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Dissertation Proposal in Music Composition
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Perhaps the most typical route for a doctoral student in music composition is to focus on developing a portfolio of pieces demonstrating specialization in handling ensembles closely associated with academic music and the western art music tradition (orchestra, wind band, sting quartet etc.) while gaining work experience teaching music theory. The idea of course being the upon graduation, the student will work teaching music theory and composition. Falling well short of guaranteed employment in a market flooded with such graduates, this template ignores the dynamic and integrated nature of modern cultural production wherein the artifacts produced and the artist themselves are increasingly difficult to describe within traditional disciplinary boundaries. This approach does little to address the diminishing cultural relevance of art music. My proposed dissertation is best understood then by first appreciating the two principal goals for the work: to enhance and demonstrate my own abilities as an interdisciplinary artist and to explore various strategies aimed at overcoming the cultural isolation of modern art music. My hope for this project, as with all of my artistic endeavors, is to create an integrated whole that self-consciously exemplifies it's own artistic and career aims.

Internationally recognized creativity scholar Ken Robinson stated in his 2006 TED Talk, "Creativity, which I define as the process of having original ideas that have

value, more often than not, comes about through the interaction of different disciplinary ways of seeing things."¹ If one may count on a consensus that composition is in fact a creative activity, the focus on specialization common to student composers can be seen as a hindrance to creativity that allows little room for interdisciplinary work. Rather, the emphasis falls on preparation for making a living off of and contributing to the classical canon even as the cultural authority of this music (and hence jobs supported by it) decays below our feet.² My aspirations of becoming an educator are rooted in the idea of finding ways to contribute to music (art) education that embraces the realities of modern culture and its modes of production and distribution and to honor the social nature of music. I agree with noted musicologist Charles Keil when he states "...music is in its very essence communal, spiritual, the opposite of private property, and at its best a totally shared experience..."³ The ways in which human culture shares experience is currently undergoing a tectonic shift through web 2.0 technology and thinking. Academic music must find a voice in this shift or leave matters to the media conglomerates where monetary returns are the only real obligation.

During my time at MSU, my understanding of my role as an artist and of art and its value generally has been greatly recalibrated. The "typical" approach for a student composer addressed above has (in my experience) proven ineffective in overcoming

¹ Ken Robinson, "Ken Robinson says schools kill creativity," Ted: Ideas Worth Spreading, June 2006, 2 July 2009 <http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html>

² Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16 (1998): 141.

³ Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Tucson: Fenestra Books, 2005), 228.

the cultural isolation that renders so much new concert/art music inert in social and cultural contexts that reach beyond the music department walls. To compose in this cloister seems to me an irrelevant exercise. As Edmund O. Wilson writes, " Most of the issues that vex humanity daily - economic conflict, arms escalation, overpopulation, abortion, environment, poverty - cannot be solved without integrating knowledge from the natural sciences with that of the social sciences and humanities. Only fluency across the boundaries will provide a clear view of the world as it really is . . ."4 Considering this, my dissertation's primary goal will be to further my own efforts as a interdisciplinary artist, granting me a wider point of view and enhanced agency in interdisciplinary settings. This seems a logical path for one who hopes to educate students in an interdisciplinary environment. In support of this goal, I have been involved over the past five semesters with the new program at the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, working first as a music mentor and then as a fellow in the CASTL program (now the RCAH Graduate Fellows Program). I have experienced firsthand the difficulties inherent to the ambitious and vital task of creating an environment suitable to interdisciplinary inquiry. During the 2008-09 school year, as part of my fellowship duties, I worked in the RCAH theatre training a group of students to serve as theatre crew, privileging me with the opportunity to learn an array of new skills related to theatre management and production. In the spring of 2008, to further augment my

⁴ Edmund O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1999), 13-14.

aperture and credentials as a multidisciplinary, I took a class from the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media at MSU that focused on designing new and creative computer interfaces. My final project was an interactive, kinetic sculpture using ultrasonic rangefinders and open source microcomputer technology and code. The piece was subsequently accepted (along with a piece by the class instructor) to a peer reviewed exhibit at the East Lansing gallery and performance venue (*Scene*) *Metrospace*. It should be noted that in addition to the electronic aspects of the piece, a great deal of fabrication was required. This process drew upon a natural predilection for manual engagement that has been nurtured over the last four years through my work as an apprentice woodwind repair technician with Eric Satterlee. As Robinson states further, " We think about the world in all the ways that we experience it, we think visually, we think in sound, we think kinesthetically, we think in abstract terms, we think in movement."⁵ More direct and salient to this position are the words of the ancient philosopher Anaxagoras, "...the possession of these hands is the cause of man being of all animals the most intelligent."⁶

The second, yet closely related goal of my dissertation is to create a work that self-consciously strives to overcome the cultural isolation addressed above. The ever-changing ways in which people find, experience and use music (and other media) via

⁵ Robinson.

⁶ Anaxagoras, quoted in Aristotle, *The Parts of Animals*, trans. W. Ogle (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), 686a.

computer and telecommunications technology affords those with access (and a willingness to devote the time and reflection) the freedom to create and share their work and identity as a multimedia (or interdisciplinary) artist with unprecedented ease. My dissertation will be a reflection and enlargement of this idea, the ultimate goal being to create a piece that engages people socially in a way that reflects the emerging paradigm in social media technology. The project will have a strong and integrated presence on many of the obvious social media vehicles (Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, RSS, Podcasting etc), my hope being to inspire engagement among those who have taken a hand in forming my identity as a musician and composer as a starting point for reaching out to culture at large. This group will naturally include family, friends, colleagues as well as former and current collaborators and teachers. Moreover, the project will attend to my own development in media literacy (a requisite tool for an educator in 21st century)⁷ and prepare me to create compelling and engaged learning environments for future students who have spent their entire lives creating meaning through digital media technology. As the philosopher Michael Oakeshott states, "... intellectual virtues may be imparted only by a teacher who really cares about them for their own sake... Not the cry, but the rising of the wild duck inspires the flock to follow him in flight."⁸ How can an educator expect to teach those who are literate in a language unknown to them?

⁷ David Considine, Julie Horton and Gary Moorman, "Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation through Media Literacy," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52 (2009): 474.

⁸ Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 62.

I have no desire in my work as a composer to trade what is generally termed "accessibility" that so much concert music seems to be looking to as a savior. To my mind, popular music has the market cornered on accessibility even more so than the current neo-romantic movement in concert music. In both cases however, the works rely on what Marshall McLuhan labels "...the comfort of recognition without conferring the power of cognition."⁹ Or as Adorno puts it, "To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it."¹⁰ While I have no desire to rely on such pointed recognition as a means of engagement, I do want to indulge in the vernacular languages of both popular and art music idioms as well as the increasingly common expectancy of contemporary culture for music to take the form of a multimedia experience. To this end, the form of the piece itself will be that of documentary musical theatre. In this case the stage will be replaced by a screen that will have projected video content and accompanying audio. The orchestra will consist of a "rock" ensemble including (at least) drum set, electric bass guitar, electric guitar, amplified vocals (and may include multiples of any of these), any number of synthesizers and live signal processing strategies. Additionally there will be string quintet, chamber winds and percussion. Any or all of these instruments may also be amplified depending on aesthetic and logistic issues. The work will be performed in

⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2003), 458.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *Culture Industry*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann (London: Routledge, 1991), 29.

the theatre at Residential College in the Arts and Humanities and include theatrical lighting and the projection of live video content through computer controlled broadcasting software. The central idea controlling all this media is that music (my understanding of music as a composer) will be the central to the formal and aesthetic constitution of the piece rather than being either made to order and in service of all other media elements or addressed as an afterthought in a manner similar to choosing images from stock photography (follow this link to read about the “auto-compose” tool in Soundbooth, the audio editing extension of the Adobe video editing platform Premiere Pro -

http://www.bhphotovideo.com/find/newsLetter/Adobe_Soundbooth07.jsp).

The video content and hence the dramatic point of view will be derived from interviews as well as other planned and spontaneous situations involving individuals considered deeply formative regarding my current identity as a composer, musician and artist. The focus of this content will be the nature or the our relationship and what if any social capital this person feels they have as a result of our connection. This of course means that the subject of the documentation is me, or more accurately, the relationships that I have established and maintained through music or other artistic affiliation. The majority of the video content will be acquired by me; however, I hope that through the use of social networking technology, I can induce others to submit video content in the form of testimonials or anecdotal stories and the like. All content may be shared during the creation process as it is gathered,

taking the form of short video/audio vignettes that will simultaneously serve to lend identity to the project and give me opportunities to hone skills involving media integration. Individual pieces may also be extrapolated and performed as stand alone works before the entire project is completed.

As I stated above, my hope is to make the project an integrated exemplification of that which it espouses. One could argue that the entire project is simply an enlargement of the typical mode of expression for college freshman who use their computer and other media devices to capture content and share their identity with friends (in person and online), creating meaning in a world where the idea of literacy becomes more inscrutable every day. Most important to me in this project is what I will learn. I can calculate that I will learn a great deal about video postproduction, live audio mixing, media integration and a host of other technical and artistic concerns. However, it is my firm belief that I can figure no measure of the project's benefit richer in meaning than the experience itself. As McLuhan says, "Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior, especially in collective matters of media and technology, were the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effect upon him."¹¹ I want to be aware of its effects on me, my art and my life as an educator.

¹¹ McLuhan, 424.