Portfolio of Compositions Commentary

Word Count: 4983

My portfolio consists of four compositions – three scores written for animation shorts or films and a fourth piece written in a Latin jazz style. One of my main goals for this portfolio was to create a wide-ranging selection of compositions demonstrating my ability to compose for many styles. Therefore, I have created a portfolio that looks at aspects of French impressionism, Cuban music, big band jazz, horror music and cartoon music. Throughout the compositional process, I have based my pieces on select research questions. I have one overriding research question that relates to the three scores written for animation as well as individual research questions for each piece. My overriding research question is, how can I use different musical parameters to drastically change how the music underscores the animation? This research question allowed me to investigate how music has previously been used in animations and to experiment with ways that differ from the repertoire.

For my first score, *Barnyard Bunk 1*, I considered two additional research questions: how can I utilise harmony and melody to create a score that fits into the 1930s cartoon music style and what percussion can I use to aid mickey mousing effects/create excitement within the piece? The purpose of this composition was to gain a deeper understanding of cartoon music of the 1930s, which would allow me to compose a completely different score (looking at different research questions) for the same animation. Later in this essay, I will demonstrate how both scores for the *Barnyard Bunk* animation contrast each other.

To avoid confusion, I have called my second composition (also written for the Barnyard Bunk animation) Alternative. My research question for this piece is, how can I change the comedic tone of the cartoon through its music/ is there scope to go further and potentially change the storyline of the cartoon not just its tone? Whilst cartoon music has always used many different styles (perhaps a reason for why the music was originally not taken seriously by other composers and critics), there are certain musical parameters that feature regularly – rooting it as its own genre of music. I decided to compose something that broke away from the norm of cartoon music by ignoring mickey mousing, disregarding obvious styles well matched for cartoons (such as jazz) and avoiding standard instrumentation. Instead, I focused on incorporating lesser used devices, such as the whole tone scale and combined it with a horror music style.

My third composition is written for a short animated film called *Sintel*. The animation lasts approximately 15 minutes and contains fight scenes, chase scenes and deals with the world of fantasy. My research questions are, can pentatonicism be used as a structural device as well as a melodic one ,and how can extended harmony, as well as other features of jazz, can be used to create dramatic contrasting sections? As this composition was much longer than the other two and contained more of a developed storyline, I wanted to experiment with the idea of leitmotif. However, instead of using melody to represent a character, which would be more common when using leitmotif, I decided to focus more on harmony.

My final composition shares very little in common with my previous pieces. Using Logic instead of Sibelius, I composed a Latin jazz piece called *Footprints*. The instrumentation is composed of a standard big band, traditional Cuban and Latin percussion, an electric piano and a string quartet. My research questions for this piece are, how can I recreate the highly rhythmic percussion of Latin music and how can I utilise instrumentation to create different textures? For this composition I used a mixture of audio (the trumpet and guiro parts which were all recorded and played by myself) and midi. However, the two sound very different so to make the piece sound more realistic and like it is being played by a real band I investigated mixing and mastering parameters such as audio effects and automation.

Background Research

I started my research with an investigation into cartoon music, a genre 'in which rapid tempo changes, unusual instrumental effects, experimental percussion, postmodern quotation, shock chords, and musical genre shifting are de rigeur' (Strauss 2002, 5). The devices that interested me most were instrumentation (particularly percussion) and mickey mousing effects. With all the different styles and genres represented from one cartoon to the next, mickey mousing is perhaps the one that features most regularly. Carl Stalling was one composer who helped popularise the mickey mousing effect. Stalling was the musical director for Walt Disney and it was with Disney when he scored the animation *The Skeleton Dance* (1929). *The Skeleton Dance* contains numerous

examples of mickey mousing. For instance, the swaying of the skeletons is synchronised with the music. Stalling goes further still when he composes for xylophone just as the audience see one skeleton run a bone over the ribcage and spine of another skeleton. As Neil Strauss points out, it was the “close synchronisation between music and on-screen movement” that developed the mickey mousing style (ibid., 7). My first composition draws directly from this approach. I have included multiple mickey mousing effects, for example, as the line of chicks hatch and march away, I have composed a militaristic fanfare for trumpet with a snare drum accompaniment. Using mickey mousing in my own composition has helped create a comedic tone and 1930s style.

The use of percussion, and sometimes experimental percussion, is prevalent in cartoon music. Percussion is also often used to aid mickey mousing. “It is often noise, more than music, that is wanted, to arouse the hilarity of the audience; and the noise again may be of various kinds. It should always be broadly imitative when accompanying a fall, a hit, a slide...” (Lang and West 2002, 18). When Lang and West refer to ‘noise’ rather than ‘music’ within cartoon music, I think they are mainly referring to the use of percussion, as well as other components. They later talk about the particular use of percussion when you see something along the lines of a fall or hit on screen. This can be seen in Scott Bradley’s score of the Tom and Jerry episode *Puttin’ on the Dog* (1944). As Tom falls over you hear a drum hit for the initial impact then a cymbal crash and trombone slide for the resulting impact. The wood block is also used throughout the episode, to resemble walking and comedic hits. Additionally, whistles are used within the score. My piece draws inspiration from how cartoon composers, such as Scott Bradley utilised percussion. For instance, my piece uses a bass drum, snare drum, acme siren whistle, triangle and wood block. I use these percussion instruments for mickey mousing effects, similarly to cartoon composers of the time. Interestingly, for my Alternative composition I decided to remove percussion from the piece as I thought it might make the work too comedic when played with the animation.

Throughout my research, I discovered that different styles were used by various composers, for instance, Scott’s use of Schoenberg’s 12 tone system (Strauss 2002, 9). But one style that was regularly used was jazz. Firstly, lots of the cartoon music was either written for or based around a big band instrumentation and hence the music heavily featured jazz influences - unsurprisingly given the popularity of big band swing around that time. Secondly, the Fleischer animation house utilised jazz to portray their darker, sleazier animations that reflected upon New York. Whilst it

made sense to use jazz in these animations that often represented a place where jazz was played, jazz was also used as a backdrop for racism. One example is *I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You* (1932). The music for this animation was played by Louis Armstrong and orchestra. Unsurprisingly with Armstrong as the main musician, the group played jazz music. However, the animation becomes quite disturbing when the black musicians (including Armstrong) become linked with characters in the animation. Whilst jazz music was used in many cartoons, it was not always used in a racial way. This is where I draw inspiration from for my own work. I wanted my piece to have that 1930s feel so I decided to use jazz, however I picked a cartoon that would not lead to any racial discrimination. An example of a cartoon that uses jazz without discrimination is Scott Bradley's *Downbeat Bear* (1956). Bradley draws upon the New Orleans style of jazz by having the melody instruments (trumpet, clarinet and trombone) play the melody as the Bear in the animation is seen dancing. This selection of instruments draws upon the frontline instrumentation used in New Orleans Jazz. Here Scott has cleverly decided to use jazz to portray his dancing bear. Since the early 1920's jazz has been closely linked with dancing, particularly the swing era. When new dance moves were created, new jazz styles/songs often followed, the Charleston being one. Although Scott decided to use a New Orleans style of jazz (more associated with marches and celebrations) the outcome is the same – the dancing bear and the jazz music become linked and give an excitable, comedic feel the cartoon desires. The cartoon that I have scored also contains dancing, like Scott, I have used jazz to represent. However, I have decided to use a stride piano style of jazz. I decided to use the stride style because the left hand "jumping" motion fit well with the dancing/jumping motion of the characters in the animation – another way in which I have used mickey mousing.

The goal for my piece, *Alternative*, was essentially to do the opposite of my first piece *Barnyard Bunk 1*. Whilst cartoon music has been experimental, I do not believe my goal of changing a storyline through its music by taking the comedy out of a cartoon has been done before. This is most likely because most film composers do not compose two pieces for the same film. Therefore, my research led me into a different area of film scoring – horror music. As pointed out by Stan Link, horror music primarily serves to promote negative emotions or negative visuals, whether that be through suspense, fear, alienation, sinister atmosphere or unpredictability (2016, 204). Within my composition, I have created sections of alienation, sinister atmosphere and

unpredictability. One composer who dealt with similar ideas was Ramin Djawadi, particularly in the film Friday Night. Djawadi creates a sinister atmosphere in his score *Welcome to Friday Night* (2011) by utilising different string sonorities. In the opening of the piece, the strings play quick tremolos with a harsh sound – which was most likely created by playing closer to the bridge. The strings then quickly switch to playing a lower, darker melody which leads into a rhythmically faster section driving the piece forward and setting a sinister tone. The use of different string sonorities is something I drew inspiration from in my piece. I decided to open similarly with sul ponticello and tremolo strings, however instead of switching to a lower melody I composed a simple melody based on the whole tone scale to be played over the top – creating a sinister tension. Additionally, I used the whole tone scale to create contrasting sections within my piece (e.g. sections using the whole tone scale and sections not using the whole tone scale). I decided to introduce the changing sections with little warning, creating fragmented and unpredictable segments that create an unnerving quality. Moreover, I chose to use the whole tone scale for its dreamlike/hypnotic quality. I only use the whole tone scale when either Dick and Larry are seen playing the saxophone or another character has just been listening to them playing the saxophone. I chose to do this to suggest that the music Dick and Larry are playing might have hypnotic qualities and that the dancing that usually follows is due to the music. I have tried to estrange the seemingly ordinary image of farm animals dancing and turn it into something far less ordinary. The idea of estranging or alienating a film or animation is again something done by horror music composers. For example, the composers of *It Follows* (2014) and *Poltergeist* (1982) both try to estrange ordinary images such as swimming pools and televisions through their music. As Link points out, the composers attempt to suggest “the ordinary itself is the horror” (ibid., 205).

Two other works my piece draws inspiration from are The Newton Brother’s *The Haunting of Hill House (Main Title)* (2018) and Francois Tetaz’s *Wolf Creek: Main Title* (2006). Both these works utilise the lower extremities of the piano to build a dark, tense feeling. A similar effect has been used by other composers using organs and tubular bells. In both the examples I have given, the slow low piano octaves can be heard over slow moving strings. I wanted to do something similar with the piano, however I used it to compose a much faster and more rhythmic baseline that not only created tension but made the piece more dramatic and exciting. Instead of layering it with

slow moving strings, I composed three different string lines over the top that gave the piece a much more rhythmic feel and created a sense of drama and tension.

For my composition Sintel, most of my inspiration comes from French Impressionism. My use of pentatonacism particularly draws on Debussy. However, I believe we have used them for very different reasons. Debussy's *Pagodes,* from the piano collection 'Estampes'*,* demonstrates his use of the pentatonic scale. For example, the opening texture (bars 3-4) show a pentatonic relationship between the tonic triad of the left hand and a tetratonic melodic motive (Day-O'Connell 2009, 226). Whilst Debussy uses pentatonicsm in a very suggestive way, characteristic of the French impressionist movement, I have used it as more of a film music device. My pentatonic figures appear either when Sintel is present on screen or when the main character is thinking of the dragon. Similarly to the use of leitmotif, I have utilised pentatonic harmony and melody to resemble the character Sintel. Moreover, my work also draws inspiration from Debussy's use of ostinato. Again, *Pagadoes* serves as a good example. For instance, towards the end of the piece, the right-hand plays very high demi semi quavers which later span over three octaves. This quick high passage is imitative of a harp player running their fingers up and down the instruments strings and has an almost dream like quality. Similarly, in my piece, I have a high semi quaver pattern that repeats in the right-hand of the piano part. This part gets taken over by different instruments within the orchestra to create contrasting colours and textures.

Another work that I drew inspiration from was Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913). I like Stravinsky's use of dissonant harmony, which is particularly evident at the start of 'The Angurs of Spring Dances of the Young Girls'. That section begins with the famous bitonal staccato chords. This is where I drew inspiration for the opening of my piece (starting at bar 10). Similar to Stravinsky, I use striking and bold dissonant chords (often diminished or augmented chords). Unlike Stravinsky, I have spread the chords throughout the entire orchestra (often having the brass come in slightly after the woodwind). The effect of this is that although the chords are not as striking or accented as the ones in *The Rite of Spring* you get a difference in colour between the woodwind and brass. Additionally, later in my piece, the horns play octave leaps representing an alarm call and musically portraying the danger that the character seen on screen is in. This again was inspired by *The Rite of Spring*. In the section 'Ritual of Abduction' the horn parts play a leaping perfect 5th

phrase. This motif created anxiety within Stravinsky's work, something which I thought would work well for answering my research question about creating dramatic sections.

My final piece, *Footsteps*, draws inspiration from a mixture of Latin music, popular music and jazz. One work that my piece draws inspiration from is *Sofrito* by Mambísimo Big Band. As a trumpet player, I particularly looked at the trumpet solo and how to get a Latin feel within a solo. Additionally, I drew inspiration from the percussion instruments used, how they were played and how the big band instrumentation worked with the Latin style of music. Within my own trumpet solo, I used the higher register of the trumpet, used half valve techniques to bend notes and played quick slurred figures based around the flat 5 or major 7 notes of a scale. After looking at how the Mambísimo Big Band and other bands/groups (such as ¡Cubanismo! and Familia Valera Miranda) used Latin percussion I decided to include a bongo, conga, timbales, clave, shaker, cow bell, bar chime, guiro and cymbal. A specific type of Cuban music that also influenced my piece is the son (a Cuban dance style). Although my instrumentation misses out key instruments, such as the tres guitar (which was later replaced by the piano) and the marímbula (essentially a bass instrument) from the son format, I still drew upon certain son characteristics. For example, the clave rhythm. Also, the son is usually made up of two sections, 'a closed strophic introduction followed by an open refrain section (Fernandez, 2012)'. I decided to base my structure around two repeating sections, however I added in instrumental solos (demonstrating a more Latin jazz approach). One example of a Cuban son is Familia Valera Miranda's song *Alla vá Candela* which includes a son section which can be clearly heard at the tempo increase. Also, the piece demonstrates the consistent and important use of clave rhythms in Cuban music with its 2:3 son clave rhythm. The work *Descargo De Hoy* by ¡Cubanismo! Is another piece my composition draws from. Like *Sofrito* this piece serves as a good example for Latin trumpet soloing as well as different examples of percussion rhythms. For example, just before the piece enters a new section, the percussion indicate the upcoming change with a slight change in rhythm. Additionally, this piece demonstrated to me that the percussion rhythms do not always have to be extremely complicated. The repetitive quaver or triplet rhythm with dynamic contrast can be very effective for introducing a new section or simply adding rhythmic excitement. With no prior knowledge of Cuban rhythms, listening to pieces like the examples I have given has been a crucial part of my

research to try and get a sense for what is rhythmically appropriate for this style of music – something I have tried to incorporate in my own work.

Another work my piece drew inspiration from was *Count Bubba's Revenge* by the Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band. What particularly interested me was how Godwin composed for each individual section of the big band. This idea I carried through into my own work as can be seen in the head section. Although the heads differ slightly, each section (trumpets, trombones and saxophones) is introduced individually before merging together. The layering of instrumental sections creates excitement in the piece by giving the sense that the music is leading to a constantly bigger section even if that does not necessarily happen.

Compositional Process

Barnyard Bunk 1

Originally, I had only planned to compose one score for the Barnyard Bunk animation. However, after researching cartoon music and discovering how experimental some of the composers were, like Scott Bradley and his use of the 12-tone system, I decided that I could do something more drastic and experimental. Instead of starting again on my original score, I seized the opportunity to use that score as a practice-based research opportunity whilst at the same time starting a starkly different score for the same animation. Like most of my scores, *Barnyard Bunk 1* started out as a simple piano arrangement. As illustrated in figure 1 which is taken from save number two of the project, it is clear to see that the melody that ends up being predominately played by the saxophone is being played in the piano's right hand (starting at bar 45), whilst the accompaniment that is later arranged for more instruments (like the trumpet and double bass) is being played in the left hand.

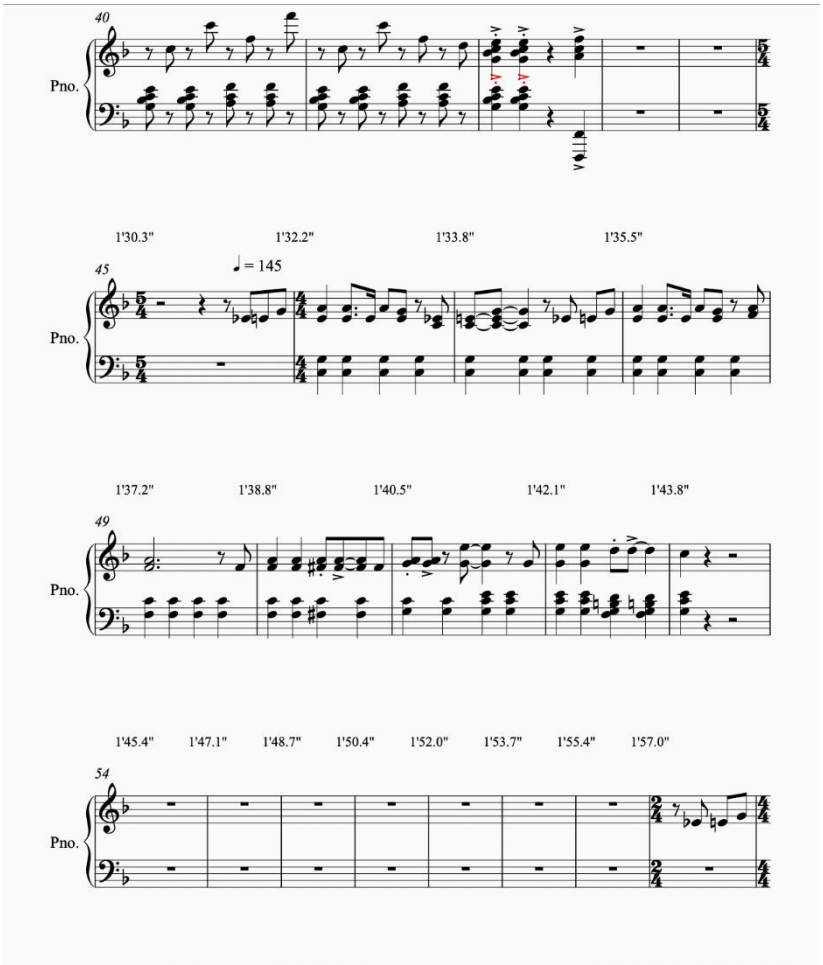

Fig. 1

The next stage in my compositional process was adding in an alto and tenor saxophone – to represent the saxophones played by Dick and Larry in the animation. Originally, my plan was to include two saxophones (the melody), a piano and double bass (the accompaniment) and limited percussion. This is shown in figure 2 – save 3 of my project.

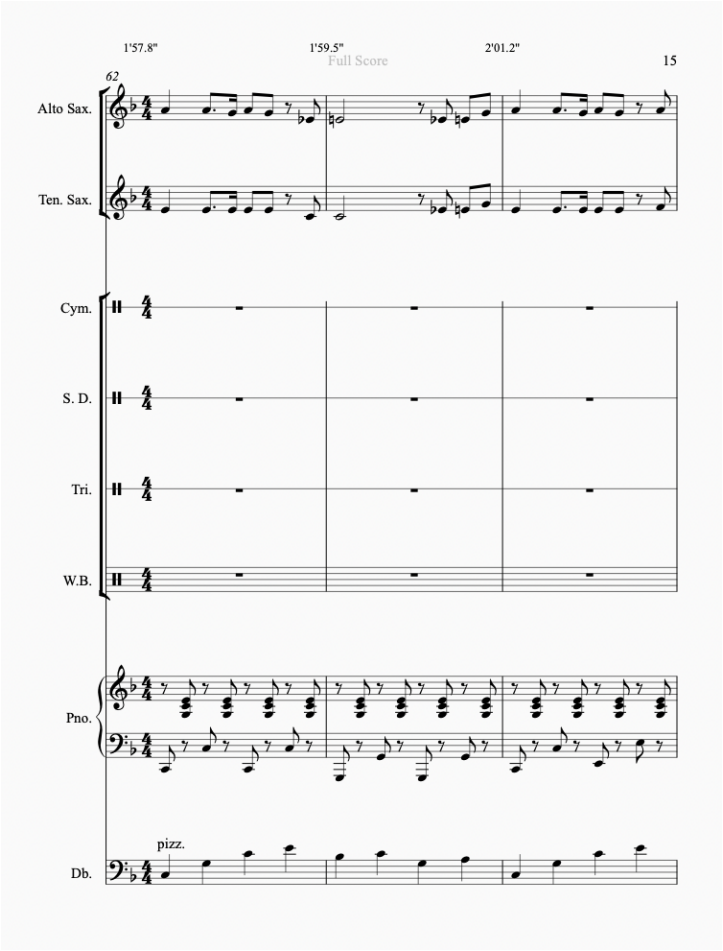

Fig. 2

However, upon reflection with my supervisor I decided to fill out the instrumentation. This enabled me to experiment further with percussion whilst creating more contrasting textures. One crucial aspect of the compositional process was deciding where the music should go in relation to the animation. The biggest decision I made in this project was deciding that when the saxophone is being played in the animation the music will replicate that by also having the saxophone play. This then made it possible for me to see where the music was going to fit in relation to the animation. For example, there is a 31-beat break in the music (excluding a single percussion hit) between bars 53 and 60. This happens for two reasons. Firstly, Dick, Larry and the farmer have a conversation (albeit using very few actual words) and secondly, Dick and Larry stop playing the saxophone. Having the music closely follow the actions seen on screen is very common practice

for cartoon music of the 1930s and demonstrates how I have kept the composition based on its research questions.

Possibly the biggest change I made during this process was including extremely specific and detailed articulation. This enabled two things. Firstly, the articulation creates excitement within the piece. Secondly, the articulation creates a comedic tone. For instance, the heavy use of staccato matches the jumpy nature of the dancing in the animation which adds to the funniness of the already quite strange dance moves. Figures 3 and 4 show the contrasting articulation from the same bar between save 5 and the final save of the project.

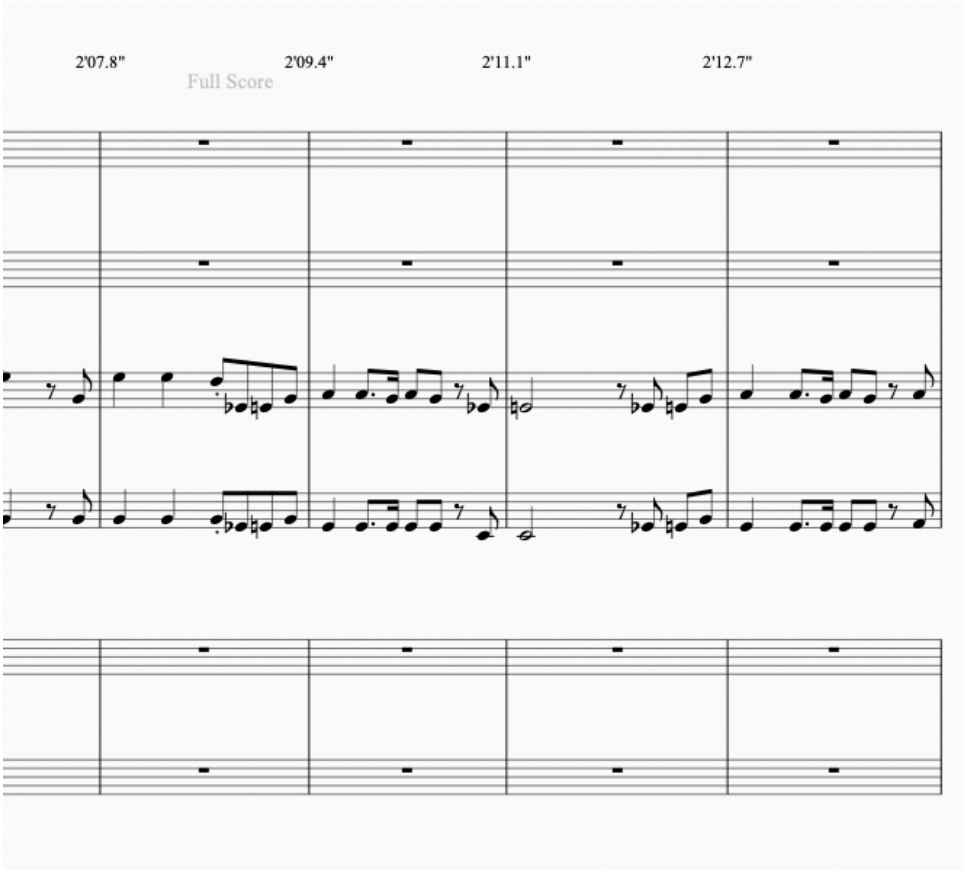

Fig. 3

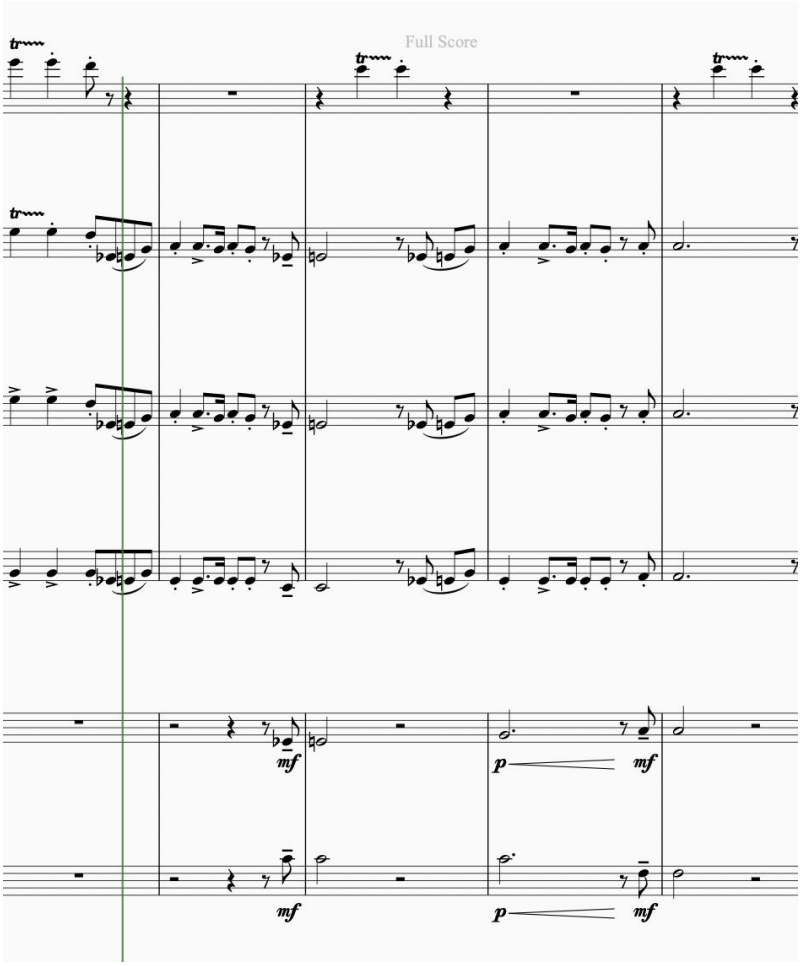

Fig. 4

Alternative

My second composition was, in essence, a major development from my first composition. If I had not started *Barnyard Bunk 1*, I think I would have decided to not carry on with a composition like *Alternative*. One major decision I made early in the compositional process was to avoid mickey mousing. This was based on my research into cartoon music for my first composition. Mickey mousing was a technique developed by the early cartoon music composers to make the animations funny for audiences. Making the cartoon comedic is the complete opposite of my intentions, so I avoided mickey mousing completely. What I was not expecting was that by avoiding the obvious visual cues for comedy, such as a character falling over, added a very sinister

tone to the animation was added. What was once a funny and harmless scene suddenly became more about danger. My music turned scenes of a harmless nature into scenes of a harmful one. This was one way in which I achieved my research question of changing the comedic tone and avoiding the 1930s style.

Following feedback from my supervisor, one alteration I made was the addition of different string techniques. This not only emphasised a darker and more sinister tone, but created very different colours and textures within the piece. For example, one way in which I create contrasting textures is by using sul ponticello. Sul ponticello offers a much thinner and icy colour that when combined with the use of the whole tone scale creates an unnerving and anxiety inducing feel (see Fig. 5).

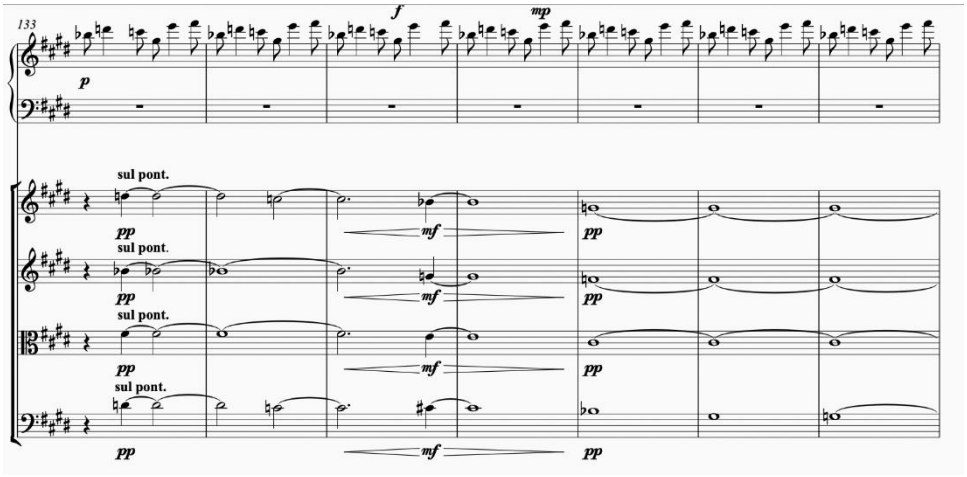

Fig. 5

Other techniques I utilised were string harmonics and glissando (with and without harmonics). I used these techniques again for their particular colours which, when used in this context, add to the sinister feel of the piece. Upon reflection, this piece could perhaps go further in pursuing the use of additional extended techniques. I believe the use of microtonality could have suited this piece well. Additionally, the use of string harmonics could have been explored further. However, even without these aspects my composition is still firmly rooted by its research questions.

Sintel

Perhaps the biggest change I made to *Sintel* was its instrumentation. Originally, I had composed for flute, clarinet, trumpet, piano and strings. However, after reflecting with my supervisor I decided that orchestrating the piece out would allow me to experiment with texture and timbre more. A good example of this is from bar 12 where I had originally written a chordal section (using lots of extended harmony) for solo piano (see Fig. 6).

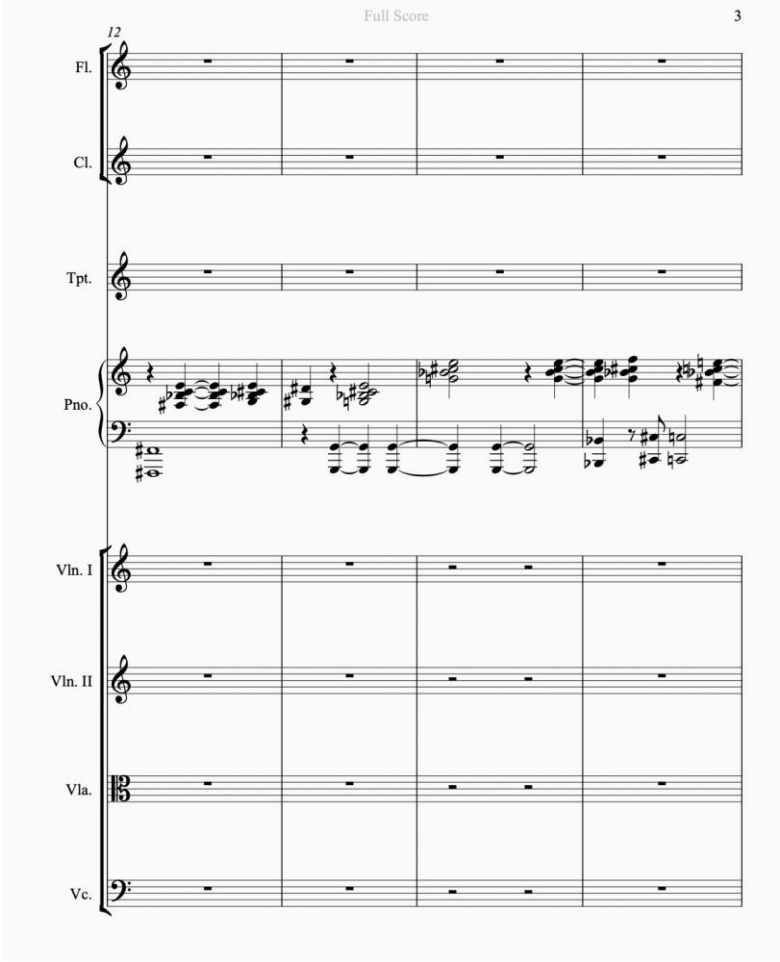

Fig. 6

However, after reflecting on this, I made changes to include a wider range of instruments. Additionally, I used the woodwind and brass separately creating contrasting colours, which when articulated with appropriate dynamics created a much more dramatic and interesting section than before – as demonstrated by figure 7.

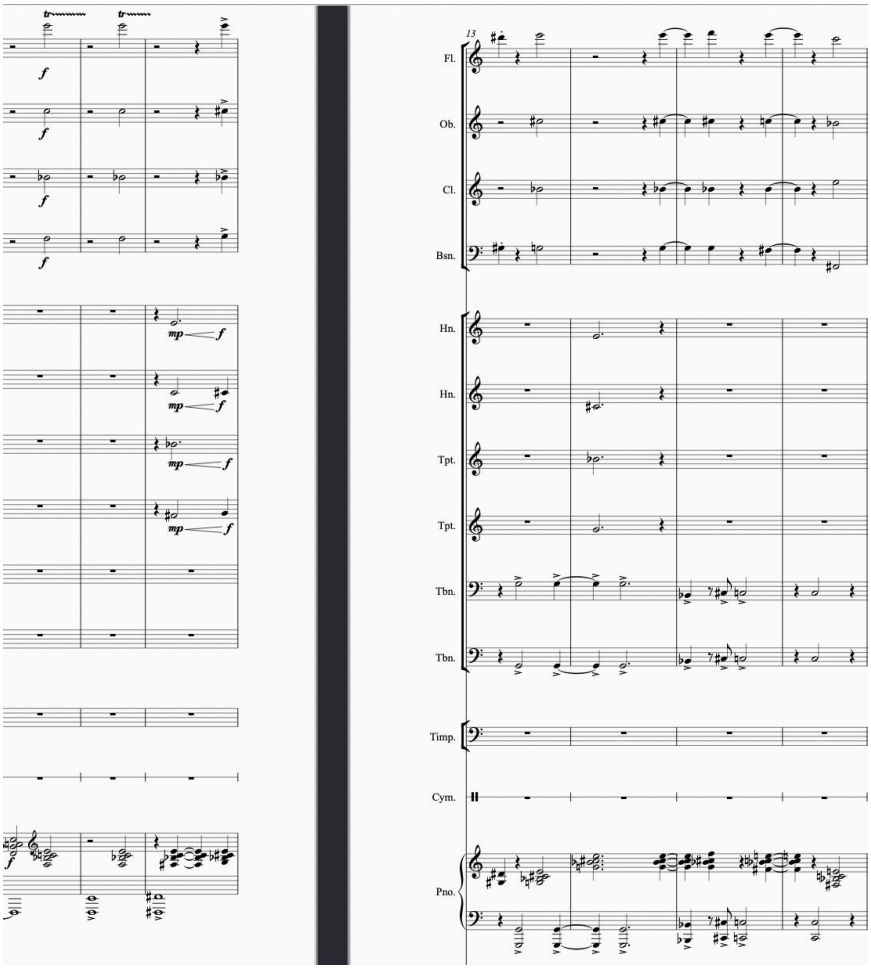

Fig. 7

Additionally, I never intended for the work to draw on French Impressionistic features. It was purely by accident when I came up with a high semiquaver ostinato in the piano, which reminded me of some of Debussy's piano works. Once I looked into French impressionism further, I realised that I could utilise some of the same devices that Debussy and Ravel used in my own way. One example of this is how I used the pentatonic scale, which I pointed out in my previous section. However, another aspect of French Impressionism that I utilised was its texture. I particularly liked the use of sparse textures, often creating a dreamlike and subjective nature, similar to Debussy. This is something I have drawn upon and can be seen in figure 8. The first half of the picture portrays a dense and somewhat homorhythmic texture whilst the second half is much sparser with fewer instruments playing delicate entries over a quiet ostinato. Similar to French Impressionism composers, I have used texture structurally to tell a story. For instance, whenever my pentatonic passage appears Sintel is seen on screen, or the main character is seen thinking of Sintel.

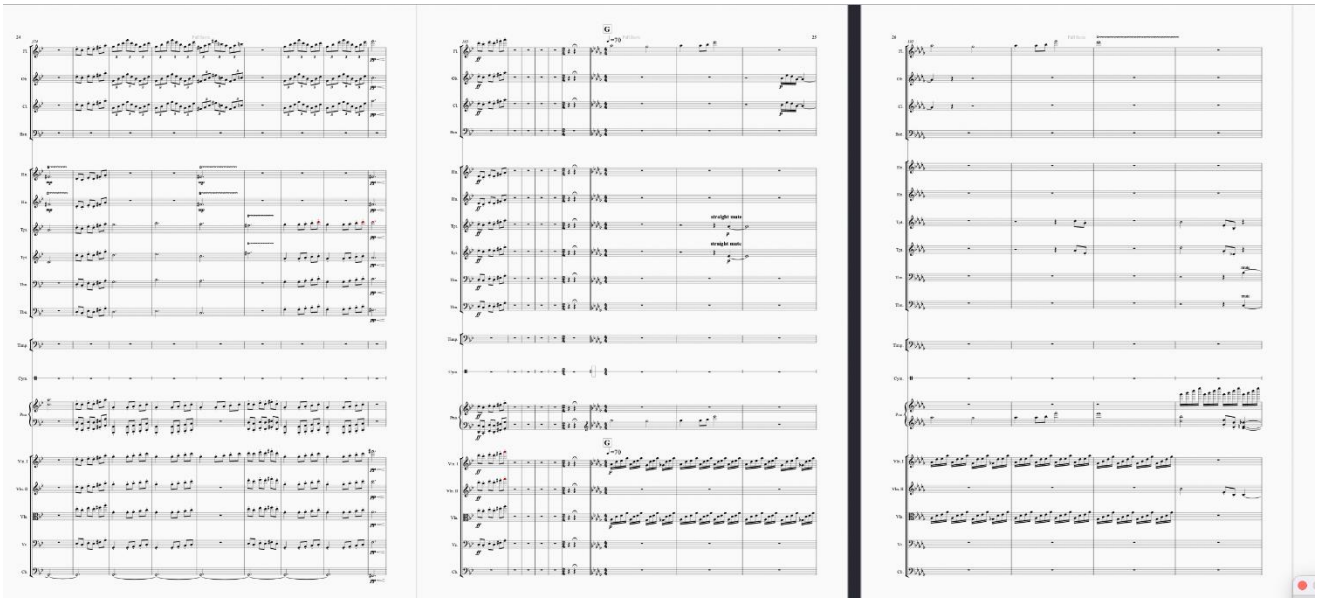

Fig. 8

Footsteps

The biggest change I made with *Footsteps* was to switch from composing using Sibelius to Logic. Firstly, the range of percussion instruments on Sibelius is limited. Secondly, the actual quality of sound on those instruments is very poor. Using Logic enabled me to utilise a wider range of percussion and allowed me to edit it by using automation and effects (an attempt to try and make the percussion sound more realistic). The instrumentation of my percussion draws massively on Cuban music, particularly the son. For instance, within the piece I utilise the clave rhythm 3:2 (meaning the measure with three strokes is played first and the measure with two strokes is played second). However, my piece departs from the Cuban model with the addition of a second clave rhythm (a 2:3 rhythm). Traditionally, once a clave rhythm has started a piece that same rhythm will continue throughout. Within my own work I have use two different clave rhythms which differentiate the two main sections. Also, the conga, and occasionally timbale, enter with the changing clave rhythm. By doing this I have created two contrasting, both rhythmical and instrumentational, sections that help to create excitement within the work.

Another way in which my work differs from the typical Cuban style is through the extended instrumentation with the addition of a string quartet and electric piano. Originally, I had not included an electric piano, however I decided that its timbral range (particularly between the extreme sonorities) would help me to compose contrasting textures. For instance, the electric piano solo demonstrates a completely different texture to when the electric piano plays in the B section, and then again, a different texture to the A section (in which the electric piano does not play). The piano solo particularly draws on the composer and instrumentalist Chick Corea. One piece I took inspiration from was Corea's song *Spain*. It Is not the way in which the electric piano is played or Corea's harmonic/melodic language that I drew inspiration from but the sound and timbre of the electric piano. Additionally, the introduction of a string quartet (an ensemble usually associated with classical music) was again to experiment with different timbres that could be used with the Cuban style.

Prior to this project, I had never considered composing music for a cartoon or regarded the music as equal to other genres of film music. After investigating cartoon music more deeply, I now understand just how experimental and ground-breaking the music is. However, with many animations being relatively simple I think there is more scope to do further projects that deal with changing audience's perceptions. The only other type of film music that deals with similar schools of thought is horror music – with its many examples of soundtrack dissonance. Perhaps further investigations into how music can alter the perception of cartoons will see a resurgence in cartoon popularity.

Additionally, I have always had a passion for jazz, particularly Latin jazz. As a trumpeter I will undoubtedly continue playing this type of music with the hope that one day I will be able to travel to Cuba and experience it first-hand. I think this will not only give me a deeper understanding of the music, but I think it will give me an understanding that cannot be learnt through research – an understanding that I would then like to use in further compositions.

I believe the main strength of this portfolio is its extremely wide-ranging approaches to the individual projects. From influences in Latin jazz, French impressionism, horror music, Cuban son and cartoon music the portfolio demonstrates a bold and unique approach to composition.

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