

Spring 2023

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Recommended Citation

Fry, Blake, "Music Production and the Creative Process Through the Lens of Neurodivergence" (2023).
University Honors Theses. Paper 1375.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1406>

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Music Production and the Creative Process Through the Lens of Neurodivergence

By

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An Undergraduate honors thesis submitted to
Portland State University's Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

In

University Honors

and

Sonic Arts & Music Production

Thesis Advisor

Anwyn Willette

Portland State University
2023

Introduction

The project I have chosen to pursue is of great personal significance and vulnerability. Thus, to adequately explore it I must talk a great deal about myself and my experiences, potentially making this thesis a bit out of the ordinary – especially in comparison to academic research or data-focused theses. Since well before my time at Portland State University (PSU), a certain feeling I used to call ‘stuckness’ has permeated throughout any creative endeavor I attempt. Be it writing music, essays, or even building things in something like Minecraft – a game I enjoy with high potential for creative expression. At the time, the reason behind this feeling mystified me, and I seemed to resist the idea that these experiences were closely related. Truth be told, the main motivation behind my enrollment in the Sonic Arts & Music Production (SAMP) program at PSU was to overcome that recurring feeling of stuckness, as making music caused the deepest and most overwhelming variation of it.

Unfortunately, it turned out that feeling would remain throughout my time at PSU; worse than ever, in fact. Going to university would not fix my problems – only amplify them, as the kinds of solutions I sought simply did not exist in the places I was searching. Even so, my understanding of the problem in the first place was naive at best. Being a self-taught composer and producer, I believed my lack of traditional training and experience to be the culprit; that pursuing those things would eliminate the struggles I faced. However there was no special composition trick, production technique, or theoretical foundation that would flip an internal switch and solve everything – wish as I may. In reality, what I called stuckness stemmed from a tangled knot of yet-unidentified and unaddressed mental hurdles like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), creative anxiety, executive dysfunction, imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and more. ADHD falls under the neurodivergence umbrella, which itself simply

means a differing mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal (Gregory). Each of these concepts plays its part in contributing to an all-too-familiar phenomenon where a person finds themselves unable to either start or stay engaged in a given task, despite any level of internal motivation to do so. They are essentially frozen, unable to complete what they both desperately want and oftentimes need to. Stuckness.

Initially, stuckness may look and sound a lot like simple procrastination. Those who experience difficulties with executive function may have also heard “poor discipline and work ethic” thrown their way once or twice at least, for example. However, this is a dangerously common misconception when it comes to the very real and disabling symptoms that the neurodiverse face daily. Procrastination is the byproduct. According to Maisel, it is an anxiety state (207). Speaking from experience, those who are told often that they are lazy or not working hard enough internally adopt those toxic mentalities and become incredibly hard on themselves and dismissive of their struggles. Neurodivergence is the lens through which I interface with life, my craft, and my process by extension. So while psychology and neuroscience are outside the scope of this thesis, they play significant roles in discovering my ideal creative processes and how best to achieve my goals. Furthermore, it is for this reason that the findings in my experiences should be helpful to any neurodivergent creative – regardless of medium.

So when faced with the task of choosing a thesis topic, the question was not what to choose, but instead, how to approach the same line of inquiry that brought me to university in the first place. However, given that I have struggled with these obstacles my entire creative career (and arguably my entire life), setting a goal to ‘conquer’ them in a graded thesis is very risky business indeed. On one hand, this prospect could prove the perfect mix of high stakes and personal motivation necessary to get things done. On the other hand, it could just as easily cause

overwhelming anxiety to the extent of full creative paralysis, an outcome more in line with past trends. Thus, an important distinction was made early in the life of the project; instead of attempting to definitively solve or overcome anything, the primary goal of my research is to make meaningful progress toward the end of better understanding my creative process, the causes behind the challenges that arise, and how best to thwart them. This distinction took a massive amount of pressure away from the thesis prospect and allowed me the necessary wiggle room to operate in the face of the uncertainties that would – and did – arise during the process. ‘Did I make meaningful progress toward my goal?’ is a much more approachable yes-no question than ‘Did I finally overcome my challenges and fix everything?’.

To achieve this goal, I will be using a selection of concepts from the books within my pool of resources as lenses to retroactively analyze the experience of writing three pieces of music throughout the academic year; *Piano Étude #1 - Modulation in F*; *Machinations*; and *Police Chase*. Taking the form of a small portfolio and analysis, this thesis will explore my processes behind creating each portfolio piece while taking care to detail any challenges that arose in doing so. But more importantly, why they arose and how they can be avoided or resolved in future endeavors.

Literature

The first and smallest (but most quote-worthy) of the three books involved in my research is *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* by David Bayles & Ted Orland. It was recommended to me by a peer conducting a thesis on a similar topic but through the lens of lyrical songwriting. This book explores many of the reasons that most who attempt art, quit, and the underlying fears that lead to that fate (Bayles & Orland 1). Throughout its two parts and nine chapters, Bayles and Orland provide answers and explanations for anyone seeking

to better understand the role fear plays in the art-making process – including how to use that knowledge to both improve the experience and the art born from it. Art-making is synonymous with music-making (and most other creative mediums), so in turn viewing this book through that lens will provide the opportunity to identify the fears that commonly arise in my compositional process.

The next book is the most important one in my research; *Mastering Creative Anxiety: 24 Lessons for Writers, Painters, Musicians, and Actors from America's Foremost Creativity Coach* by Eric Maisel. I discovered this source through an inquisitive Google search detailing the symptoms of stuckness. The title immediately spoke to me when I saw it; a moment of understanding as soon as I saw the words ‘creative’ and ‘anxiety’ put together. The cover mentioning Maisel as “America’s Foremost Creativity Coach” intrigued me into finding out what such a figure would have to say about creative anxiety. Additionally, the peer who recommended the previous text to me received my recommendation for this one. Through its twenty-four lessons with built-in to-do lists, vows, and teaching tales, this admittedly painful book lays bare the simple truth about creativity; it will always include anxiety (Maisel 1). To manage this, Maisel also teaches twenty-two anxiety-quelling techniques for readers to try out and tailor to their unique experiences – something he stresses as the most important part (8). Given the very first lines of this book’s introduction immediately prompted tears and a knot in my stomach as I reflected on my music-making experience, I knew right away that it was going to be a painful but critically beneficial read.

The final book of the pantheon; *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is truthfully one I considered not including after having read it. Published in 1990, this highly acclaimed yet outdated book proposes that the secret to happiness is what

Csikszentmihalyi calls ‘optimal experience’, or ‘Flow’ – arguing that the frequency of its presence in a person’s life is the biggest contributor toward their sense of having lived a life of happiness and fulfillment (3). Essentially, the more you enter the ‘flow state’ the happier you are. This book was personally recommended to me by my composition mentor who also has ADHD, specifically for its promise of teaching one how to induce the coveted flow state at will. I was initially excited as we both agreed that this was the exact kind of skill I needed to kindle. But ironically, this book holds incredibly inconsiderate and condescending beliefs toward those who struggle with things like managing attention, anxiety, or self-doubt – even going as far as to bring up that many cultures in history considered those who could not master their thoughts and feelings not fully human and had to forfeit their right to community (Maisel 23). The author’s beliefs aren’t quite that bad, but they aren’t much better – basically arguing that achieving flow is impossible under such circumstances, implying throughout that those people will lead miserable lives without it. However, the reason I decided against its omission is due to it having just as much helpful and useful information as it does ignorant information.

Ultimately, the two biggest through-lines echoed across each of these sources are as follows; one must find nourishment in the work itself – anxiously avoiding creation because the process brings negative energy is doing both the creative and their would-be creations a huge disservice; pure knowledge or understanding of a problem does very little to solve it – it takes dedicated practice and careful implementation of the given methods or solutions before they can yield tangible results. In the words of Bayles and Orland, “Learn how to make your work *by making your work...* and lots of it!” (6). Something that can feel near impossible for the neurodiverse, unfortunately. A third concept that comes up in different ways across each resource is the idea that most people, deep down, already know what they must do to achieve their goals

or overcome their challenges – that it is fatalistic tendencies fueling inaction. As a person who needed to seek higher education to help illuminate ‘what I must do,’ I find the first half of that concept a bit patronizing. Though I do agree that many people are likely held back in their aspirations by deep-seated fatalistic beliefs, I relate to this sentiment to an extent. “...Fatalism: namely, that it is a species of fear – the fear that your fate is in your own hands, but that your hands are weak.” (Bayles & Orland 3).

My main takeaway is that if there were a single word to accurately encapsulate the source of my troubles, it would be anxiety. Anxiety also connects each book; fear is another facet of anxiety, and its presence inhibits flow. I would go as far as to say replacing ‘fear’ within *Art & Fear* with ‘anxiety’ wouldn’t change anything, nor affect the wisdom within. However, to finally realize that anxiety controls my process with an iron grip was incredibly relieving (albeit bittersweet) and serves as the justification behind my insistence that *Mastering Creative Anxiety* is the most important book in my research. That said, anxiety is something that can be managed, and thus an actionable solution is learning the methods and techniques necessary to do so.

To create and to deal with all the anxiety that comes with creating, you must acknowledge and accept that anxiety is part of the process, demand of yourself that you will learn – and really practice! – anxiety-management skills so that you can master the anxiety that arises, and get on with your creating and your anxiety management. It is too tragic not to create if creating is what you long to do, and there is no reason for you not to create if “all” that is standing in the way is your quite human, very ordinary experience of anxiety. (Maisel 2)

Methods

To do that, I chose six of the twenty-two anxiety-quelling techniques proposed by Maisel that seemed most realistic for me and tailored them to fit my unique needs. The following are the six personalized anxiety-management techniques I selected to put into practice throughout the project.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing entails breathing in and out deeply for five seconds each. This is the easiest and most effective way to communicate to your body and mind that you wish to be calmer, and acts as a base for combining with other techniques (Maisel 11). As an asthmatic, I am no stranger to breathing techniques.

Cognitive Work

Cognitive work is about monitoring what you are saying to yourself, disputing negative self-talk, and substituting those thoughts with positive ones when possible (Maisel 11). This one is extremely important for me, as I recognize that I am often subject to negative thought spirals that can stop me in my tracks no matter what I am doing.

Incanting

Incanting is about coming up with a personal phrase or saying that you can repeat to quell anxiety when it arises (Maisel 11). The phrases can be as long or short as preferred. I went with just the word “process” for example. They can also be tailored and adapted to fit each unique scenario. This is a great one to combine with deep breathing, as I often did.

Ceremonies and Rituals

Ceremonies and rituals is a preemptive method that entails separating regular life with creative time via a repeatable ritual like lighting candles, dimming the lights, or making yourself

comfortable in other ways (Maisel 14). Among my chosen methods were dimming lights, wrapping in a blanket, putting on comfortable clothes, and enlisting an accountability partner. I also consider the process of learning where and when one works most effectively during the day a big part of this too, though not included in the original description.

Anxiety Analysis

Anxiety analysis is the act of learning to pinpoint the moment when anxiety arises to analyze the triggers behind it (Maisel 10). This one is harder than it sounds, as it often takes a few moments to realize anxiety has crept in. The value here is shortening that delay time and addressing the anxiety as it appears to swiftly dispute it and note where it came from to prepare for it in the future.

Discharge Techniques

Discharge techniques are about the physical release of anxiety and tension in the body; screaming silently (or into a pillow), jumping jacks, walking, or taking showers are all examples of discharge techniques (Maisel 15). These techniques are familiar as I have naturally done this throughout my life, but employing them purposefully for anxiety specifically is not something I had tried yet.

Results and Retrospection

Piano Étude #1 - Modulation in F

The first piece in my portfolio and the first experience to be analyzed is *Piano Étude #1 - Modulation in F*. This piece was the result of a small challenge I set for myself in my composition lessons with my mentor, Kenji Bunch. The challenge was to compose a weekly étude (a short musical composition to improve or demonstrate a specific skill, concept, or

technique) using randomly selected attributes – such as the musical key, or tempo. *Piano Étude #1 - Modulation in F* was the first – and last – piece to come out of this challenge. But despite it falling through after the first attempt, the single piece born of it happens to be one I am quite proud of.

On the technical side of things, the goal for this étude was modulating (changing keys) to a distant key in thirty-two short bars of music. The initial key of F major was chosen at random, so naturally, I decided to reach for the farthest possible key from F in the circle of fifths; the key of B major. B major is a tritone (the most dissonant interval possible in Western music theory) away from F major. It would take some finesse to transition smoothly, especially with so few bars available to work with. The challenge made me excited, but nervous; excitement meant potential disappointment. At the time, I knew of two ways to approach modulation by a tritone. In simple terms, the modulation could happen suddenly whilst drawing attention to itself; or slowly and subtly, throughout an extended chord progression. The latter was the more interesting option in my eyes. Despite loving complex chord progressions (and spending a lot of free time analyzing progressions from my favorite pieces), I admittedly rarely ever begin a piece by mapping one out. Even now, one of my biggest goals is to expand the harmonic language expressed in my music, so this was the perfect opportunity to try a new progression-first approach that may aid in that end – even if it did lie squarely outside my comfort zone. Though before I could think of chords, I still needed to decide the structure and form of the piece. Thirty-two bars is extremely short depending on the tempo and form, so I decided on the simple ternary form (often represented by the letters/section markers ABA) at a slow and relaxed tempo of 85 beats per minute (BPM). The ‘A’ section would get eight bars, the ‘B’ section sixteen, and the final ‘A’ the remaining eight. This would allow me eight bars to set up the main musical

elements of the piece; sixteen to explore them and perform the modulation; and eight to contrast the first section with the repetition of its material in the new key. With these choices made, the outline of the piece was complete.

I would like to briefly mention a few specific concepts that informed my creative approach for this stage of the project. Bayles & Orland and Maisel both touch on a brand of anxiety caused by the necessity of constant decision-making in creative endeavors; Bayles & Orland in their subsection on imagination (79); Maisel in his chapter “The Anxiety of Choosing” (15). I have always been an incredibly indecisive person and find even the simplest of choice-making scenarios difficult in daily life. It only makes sense that this extends to creative choices as well. Maisel argues that typically people are entirely unaware of how much anxiety choice-making causes them and that the most common response is to subconsciously avoid the work to be spared from it (80). I also love the explanation Bayles & Orland propose, that a creative project’s potential is never higher or more magical than the moments before the first choice (15). With every decision made, what could have been is exponentially narrowed down to what is – and that causes real anxiety. The only thing that can be done is to accept the nature of this relationship and to keep it in mind while making decision after decision, making sure to commit to them as long as they remain reasonable (Maisel 80).

So in the spirit of making decisions and not overthinking them, I decided on a simple [I - vi - ii - IV - V - I] chord progression to kick off *Piano Étude #1*. This was filled out with extensions later, but establishing the framework of a simple chord progression had incredible power in allowing me to smoothly sketch out musical ideas. From there, the first eight measures of music appeared swiftly as I awoke from the elusive and unfamiliar flow state as described by Csikszentmihalyi; one of the few rare instances of this occurring. I knew that the second ‘A’

section in my ternary form should be a reprise of the first, so it was then a matter of copying and pasting the material of the first eight bars to the last – only transposed down to the new key.

These copied bars would be altered and varied later in the process but initially functioned as a rough guide for feeling the differences between the sonic characteristics of the two keys. The new key made the original material take a new melancholic tone, coming across as almost bittersweet or nostalgic. To further drive home this effect and pull on the heartstrings, I

significantly slowed the tempo by twenty clicks to a gentle 65 BPM. Next, the ‘B’ section. The hard part. I initially decided to go with the opposite of my tactic for the ‘A’ sections. Instead of mapping out a chord progression, I used my ear to follow where I felt the material transitioning out of the ‘A’ section naturally wanted to go. In following the line to its natural end (to my ear that is – these types of things are always subjective) I used up twelve of the fourteen bars

allocated in the outline. That left only four to perform the modulation and transition back to familiar material. This was problematic for a few reasons; it meant I could not rely on modulating via an extended chord progression as I planned, and I was fond of the material my ear led to and did not wish to change it. But the solution to this puzzle was quite simple!

Throughout my ear-led exploration, I ended up steering the harmony into D minor territory – the relative minor key of F major, the home key. That meant to begin approaching the sharps I would need for B major, I could let the new material cadence with a Picardy third into a Dmaj7 chord, introducing an F# and C# into the mix. Then all that’s left is setting up a perfect authentic cadence to the key of B major (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. *Piano Étude #1 - Modulation in F m. 19 - 29*

The most important aspect of the étude was how the modulation was handled, so naturally, that was the point in my process where I hit a bit of a wall. I initially attempted the modulation a few different ways in a separate ‘scratch’ score with little success, which in turn sowed early seeds of doubt and uncertainty into the rest of my process. Trying a thousand different ideas and scrapping each one of them for ‘not being right’ or ‘good enough’ is an unfortunate constant in my creative process. To put it into perspective, the majority of the outlining and composing had been done over a single evening, whereas the simple four-bar transition took the rest of the week. Those remaining four bars (m. 21 - 24) were written hastily and apathetically mere minutes before my composition lesson that morning. There are valuable lessons here, however. The first ties back to Maisel’s ‘Ceremonies and Rituals’ technique for anxiety-quelling. Learning your body’s prime productivity time and when best to capitalize is a crucial part of creating an effective personal ceremony or ritual. This led me to restructure my schedule around working in the mornings and early afternoons instead of late nights and evenings. For some, that simple change alone can dramatically improve productivity. Subsequently, this experience was also first-hand evidence of the value of learning to let go of expectations and criticism while working on a piece. I likely would not have finished the piece if

I was unable to reach that apathetic point of just wanting to get it done and over with. Sometimes ‘I guess it works’ is just as good as ‘good enough’ or even ‘great’ as long as it gets done. However, for a professional perfectionist like myself, such notions are challenging to adopt. Old habits do indeed die hard.

Overall, writing this piece was unexpectedly rewarding and straightforward. The roadblocks that arose did so late in the process, yielding ample time to work out technical details or shortcomings. The scope of the piece was challenging yet manageable, and that is likely the biggest reason behind it being a mostly smooth, *optimal* experience. Csikszentmihalyi believes that optimal experience/flow is supported by maintaining a sweet spot between constantly improving one's skills and seeking appropriate challenges as skills improve – tipping too far in any one direction resulting in anxiety or boredom (Fig. 2). Thus, I had accidentally manufactured the perfect scenario to cultivate flow. The format of an étude lends itself well as an approachable way to construct realistic challenges in line with current skills. I also chose a short length and focused on the goal of modulation, so in turn, I didn't feel too overwhelmed or outmatched by the task at hand.

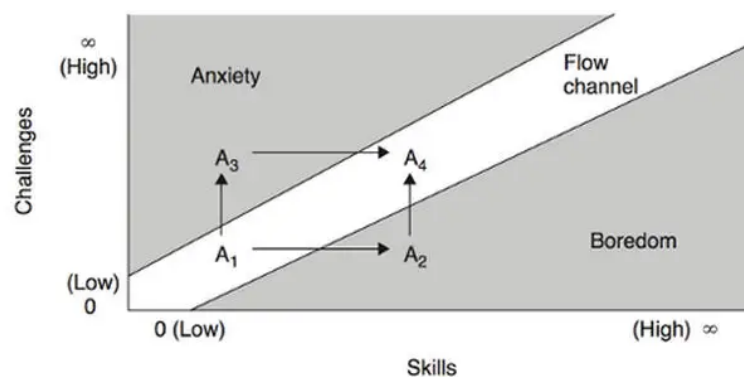


Fig. 2. (Csikszentmihalyi 74)

Machinations

Naively riding high from the success of my first attempt proved short-lived when what came next sucked all of those feelings of accomplishment and progress straight back out of the airlock. If there were any doubts about what my thesis subject needed to be, the experience of writing *Machinations* cleared them ten times over. An incredibly harrowing experience, to be blunt, but one that helped teach me many important lessons about my process and the true debilitating nature of the anxiety that often stands sturdy in the way of creativity.

Machinations began as a celebration. The news came through my email that I and a few other students in the composition area at PSU had been chosen to compose substantial pieces of music to be presented to and judged by the touring ensemble *Bang On A Can All-Stars* as a part of a masterclass they were hosting. This was a huge opportunity and one that sadly (and predictably) ended in disappointment. Each composer was given a free choice of instrumentation from a small list of available instruments with ensembles allowing up to five players. The composition was also to be at least six minutes in length, which is a significant task on its own. This was also the criterion that scared me the most, as I routinely struggle hard with extending ideas past the one-minute mark. Outside those parameters, the rest of the composition was left entirely up to the composer. This was also a scary prospect since I am among those who end up *more* overwhelmed when given complete freedom of expression. In situations like these, it's best to manually impose limitations or challenges where they don't exist.

The first mistake was my choice of instrumentation. It was a well-intentioned mistake, but a grave mistake nonetheless. Since I had been composing a lot of softer and slower music with strings and woodwinds throughout the previous year, I thought it would be a fantastic idea to try something new; something loud, fast, and with instrumentation akin to a jazz ensemble.

Trumpet, trombone, tenor sax, bass guitar, and drum set; instrumentation I had little experience writing for. This alone grew to blanket the entire process in a thick layer of doubt, uncertainty, and regret. The other factor behind my choice was my latest hyper-fixation on a new, taste-redefining album released by my favorite band that explores the sound world of horns and low reeds set to bumping bass guitar lines and groovy drum set patterns. I spent a lot of time analyzing that album as part of work that ended up being cut from the scope of my thesis; though it was work I would have done in my free time either way. My thought process was this; I would use the *Bang On A Can All-Stars* composition opportunity to practice writing in the style of my favorite album. Both to keep me excited about the project and to stay engaged throughout the anxiety-laden road I knew lay ahead of me.

Still jazzed with how smoothly the outline-first-based approach of *Piano Étude #1* ended up, I eagerly attempted the same strategy for *Machinations*. However, coming up with the outline for a six-plus minute composition is much more involved than it would be for something like a small étude in ternary form. So instead, I decided to borrow the structure of another piece I was analyzing for fun in my own time; the song *Heavyweight* by electronic artist Infected Mushroom (Fig. 3).

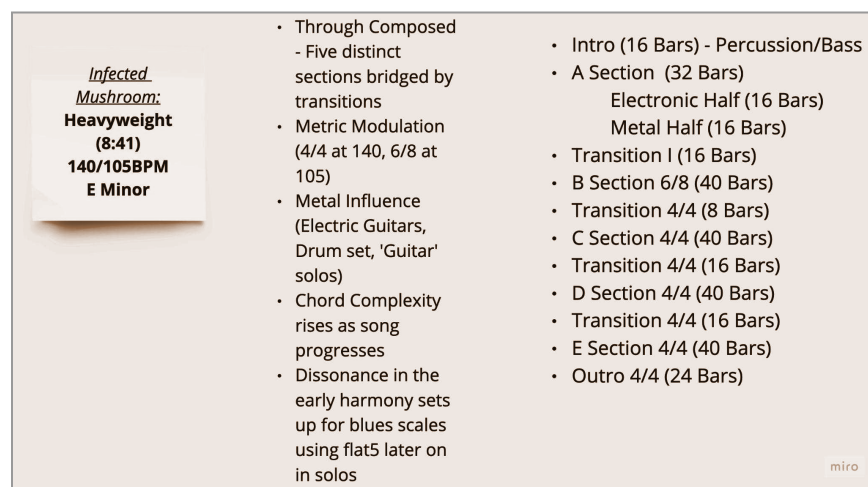


Fig. 3. *Heavyweight* analysis overview

I adopted many of the techniques employed in *Heavyweight* to then directly create an outline of my own by imposing its structural makeup onto a blank score. That way I had a map of my piece built into the score from the start, like a template of sorts. Then I could just fill it with original musical ideas using fresh instrumentation to make the piece my own. The original also toys with the relationship between two starkly contrasting genres, electronic dance, and metal – so I decided to imitate that relationship by substituting the electronic dance part of the equation with jazz-funk. And since *Heavyweight* is over eight minutes long, adopting its structure guaranteed that the length of my piece would be of similar length, thereby fulfilling the criteria for the composition. An idea I had to take the experiment further was to (digitally) handwrite my outline ideas and notes overtop this new template. I wrote key events and characteristics in words along the margins, while using simple lines to block out the sections and indicate melodic motion. I had never tried anything like this before, but the feeling of ideating through the piece and jotting down initial plans provided another wonderful sense of forward momentum. It allowed the space to let loose and continue the lessons in decision-making learned from *Piano Étude #1*.

By this point, the stress and anxiety was already setting in. The template idea sounded amazing on paper, but correlating my work with a work I hold in high regard was not the wisest move in hindsight. Correlation invites comparison; comparison invites anxiety. I could already feel myself approaching that familiar wall of procrastination-paralysis. So with that said, the hand-drawn outline idea once again came hastily at the behest of a particularly panicked catch-up session the morning I was to showcase my weekly progress (which was nothing) at my composition lesson that morning. Below is a snapshot of that outline (Figure 2).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Machinations". The score is written on five staves: Tenor Saxophone (Ten. Sax.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Trombone (Tbn.), Bass, and Drums (Dr.). The score is divided into two main sections by a vertical line. The first section is labeled "small transition/buildup into the main transition section" and the second section is labeled "Transition 1". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Handwritten annotations in black ink provide additional context and instructions for the performers. A large handwritten "B" is placed at the beginning of the second section. The score is numbered "45" at the top left.

Annotations:

- small transition/buildup into the main transition section
- Transition 1
- bridge the gap between rock vibes and jazz/funk vibes, setup the metric modulation to 6/8 - give the trumpet player some time to rest
- bring in some textural stabs, little runs, and tenor potentially dropping down to double bass guitar for texture
- instruments can drop here
- work in trombone somehow, perhaps doubling or playing off of the bass
- this section is all about the low end
- halftime feel, cymbals every other beat

Fig. 4. Outline snapshot for *Machinations*

Unfortunately, all the time invested in this outline was moot once I realized I was unable to translate my outline into actual music. The challenge was far above my current skill and experience level. I spent weeks scrapping many 'failed' attempts, desperately trying every technique I knew of to assist in getting this piece written. I tried waking up early, enlisting accountability buddies, using foundations of other works for inspiration, and anything else from my research (and even beyond) I could think of. But no matter what I tried, nothing I composed felt up to the standards of the opportunity I was involved in – that being a university-level composition masterclass. I couldn't bear the thought of presenting what I was making to a panel of professional musicians with substantial notoriety alongside the skilled works of the other chosen students. I was being extremely hard on myself, judging everything I tried so strictly that ideas never made it out of the idea stage. I became incredibly frustrated, anxious, and depressed. It got to such an unhealthy point that any attempt at working on the piece resulted in a near-instant panic attack where all I could think about was dropping the masterclass. So when I ashamedly turned in two out of the required six minutes of material after four extensions and was predictably told it was insufficient, I ended up withdrawing.

Rather than moving past the outlines to speak on the technical side of the music for *Machinations*, I would instead like to focus purely on the troubled process behind it. This too feels overwhelming however as I experienced nearly every concept explored by Bayles & Orland and Maier to a certain extent. Therefore it would be simpler to instead touch on the biggest contributors. First, the flow state was a stranger to the process. Everything felt extremely forced and sounded that way in turn. I was waiting for the moment I would finally slip into flow so I could knock out the piece in a matter of hours, but that moment never came. In the chapter “Fears About Yourself,” Bayles & Orland describe the fear that one is only pretending to be an artist in comparison to ‘real’ artists and that this belief is justified and amplified when the process isn’t going well (24). This begets a state where the artist is attempting to create intuitively while self-consciously weighing the effect of their every action (Bayles & Orland 25). This depicts my headspace during the writing of *Machinations* perfectly. Of course, the solution to this dilemma and secret to making good work is allowing oneself to make lots of work that *isn’t* good while weeding out the aspects that make it so (Bayles & Orland 26).

Another reason the masterclass opportunity provided such a harrowing experience was its innate ties to the fears and anxieties connected to the anxiety of approval. In other words, having people like what you make. Or in this case even worse, having them specifically there to judge what you make. For those who are not uncomfortable with confrontation, however, this is likely much less of an issue (Bayles & Orland 46). But for those like myself who specifically struggle with conflict (a common trait with ADHD), courting the approval of peers – or worse, judges – places a huge amount of power in the hands of the audience and brings with it intense amounts of anxiety (Bayles & Orland 47). This was absolutely the case in my experience as I found myself

slipping into thoughts about whether or not the judges or my peers would approve of the work I was making.

On a related note, I hypothesize that perfectionism is one of, if not the biggest, contributors to my anxiety. Perfectionism is something I have recognized in myself long before this research, and it continues to be a roadblock I cannot seem to get over. So rather than redundantly note the role it played in each experience, assume its persistent presence throughout.

... to require perfection is to invite paralysis. The pattern is predictable: as you see the error in the work you have done, you steer your work toward what you imagine you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do – away from risk and exploration, and further from the work of your heart. You find reasons to procrastinate, since to *not* work is to not make mistakes. (Bayles & Orland 30)

There's that word procrastination again. We've already established that it's a state of anxiety, but what does that mean in context? While procrastination is initially a byproduct, it itself produces more anxiety (Maisel 207). The longer one spends procrastinating, the more anxiety builds – until what was initially causing it is replaced by a mountain of problems in its place (Maisel 207). What's worse, this eats away at self-image via negative thought spirals, oftentimes taking the form of the criticizing voices heard throughout our lives: "Why don't we just do it? What are we waiting for? Why are we so weak, undisciplined, and cowardly?" (Maisel 207). The only way to break this vicious cycle is to recognize that procrastination can end instantly if one takes the time and effort to address what is bringing it on in the first place; to then use anxiety-managing techniques to handle it (Maisel 208).

The biggest takeaway from this experience however is how truly important setting and pursuing realistic goals are. I should not have taken the opportunity to begin with, or at the very least stayed within my comfort zone regarding instrumentation – as hard as that is to say. While these things are incredibly tough and potentially embarrassing to talk about, it is important to be transparent with our struggles as musicians. You never know how many other creatives are feeling alone and isolated with the same challenges. On a lighter note, I went on to run sound for the masterclass where I got to witness the brutal extent to which each piece was judged by each member of *Bang on a Can*, so perhaps I dodged a bullet in withdrawing in the end.

Police Chase

The final piece of my portfolio, *Police Chase*, was my last chance to put the concepts I had been studying into practice. Furthermore, another conclusion I came to through *Machinations* is that my workflow with traditional notation software suffers in comparison to working in digital audio workstations (DAWs) – despite traditional notation being the way I learned to write music in the beginning. *Police Chase* was written for my Music for Visual Media class, and thus provided the perfect opportunity to test my workflow in a DAW versus traditional notation. The assignment was to compose a looping background theme for a video game level either based on a real game level or a conceptualized one. I went with the latter option, imagining a car chase scene between a criminal and the police where the criminal is completely unbothered and barely trying.

Bayles & Orland teach that the lessons an artist needs to learn for their next piece are hidden within the shortcomings of the last (35). In the spirit of this, *Police Chase* was an opportunity to revisit the sonic character and instrumentation originally planned (and fumbled) for *Machinations*. The instrumentation fits the level I had conceptualized as well. This time,

however, the stakes were significantly lower. This piece would not be shown or performed by anyone, and it only had to be a few minutes long. This is an environment much friendlier to flow, and after the harrowing experience of *Machinations*, it is my pleasure to reveal that *Police Chase* indeed cultivated a level of flow even more potent than *Piano Etude #1* had.

I began by searching through a folder of saved musical sketches until I found one I wished to explore. I found a bouncy, jazzy, synth riff originally composed and discarded for *Machinations*. I naturally turned it into the main driving force of this piece; I dropped the sketch right into the project file and began building from there, following my ear instead of any specific outline or theory concepts this time. This approach doesn't always work. Fortunately this time it worked very well, and before I knew it the entire piece was finished and ready to turn in. Not only that, but I felt incredibly proud of both how the piece turned out and how I handled the challenges that arose. When working in a DAW, a trend I often fall into is trapping myself in a two-chord loop – something I have desperately wanted to fix. *Police Chase* is no different, but this time I allowed myself to say screw it and continue working on the piece anyway. The other hiccup that had arisen came from a lack of direction around the midway point of the piece. My initial ideas led to their natural ends, and I had no idea what to do next. This is a very common point I find myself at, but this time I let myself experiment with ideas even if they weren't perfect right away. This led me to test a forming hypothesis that starting with the rhythm or percussion section of a section before any pitch material would help give me a sense of direction if stuck. What started as sketching rhythms on the drum set turned into a whole extended drum set feature in what I would call my favorite part of the entire piece. I rode this momentum right up to the loop point, thus ending an incredible success in terms of the process alone. In terms of optimal experience.

Conclusions

Thus, we can put to rest that the simple act of taking realistic challenges in line with consistently improving skills and experience is the most effective way to achieve flow and find a sense of fulfillment from the process itself. There will always be anxiety that stands in the way of this, but it is the responsibility of the artist to not only study their craft but to study themselves and how they interface with it. To allow oneself to make choices and stick with them. To trust in the process. To work on anxiety-quelling techniques, and to commit to incorporating them into their routines. My project only showcases the beginning of a lifelong journey that I must carry out to truly find the future as a creative I envision – a journey that any artist could benefit from.

In order to truly wrap things up, I would like to be completely forthright and transparent. The initial plans for this thesis project involved much more than what ended up being covered here. The three books I chose were only meant to be the launching point in my research. Instead of the three pieces covered – which would have been a part of the research regardless – I had set out to compose an entirely new song complete with lyrics, recorded instruments, and a showcase of adopting techniques from my musical influences. Something I could officially release. That didn't end up happening, of course. I ended up getting so stressed out about the music I had to write that I anxiously avoided it until it was too late – an almost identical scenario to what went wrong with *Machinations*. There were supposed to be weekly musical sketches with reflections on my process where I then logged any difficulties that arise. I never ended up committing to that either, despite trying initially. Not to mention the dozens of articles and YouTube videos I set aside for the project that never got opened again. What's more, this is the part where I admit that Maisel's anxiety-quelling techniques I chose to commit to and employ did not have much of an effect either. This could be because I did not practice them enough or as diligently as I should

have, or they may simply just not work for me. In both cases, more experimentation is necessary to know for sure. During *Machinations*, I still felt as powerless as usual when everything went spiraling in a very familiar direction. Changing up my sleep schedule and trying to change when I was productive did not last long either, especially as anxiety built.

The very writing of this thesis was a massive source of anxiety and strain in almost every single way that has been applied to and used to analyze art or music thus far. There have been multiple extensions, multiple apologetic emails, cutting deadlines close, promises to figure it out by the next week, and coming up short – the usual. Stuckness comes with any creative endeavor, after all. This is unfortunately the reality of many under the neurodivergent umbrella, and I hope that my experiences can at the very least provide a sense of community or kinship with those who struggle similarly. On that note, a more personal conclusion I've come to is that seeking professional help for mental health and anxiety would be the best next step for me, as soon as financially able. In my experience, and even throughout the books discussed here – there just isn't enough consideration toward the struggles of the neurodiverse concerning creative theory, so working with a professional is the best way to receive support on that front.

Despite all this, however, the goal still isn't to fix anything. It isn't for me to finally put all my struggles to rest or find the secret thing that's been holding me back all along. It is to simply make meaningful progress toward better understanding my creative process, the struggles that arise, and how best to thwart them when they do. In that goal, this project has been an absolute success. One that is brutally honest, and hopefully strikes a chord with those who can relate. I have come away from this project with a better sense of what to do next for my creative goals than ever before. And *that* is the best I could have realistically asked for.

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