UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

Danzig

Special Project - Composition Pathway (MUSI4016 UNUK) (SUM1 19-20): Commentary

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1. Introduction

My grandmother, Angela Lindenau, was born in 1929 in the Free city of Danzig (modern day Gdansk, Poland), a semi-autonomous state on the Baltic coast that was created in 1920, in the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles, from what were previously German lands. The state was founded as a compromise between the nationalist interests of the German population and the economic prospects of the Polish government (Clark, 2017). My grandmother lived a relatively idyllic early childhood, growing up in the seaside resort city of Zoppot, with her father, mother and brother. However, that all changed when in 1939 the German army invaded Poland and annexed the Danzig state within the Third Reich. The German majority, who were largely sympathetic to the Nazi cause, welcomed the annexation, while a large number of the remaining Jewish and Polish population were arrested and executed during the massacres at Piasnica (Piotrowski, 1998). The following war years led to a decrease in tourism and therefore prosperity in the area. Furthermore, my grandmother's mother died of cancer in 1943 and her father was conscripted into the army, where he was killed in action in France, four days after D-day in 1944, leaving both my grandmother and her brother orphaned. As the Soviets were approaching in 1945 the German population began to evacuate, and my grandmother and her brother managed to board the very last train leaving the city. When the Red Army eventually arrived, they raped and looted the city and left it in ruins. The remaining German population were expelled in what became the biggest expulsion of a population in European history (Service, 2012). In the following years the city was renamed Gdansk, and was rebuilt with an effort to eliminate any German cultural influence throughout the city and the surrounding lands. I decided to use this relatively personal story as the foundation for my final compositional portfolio.

It is both important and interesting to note that despite my grandmother's lived experience; most of my knowledge of what happened during this period came from my own personal research rather than through my grandmother directly. This was because whenever my grandmother spoke about the war and pre-war years, it was only through short anecdotal stories and memories that were told

sporadically and non-linearly. In fact, I only truly gained the full summary of her personal story at her funeral in 2016. With this in mind I decided to tackle the subject in a philosophical manner, by choosing to address more of a subjective emotional state of mind associated with the events, rather than a literal representation of the events. This led me to the idea of creating thematic motifs based around the idea of feelings associated with memory and how one places oneself within the fabric of events that are largely outside of one's control.

2. Non-Musical influences

My first source of inspiration came from the films of Terrence Malick, a filmmaker who is well-known for taking a philosophical approach to cinema. I was particularly drawn to his film *The Thin Red Line* (1998), a film that follows a group of US soldiers fighting in Guadalcanal during WWII. What struck me most about the film was how Malick would, in the midst of a battle scene, cut to a scene of nature; trees blowing with the wind, birds and animals going about their daily business. Bradfield (2018) states 'It's as if the trees, rivers, and creatures are operating on another plane. They are the timeless and ongoing set against the frenzy of the film's action'. This contrast between the natural world, something that is timeless and ongoing, and the human world of everlasting change, evolution, progression and regression, particularly within the context of war, were most striking to me. As Danzig, a former Hanseatic city and strategic port of huge historical significance, repeatedly changed its masters, culture, language, and was even renamed in the aftermath of the war, one is reminded that these arbitrary measures did not change the things that could not be changed: namely the indefinite continued progress of time, its geographic location, and the natural cycles that continue regardless of human interference.

Although a film director, Malick is no stranger to the world of philosophy. Before working in film, Malick studied philosophy at Harvard and Oxford and briefly taught the subject at MIT. During his studies, Malick concentrated a lot of time on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Woosener, 2010). Unlike other philosophers that came before him, Heidegger focused on addressing the

question of *Being* and how humans exist within the world, summarising these thoughts in his Magnus Opus *Being in Time* (1927). Heidegger states that human beings don't exist as separate entities in the world, but are part of the fabric of the world; their experiences are their world. Hence, human beings and objects co-exist together in one experience. Heidegger further argues that objects that are of use become nothing once they lose their usefulness. Sherman (2009) uses the example of how 'college students relegate large segments of their personal and social lives to the virtual world and do not think twice about it—until the network goes'. Danzig existed as an entity for its German inhabitants, it had a use as a city, however its destruction in the war rendered it useless and it became nothing, despite the fact that it still had a physical presence. The same could be said when my grandmother's parents died during these events, consequently breaking the family life she once had. Heidegger argues that when one encounters these situations, it creates instability in one's own being, upsetting the fabric of our world. Furthermore, it invokes, what Heidegger calls anxiety. This is distinct from fear, which is 'directed towards some distinct thing in the world' (Critchley, 2009), rather anxiety is something that is experienced in the face of nothing.

Overall, I wanted my compositions to reflect these ideas of existentialism to some degree, in order to elevate the piece from being more than just a narrative-led composition which tells the story of what happened, but rather reflect an experience of being in a world which goes through constant changes, but also a world which remains the same at its core.

3. Musical Influences

My intention from the very start was to create a small number of thematic motifs representing a series of emotions and states of mind, including calmness, anxiety, trepidation; as well as the ideas of disturbance, temporality and fragility, and overall, the contrast between peace and chaos and the concept of change. These motifs would be developed and expanded throughout the entire duration of the composition. This intention inevitably led to the decision to have the composition firmly

located within a minimalist style. I was particularly drawn to so-called 'holy minimalism' in the works of Avro Pärt, John Tavener and Henryk Górecki, which often uses repetition of musical phrases and a more tonal harmonic landscape than the avant-garde music of their contemporaries, not too dissimilar to more conventional minimalist composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich. However the subject matter tended to be intensely religious, which gave the music a much more subdued and transcendental aesthetic. In the same way that I feel about the work of Heidegger and Malick, I feel that the music of the holy minimalist composers seems to allude to something higher or further than something that is earthbound; it can't be easily explained or rationalised. Rather, similar to the way Malick uses a non-linear structure for many of his films, the music of holy minimalism tends to exhibit a plethora of sequences that convey a series of emotions that are concentrated within the moment. This is further heightened by the devout faiths held by Pärt, Górecki and Tavener, which gives the music a profound sincerity. Therefore, it is by no coincidence that Malick frequently uses the music of these composers throughout his work as a filmmaker.

An appropriate, and in some ways obvious, source of musical inspiration came from Górecki's 3rd Symphony: *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1976). The three movement piece uses the context of the war in order to portray themes about motherhood and loss. Teachout (1995) describes Górecki's music as being a 'conventional array of compositional techniques (which) includes both elaborate counterpoint and the ritualistic repetition of melodic fragments and harmonic patterns'. What is peculiar to the piece however, is its strict austerity in its musical nature while still being intensely emotional, as well as being 'unabashedly tonal' (Teachout 1995). For my composition, whilst I started with the intention to emulate the styles of holy minimalism, and in particular Górecki, during the process of composition, I began to include other elements, particularly when it came to tonality and timbre.

In the same way that the music of holy minimalism tended to be orchestrated for strings and voices, I started the compositional process with just a string ensemble playing a series of musical phrases that were strictly tonal. However, a typical criticism of Górecki's music, which as Teachout (1995)

explains ‘the use of repetition in this work, as in many of Górecki’s other pieces, does at times test the limits of the attention span’, began to become apparent in my composition. Therefore I tried to escape the confines of holy minimalism. While considering how to convey the more negative aspects of the ideas I wanted to express, namely the disturbance of war, I recalled the music of American saxophonist Colin Stetson. Stetson, an instrumentalist and minimalist composer, who has gained significant fame both in his solo work and performances with bands like Arcade Fire and Bon Iver, is most well-known for the very virtuosic techniques he utilizes in his playing. These include circular breathing, which allows him to play a continuous note, or a series of notes; the use of multiphonics and voicing in order to produce certain overtones to the notes he is fingering, the use of a contact mic on his throat in order to add his singing voices as a layer; and his utilization of the percussive potential of the saxophone, namely key clicks, which he highlights both in performance and recording by attaching contact mics to his instrument. What’s most peculiar to Stetson however is his ability to do all these techniques simultaneously, which he explains in this video (Q on cbc, 2011) where he breaks down one of his pieces *Judges*.

I first came upon Stetson’s music when watching the horror film *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), in which Stetson composed the film’s score. The film tells a story about a family being oppressed by exterior forces, both natural and supernatural. In order to convey this sense of oppression, Stetson plays a low, and at times inaudible, ostinato on a contrabass clarinet (Bishop, 2018), that plays continuously for many scenes, even during mundane dialogue sections, where one would not necessarily expect a musical score to be playing . I thought this successfully conveyed a menacing atmosphere that conflicts with the supposedly peaceful family unit shown in the film. I believed that the use of a continuous, machine like ostinato, played simultaneously with a variety of aggressively sounding and dissonant techniques, would be useful in representing the minacious force of technology that war brings. I therefore concluded that the instrumentation should be a combination of a string ensemble representing the more nature-driven and emotion-driven forces within a holy minimalist style and a ‘SSAATTBB’ saxophone ensemble to represent a technology/mechanical driven force

heavily inspired by Stetson. It must be noted, that the specific virtuosity of Stetson's playing proved to be difficult to translate into an ensemble setting. Andrews (2017) recounts how 'Colin Stetson was warming up for a lesson at the University of Michigan when his saxophone professor Donald Sinta burst into the room with a wild-eyed look on his face (asking)"how are you doing that?"' This clearly highlights how unique Stetson's ability is and how I, as a composer, had to ensure that what I wrote could be played by the majority of saxophonists, especially as I was not writing for a specific performer. In order to ensure playability in the saxophone parts, I sought consultation from a professional saxophonist, who advised me on playing techniques and notation. Additionally, I watched Joshua Hyde's (2020) video series 'Composition Recourses', in order to gain greater insight in how to use extended techniques for saxophone.

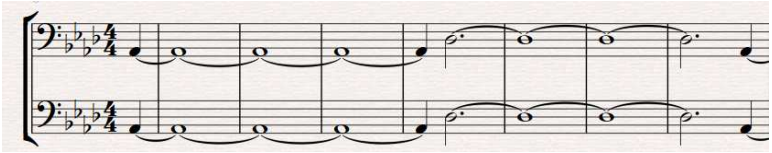
I wished to depart from the tonal confines of holy minimalism even further, by bringing forth moments of strong dissonance into the work. While some of the holy minimalist composers, such as Taverner, used small moments of dissonance in works like *Song for Athene* (1993) and *The Lamb* (1982); I wanted the tonal dissonance to enter into the space and wipe out any remnants of a strong and clear tonality. While I did not want to emulate the use of sonorism, to the extent that Krzysztof Penderecki used in *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1961), I did want to capture the sense of chaos, war and destruction that are prevalent in that piece. In fact, the slight use of sonorism, is in a way, fitting to the context of my piece, given the Polish origins of the sonoristic style.

4. Compositional Process

Inspired by the structure used by Steve Reich in *Different Trains* (1988), which carries a similar context and similar themes, I intended this piece to have a three movement structure, with the first movement representing the pre-war years, the second movement representing the duration of the war and the third movement representing the post-war years. The first movement I named 'Peaceful Shores', in order to allude to the natural cycles of the sea (waves, tides, currents) that continue

regardless of human interference, as well as to reflect the idyllic childhood of my grandmother spending many summers on the beach. The second movement is named ‘This House Will Last Forever’, which is a line from Suji Kwock Kim’s poem *Occupation* (1994), a poem that contends with the feelings of endlessness that comes with occupation, as well as an implied sense of normality. Pinsky (2006) in his analysis of the work, writes that the phrase ‘reflects the inner, defeated rationalization of the oppressed’. The third movement is named after Heidegger’s book *Being and Time* (1927) and, in contrast to the other movements, is more of a reflection of the elements featured in the other two movements and philosophical themes found in Heideggar’s work.

As stated previously, I intended the piece to be formed out of a series of thematic motifs that are developed throughout, while each thematic motif explores, and at times battle each other, while finding their identity within the fabric of the work. Each movement is home to either a singular motif, or a number of motifs, although some motifs do cross-cut from one movement to the other. I have labelled the following motifs, in chronological order.



Motif A

I. Motif A

The main thematic motif that is featured, almost completely uninterrupted, throughout the composition, is the constant alternation between the tonic and the subdominant, both in terms of melodic and harmonic material. The most prominent example of this can be seen in the cello and basses from the beginning of the first movement up to rehearsal mark D, where the instruments alternatively switch between an Ab and a Db in four semi-breve long periods. A less obvious

example is in the second movement, where the soprano and alto saxophones play a series of perfect fourth intervals at bar 75, although at different pitches, therefore hiding the motif behind a dissonant wall of sound. Symbolically, the motif represents the ongoing force of nature that continues indefinitely regardless of the changes brought by human interference, even if the more chaotic material masks the motif.



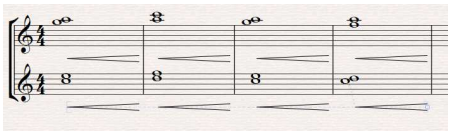
Motif B

II. First movement (motif B).

The first prominent melodic motif in the piece is a series of descending sixths in the violins, which feature throughout the first movement. This motif represents the calm and peaceful harmony of the natural world and how humans interact with it. A more literal representation of this motif is of waves calmly breaking on to the shore. This imagery is further perpetuated by the second violins doubling the first violins at rehearsal mark A; though they start a minim behind, therefore emitting an overlapping effect, much like waves overlapping each other. This motif which lasts for six minims in each sequence, plays on top of the alternation between the tonic and subdominant in the cellos and basses, starting at different points throughout the sequence. This lasts for 21 bars before the cycle begins again. This evokes an ebb and flow effect between the two thematic motifs.

The descending sixths motif continues, while the texture and the harmony grow richer and denser with the addition of ascending and descending scales in the violas. However, this sense of peaceful harmony becomes disrupted by the formation of tone clusters in the saxophones that gradually become dissonant. From this, as well as the replacement of the alternating notes in the cello and basses with a continuous drone, the descending sixths gradually begin to disintegrate and fragment;

first rhythmically, then in terms of pitch, while the motif becomes extremely fragile before gradually fading into nothing. The movement ends with the tone clusters in the saxophones being the only audible sounds. The breakdown of the diatonic structure, was to evoke the effect of looming danger and to allude to Heidegger's ideas of how one's experience of 'Being' becomes blurred once it has been interrupted. In fact, the use of dissonance throughout the entire composition represents Heidegger's concept of anxiety. The use of dissonant tone clusters, are directly influenced by the work of György Ligeti, such as *Lux Aeterna* (1966) and *Atmosphères* (1961).



Motif C



Motif D



Motif E (in concert pitch)

III. Second movement (motif C, D and E)

The second movement forms the battleground between three different motifs; motif C played only in the strings, motif D which is played by both ensembles and motif E played only in the saxophones. The first motif heard in the movement in the strings, features two alternating chords, an A minor 7th and a D minor 7th, with every other D minor 7th chord alternating its voicing. The motif is practically a continuation of motif A, as it is another example of the harmony switching between the tonic and the subdominant. While motif A represents the ongoing force of nature, motif C continues this idea, but now with a specific harmony. Both this motif and the use of strings in this movement were used to represent the human aspect and how humanity continues alongside nature. After a prelude where the minor 7th chords evoke a sombre and ominous tone, the direction of the piece is then commandeered by motif D; which is less a series of notes, but rather a series of repeated triplets. These triplets represent the force of anxiety, unstableness and chaos. The strings play a combination of quaver triplet and semi-quaver triplet ostinatos, creating a buzzing effect.

Because of the lack of rhythmic stability, this invokes Heidegger's (1927) view of anxiety when stability becomes dismantled in one's own life, which is perpetuated further when the tonality loses its stability later in the movement. The ostinatos are interjected with spasms of ascending and descending dorian scales; while the harmony continues the tonic and subdominant alternation, this time between G minor and C major.

The strings are then disrupted by the saxophones that enter in a C# tonality, consequentially creating a huge dissonance; similar to the tone clusters in the previous movement. Here motif E, comes into effect as an arpeggiated (without the third) ostinato that is dovetailed between the two tenor saxophones. This motif, like an engine, pulsates right to the end of the movement with no interruption. This motif was directly inspired by the work of Colin Stetson and intended to represent the technological destruction of war. As this ostinato gradually invades and overwhelms the strings, it is accompanied by repeated triplets in the alto and soprano saxophones; however unlike the triplets in the strings before, they are extremely dissonant in terms of harmony. These twisted versions of motif D, along with the use of split tones and siren-like glissandi, invoke a sense of unbridled chaos. Nevertheless, the alternation between the tonic and the subdominant continues in the strings, this time between a C# and F #, symbolising how even through war, nature endures.

While the ostinato in the tenor saxophones persists, the movement evolves into a quieter section, where the ostinato is accompanied by random key clicks in the alto and soprano saxophones and a reprisal of motif C in the strings; however this time, because of the use of artificial harmonic performed with glissandi, the motif is merely a shadow of its former self. The chords of motif C are then reprised again; though instead of block chords, they are now a sequence of ostinatos, played at such a fast tempo, they are unrecognizable from when they were featured at the beginning. The ostinatos are then joined by the *Dies Irae* motif, first in the double bass and then fragmented and scattered across the saxophones. The use of the *Dies Irae* motif in this was to allude to the masses of death that war produces. All this builds to a climax where the strings form prototypical tone clusters, built from the intervals of a perfect 4th and played with an aggressive tremolo, before the

whole movement comes to an abrupt stop. Overall, throughout the movement, the strings and the saxophones operate on two different levels, while conflicting with each other over control of the movement.



Motif F



Motif G

IV. Third movement (motif F and motif G)

Motif F forms the main foundation of the third movement and is the most developed out of all the motifs. The Motif consists of the notes Eb, Ab, Db, G, C, F and Bb; in that specific order. With the exception of rehearsal mark D, these notes are played continuously, although in different sequences. The notes are separated by an interval of a perfect 4th (a reverse circle of fifths), another continuation of the relationship between the tonic and the subdominant of motif A. The exception however, is the interval between the Db and the G, which forms a tritone. This motif, in my mind, represents the feelings of trepidation and the unknown one would feel in a post-war situation, as society and infrastructure start to be rebuilt as something new, but unfamiliar. I tried to perpetuate these feelings, by constructing a somewhat episodic structure while the motif goes through many changes.

The motif is first heard as the notes are played in the violins and viola with artificial harmonics, with the notes overlapping each other. This was intended to create a very fragile and delicate aesthetic, suggesting a sense of things still being wounded in the aftermath of the second movement. The notes are then used to form a bassline in the cellos and bases to accompany motif G, which are formed of the Eb sus2sus4 and the Ab major 7th chords being played by the violas and second violins. Because there are seven notes in motif F, which are played in conjunction with motif

G, when the cycle begins again, each note is played on the other chord; similar to the first movement, this creates an ebb and flow effect. Additionally, as the tonality is in Eb major, the notes of motif F, if they were in a consecutive order, would form a mixolydian scale. The uneasiness the mixolydian tonality gives the piece, is further highlighted when the first violins start playing the same sequence of notes at bar 22. However, unlike the cellos and basses, the sequence starts on the Db. The first violins are then divided between the notes of the motif at the bottom, and the alternating notes found in motif G. By choosing the pitches and consequently the harmony, by means of predetermined formulas, I allowed the harmony to come into place more by chance; therefore allowing dissonances to formulate almost randomly within the sonority. This was to deliberately create a sense of uneasiness and apprehension, as it builds to a climax; while simultaneously keeping the music grounded in a regular rhythm and not letting chaos and anxiety completely take over. Although I don't use the same compositional device, the minimalist approach I use is not too dissimilar to Avro Pärt's use of tintinnabulation in his work and how he uses notes that are determined around a certain formula.

The sequence of notes from motif F are then fragmented and transformed into short melodic phrases that are repeated on the soprano and alto saxophones, whilst the tenor saxophones play pulsating ostinatos; the notes in the tenor saxophone 1 using the notes that are alternated in the chord sequence from motif H, and the tenor saxophone 2 alternating between a series of perfect 4th intervals and the sequence of notes of motif F, although at alternative registers. This section is a clear reference to Steve Reich's Counterpoint series, such as *Vermont Counterpoint* (1982) and *New York Counterpoint* (1985).

This is succeeded by the section that begins at rehearsal mark D, where the use of motif F is discontinued to allow something new to occur. While the strings play long, drawn out chords, again between the tonic (F) and the subdominant (Bb), the saxophones play a series of ostinatos and melodies using predominantly triplet rhythms in order to create a blossoming, impressionistic effect and to allude to motif D, the motif that represents anxiety. But here, I tried to invert Heidegger's

original concept of anxiety, in order to show how instead of there being nothing beyond, something new is gradually born out of the ashes of what has originally come before. It is important to point out that at rehearsal mark D, marks the first time, since the first movement, that the saxophones and the strings come together in the same tonal space, with the strings providing the harmonic foundations and the saxophones providing the colour. This is then followed by a reprisal of the chords that were formed at bar 53.

What follows is a renewal and an amalgamation of the material that has come before. First there's a reprisal of the motif G in the second violins and violas, though this time the chords have been transposed to Absus2sus4 and Db major 7th. Then there's the return of the sequence of notes of motif F, first through fragmented phrases in the cellos, then in both quaver and semi-quaver ostinatos in the cellos and first violins respectively. While the chords featured at rehearsal mark A were in the key of Eb, which gave the sequence of notes a mixolydian quality; this time the chords are firmly within the key of Ab and therefore the tonality is firmly diatonic. The saxophones then enter with elements they have played previously, with the tenor saxophones playing the pulsating figures found between rehearsal mark C and D and the sopranos repeating the triplet figures found after rehearsal mark D. This continues until rehearsal mark F when the descending sixths motif, found in the first movement, makes its return, accompanied by the alternating bass line of motif A, while the other elements of motif E continue. The return of motif B and the amalgamation of the elements that make up the third movement, symbolises the changes and journeys these motifs, themes and ideas go through, before finally meeting together in a positive-sounding space of harmony and peace. Nevertheless, the movement and the composition ends with a creeping, return of the dissonance so heavily featured in the other movements, with the dovetailed ostinato in the tenor saxophones (an implied hint to motif E) being gradually augmented, while simultaneously crescendoing to an abrupt stop. This ending reminds the listener of the idea of temporality and death, both key sources of thought within Heidegger's philosophy.

5. Conclusion

All three movements carry with them motifs that represent an essence of one's own being, namely the emotions and feelings we all express. However, in reflection of my compositional process, I realised how much the motifs interconnected with each other at their core, therefore reflecting a certain unity that Heidegger expresses in his work. For example, both motif D in the second movement and motif H in the third movement are made up of alternating chords. Furthermore, when they are reprised later in their respective movements, the tempo and the duration of the notes are increased, therefore transforming the motifs to sound very different to what they sounded before. However, the main example of interconnection between the motifs is the common usage of the perfect 4th interval and the relationship between the tonic and the subdominant that can be found virtually in all the motifs, with the exception of motif E, which represents the destruction of war and the disruption of time. This means that the perfect 4th interval which connects motif A with the other motifs, in essence, represents the continuation of time, though more precisely, time as we, as temporal human beings, experience it; consequently the ending of the piece represents the finitude of time as we experience it. This interconnection creates a continued experience of experiences, which links back to Heidegger's idea of one's own being intertwined with the nature of the world.

Overall, with the exception of the use of an intended duration of six minutes for the second movement, in order to invoke the duration of the war, the composition features little that would directly link it with the story of what happened to my grandmother in Danzig during the war (early ideas included using the German and Polish national anthem). Rather I used the concept and the personal story of my grandmother as a seed of inspiration, in order to create a certain soundscape that would be able to convey a series of emotions that would be seen as universal to the common human experience; where change, both good and bad, happen constantly and consistently; and how we reflect on that within our own existence.

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