getting sick and not being able to record when I really needed them to. However, I usually had at least a scratch track that I could work with until the keeper was recorded.

But there were also internal limitations that I wasn't planning on having to face. In October, the cartilage in my knee ruptured, leaving me unable to walk for the better part of a month - hampering my mobility until late winter, when it was decided that surgery would be necessary. After having an arthroscopy to repair my meniscus, my mobility was limited even more for a short while – leaving me unable to leave my apartment for a week and taking another couple months to fully recover. If you want to talk about challenges, moving pianos and getting on the ground to mic up drums, patch XLR's into wall plates, and adjust the outboard processors that were close to floor-level with a bum knee was not only difficult, but also extremely painful, aggravating, and a major hit to my morale. Though there's no proper English translation for the word, I believe "agobiado" would be an accurate way to describe the ennui of the experience.

But for what ultimate purpose besides simply expanding my skills and breadth of expertise would I choose to create the Master's Portfolio as my CE? There were three major considerations that went into the decision. First, I wanted to expand my market as far as my range of possible clients is concerned. Sure, I can do rock-centric music just fine, but if I want to really make a living doing this, I have to be able to work with anyone and any type of music that they're trying to create. I have to be able to crank out highly technical tasks like tuning vocals, rhythmic correction, and doctoring tracks that have flaws such as hums, pops, clicks, and other unintended noises for

artists, even if I'm not working on their session as a whole. I need to be a go-to engineer in whatever city I find myself in next.

The prospect of teaching at a university level has also been a major consideration for me. Making a living off of engineering these days is a bleak endeavor, and one of the reasons I came to Berklee Valencia in the first place was that I wanted to advance my career and academic standing to a point where I could garner a position with a steady paycheck. Plus, I actually love teaching and consider myself quite good at it. I've done it before, and would like to continue my path in pedagogy in the future.

Lastly, I'll be submitting my portfolio as an application to McGill's Sound Recording program, which would afford me the chance to continue the advancement of my knowledge and abilities, and work on the furthest horizons of the development of audio technology. If accepted, I might even proceed towards the acquisition of a PhD.

Despite coming here to delve in programming, circuit bending, and app building, my change of course has been a much more gratifying and fulfilling experience in the progression of my true passion. I've become significantly more successful in terms of my decision making and methodologies becoming more intuitive, adept, expansive, and imaginative in my work, and I now feel much more confident in my future prospects, whether I find myself teaching, freelancing, setting my own studio back up in a new location, and/or continuing my formal education in Montreal. On top of this, I will be leaving Spain knowing that it doesn't matter when, where, or what the situation might be, whether I'm in a multi-million dollar studio, a practice room, my own small-scale studio, an apartment, or running live sound. I can get excellent results with all the gear in the world or just a four-track tape recorder and a few undesirable microphones. I can now not only satisfy, but exceed expectations in any instance, and I'll be running with that momentum into the next phase of my career, whatever and wherever it may be.