Baroque Sounds in Contemporary Music

Abstract :

Classical instruments and compositional styles were effectively used in contemporary music during the 1950s and 1960s. These techniques have become watered down through electronic sampling, harmonic oversimplification, and an emphasis on production over music. My aim is to compose, record, and produce music that employ classical instruments and compositional styles, but remain accessible to a contemporary audience. I will document this process in writing and discuss the effectiveness of techniques I employ. I hope to break away from the track/hook 'hit factory' style seen in most popular music.

Description:

My project has two components: a creative studio component and a writing component. Many modern composers like to incorporate orchestral strings into their music. The timbre of orchestral string instruments, along with their ability to provide counter melody and accompaniment, makes them a popular instrument to use. However, I believe that the way in which they are popularly used today is not as effective as they have been used in the past

I am identifying two time periods as frameworks for strings in contemporary music. Firstly, I will identify Baroque composers (1600-1750) and how they used string instruments in their compositions. Secondly, I will reference the 1960s era of "Baroque rock" as my framework for a good example of artists effectively and artistically incorporating string instruments into contemporary music. Finally, I will analyze how artists now use strings in the digital age (sampling vs. actual recording).

My creative component will be to write, record, engineer, and produce a collection of compositions, unified around the theme: using Baroque compositional techniques and real string instruments in a sound that is both musically creative and accessible to average listeners. Though accessibility is not strictly quantifiable, it is easily identifiable. Accessible music generally can be enjoyed by an unfamiliar listener without musical training. Artists frequently compromise musicality to create more accessible music. I find that some late 60s jazz, pop, and rock groups were able to be both accessible and musically and textually complex. I aspire not to replicate this sound, but to draw from it. My finished product will be a recorded album, comprised of digitally listenable sound recordings. Once I have my finished product, I will play my compositions for a sample audience of UVM students and measure their responses.

The writing component of my thesis will include an analysis of the three time periods mentioned above and a description of my creative process that will read like a lab report. I will outline my process (before and during), as well as analyze and draw conclusions from the outcome. I hope I will be able to not only end up with a collection of recordings up to commercial standards, but also a written documentation of every step along the way.

Previous Works:

This thesis seeks to reflect three different time periods: the Baroque period (1600-1750), the Baroque rock period (1960-1975), and popular music at the time of this thesis (2022). In the Baroque period, Johann Sebastian Bach was a prolific composer. Though less well known than other Baroque composers such as Antonio Vivaldi, Bach was ahead of his peers in employing complex techniques such as counterpoint and polyphonic harmonic structure. His music also

contained unorthodox key modulation and instrumental rhythmic diversity. Though his works spanned across many different compositional formats, his signature pieces were fugues. Fugues are four part works where a theme or "subject" is set up by a solo part, and each part follows adding their voices in succession echoing the subject. This compositional style, though formally simple, contains modulations and melodic complexities, where each part is intricately weaved together. I hope to incorporate many of Bach's compositional styles in my music, as well as the fugue 'exposition (subject)/counterpoint' form.

In the 1960s, a few artists emerged with groundbreaking work that incorporated intricate baroque styles and instruments with the recording technology at the time to create studio masterpieces. Brian Wilson in particular pushed the genre of pop/rock music further with his usage of chamber strings in the studio. His most popular songs include "God Only Knows" and "Wouldn't It Be Nice." He wrote and produced these songs, along with many others in his 1966 album "Pet Sounds". He used session musicians and arranged complex string parts not just as accompaniment, but as an integral part of the composition. He built on the "wall of sound technique" that Phil Spector famously used but had less muddy arrangements. Each part can stand alone, but the product is also much greater than the sum of its parts. Oftentimes, when strings are sampled in popular music today, they are added simply for embellishment or accompaniment. I plan to include chamber strings as a substantial portion of my compositions. However I hope to use them only when needed and incorporate them as part of the music rather than simply an accompaniment.

I intend for my compositions to stray from modern popular music primarily in two ways. First, I hope to avoid conventional verse/pre-chorus/chorus/bridge/outro format. This format came into popularity largely because of producers that wanted to be able to put hooks in multiple parts of the song and introduce the hook as early into the song as possible. Although Bach and other Baroque composers typically (though at times loosely) adhered to piece forms (e.g. Fugues, Cantatas), Baroque rock songwriters did not. I intend to more closely follow the 1960s' looser, more blended song structure.

Some modern pop artists do still effectively use Baroque rock styles, but many fly under the radar as 'indie' artists. An example of a group that was able to find success whilst straying from modern pop convention is Vampire Weekend. Their songs use chamber strings sparingly, though tastefully. Their songs are formally ambiguous, with many abstract and obscure lyrical themes. Their music almost seems underproduced at times, letting each instrument stand on its own. One of their band members, Rostam Batmanglij, produced their most critically acclaimed work. He was successful in taking the intricacies of their music and layering them carefully and clearly using modern digital studio technology. One of their most popular songs, "Step," employs the harpsichord as well as a very similar voicing of Pachelbel's "Canon in D major." Theirs is perhaps the best example of my stylistic influence for this project.

Methodology:

First, my process will be to write the music I intend to record. I will conduct most of this process at home on a MIDI keyboard, guitar, and bass guitar that I own. I will create demo recordings of my compositions through the Digital Audio Workspace (DAW) I own on my computer:

LogicProX. While this is not up to the industry standard ProTools software the school studios use, it is comparable in terms of workflow and will function for my demo recordings. Commercially viable recordings can still be made on this software. These demo recordings will serve simply as a template/outline as to what I intend to record in the studio and will be neither mixed nor mastered. I will also write out lyrics and lead sheets. These will also be included in my finished product. The songwriting portion will occur in fall semester, and I will have my complete demos ready by the end of the semester. I approximate that the product will be narrowed down to 10-12 compositions, the standard length of an LP.

Following this, I will distribute sheet music to instrumentalists that I need for my recording sessions. At the start of spring semester, I will begin recording sessions/rehearsals. I hope to record all songs by spring break. I will ask for permission to use the UVM studio on weekends, which is typically granted to senior projects and theses like this one.

UVM's studio is equipped with professional-standard, state of the art equipment. This includes pre-amps, mixing boards, the patch bay, and audio interface. The studio also contains multiple SM57 dynamic microphones, as well as a variety of large and small diaphragm condenser microphones. While recording, I will audition different microphone types and positions with different instruments to obtain my desired sound. By spring of 2023, I will be in the process of taking my third studio production class, where I will have the skills necessary to record and produce a commercially viable sound recording.

My last step will be to mix and master the recordings. This will use the remainder of my time after spring break. Mixing and mastering are processes used to edit and adjust recordings and format them to be played and reproduced through different mediums without loss of sound quality. This process will take several long sessions, but is more subjective, as I will be able to apply different dynamic processors and effects to obtain a more cohesive and listener-friendly recording. This process can be done via any of the studio computers, all of which have the same DAW, ProTools, that I need to edit my recordings. After I have completed my songs, I will test them in a listening focus group with a sample of students across at least 6 different programs (at least one studying music). I will not run the focus group in order to preserve anonymity of responses and lack of social pressure to respond differently.

Through this process, I will document my songwriting and studio sessions. I hope to develop the timeline laid out in this proposal into a more specific weekly plan. I will include a broad hypothesis in the beginning of my writing section, outlining my goal to create a collection of songs that are influenced by the compositional styles of Baroque and Baroque rock composers, but accessible to a modern audience. Then, my aim is to document each step of the process, writing concisely, but including all important details of the writing, recording, and production process. This section will read as journal entries and will simply act as a first-hand account of the arduous processes behind writing, recording, and producing music, which are generally unknown. This will highlight how thrilling, grueling, and technical this process can be. Once I have a finished product, I will write approximately four pages reflecting on the process and the product. This section will also draw conclusions as to how the product differs from or satisfies the goals outlined in the hypothesis section. Few people document the process of songwriting,

recording, and producing in such detail. Generally, only well-known and well-established artists publish these first-hand accounts of their projects. I believe that I will provide a fresh perspective as a relatively inexperienced producer and songwriter and can show how the process can be for those just starting out. In addition, I will reference the unique theme of 'Baroque sounds in contemporary music' in both the compositional and writing portion of my thesis. My official timeline is as follows: September through November will be used for songwriting. December 16th through January 16th will be used to record demos. January 16th - March 12 will be used for weekly official recording sessions. March 13 through 17 (spring recess) will be used for mixing. March 18 through 23 will be used for mastering. On April 1st, I will test my recordings on a sample audience of students. March 23 through the end of April will be used to complete the conclusion section of my written component, and prepare for my defense in May.

Significance:

The intent behind this project is to both highlight historical compositional methods and to discover new sounds and textures through this creative experiment. Though many like to use strings in their music, I hope to find creative and original ways to incorporate not only strings themselves, but Baroque compositional styles in my music. Writing about this process will provide a unique perspective of the composition and recording process. Every musician has their own process, and I hope to convey mine through my writing, both to document the process and to provide a more methodical approach to my music.

Overall, this project aims to take Baroque musical themes and make them contemporary. The importance of this is to steer away from sampled sounds and misuse of strings simply for the

sake of having them in music. I hope to provide a new perspective, where all the instruments I use are recorded with microphones and used when necessary to contribute to texture, rather than arbitrarily.

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