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Compositional Intent: A Presentation of Original Music

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Compositional Intent:
A Presentation of Original Music

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in Music Composition

By

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Music Composition

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas

The music to be presented in my composition recital and thesis defense spans most of my career at the University of Arkansas. “GAIA” is the second product of my personal study with Dr. Robert Mueller (beginning in Fall 2014), whose gentle nudges pushed me to explore a wider facet of composition than I had previously known. The final work of the program, “Hours,” is my most recent composition, and will be receiving its world premiere. While these pieces are but a sample of my compositional output, I believe they best represent my compositional goals and skills.

A few commonalities exist within these works: while they were all written at the University of Arkansas, they were also written exclusively for University of Arkansas performers. “Writing what you know” might be a popular cliché for authors, but it can lead to stagnation for composers; writing for whom you know, however, is more likely to create performances—the bread and butter on which composers thrive. If the performers live and work nearby, it is easier to collaborate and create personal stake in the project.

My goal as a composer is to evoke something—anything—in the listener, whether it be an emotion, thought, or memory. At the same time, I believe that music can be the most subjective art because its language is not uniformly appreciated. A classically-trained musician will have a much different listening experience than a musically-illiterate concertgoer, but neither should leave the performance without a new thought or consideration. To this extent, I aim to always provide two things in my compositions: a repeated, easily-recognized feature (melody, motive, texture, etc.) and a subtler, reoccurring musical effect (transposition, pitch set, etc.). The first can be enjoyed on the surface level by the trained and untrained, while the second is a discovery—active for the former and subconscious for the latter.

descending motive is the focal point (Figure 2), tossed between all three instrumentalists and culminating in a three measure burst of energy. What follows is a chase scene, starting softly but never lacking intensity, as the tuba and euphonium exchange motives, always answered by chords in the right hand of the piano (Figure 3).

Figure 2 shows the final form of a descending motive across three staves: Euphonium (Euph.), Tuba, and Piano (Pno.). The music is in 7/8 time. The Euphonium staff begins with a descending eighth-note scale starting on G2, marked with accents and a dynamic of *f*. The Tuba staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with sustained notes and a similar descending scale starting on E2. The Piano staff features a complex accompaniment with chords in the right hand and sustained notes in the left hand, also marked with accents and a dynamic of *f*. The measure numbers 50, 51, and 52 are indicated at the beginning of the respective staves.

Figure 2 (mm. 50-52) – final form of the descending motive

Figure 3 illustrates a "chase" scene between the Euphonium and Tuba, with the Piano providing an "answer" through chords. The music is in 3/4 time. The Euphonium staff starts with a descending eighth-note scale on G2, marked *pp* and with a crescendo hairpin. The Tuba staff enters with a similar descending scale on E2, marked *p* and with a decrescendo hairpin. The Piano staff features a series of chords in the right hand and sustained notes in the left hand. The measure numbers 61, 62, 63, and 64 are indicated at the beginning of the respective staves.

Figure 3 (mm. 61-64) – euphonium and tuba "chase" and piano's "answer"

“cling’s” quiet middle section offers a contemplation of what has been stated. Tentative questions are offered by the piano’s highest register, to which muted brass respond with uncertain dissonance, hindered further by occasional growls.

The next section’s singing melody, reminiscent of the previous chase, starts in the tuba and is harmonized by the euphonium over a repetitive but constantly-embellished piano motor (Figure 4). The piano fades away, leaving the brass to exchange contrapuntal phrases, and “cling” climaxes with the piano’s return: a brass and piano-left-hand chorale accompanied by arpeggiated chord changes. Energy expended, the piano creeps to its lower register before repeating the piece’s opening phrases in a short coda.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Euphonium (Euph.), Tuba, and Piano (Pno.). The score is for measures 136 to 139. The Euphonium and Tuba parts are in bass clef, and the Piano part is in treble clef. The tempo is marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). The Euphonium and Tuba parts feature a melodic line with triplets and a 'simile' marking. The Piano part features a repetitive motor pattern in the right hand and a more complex accompaniment in the left hand.

Figure 4 (mm. 136-139) – piano motor and “singing” melody

I make no claim as to what is being held close; we cling to many things, both tangible and abstract. This piece suggests several different routes that the initial music could have taken but, for better or worse, ignored.

GAIA

Though most of my music has little to no programmatic imagery outside of an abstract nature, “GAIA” is the exception that proves the rule. When I began working with the first motive on piano, a picture of thick, tall, leafy trees sprang into my mind (hence the title, which refers to the ancient Greek primordial deity of the earth). I used this image for further inspiration, creating primitive and animalistic sounds. Between the flute’s rich lower register and range of extended techniques, I seek to conjure the images and sounds of jungle aerophones, bird cries, growls, and more (Figure 5).

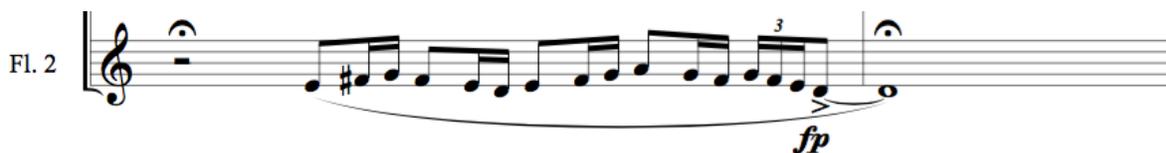


Figure 5.1 (m. 12) – low register “Jungle aerophone”



Figure 5.2 (m. 20) – “bird calls”

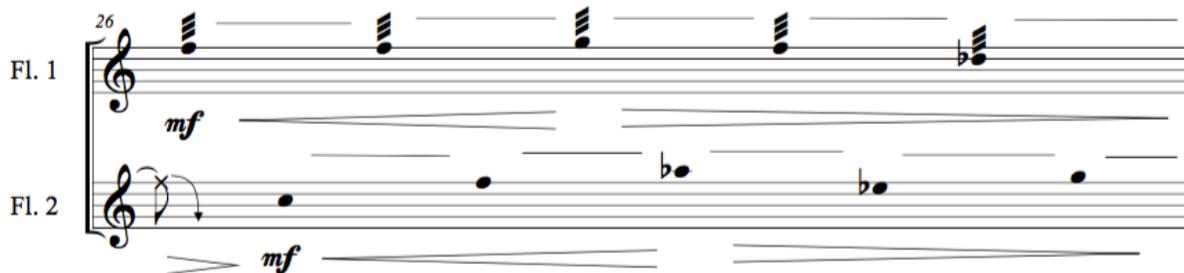


Figure 5.3 (m. 26) – “growl” and “wait” technique

A wealth of aleatoric features add to the primitive or unrefined nature of the music. Some sections of “GAIA” require one flutist to wait on the other (Figure 5.3) for a certain range of time—seconds, rather than musical beats—before changing pitch, while others request nearly identical bars to be played uninfluenced by the other (Figure 6).

Figure 6.1 (mm. 7-8) – *timed technique* (flutes, treble clef)

Figure 6.2 (mm. 28-30) – *“disjunct” technique*

GAIA’s musical form is a loose theme and variations based on two melodies (the first musical material presented, separated by a brief transition). However, the melodies are not presented in completion by one voice until the very end, after they have been thoroughly modified and explored (Figure 7). The duet was composed for Hannah Craig and Donna Vickers in Fall 2014 and premiered on February 15, 2016.

Freely

Flute 1
pp
 3
 3

Flute 2
p
 3
 3

Figure 7.1 (mm. 1-4) – *Theme A, separated*

Fl. 1
p
 3
mf

Fl. 2
fp
 3
mf

Figure 7.2 (mm. 9-11) – *Theme B, separated*

40 Arrive together End on marked note.

Fl. 1
mp
 3
 3

Fl. 2
mp
 3

Figure 7.3 (m. 40) – *Themes A and B, complete in each voice*

Hours

I. 0400

II. 1700

“Hours” was inspired by an episode of the TED Radio Hour Podcast in which poet and artist “Rives” speaks about society’s obsession with 4 a.m. Rives traced the ubiquity of “four in the morning” through books, magazines, television, music, and film, creating a virtual museum of documented occurrences at www.fourinthemorning.com and www.mofitm.tumblr.com.

I explore two main ideas throughout the piece: a nostalgic melody and the interval of a fifth. The first melody, presented by the horn, is based on a perfect 5th, while the flute plays the prime statement of the second melody at measure 25 (Figure 8). This movement represents the abstract idea and moods of 4 a.m.

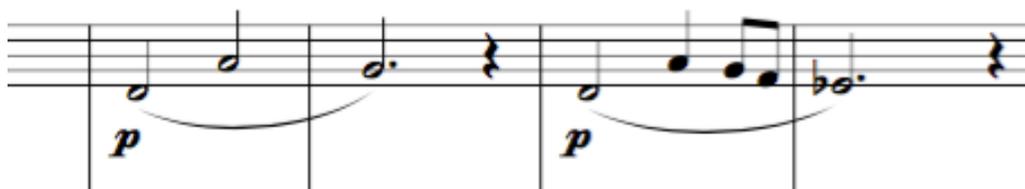


Figure 8.1 (mm. 5-8) – perfect fifth melody in (horn, treble clef)

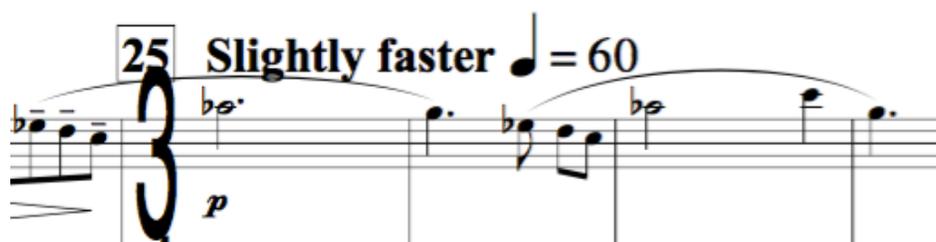


Figure 8.2 (mm. 24-28) – nostalgic melody (flute, treble clef)

After completing the first movement, I realized two things. First, I wanted to continue exploring the ideas of the first movement and second, that “0400” would do well with a

companion piece. If the most influential facet of the first movement is the nostalgic melody, then “1700” encapsulates the perfect 5th interval. As 5 p.m. is rush hour in most cities, the forward motion and complexity of “1700” is an ideal contrast to the solitude and depth of its predecessor.

The introduction of “1700” is a trichord taken from “0400’s” nostalgia melody, set in prolation canons between three voices and transposed up a perfect 5th or down a perfect 4th (the inverted interval) (Figure 9). The trichord is used as an interjection between melodic material, gradually embellished until the motive uses all the pitches of the nostalgia melody (Figure 10).



Figure 9 (mm. 1-5) – first appearance of trichord

Figure 10.1 (mm. 26-34) – trichord interjection

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Violoncello (Vc.) and Double Bass (D.B.). Both parts are in bass clef. The Vc. part begins with a trichord embellishment in measure 145, marked *mp*. The D.B. part also begins with a trichord embellishment in measure 145, marked *mp*. The music consists of eighth-note patterns with various accidentals.

Figure 10.2 (mm. 145-149) – *first trichord embellishment*

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Basset Clarinet (B. Cl.) and Bassoon (Bsn.). The B. Cl. part is in treble clef and features a trichord embellishment starting in measure 199, marked *mf*. The Bsn. part is in bass clef and features a trichord embellishment starting in measure 199, marked *mf*, and ends with a final trichord embellishment marked *f*. The music consists of eighth-note patterns with various accidentals.

Figure 10.3 (mm. 199-201) – *final trichord embellishment*

“Hours” can perhaps best be analyzed in a tripartite form, consisting of two main melodic ideas and a bridge section. While the melodic material appears as ABABCA with the final “A” section a combination of both melodic ideas, the reprise of the B material is short compared to its first iteration. Rondo form, or ABACA might be more appropriate than squeezing the melodic material into a rough sonata form, where exposition = AB, development = ABC, and recapitulation = A. The forces used, a chamber orchestra of woodwinds, brass, strings, percussion, and piano, are ideal for expressing a variety of colors without becoming too heavy or thick.

Conclusion

The compositional process is extremely personal and often difficult. I sometimes find myself repeating a single melody or motive countless times on a piano, intently listening for how it wants to develop or lead to the next idea. If luck strikes, I quickly mark my staff paper in semi-legible blurs, but such inspiration is unusual. More often, the central musical seed of a piece must live in my mind for a lengthy period, turning itself over and over before becoming useful. The secondary theme of “Hours,” for example, is based on a line that I wrote in high school, and “GAIA’s” initial theme remained a scribble in a notepad for almost a year before it grew into a flute duet.

At other times, the music is ready but inappropriate for the piece being composed: an extremely technical idea might work well on piano but suffer on string bass. I experienced this firsthand while rehearsing “Hours” as a conductor; the piece, which feels lived-in and homey to me, is even more complex and difficult to perform than I first imagined. It is essential for the composer to place his or herself in the performer’s chair before, during, and after the compositional process. But most of all, the composer must be mindful of the audience: every ink dot on the page is time and money sacrificed to hear the composer’s intent.