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Mozart To Monroe

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Mozart To Monroe

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The purpose of this thesis is to give examples of how very different genres of music can live in cohabitation with the same respect and admiration within the world of music. This thesis explores the origins of each genre, the inherent differences between the two, and the process its author followed to produce the finished product. Mr. Brooks draws from his experience as both a professional bluegrass and classical musician and demonstrates through his own compositions how the two genres can be meshed and formed into a hybrid which could be performed respectively in front of experts in either of the two fields. The process of this thesis may be broken down into a few key areas such as 1.) Inspiration, 2.) Choosing a voice part, 3.) Transcription of melody, 4.) Composition of accompaniment, 5.) Input to Finale, and 6.) Performance.

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The idea of mixing and melding musical genres has been one of the most prolific vessels of progress within music since the dawn of time. The root of this collaboration seems to stem from our inexplicable need to deviate from the norm and to search for some higher, truer art form to create. The modernistic descriptor for such a mixing of cultures, influences, and genres in general is the term "genre hopping". This term is used to describe the sensation and action of shuffling through various genres and styles when listening to music. However, for some musicians like myself, the term seems to be a bit outdated and at best to have a short shelf life ahead. The problem with the term is that it implies strict boundaries to separate musical styles and to alienate musicians from one another. It is egregious to think that the meter, tonal structure, and form for any genre or piece of music is really definitively different from any of the others. It was with this mindset that I ventured to begin this project combining two of my most knowledgeable genres and creating a hybrid which will soothe the ears of a bluegrass or art song fanatic.

It would be foolish if I were to not give some background into each of the genres and my involvement and expertise within each respective field. Within the past four years

of collegiate study I have performed and studied countless examples of art song. Art song

can be defined as a song set usually for voice and piano containing a melody line for the

voice, a corresponding text by a poet, and a collaborating piano accompaniment. Art

song is often seen in a strophic form, which is to say that there is a repeating melodic and

accompaniment line which is utilized with multiple verses of text. The niche of art song

has been thoroughly explored by many countries and cultures, but most predominately

and thoroughly by the Germans (where it is called lieder), the French (referred to as

mélodie), the Brittish (English art song), and the Americans (known as American art

song). Below (figure 1) is an example from a classic German lieder (which utilizes a

strophic text form) by Franz Schubert *An die Laute.*

As far as my personal experiences, I have completed a great deal of course work

where I have been afforded the chance to sing many art songs in each of the most notable

subsets. In the spring of 2020 I will graduate with a degree in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy which deals with the teaching and interpretation of art song, and I have been a semi-finalist in the Kentucky National Association of Teachers of Singing vocal competition where I performed multiple art songs. My love for art song and the advancement of it as an art form has played a great impact on this project.

In the field of bluegrass I have even more experience and knowledge to draw upon. I have been a bluegrass musician for over ten years now and have toured both regionally and internationally. Bluegrass can best be defined as the music of the common man, as it was intended to be an informal genre which was centered on allowing every-day people the chance to enjoy and perform music. The roots of bluegrass music can be traced to the Appalachian Mountains where the pioneers of the genre such as the "father of bluegrass" Bill Monroe shaped the genre into the classic bluegrass sound. When searching for songs to arrange I often looked back to the roots of bluegrass music for inspiration on which songs to set, however I also wanted to accurately depict how far bluegrass has come as its own unique genre so I selected some from the modern repertoire as well.

The process for arranging music is a bit different for each individual composer, however some concrete elements remain the same. After visualizing my process, I narrowed my gaze to picking four songs, with two of them being for each vocal types either male or female. Furthermore I had to narrow my choices of songs to those in which I thought would emulate aspects of both art song and bluegrass well. This would turn out to be one of my biggest struggles, seeing that bluegrass music carries more of a stigma

and perceived style for most than art song. With this in mind I chose my four selections *I'm A Wanderer, Shady Grove, West Texas Wind,* and *The Willow Garden.*

Once the stage of picking the songs to be arranged was over I had to refocus on deciding what aspects of each art form I wanted to retain to create a balanced and unique sound. The obvious first choice was to retain the original melodies of the respective songs and to keep the prosody (or rhythmic patterns of speech or song) and the tonal centers the same. With that being said it would seem that I would be dealing with a two-edged-sword, balancing the traditional bluegrass melody and sound while also composing a coherent and technically sound vocal line that would be comfortable for the trained classical singer.

The solution to this problem seemed to rest in finding the most comfortable and accessible key for a range of different singers. This solution bypassed one of the biggest problems that plagues composers who wish to write easily accessible and performable music with is navigating the nuance of avoiding a singer's zona di passaggio (this can be described as the point of transition between vocal registers). This point is different for each singer however there are approximations that can be made for a generalized vocal range such as baritone, soprano, tenor, and mezzo soprano. With that being said I opted to compose my music using the approximations for the most commonly accessible ranges of the baritone and mezzo soprano.

The next step was to dictate the melodic lines from each of the songs into written pitches and rhythms. This would prove to be one of the most tedious and difficult steps seeing that bluegrass music is notoriously an oral tradition, meaning that the songs have scarcely been notated and all of my work had to be done by ear. To accomplish this I

would figure out what meter the songs were in by finding the beat pulses within each piece. Then I would subdivide the beat into smaller beat patters as seen in the figure below and find out where in the beats the original prosody of the melody lies.

After dictating the rhythm I could then dictate the melody of the original song by utilizing intervallic relationships. A common way of simplifying intervallic relationships is through using a solfege scale. A solfege scale works by assigning syllables to each of the seven diatonic pitches within a major or minor scale. In the case of a major scale the syllables are as follows: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, and back to do to finish the scale. The intervallic relationships are also commonly expressed using words such as major, minor, and perfect with a corresponding number for the interval. For example, the relationship between "do" and "fa" is also the same as a "perfect fourth". Figure 3 below depicts a solfege scale and corresponding intervallic relationships in relation to the tonic.

Using this information I carefully listened to each pitch of the songs I was arranging and meticulously charted the relationship between each pitch in order to decode the melodic line. With this information I was able to derive the respective ranges of each song and then cross-reference the ranges with the comfortable ranges of the appropriate voice parts in order to decide what key the songs should be arranged in. However, contrary to the belief of many singers they are not more important than their collaborating pianist, so I attempted to find a middle ground of a comfortable key for the pianist to play in as well (avoiding too many flats or sharps in the key signature).

Once the vocal lines for each of the songs were set I could then turn my attention to the piano accompaniments. The accompaniment is where I attempted to apply most of the characteristics of traditional art song. I wanted the piano part to be a romantic collaborating accent to the hybrid nature of the arrangements. However, it is best that I describe my method of composing a piano part through the lenses and context of each individual song.

The first song I arranged was a setting of the Chris Jones and the Night Drivers song *I'm A Wanderer.* I was introduced to this song through the Eastern Kentucky University Bluegrass Ensemble when the director (Pam Perry) asked me to consider singing it. The infectious and moving lyrics and melody instantly won me over and I have

been in love with the song ever since. This song is actually part of the conception of this

entire project as I was practicing piano one night in the practice rooms of the Eastern

Kentucky University's School of Music and I thought it would be fun to compose a

romanticized classical version of this song. The melody and harmonic progressions

seemed to seamlessly flow with the sound of a piano. When arranging this piece for the

project I drew heavily upon the original recording by keeping the same harmonic

progressions but giving a more recitative like accompaniment to the verses so that the

beauty and depth of the lyrics may clearly understood and sung within the singer's own

time. You can see the fruits of this in figure four below where the piano has sustained

half note chords acting only to harmonically progress the melody in the verses and then

becoming more active within the choruses to accent the excited declaration of the text.

The second piece I arranged was *The Willow Garden*. This piece is an excellent example of one of the most prolific and common themes within bluegrass music which is the murder ballad. This song was introduced to me through my grandmother. I had asked her what one of the "old timey" songs from her youth she remembered that really stuck out to her. Upon hearing the song through a recording of popular bluegrass artist Dan Tyminski, I was stuck by its lively and playful melody and harmony which accompanied such troubling and insidious lyrics. However, its tuneful melody and meter make it hard to not look past the lyrics and see the beauty which the song holds. When arranging my own version of the song I drew heavily upon the Celtic feel which Dan Tyminski imposed upon the songs and decided to make the piano accompaniment very lively and waltz-like.

Furthermore I drew upon a familiar art song bass line motive as seen in the Schubert *An die Laute* example earlier. The rhythmic gestures of the right hand in the piano part also give the piece its forward momentum and the faster movement of the "B" section of each verse works to give the piece direction moving forward. Figures five and six below demonstrate the before mentioned likeness to *An die Laute* and the progression of the accompaniment into the chorus.

The third piece I arranged was a setting of *West Texas Wind*. This song is most commonly associated with the band Dixie Chicks, however the rendition that inspired my arrangement was that of a bluegrass band called The Seldom Scene. This song, like *I'm A Wanderer*, was introduced to me by Pam Perry so I could perform it with the Eastern Kentucky University Bluegrass Ensemble. This song is a bit different than the rest being that it is not in strophic form. This arrangement also is quite more embellished in its piano accompaniment than any of the other arrangements. This difference in arranging was partly due to the fact that I wanted to give the accompaniment a more ever-changing feel to paint the text of the wind that drives the story of the lyrics. Furthermore, I wanted to challenge myself to have a more active piano part similar to the kind that would be seen in a traditional art song. Below in figure 7 you can see an example of the active

piano part.

The final arrangement was a setting of *Shady Grove.* This arrangement was heavily inspired by the rendition Billy Strings performs regularly. I like his rendition especially because he always finds a way to add some exciting flair to even the most commonly done bluegrass songs. His virtuosic guitar playing and blazing tempo add much excitement to the traditional tune. With this in mind I tried to emulate his flair and energy by creating a rocking vivace piano part that also transposes up a whole step for the final verse. This use of speed and syncopated rhythms makes it the liveliest and most exciting arrangement out of the four and is maybe the most accessible for both singer and pianist alike. Below in figure eight you can see the rhythmic motives of the piano part.

The penultimate step in the process was to input the music into a notation software called Finale. This program is used widely throughout the music industry as one of the preferred programs for inputting musical notation. This process is often a tedious and slow one, seeing that every pitch, rhythm, lyric, and rest must be manually inputted precisely to prevent error. This process was made easier by the use of a MIDI keyboard. A MIDI keyboard is an electronic piano which can be used to dictate what specific pitches are to be inputted into the staff, however the duration or rhythm of the pitches must be simultaneously entered by using the number keys on a computer keyboard. Once the pitches and rhythms were entered the lyrics had to be entered by typing them in in relation to the rhythm of each note to ensure a goof prosody of the text. Furthermore the finished product had to be converted into a PDF format so that the music may be usable for musicians to perform.

The final step in my process was to record segments of each piece so that I could play them at my thesis presentation. Following the voice parts I intended, I sang two of the pieces (*I'm A Wanderer* and *The Willow Garden*) and Ms. Kelli Evans (who is pursuing her Masters of Music in Choral Conducting) sang (*West Texas Wind,* and *Shady Grove*). When I asked Ms. Evans to sing two of my pieces I only gave her

approximations of tempi as a guide throughout the songs. By doing this I allowed her to make artistic decisions of text stress, ebb and flow of dynamics, and many more on her own. The process of creating one's own interpretation is one of the key aspects of both bluegrass and art song, and I wanted to stay true to that tradition by not micro-managing.

In conclusion, this process was a challenging but rewarding one. The ability to have concrete evidence of successfully merging two different genres is a great promoter of the mutual respect deserved by each of the two. The process pushed me to hone all of my musical skills and experiences and to create a truly original and exiting new group of arrangements. Going forward I hope to continue my advocacy for the mutual respect deserved by both genres and the progression of more merging between the two. It has been an immense honor and privilege to work with such and esteemed mentor, and greatly rewarding to finish this process.

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