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Folio of Compositions

Chimera_52: The Genealogy of a Contemporary Composition Practice

Faculty of Fine Arts and Music
University of Melbourne

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Music (Interactive Composition)

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Abstract

This folio of work explores the composer’s compositional aesthetic through a method of creating one new piece of music per week for fifty-two weeks. This thesis expands upon the impressive literature in this field by providing a significant amount of music composed regularly over an extended time scale. It comprises one new musical work in fifty-two parts of recorded acoustic, electroacoustic and electronic works in varied styles experienced interactively through QR codes. A shorter curation of the entire composition is supplied, along with a written introduction followed by fifty-two blog posts that supplement the research. The resulting work demonstrates a synthesis of styles and techniques using multiple crafts and technologies.
Declaration of Originality

This is to certify that:

The folio comprises only my original work towards the Master of Music (Interactive Composition).

Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors Dr Anthony Lyons and Professor Mark Pollard for all your support, advice and guidance throughout my Masters’ candidature. Dr Lyons for his availability, insight and calm demeanour, and Professor Pollard for his large ideas and larger conversations.

To my family and friends thank you for your patience, support and love. Most of all my wife Anna Harvey, thank you for being with me every step of the way, listening to every piece of music and errant thought, being honest and having my back.
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Introduction

I am a composer and multi-instrumentalist working across a variety of musical genres including dance music, experimental pop, contemporary classical, interactive installations and music for media. I have made a career moving flexibly between disparate genres and this has fuelled an interest in the musical possibilities of combining elements and processes from each of these musical traditions. As a practitioner and in life, I am deeply connected to discipline in practice and achieving goals through regular small efforts.

Partly inspired by Sidney Nolan’s *Snake*¹ ² this masters project explores my compositional aesthetic through repetitive making. Nolan’s artwork resonated with me because of my history of instrumental practice, composition, fitness endeavours and exploration of meditation. I postulated that there would be much to learn of the principles underlying my music through repetitive making over an extended time-period, and that this point of view through the eyes of the maker would add some knowledge to the broader field of interactive composition research.

*Chimera_52* was a weekly compositional task that delved the theme of technology and humans and was published weekly for a year. It emerged from a synthesis of emotional and intellectual engagement with the theme of technology and at its centre is a single musical work in fifty-two parts, totalling two and a half hours of music, examining my personal compositional style. An individual blog post and image accompanies each part totalling twenty-seven thousand words, made available to the listener to provide deeper insight but secondary to the composition. They are viewable in their original form through the QR codes provided with the recordings and are collated in appendix 1.³

“Momentum: Experiential Development in Music Composition”⁴ by Natalie Grant was a year-long, cumulative composition and blogging project that set a methodological precedent. Grant composed one minute of sound art daily, created from field recordings which she weaved into a larger work to explore the effects of disciplined process on an art practice.

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² 1620 individual images drawn individually over the course of two years forming a giant snake when hung on a wall.
³ Each blog reflects on the compositional process for each part in the tone of a blog post by elucidating the theme, pre-compositional structures, inspirations and processes used. They contextualise the work emotionally, temporally and geographically and were a method for me to record a picture of my thoughts weekly.
⁴ Natalie Grant, "Momentum : Experiential Development in Music Composition" (2014).
Chimera_52 inherits this structure and shifts the focus by creating conceptualised musical works and blog posts weekly that create a roadmap of a compositional aesthetic.

It is intended that the experience of the work further engages the core technological theme, immersing the listener through interactivity. Chimera_52 was composed amidst and in reflection of many aspects of the modern online experience including constant new content, short attention spans and split attention across multiple media platforms. Thusly it is not necessarily a dedicated listening experience, rather one that is accessed through QR codes which direct to a blog post with image and audio. This further resonates with the making of the work, discussed in the following pages.

Considering the scale of the piece a shorter journey has been curated, analogous to the path created by Nolan’s Snake across his giant mural. This collection is one potential experience of Chimera_52 but many are possible including non-linear routes. By design the listener should be distracted by the blogs, the QR codes and the images. They have been included here as they affect the experience of the work, much as the knowledge of the making of Snake affects one’s experience of it.

Investigating Chimera_52 demonstrates an aesthetic that is mostly tonal. It blends a majority low fidelity sound world with high fidelity moments. A bed of contemporary western music sensibilities from electronic music, dance music, hip hop, krautrock and indie music provide a foundation for experimental sounds, tone colours, rhythms and timbres to feature occasionally, keeping the listener slightly off balance. Artistic influences are audible and varied, ranging from bands and artists such as Suicide, Björk Guðmundsdóttir, Scott Walker, Giant Claw, Radiohead, Lost Animal and ESG to composers such as John Luther Adams, Nico Muhly, Holly Herndon, Donnacha Dennehy, Jonny Greenwood and György Ligeti.

Each Monday a new musical section was composed through a process that combined conceptualisation, improvisation and recording. The thoughts and ideas were recorded in a journal at the end of each composing session. Ideally, the concept and main themes were solidified by Tuesday with the bulk of recording, editing and mixing performed on Thursday and Friday.
On the following Monday morning, the practice began again. After the initial composing session, a short blog post was written and edited describing the previous week’s work. The finalised elements were then uploaded to music sharing website Soundcloud\(^5\) and blogging platform Tumblr\(^6\).

It should be noted that during this time I was working flexibly two to three days per week alongside touring regularly nationally and internationally. The work was completed around these obligations with Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays largely dedicated to composing.

The year time frame and regular iterations provided space for development, observation and reflection. But it should also be noted that the weekly deadline put a developmental cap on each part, and as such they can be viewed as similar to sketches or demos. Much like the individual parts of Nolan’s *Snake* inform the giant mural as a cohesive work, each part of *Chimera_52* informed the growing musical work.

| Monday          | • New work begins: research, improvisation, reading, experimentation  
|                 | • Blog for the previous week assembled  
|                 | • Listen to previous week’s work, quality check  
|                 | • Previous week’s work and blog published  
| Tuesday         | • Work continues – solidify concept, pre-compositional structures  
|                 | • Journaling and reflection  
| Wednesday       | • Improvisation and studio experimentation  
|                 | • Journaling and reflection  
| Thursday        | • Recording  
|                 | • Journaling and reflection  
| Friday          | • Recording, production experimentation, mixing  
|                 | • Journaling and reflection  
| Saturday        | *No work except for busy periods*  
| Sunday          | *No work*  

*Figure 1 An ideal composing week*


Chimera_52 has shown me that the interplay of three principles and the elements that extend from them underpin my compositional aesthetic. Throughout this enquiry work was composed regularly, over an extended period, accompanied by reflection on each section of the piece and the elements that inspired it. I learned that I approach composing intuitively and intellectually\(^7\) and combine disparate methods and techniques to produce music. Concepts and themes are established, then pre-compositional structures, chance techniques, cryptograms, structure maps, number to note conversions and found sounds are used to generate material. Material is developed by improvising with instruments, electronics, recording equipment and cut-up techniques. Challenges were created by using uncommon time signatures or exploring new ideas like spectral composition to produce new music directions. To record and finalise work the laptop studio setup is used, oscillating between software and hardware intuitively. The subtle and not so subtle mesh of these elements is evident across the fifty-two parts of Chimera_52.

\(^7\) For the purposes of this discussion, intellectual refers to analytical and reasoned steps in process, while intuitive refers to subconscious and instinctual responses.
American composer Holly Herndon explains “There is always some kind of conceptual framework”\(^8\) to her work. Discussing her 2015 album *Platform*\(^9\) she notes that “some tracks start with concept, others start with a musical idea – or an atmosphere or emotional pull. But there is always some underlying concept”\(^10\). Herndon’s work and ideas resonate with *Chimera_52* as she draws together material from her life to compose with both intellectually and emotionally. Her process is an interplay of visceral and cerebral responses to source material and any element of her immediate physical or virtual environment may become the subject of her exploration.

I have learned that establishing a concept or theme for a piece of music is elementary to my compositional aesthetic. Every part of *Chimera_52* began with a concept. These concepts were drawn from my immediate surroundings including news articles, podcasts, friends, musical heroes, technological devices and were largely triggered as points of interest by connection to the overarching theme of the project. For example, #51 *Bob and Alice* draws its concept from a news article about two Artificial Intelligence programs that developed their own language while problem-solving together. Conversely, #3 *Walking*, #4 *Running*, and #5 *Burning* use the concept of fitness trackers while #10 *Quokka Island* is a response to a physical environment and #37 *Tired* is an emulation of an inspirational piece of music.

Experimenting in various ways with numbers to generate musical material defined much of the gestational work for *Chimera_52* and this interest is reflected in and connected to the work of Nico Muhly. His second album *Mothertongue*\(^11\) combines a high degree of conceptualisation, emotion and integration of musical styles and ways of making. Opening track *Mothertongue* explores the way “numbers come to define a person’s life by layering multiple tracks of mezzo-soprano Abby Fischer singing and chattering Zip codes, past addresses and other data, interleaved with a range of other musical episodes, from swelling string chords to electronic growls to the static sound of a frying egg.”\(^12\)

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10 Saxelby, ”10 Radical Ideas That Inspired Holly Herndon’s Platform”.
I have come to understand that these experiments and frameworks serve as an impetus that I respond to intuitively and intellectually. An example of numerical experimentation can be seen in the use of cryptograms. A musical cryptogram is a technique of deriving a sequence of musical notes from a given source via some logical relationship between notes and letters. A basic example of the technique is displayed in #14 Coffee, where the word Coffee was used to create a series of notes. A more complex example of this technique can be observed in #30 Pocket Fritz 4 vs Rodriguez Vila, where the first forty-four moves of a chess game were used to create a melodic motif.

Another catalyst and structural feature is the use of non-standard time signature patterns, usually pentuple or septuple. I have observed that I make such choices to place myself outside of my comfort zone musically in the hope of creating new ideas. This concept occurs on many levels in the music of Chimera_52 from micro elements such as rhythmic and melodic ideas to macro textural juxtapositions and mood changes.

It is integral to my compositions to seek beneficial outcomes from unplanned events and mistakes through improvisations. Effects pedal and laptop improvisation developed textural and formal material many times throughout Chimera_52. Composed and recorded material was re-recorded as live improvisations of melodies through effects pedals to create new music. The same process was used with software plugins such as Max4Live’s buffer shuffler. In fact, improvisation features in some form in every part of Chimera_52 from the development of melodic and harmonic material to lyric writing and formal concerns.

After observing the melange of textures and sound qualities combined in various parts of Chimera_52 it seems a parallel can be drawn between my aesthetic and the DIY/Lo-Fi music movements. I search for imperfections and interesting sonic artefacts to weave into the musical texture. There are more parallels with the work of Holly Herndon and Nico Muhly here.

\[\ldots\]

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13 #14 Coffee is not included in the curated version but can be accessed on page iii of Appendix 1
14 Do It Yourself
Composing music weekly for a year produced a folio of work that demonstrates my compositional aesthetic. Conceptual ideas were used to begin musical works and the development approached both intellectually and intuitively. Material is sought for concepts intuitively from the local environment such as news articles, conversations, podcasts, other media and past works. Pre-compositional structures influence the process, and interactivity deepens the engagement to the theme while also reflecting the creation of the piece. *Chimera* _52 is one big pre-conceived structure to work within. Various methods of converting numbers to musical material were featured. Moving between improvisational techniques in various forms to theoretical and technical composing is featured, and used often used to circumvent creative blocks.

Listening to the work overall a compositional voice emerges towards the end of the project. Extreme stylistic deviation happens less, especially in the last ten parts. Over the course of the year a honed set of techniques developed by repeatedly using the same equipment, devices and processes. Further research is needed comparing data from the blog posts and the musical output, but is beyond the scope of this enquiry. Moving forward I would like to continue exploring the theme of technology through interactive artworks that blur boundaries between media, artwork, performer and audience.

Experiencing *Chimera* _52_ recalls the image of Nolan's Snake, a giant chimera of colour and shapes stretching and weaving across the wall. The individual parts of this project stretched in many directions, searching and experimenting, pulling together ideas and colouring them with my aesthetic. Though difficult, the year-long task that I set myself helped me grow and has added some knowledge to the field of Interactive Composition research. In the year since I have finished I have found that I approach all new work with a confidence born of self-knowledge and skill. I perceive a voice in my work that grows with each iteration and I continue to reach further into new territory.
Bibliography


Appendix 1
Recordings - *Chimera_52*

While the pieces are presented here in order of composition, it is not necessary to listen to them linearly. Rather, scan where the eye leads you or your interest takes you.

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Appendix 2

Blogs

#1 Message
August 3rd, 2016

It was HARD to start this piece. After the freedom of my holiday period (two weeks of writing every day!), adjusting to writing around my work routine has sucked. This combined with a niggling fear that I was creatively "spent" after those two weeks. As I seem to keep discovering though, the solution was to shut my head up and just experiment. As soon as I have an instrument in my hand things begin to flow.

I began with an idea left over from another session - a sexual relationship with a mobile phone. Dark and driving, with masturbation or some sort of sex act as a metaphor for receiving a message and wanting to read it...

#2 Phone
August 7th, 2016

#2 Phone - I had a cough all week. This piece really grew out of a necessity to keep going - I was so busy that I didn't really have the luxury to stop and think if I liked anything, just had to keep improvising, writing and recording.

Most of the sounds are from the stock iPhone sounds, mutilated through pedals and the computer. The lyrics were inspired by a page from In Watermelon Sugar, a very bizarre and otherworldly Richard Brautigan book I'm reading...it's a chapter about the narrator’s name and he throws up all these poetic moments in place of a name.

I travelled to Sydney and had the pleasure of seeing the New Romance exhibition at the contemporary art museum. Australian and Korean artists explore art and the posthuman, very inspiring and hoping to include some themes in future work.

Final mix finished at the hotel bar
#3 Walking

_August 15th, 2016_

I’m experimenting with the form of the blog element at the moment, writing into Instagram from my phone was a little infuriating and I’d like the opportunity to go into more depth about the development of the work. So…

I bought myself a fitness tracker a few weeks back and I’ve been using it religiously ever since, in keeping with some of my more obsessive traits and much to my wife’s amusement. During my first morning of writing this week it occurred to me – why not use some of the data from the tracker in a work? And then better yet, why not have a series of works that connect to the data? So _#3 Walking_ is the first of three works that use the Garmin watch data as inspiration.

The first set of data I have used is my daily step count. Before I get into that, I should give some background on the other inspirations for the piece, it’s a bit of a flip musically: On my Monday morning run this track came on by composer Nico Muhly. His album _Mothertongue_ made it onto my iPod through one of my favourite podcasts - Meet The Composer – the theme music is the opening 20 seconds of the album. I always loved the theme, and then of course _Meet The Composer_ did an episode on Muhly etc. The album has some very beautiful moments and his work with other more pop-orientated musicians is worth a listen.

So what really struck me about this piece was the way the initial explosion of sound moved into the beautiful folk tune. I wanted to see if I could pull off a similar move, so I decided to use his form as a template. I adjusted the idea to reflect the timeline of a morning walk – from waking from a dream, heading out into the morning and having a moment of clarity, to wandering off into the mess of the rest of the day.

First I played with a simple chord progression. Lyrically I experimented with William Burroughs’s cut-up technique, I was taking words from science texts and cutting them up to make new things. I wasn’t liking the results so I wrote a short poem about a walk down to the
creek near my house. The Burroughs technique came in handy later though - I cut this poem up to create the lyrical structure of the beginning section.

Defining structural elements is always very helpful to my process. I get a kick out of finding ways to use data to define or restrict things in my writing. So I took my steps from Monday, 16395, and converted them to tones, B, E, C#, G and D#. I was working in B (ish) and decided to use the numbers as semitone intervals (you could use anything really, scale degrees etc). Tuesday’s steps, 6233, became time signatures, 6/8, 2/4, 3/8 and 3/4. My reasoning with the bottom numbers was to confuse the pulse. Wednesday’s steps (10463) became time signatures – 104bpm and 63bpm. This is an intuitive process with no real rules, just find a way to use the numbers.

These tone rows and rhythmic ideas feature in the opening and last sections. The last section has the daily steps actually sung. Oh and my cat Walter kept interrupting me so I recorded his purring. I think I pulled the first transition off somewhat, not so sure about the end. I had a hell of a lot of fun getting my folk/country on and playing with a bit of sound collage. This post is already blowing out, and I have left out so many things that influenced me this week. I really loved this podcast featuring Maria Popova, in particular what she has to say about writing for yourself. Check it out. Please let me know any thoughts you have here, over on Soundcloud or Instagram. I will be seeing out this trilogy of works and then having a friend join me for a week.

#4 Running

*August 22nd, 2016*

Super busy week! My schedule was thrown about a lot, I ended up with a few hours Tuesday morning to plot and scheme about this piece, and then most of Friday to record. This is what I came up with, and get ready for some nerd out…

Continuing on from last week’s work, I wanted to somehow keep using data from my Garmin fitness tracker to shape the piece. As I’ve mentioned and will probably keep on mentioning, having this type of starting point is really helpful in my process – it doesn’t matter how I end up using the info, it’s just that I have something to focus on, to box in infinite possibilities that are so daunting when you sit down to make something.
Last week focused on steps and walking, why not look at running? The watch has a setting where you can track your run, it also provides a graph of your last four hours of heart rate data. My original idea was to use the graph information, but there seems to be no way to get it off the watch into a form that is easier to read and select numbers from. What you CAN do is get an excel spread of your heart rate data from a selected activity from within the online component of the app – such as a run. Cool! I set out to use the changing heart rate as tempos, and maybe even changing pitch centres.

So I’m thinking and tinkering with all this on Tuesday morning when I notice that it’s actually a beautiful day – why not get out on a jog, track it with the watch, take the Zoom h4n to record audio and use your phone to grab some vids? I got a fair few odd looks on the Merry Creek trail loping along with headphones in, trying to film and keep the Zoom’s mics somewhat protected from the wind. Regardless it was fun and I got some great footage. The heart rate data from that run ended up being a little boring, so I used one from last week when I had a range of 60ish up to 190bpm.

Unfortunately when you export this info to the excel file it only gives you average heart rate for every 2.5 minutes or so…because of my time restrictions I decided to just roll with that instead of wasting time digging around trying to figure out how to get more. I ended up with an hour of data, which I wanted to condense into 3 mins. Mapped out in my Logic session, about every 7 seconds I have a changing time signature (correlating to my heart rate changes) and a changing pitch centre (from the same number). For example – my beginning heart rate is 67 bpm, so the opening tempo is 67 and pitch centre is C plus 42 cents (you can put numbers into this nifty frequency to pitch converter, 67Hz is equal to C2 plus 42 cents). The second section moves to 136bpm with a tonal centre of C# minus 33. For more info on the cents stuff, and if you want to really fall down the rabbit hole, Google some things on equal temperament and the harmonic series (feel free to get in touch if you want to geek out on this).

The abrupt switching between keys and tempos reminded me of the Burroughs cut-up technique from last week, and both together reminded me of a game I played in first year Uni.
Cobra is an improvisation game created by composer John Zorn. It involves a group of musicians responding to a series of cards held up by an adjudicator or conductor, whilst trying to get the conductor to do what THEY want via a series of hand signals. There’s a bit of a learning curve, but once you get the hang of it with a group of people you can end up making some crazy blocks of sound. And it gets very competitive! I chose to experiment with Zorn’s ideas to produce the rest of the material for this piece.

My game looks like this – three hats have a series of cards in them. Hat one: has the numbers 1 – 12, which tell me how many instruments I have to use for a given block. Hat two: has each instrument (Voice, Synth, Alto Sax, Tenor Sax, Clarinet, Percussion, Elec Guitar, Acoustic Guitar, Slide Guitar, Bass, Rx11 and Vibraphone – I just looked around my room at everything I had lying around). Hat three: has different things I think when running – cute dog, I ain’t going to make it etc.). Pull a card from each hat and you have the ingredients or your first block of sound. For example, the first block came out as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hat One</th>
<th>Hat Two</th>
<th>Hat Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Clarinet</td>
<td>“Not going to make it!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alto Sax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slide Guitar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acoustic Guitar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vibraphone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this point, grab the first instrument on the list and start jamming the vibe indicated by hat three. Grab the next instrument and add to the first. So-on and so-forth.

On Friday I got going in the morning and went through till 5pm with a break for lunch and the gym in the middle. It took a while! I pulled up stumps with about two minutes of music finished. Some moods ended up getting repeated, so I would reimagine them with the new set of instruments. I wish I had another day to keep playing the game, but maybe I can use the format again at some point – I still have 48 weeks of this to go!
#5 Burning

*August 29th, 2016*

I mentioned a few weeks ago that a comment Maria Popova made really resonated with me – always write for yourself. Writing for yourself as your main audience is something that comes up for me quite a bit, and this project has only thrown the idea further into the spotlight. I’ll always have one listener, and I mostly know what he likes, although he is a fallible creature and prone to abrupt changes of direction…

This week’s work is number 5, titled Burning, referencing the daily burning of calories as recorded by my fitness tracker. I began as in the previous two weeks of this trilogy, by exploring the data in my watch and trying to find ways to use it to constrain my writing. Here’s a condensed version of my process, skip it if the numbers bore you!

I wrote down the previous 7 days “active calories”, I am fairly sure this means the calories I burn through moving about and not those I burn from just being alive. They looked a little like this – 1168, 1149, 1276, 490, 971, 963 and 272.

I experimented with using the numbers as a series of chords, a technique I have used in the past. There’s a couple of ways to go about it – you can say 1 or 0 is the tonic, and then the other numbers can be scale degrees or intervals from the tonic. In this case I went for 1 being the tonic, and the other numbers being scale degrees – if 1 is G, 6 is Em etc.

These choices are arbitrary and I use them to generate interesting info to be used as a creative springboard. For example, playing through the chords forwards was boring to me, so I tried backwards (272, 369 etc.) and liked it much more. Looking for a way to generate a time signature, I thought of 5 meals a day, 7 days a week - 5/8 and 7/8 (which actually sounds a lot like 12/8 in this work).

I started jamming with these ideas, and a very Ween-esque vibe began to emerge. Initially I was worried that it wasn’t in keeping with the previous two pieces in the fitness tracker series…but I was having so much fun! And kept on doing so. I added a sultry, off-kilter Sax line. After each instrument was recorded I would re-amp it through my various pedals and perform an effects jam to create another layer of interesting textures.
The last element was the vocal line. By this point I had what sounded like a weird smoky love song. I wanted to play on the idea of this obsession we have with diets and calories. This almost sexual desire many people have to lose weight, look good naked. This led me to riffing on the cyclic nature of burning, we put things inside us as fuel, eventually we become fuel and have come from fuel. Nants ingonyama and all that. This is what I came up with:

_Burning_

_The first fire gave a light_
_The long night’s pyre pushed the dust_
_Then pulled by trust the dust formed an eye_
_That burned in deep night with the beginnings of you and I_

It’s a little out there but I like the imagery. I also had fun with the rhyming scheme, trying to rhyme the last word of each line first and then a word from the first part of the previous line. This is an important example of a creative process for me – various methods of generating material, including just free jamming/noodling/playing with numbers etc. until hitting a spark of inspiration. At which point it is ok to throw it all out the window. Trash it! Chase that little thing until you’ve caught it and brought it into the world. Or maybe you lose it, but have a killer time in the process.

#6 Connected

_Sepember 5th, 2016_

_“The artistic process seems to be mythologized quite a lot into something far greater than it actually is. It is just hard labour.” – Nick Cave_

Arguably, successful composing/songwriting/word writing is something like 70% showing up and 29% being prepared. It was tough to get going this week and the entire process consisted of a truckload of work and a sprinkle of inspiration.

Monday I went through my usual morning routine, about which I am becoming more militant as this year wears on. It looks something like:

1. 6:00am Rise (I get up this early because my wife does, and it’s nicer to do things together)
2. Meditate 10 – 15 mins
3. 6:20am Exercise 1 hour (sometimes this happens before lunch)
4. 7:30 Shower, Cook Breakfast
5. Write things that would make the day awesome in journal
6. Eat breakfast
7. Make a coffee and read a little news (trying to move the news reading to later in the day but can’t kick the habit)
8. 8-8:30 Start composing/writing, usually until midday

If my morning happens like this I am so happy. If I could live the rest of my life like this, I would be so happy. There is something about this routine that works for me, and something about writing in the morning the leaves me feeling fulfilled (most of the time). Maybe I will eat my words in 10 years and hate it, but somehow I doubt it.

Back to the story though, beginning my new piece this week was difficult. I felt quite good about last week’s work, so maybe I wasn’t ready to move on. Possibly I was feeling a little drained from having to constantly begin anew every week. Definitely it is difficult to just begin immediately without a small period of idea gestation. Hopefully I will develop a routine with this, accepting that it is ok to ruminate a little of a Monday morning on the weeks work to come.

I put on Björk’s *Where Is The Line*, from the album *Medulla*. I have been a little obsessed with this album since my mentor Anthony Lyons introduced me earlier this year. I love the textures, harmonies, the commitment to pretty much voice only as instrumentation, the forms…I toyed momentarily with using the track as a model somehow for this week’s work but felt a little unconfident about it for some reason. By the end of the session I had a short melodic motif that I had begun to set to different chords.

The next evening I was preparing a lesson for a composition student and came across this article about Ligeti. Ligeti is one of my favourite composers, he wrote music that I would happily listen to whilst floating off into oblivion. The main point of the article is that Ligeti used Bartok’s String Quartet number 4 as a model when he wrote his *String Quartet No. 1: Metamorphosis Nocturnes*. This was all the encouragement I needed, so I decided to model this week’s work on Björk’s song.
I wrote out a temporal map of the work (pictured below, complete with spelling mistakes and incomplete sentences). For each section I noted elements that I felt were important e.g. in section A1 I wrote “Disjointed beat based on theme, long clashing chord sequences, extreme range, synth backup/dovetail”. I constructed the form-map in Logic and set about adding my theme to the structure, and emulating the directions I had written for myself.

It was about halfway through my session on Thursday morning that I realised I had bitten off more than I could chew. Just in terms of the sheer amount of stuff I had to write and record to fill out the map. It was particularly difficult knowing my time was limited and that to meet the deadline I had to keep on going even if I was unsure of a recording take or part I had written. If I didn’t completely hate it I had to keep moving.

By the time I pulled up Friday lunchtime for an exercise break, I was fairly convinced I had run off track. The overall vibe wasn’t working for me. I came back fresh that afternoon to finish it for better or for worse. The turning point was when I re-amped groups of instruments through my effects pedals. The original Tenor Saxophone line, although rhythmically interesting, had begun to feel really stale. With a little experimentation on my Memory Man
I found this great effect involving the reverse delay, adding a fun texture to the line. I went through this process with most of the parts and it added a new layer of interesting timbre to the work, revitalising it for me. This little moment of improvisation really invigorated me. It is often hard to remember to experiment or do something a little crazy when I’m in the midst of creative labour, but it’s usually worth the effort.

#7 Cascading

*September 12th, 2016*

In philosophy, a Rhizome is a non-hierarchical structure of interconnected events and information. I find myself drawn to the concept more and more during the work for this project as each piece unfolds with multiple points of reference. They interconnect, but not in a “tree of knowledge” kind of way where there is a beginning, middle and end to the influences. Instead I see multiple points of influence and attraction that exert force on each other, a continuous system where the push and pull energy is driving the creativity.

And let’s step right back from the precipice there, I have been reading a lot of Deleuze and Guattari in an attempt to begin to find a method of framing this work. My Masters’ confirmation is coming up this week and I am a little deep in it!

About two years ago a friend from uni (really can’t remember who, chime in if it was you!) recommended I go to see a show at the Toff In Town in Melbourne. It was a solo saxophone player who goes by the name of Colin Stetson. I wish I could remember how they convinced me to go as I am not really a fan of jazz and you could be forgiven for assuming a sax player would be beeping the old bop…regardless it turned out to be up there with my top five shows, so thank you random uni friend.

Colin Stetson fits somewhere in the contemporary minimalist and improvisation traditions. His music is often performed solo on a saxophone which he has mic’d specially to emphasise the clicks and thumps of his keys. He circular breathes for most of his pieces, often playing for 15 to 20 minutes without stopping (when I saw him the first one went for 25!). Stetson has a throat microphone and sings WHILE HE IS PLAYING THE SAXOPHONE. The guy is off tap. The show I saw was a religious experience. The sound was overwhelming, it filled the entire space, the effect of micing the small and intimate sounds of his instrument and magnifying them through the Toff’s impressive PA was devastating.
A song of Stetson’s came on while I was going for a walk on Monday morning, as seems to be a bit of a theme at the moment. It was on my mind that I had less time than usual this week as I was heading off on Friday for some shows at the Junction Arts Festival in Launceston, and I have a rule about not working on the weekends with this project (or anything at the moment, I want some life dammit). Combine this with work and I essentially had two days to make the piece happen. Performing some sort of Saxophone improvisation seemed like a great idea.

I returned home and played around with ideas. A feature of Stetson’s work is cascading arpeggios and minimalist motifs. I improvised some of my own and found that if I broke the riff into a 5/8 feel it sounded less like a complete rip of his music. This signature has featured in many of the works so far, so I like the symmetry also. I created a simple riff that moved between E and F. Then for a midsection I added a move up to G, which freed up my right hand to modulate my effects pedals.

I returned to the work on Thursday. I set up a dynamic microphone running through my pedals and then a condenser microphone next to my right hand to pick up the thumping and clicking of my playing. Lastly, on a whim I placed a second condenser microphone in the next room (the kitchen). On testing the sound I found that this produced a delay/reverb effect that I found very pleasing. Once I was satisfied everything was working I performed two improvisations, the second of which I used for this week’s work.

Circular breathing for nearly three minutes is pretty weird. You get quite puffed and the first time through I got very light-headed! It felt really great to just bash something out led by intuition. So far I feel like the pieces in this project have been a little dance of planning and intuition, and it was nice to just let it all go and play.

#8 Chatbot Love Song
September 19th, 2016

Some days it’s easy and some days it’s hard, and some days you would rather poke your own eyes out than keep lugging your musical rock up the creative hill. It was a hard week. I was burnt out, distracted and grumpy. It was very rainy in Melbourne, I didn’t sleep much over
the weekend and I was very busy with work commitments. Winge winge winge. But I pushed through and made something, so here is the story…

Beg, Borrow Steal

A good way of getting past a blank page is to cover it with other people’s work. Some people have an instinctual negative reaction to this idea, but many of my friends in all areas of creative practice use work they admire as a springboard to new ideas. It is art feeding art and I see nothing wrong with it. In my experience it has a positive use for both the beginning and experienced practitioner. The beginner will emulate artists they admire while often not possessing the skill to move far beyond this emulation. There is nothing wrong with this. It is learning, the best kind of self-directed, fumbling in the dark learning that elicits deep change. As the artist develops a personal aesthetic the final works grow further away from the beginning kernel until they often become barely related.

So once again I began my week by listening to some music. Literally the first song that came up was Mistress by Nicolas Jaar, a beautifully mutilated recording of a piano solo. Jaar is a recording artist based in New York and his track ended up in my collection thanks to my ever-tasteful brother-in-law Ezra. I was struck by the mood of the piece and decided to use the vibe as a starting point for this week’s work. I went for a walk around the block listening and thinking, and was struck by the notion of a chatbot love song – a lonely ode in a digital ocean.

Binary Ideas

I’ve always wanted to try creating music using binary code. I researched techniques and did a little tinkering, producing a usable method very quickly. Here’s how it works:

Grab a word or sentence you wish to convert. In my case I used I LOVE YOU, this being a love song and all. Find yourself a binary-to-alphabet conversion table and make your code!

Mine looked like this (each word has its own line):

01001001
01001100 01001111 01010110 01000101
01011001 01001111 01010101
For the pitch:

I added each series of 8 numbers together to produce a number I then converted to a scale degree. So the first, in this case the letter I, is $0+1+0+0+1+0+0+1=3$. In the key of C the 3rd degree is E. After adding them all up you are left with a tone row – E, E, G, F, E, F, G, F.

For the Rhythm:

Each separate number is equivalent to a quaver or 8th note, which adds up to an entire bar for each letters code. A 0 means rest, a 1 means a note occurs. So a bar containing 01001001 would equal quaver rest, note, rest, rest, note, rest, rest, note. I chose to allow my notes to sustain over the rests to produce a lyrical melody. I added my tone row to the template, repeating until I had filled all the notes in and came up with this:

These decisions are arbitrary. You could come up with plenty of different ways to convert code to melody, and if anyone does please get in touch as I’d love to see and hear it.

Pushing Code Up Hill

It was all pretty straight forward from this point. The next day it was pouring rain so I set up a microphone in my kitchen where the rain roars on the tin roof. I recorded myself performing the melody a few times over with this microphone and two closer. I then harmonised the melody in ways I found pleasing, a little alien and alone. Most of the rest of the work was in finding interesting ways to mix the sounds and different microphones. As I mentioned at the beginning though, I lost the will a little. For some reason I wasn’t attached to the work, but for better or for worse I persevered to finish it. I suspect this won’t be the only week that I feel flat and unattached and I am thankful that my eighth week is the first that I’ve felt this way – pretty good average. Thanks for reading and please feel free to let me know any thoughts.
On the road again! I’ve had a peaceful 3 months of routine, wife and friends. Now the summer gig season is kicking off some of these pieces will be written and recorded on the road – not quite sure how this will work! I’m blogging in the front seat of the tour van, about an hour out of Wave Rock in Western Australia but this week’s piece was recorded at home before I left. It’s the first collaborative Chimera – I was provided with a 3-minute composition and produced a reaction to it.

Nigel Tan is a composer, video artist, dapper Singaporean and good friend of mine. We met during our undergrad composition degree at the Victorian College of the Arts. Nigel was quiet at first…as in he didn’t say a word to anyone. During our lab class led by New York experimental composer David Shea (who is worth his own blog post and collab, hopefully later), we all had the opportunity to perform an improvisation. Tan-man produced some serious noise with a bunch of pedals and a synth, an amazing improvisation that left me floored. I introduced myself after class and we have been friends ever since.

Nigel is a very intelligent and thoughtful composer. He puts his faith in process foremost and his compositions have layers of meaning and intention. His work extends from the avant-garde and noise traditions, and I admire his style and commitment.

From Tan about how he made his composition:

“I created the noise using the No Input mixer technique which basically creates sounds via a feedback loop on a mixer. By placing the input into the output and into other various channels, I was able to create subtle shifts in sine waves, which affects the pitch as well as density. I then fed these sounds into various effect pedals to further manipulate them resulting in what you hear.”

I chose to compose as a response to Nigel’s work. Imagine he had drawn me half a picture - I needed to finish it. My process was very simple. I listened to the work and improvised reactions, intuiting instrumentation and vibe. I’m not going to go into details this time, it’s
pretty boring but if you’re interested in any of the sounds hit me up and I will run you through it.

Responding to Nigel’s work was energising for me, I think the constant deadlines and urgency to keep producing for this project have been draining. Next time I collaborate for Chimera_52 I would like to pass the work back and forth. Go and check out Nigel’s work! Thanks for reading and if you have any thoughts, criticisms or good jokes – get in touch.

#10 Quokka Island
October 3rd, 2016

Well Melbourne, you fickle weathered thing, it’s great to be back. I’ve just finished a whirlwind 5 shows in WA with Mighty Duke and The Lords followed by a short holiday with my wife on Rottnest Island. We saw some incredible country! Wave Rock was definitely a highlight – beautiful setting and excellent festival vibe. I intended to collect samples from everywhere to use in this week’s Chimera, but in the end I focused on Rottnest Island for practical AND irrational reasons…

Rottnest Island is situated off the coast of Fremantle in WA, about a 30 minute Ferry ride from shed B or 20km as the Raven flies (yep, Australian Ravens. I think I have been mistaking these guys for Crow’s for most of my life!). The Island is beautiful. It is home to some unique flora and fauna, including the rat come kangaroo marsupial the quokka (SO CUTE), sea lions, seals, osprey and trees I don’t know the names of. Like much of Australia it also has a fairly savage history, most of which is left unsaid in the various tourist plaques and reading points across the Island. It is set up for holidaying, but you can quickly get away from the main settlement and explore for yourself on the bicycles for hire.

This is the first Chimera I have produced entirely abroad and I was uncertain about how I would go about it. Working from my studio I have the comfort of all my gear and instruments, and partly these are the things that bring some unity to the project. I decided to wing it – collect as many samples as possible and weave them into some sort of piece of music on the plane home. This explores the core concept of what a Chimera is to me; reterritorializing disparate music/sound/ideas into new work.
The Zoom H4n will be familiar to anyone who is involved in sampling or portable recording. I purchased mine a few years back at the behest of my then mentor George Papanicolaou (film scorer extraordinaire and all-round legend). I really like the built-in XY mic set up, and the ability to record 4 channels at once (XLR inputs also), great for recording band jams. I have found the unit a little unreliable on occasion and for some reason the power input has stopped working. Maybe compare it with other models on the market before you go and buy one, although it seems to be the standard so maybe mine is a bung unit.

Armed with the Zoom I tried to capture any sounds I found interesting. This was particularly difficult on the first day as it was blowing a gale. Anna and I rode around the Island and I was constantly stopping to try and sample ravens, baby ravens, seals, waves…she was very patient. The most usable and interesting sounds ended up being:

- A squeaky gate to the public bathrooms that was there to keep the quokkas out
- The settlement church bells, you could have a play on between 3 and 4pm but you had to fight with the kids to get a go…
- Rain on tin roof
- Scratching the bark of a tree
- Ocean recorded from a small cave
- A tiny bird living in the bathroom, guarding its nest with a partner

I wove these together on the return trip which featured a 4 hour stopover in Adelaide, the last half of which I spent in the airport bar watching the footy final. My only restrictions were that it be in three parts and express the ruggedness of the landscape, the island holiday vibes and the unease I feel with the history of the place.

My favourite result from the piece came from slowing down the sample of the gate shutting. It allows you to hear all the clashing harmonics spread out which can sound both beautiful and disturbing. I went through this process with smaller and smaller parts of the sample, producing a 3-minute bed which I then eq’d to emphasise different tones I liked.

I suppose you could call this musique concrète. It’s not my usual style but I have worked this way before to varying degrees of success. With this piece I focused on manipulating the fore-, middle- and background textures which seemed to help with the linear progression of the
work. I would recommend focusing on texture when working in this style as it gives you something to manipulate in the absence of melody, rhythm, harmony… I’d be interested to hear what you think. As always, thanks for reading and get in touch if you have any questions or want to talk music.

#11 Mirai

October 10th, 2016

Sometimes you have to cleanse the palate a little. A bit of musical citrus. Although there were some overarching themes behind the scenes this week, I mostly followed my intuition and tried to have a bit of fun! Read on for more info…

Some of you may have heard of a Distributed Denial of Service attack (DDoS). Check this out if you haven’t. The way I understand it, a hacker uses a network of slaved computers, called a botnet, to bombard a website or server with so much information that it can’t handle the load and is essentially paralysed. On Monday morning I read an article in the Guardian about a DDoS attack on a journalist. It interested me, I think because the botnet spoken of in the article was actually created out of devices within the Internet of Things (IoT) that have shitty protection from hackers. We live in the future!

I followed along to the journalist’s website and discovered that the code was called Mirai. It functions by scanning the net for vulnerable devices then installing malware that causes them to report to a central server. THEN it can be used “as a staging ground for launching powerful DDoS attacks designed to knock websites offline.”

Super interesting! I decided to begin here with this week’s composition, entitled Mirai. There were no fancy connections this week. Just inspiration and intuition from the idea of an army of our most functional things – fridges, cameras, phones – blindly attacking and taking down a website. I did spend a bit of time playing with how things sounded, so it’s probably worth a mention…

I have a UA LA610 pre-amp/compressor. It is my favourite and I use it for most of my recordings. I recorded the bass (an Epiphone Viola) through my space echo pedal (which is a bit noisy at the moment unfortunately) straight into the pre-amp with the gain dial right up.
The drums are an old Yamaha Rx5 unit I have, same signal path but with even more gain and some limiter on the top to squash it. The synth sounds all come from my DSI Mopho x4, again straight into the pre-amp.

And that’s about it! A very straightforward track, it felt good to do something with groove as the focus. Thanks for listening and reading. Get in touch if you have any questions or want to pass on some music, I’d love to hear it!

#12 When The Wind Blows Hard

October 18th, 2016

Experimental Music is a confusing term. It gets thrown about a fair bit and seems to have moved away from its original meaning, often being plonked in front of genre terms – experimental pop etc. Anyway, I use it a lot and I’ve realised it’s in need of some clarification. So I had a think about it.

“An act the outcome of which is unknown” – John Cage, Experimental Music: Doctrine

I think it’s best to look to John Cage as he is considered one of the first composers to use the term. Cage was a pioneer of experimental music, probably most well-known for his piece 4’33 (check this link for Zappa’s cover). I definitely misunderstood this work until I started getting into Cage and his much broader concepts of what music could be (here to buy, here in archive form!). It is performed without any deliberate sound being created and this forms one of the cornerstones of his philosophy, alongside indeterminate music. So! John Cage says experimental music should not be judged “in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown.” I like this pure definition but our usage of the term seems to have changed a little when we use it in conjunction with genre definers.

“Very generally, avant-garde music can be viewed as occupying an extreme position within the tradition, while experimental music lies outside it” – David Nicholls, The Cambridge History of American Music
Reading about definitions of experimental music led me to an article from 2015 in the Fader. The article focuses on underground electronic music and introduced me to an album that inspired this week’s work. The album Dark Web by Giant Claw is a nose bleed inducing fall through mashed up internet sounds and was described in its promo material as “drawing inspiration from late-night hours spent digging through the internet’s infinite crates. It’s an analysis of art and artist in the digital age, where one’s cultural heritage and artistic work is informed and bombarded by constant stimuli, whether it be social media, YouTube videos, message boards, or otherwise.”

So I did a general analysis of the opening piece, which provided me with a general thematic structure and textural ideas. It’s similar to what I did with #6 Connected and the Björk work and I’ve been keen to give the method a go again. As long as you can manage to abstract the map away from the original work it produces super interesting stuff. The piece I produced bears a little too much resemblance to the work I modelled it off, but I’m still very happy with it.
Theme A, the harmonised vocal element was inspired by the very windy Sunday we had in Melbourne. Two large sheets of tin blew off my roof! I wrote a poem about it on Monday morning, it was a very surreal afternoon. Thankfully my neighbour who actually knows how to fix things was around and we spent an hour on the roof re-drilling the corrugated iron on before the rain came.

For the B theme, the sax line in the work, I re-harmonised the A melody in a bunch of different ways and then recorded myself improvising arpeggiated lines over the chord progressions in varying rhythmic ways. Theme C is the synthesised bass line and was improvised.

I recorded these three themes before I left on an NZ tour. I then worked at cutting them up in different ways over a couple of days of transit and touring. I began following the original map I had made but inspiration took over and the piece unfolded very organically. It may have had a little help from the free bubbles in the premium economy seats on the Air New Zealand flight (we got upgraded thanks to an epic stuff around).

“However music is defined (and it matters little in the final analysis), it possesses elements that make craft and consistency fundamental to its quality.” - David Cope, Techniques of the Twentieth Century Composer

I speak rarely of it here, but I consider Chimera_52 a multimedia work consisting of the music, video and the blog post. More importantly it is the interaction of these things and how people are accessing the work over time that I find most interesting and somewhat experimental.

Arguably, I can’t call myself an experimental musician in the truest sense of the word because I care about the aesthetics of the end result. That I am invested in the end result in any way kind of disqualifies me. I want to like it. I want to be intrigued by it, I want it to sound good and I want other people to like it. But I do think that I am committed to elements of experimentation within my process. I take experimental actions in the Cage-ian sense but I will discard the outcome if I don’t like it, if it doesn’t fit the work or just plain sounds crap. As always, thanks for reading and listening and please feel free to get in touch or comment.
This is the first week in 13 weeks of this project that I haven’t finished a piece of music to my satisfaction. Hopefully it’s the last as well. Being on tour – it was just too difficult to carve proper time out to compose, mainly because of sleep deprivation. I managed to carve out about two hours on Wednesday and another one and a half on flights. So this is a sketch and I am disappointed as I think it had potential. But I can always come back and finish it sometime.

There’s not heaps to say. I stumbled across the work of Lucy McRae through The Creators Project. I will happily admit that I am a Science Fiction enthusiast, mainly through novels of all sorts (Vonnegut, Dick, Reynolds, Banks, Corey) so McRae’s work is instantly appealing to me.

Somewhere through this video there was mention of hugging machines. What an interesting idea! A quick Internet search led me to a fascinating paper by a controversial professor named Mary Temple Grandin. It turns out she is one of the first people in the world to share insights into her experience of Autism. She invented this squeezebox to help herself deal with over sensitivity. I used the idea for general thematic inspiration but with more time I would have liked to weave elements of the concept into the work.

The other thing that influenced this piece was the idea of “between moments”. I set out to create a piece by cutting up samples and pretending I was a machine misunderstanding the significance of sounds. For example I would chop out the very beginning part of a word, or the middle, or an intake of breath. Moving forward I would like the chance to explore this fully as I think it could bear some interesting fruit.

I’ve just realised this marks one quarter of the work done for Chimera_52. I will take stock today and have a think about what this means, but off the top of my head I have three goals for moving forward:
1. I would like to curate sections of the work for a live performance
2. I will be trying to add more narrative to the video element, as opposed to the chop up representation of the week I have been going for
3. And I would like to begin accepting audio from the audience for the possibility of inclusion within the work

As always thanks for listening and reading. Onwards and upwards!

#14 Coffee

October 31st, 2016

Embarking on this project was a risk for me. It came about from a need to cast caution to the wind, to stop being afraid of opinions and judgement. It’s not the craziest thing anyone has done by a long stretch, but for me the act of regularly uploading my work to Soundcloud and therefore submitting it to opinion is difficult. Hopefully by the end of the year I will have learnt something, or at least have some good music to take away!

The traditional ensemble music of Java and Bali in Indonesia is called Gamelan. It’s performed on mostly percussive instruments and is considered some of the most complex music in the world. Many Western composers have been influenced by Gamelan’s trance-inducing vibes, including Debussy, the American minimalists (Riech, Glass and more), Gyögy Ligeti, John Cage and I believe our very own Mark Pollard.

Possibly because my wife and I have finally booked our honeymoon to Indonesia (!!!), I have been thinking about Gamelan music this week. On Monday morning I was having a pretty serious YouTube session listening to whatever popped up in a Gamelan search. I was most interested in the way the music shifts tempo fluidly and decided to experiment with this idea in this week’s work.

While making myself a second coffee for the day and thinking how much I enjoy my new hand grinder I thought hell, why not do a piece about coffee? So with these tempo fluctuations in mind, I mapped out a three-minute timeframe that arbitrarily represented my coffee intake over a day with corresponding tempo highs and lows. I then created a project in Logic X and mapped out these same fluctuations in the tempo editor. The piece begins at 120bpm, maxes out twice at 140bpm and has a low of 80bpm.
I got to thinking about form. I was really happy with the way things came together for #12 When The Wind Blows Hard, so I decided to experiment with this method again. This involves having three themes (A, B and C) and mapping out how they will interact. I think in #12 it was more successful because I was more ruthless and complex about weaving the themes together, whereas for this work I lost focus on this aspect of the form. They overlapped each other once or twice but didn’t develop a vibrant conversation like in #12.

Theme A I created from the word Coffee. There’s plenty of ways you can turn letters into musical notes, but I gave this a shot:

<table>
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<tr>
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Each letter has a corresponding note on the top row. So for Coffee you end up with CAFFEE. Theme B I did Long Black, which gives you EAGG BEACD. In the end I discarded the B theme because I didn’t like it. Theme C was an improvised Guitar motif.

Ideas trickled out Monday and Tuesday, but by Friday when I next had a chance to compose I was really not feeling it. Possibly I was worn down. I definitely didn’t manage to intertwine the themes the way I wanted. I said to a friend of mine, “I feel like I’m trying to polish a turd today”. He replied, “why not roll it in glitter?” So I returned to running parts through my pedals and making strange sounds. It’s funny how this often makes me feel better about parts. I think I enjoy the chance aspect of improvising with the pedals.
It’s worth experimenting further with the tempo fluctuations. I only scratched the surface and the possibilities for compositional tension and release are interesting. Further research into composers or types of music that utilise the technique will help!

I’m feeling the need for a bit of a shake-up. A bit of cold water on the face compositionally. The next three works will be a collection, an exploration of the protocol for response in the event of Alien contact. I will be attempting to make the video more relevant to the theme of each work rather than a document of the week. Thanks for reading and please feel free to comment!

#15 One Hundred Years Just To Say Hello

November 9th, 2016

I tried to be a little more relaxed this week and allow some time for inspiration to come. I think part of the challenge with working to this weekly deadline is it’s hard to allot the time you need for reflection and general inspiration building activities. That is, it is hard to be like ‘for the next hour I am going to allow my subconscious the space it needs to develop new and interesting connections and ideas with the things I am trying to explore…’.

For the next couple of weeks I will be exploring the idea of first protocols in the event of Alien contact, inspired by this article.

Audible Process

I was listening to this fantastic Holly Herndon talk on process. I have a lot of respect for Herndon as an artist and feel a small kinship as someone with one foot in “the academy” and one in the contemporary music/band/electronic scene. Holly’s commitment to process and deep exploration of ideas is inspirational. One particular line stuck with me (it has the ring of a research question):

“How can the concept of a work inform the production of a piece to the extent that it is actually audible?”
What a great idea! And I feel relevant to my work, particularly in Chimera. Often I derive musical elements from concepts – melodies, textures, rhythms – but taking this further to influence the production is something I hadn’t thought of. And further again:

“How can we take ideas from extra musical material or ideas and use that to generate new aesthetics, new approaches, new production techniques that speak to our lives today?”

Cutting and shuffling

I spent some time in the yard thinking about the idea of communicating with an Alien and it occurred to me that you have to assume a lot to even begin with this. Assume that they can hear in the way we do. That their language is audible. So I wrote a little spoken work on the subject. Recorded it and started chopping it up. I explored ways of jumbling and re-imagining the sentences, as if someone were trying to piece it together. In particular, after some time cutting samples up and shifting them around I remembered this great max4live patch called Buffer Shuffler. In short, it’s a really quick way to mangle an audio sample by influencing pitch, panning, direction, stutter and many other parameters. Really really really fun. I passed bits of my spoken word through this and added some delay.

Phases of funny dancing with limited modes

Because of this jokey idea of a language of movement I was pretty keen to make a quirky dance track. After building the basic groove with the rx5 I experimented with bass lines, trying to stay away from straight-up major or minor keys. I played with some of Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition, a bunch of scales you can only transpose a few times due to the nature of their interval composition. I’ve worked this way before, you can often get some quirky sounds but I find sometimes it can limit you to a particular weird palate. Regardless, I ended up with a whole tone bass line.

I experimented with the max4live plugin on the hihat sound a produced a phasing effect a la Steve Reich (I was lucky enough to meet Reich in 2012 with a bunch of my VCA composer
A basic way of using phasing is to have two of the same sample at slightly different lengths and start playing them at the same time. As time progresses they will become more and more out of sync with each other - out of phase. It’s a fun way to mess with the time division of a piece, I think particularly effective in this week’s work as it slides between triple and duple subdivisions.

Back to the pedals

After I had most of the parts down I turned to my pedals. I passed groups of instruments through them producing delay and phasing (the psychedelic kind) improvisations. I particularly like the marimba type sound in the middle of the work. I panned the dry take slightly off centre and the wet take further off centre to the other side for a cool spread.

International

I had no idea, but there is actually an international language called Esperanto. Among other things, it was designed to be very easily learnt. So I included a few phrases that we might throw at our Alien friends such as “my name is Cayn – mia nomo estas Cayn” and “We will love! – Ni amos”.

I had a blast making this piece. I felt the right balance of inspiration, fun, commitment to process and ideas. As per usual a bit more time would have been nice, but I can always return to it at a later date. Thanks for listening and please feel free to comment.

#16 Contact

November 15th, 2016

At some point in a long and a little bit boring Tim Ferris podcast, author Rolf Potts starts talking about a concept called beginners mind or Shoshin. It’s an idea from Zen Buddhism. The original meaning refers to cultivating an attitude of openness and lack of preconceptions
towards the study of a subject, in the manner of a beginner. The idea is that you have more options, or would take unexpected paths toward a goal. This set off some fireworks in my head as I have some strong opinions about options in creative process. But what relates to this week’s work is the idea of creating this state by changing your tool of creativity to one you aren’t completely proficient with.

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” – Shunryu Suzuki

It’s been a flat out week opening with a trip to WA for shows with my NO ZU family. This piece began on the plane during that trip. It is driven by the broad conceptual idea that influenced the last work and will influence the next - what the hell would we do if Aliens got in touch? On a whim I decided to start this piece in Ableton Live. For anyone that’s been following, I usually work in Logic but have some experience in Ableton. I’ve used it for mangling audio files in fun ways over the last couple of works and have enjoyed the outcomes, so thought I might see what happened if I began entirely in that DAW.

I was discussing Melbourne musician Lost Animal with two of my bandmates and began the work with this vibe in mind. I’m a big fan of his music and have been interested in experimenting with some marimba and vibe sounds in the manner he does. I messed around organically for an hour or two. Working in an audio program that I wasn’t used to made me experiment more in some ways, definitely trialling lots of sounds that I didn’t know, playing with new effects. It was also frustrating occasionally, particularly as I wanted to have a fluctuating time signature and didn’t know how to create this in Ableton (nor did I have access to the net to look it up!)

I approached the piece a few days later back in Melbourne. I improvised the sax line in one go. The Alto line I ran through a delay pedal and a TC Helicon D1 pedal with the octave up effect wound on slightly. The pedal isn’t always quick enough to keep up with the sax so you get this cool scream sound popping through every now and then. The Tenor sax has an octave down effect from the same pedal. I messed a lot with synth sounds too but only ended up layering things I had done in the original Ableton session with sounds from my analog synth.
I wrote the lyrics one morning in the backyard, inspired by something I read about the likelihood that if Aliens exist they would actually be super-intelligent machines. Can’t for the life of me find the article! But yeah, the lyrics play directly with this. I spent some time messing with octave up and octave down effects on my D1 pedal, the octave down effect you could almost call the signature sound of Papa Nic Oogjes, head honcho of NO ZU beat unlimited.

I spent a bit more time on the mix, particularly the drums. I was trying to emulate the way the drums almost break apart on my bandmate Becky Sui Zhen’s album, in particular the song Infinity Street. Mainly I tried to parallel compress the drums and really overdrive one of the channels. I think I may have to accost her engineer to figure it out properly. I hope you enjoy the track. Next week will be the last in this Alien trilogy, help me think of something else to write about! Leave any technology related ideas you may have in the comments. Thanks and bye!

#17 It Turns Out We’re Not Alone

November 21st, 2016

I’m sitting in Newcastle airport, returning home after a few days in my hometown celebrating my mother’s 60th birthday. It has been so excellent to get out of Melbourne! Don’t get me wrong, I love the city but the second my wife and I were in the hire car heading up the Pacific Highway I felt a bunch of niggling stresses I didn’t realise where there melt away. So in keeping with this feeling, I’m going to keep this post short so I can be present for the last little part of this wonderful break.

This is the third instalment of a trilogy exploring the idea of first contact – what would we say or do? The work had a couple of milestones in development:

- Monday morning I spent about 45 minutes writing lyrics from the idea that Aliens contact earth and we end up fighting with each other, it kind of drives us mad, we bicker and fight about what to do, we implode…I am initially using the lyric structure of So Long Marianne in honour of Leonard Cohen.
- I experiment with sounds and focus on creating a groove in ¾ that is danceable, something I find challenging.
• I hit a wall but find inspiration during a break when I listen to my friend Rowan Mason aka Sanpo Disco’s latest mix. The opening track has the vibe and sound pallet I am interested in.

• I spend an entire session working on the vocal melody, jamming and rewriting, influenced by this track my friend Andrew Noble shared on Facebook.

• The last session is a marathon as I am cramming to finish before a holiday. I decide to put on a baritone voice for the vocal part, add harmonized bv’s, synths and a big wig out at the end.

I think this track would also work really well as an instrumental. I love the opening vibe and I’m not sure that I nailed the vocal idea. I would love the chance to re-work it at some point.

Thanks for listening and reading, I’m off to have another airport beverage!

#18 Briefly There, Now Gone

November 29th, 2016

I have a tendency to say yes to too many things and forget to leave time for myself to just live, be with my wife and friends or just by myself! This week’s track and post comes from somewhere amidst workshops, travel, rehearsals, dinners with friends, work and festival shows. It has been back-to-back full days and nights. And as I write this I am preparing to leave the country for ten days for a show and then some down time.

I helped my good friend Glen Walton deliver some workshops in a little country town called Lismore this week. It’s over two hours drive from Melbourne so I took the opportunity to catch up on some listening. Scott Walker is an artist I have admired for a while, in particular his album Scott 3. The orchestration is what really gets me I suppose, his beautiful voice and songs are subverted by these almost horror film strings, it’s very striking. So I have wanted to check out more of his material, as he apparently became more and more “experimental” (to use a loaded term we have already discussed in a previous post) as his career progressed. The album of choice was Bish Bosch and yep, it is challenging. If you check the opening track you will get a feel for it. It really spoke to me. Once again the orchestration was a highlight alongside Walker’s cinematic lyrics. They are presented in extremely provocative segments that paint insane stories in your head. Quite an intense way to spend 70 mins in the car!
With this vibe in mind and the knowledge that I would have little time this week I decided to focus on producing an improvisation for sax, voice and effects. I had a spare hour on Wednesday afternoon and experimented with running everything through the PA in my studio. I played with the percussive keys on the saxophone and managed to produce a feedback sound alongside this by placing the microphone down the bell of the saxophone. I was able to produce a side-chain compression effect. After I was satisfied with my experiments I set a condenser microphone on the PA speaker, a line in from the pedalboard and hit record.

For the lyrics I flipped through an old writing book of mine and chose random lines that were very visual (at least to me). I ended up with:

_We were toddler giants_  
_In lonely moonlight_  
_Smashing beams of silver tears_  
_Briefly there, now gone_  
_Like a comet_

I probably spent more time mixing this than recording. I really focused on emphasising the sounds of the sax I wanted to hear. I made separately equalised channels for the clicks of the keys, the boom of the low notes, the high feedback tone and the higher overtones. I spread these around the stereo field and faded them in and out as the track progresses.

I am happy with the experiment but would love to explore the work further. I think there is more to be discovered in the sax part, more subtlety in the form. At the moment it feels too much like a continuous drone. I think it will be very effective to perform live at some point.

Thanks as always for reading and please get in touch if you have any questions.

#19 Transit  
*December 6th, 2016*

This week’s track was made entirely in transit – on a plane between Melbourne, Doha and Paris, and in the tour van between Paris, Rennes and Paris, and a little at Ory Airport.
Anytime, Anyplace

If there’s one thing this project has shown me it is that ideas come from everywhere, at any time, usually when you are least equipped to deal with them. I’m reminded of a Tom Waits story related by Eat, Pray, Love author Elizabeth Gilbert in a TED talk she gave. Tom is driving down an LA freeway when a melody popped into his head. He looked around his car for something to record it with – a pencil, paper, anything – but could find nothing. He began to panic that he would forget the melody and be haunted by it forever, that his talent would dry up and he would become nothing (I’m sure anyone reading can relate to this, even if you aren’t engaged in creative practice it is always the new things that you can’t quite fully grasp that seem the most important). At some point during his panic attack he stopped and said to the melody, “Excuse me. Can you not see I’m driving? Do I look like I can write down a song right now? If you really want to exist, come back at a more opportune moment … otherwise go bother somebody else today. Go bother Leonard Cohen.”

Systems of Capture

While I haven’t quite gotten to the point of telling my ideas to come back later (that’s some ninja level shit, or maybe Waits/Cohen/Dylan level) I have developed a very quick system for cataloguing ideas for later reference. It’s barely even a system really, it’s just that if anything at all peaks my interest (article, show, podcast, song, book) I make a note of it and put it all in the same place to sift through when I’m ready. The key is ‘when I’m ready’. Sometimes it’s great to follow an idea immediately. But I also find it effective to let the initial excitement or interest nestle gently in the back of my mind for a while, let whatever happens back there happen and then approach it when fully energised.

Briefly back to the system of collection, I use Evernote but the tool doesn’t matter. I think the only pre-requisite is that you are able to file the idea very quickly and unobtrusively, no interruption to workflow. Because I often get new ideas while finishing old ones and that can just lead to a whole lot of unfinished stuff. Evernote works for me because I have it across all my devices, I have web clippers on my web browsers, it captures audio etc. So if I am reading, watching or whatever it is very quick to file the item in the correct place, often only two clicks.
In Flight Jamming

The work formed in two parts quite organically. The first on the flight between Melbourne and Doha, lazy groove I created thinking of floating in a slightly boozed and medicated daze through clouds. I made it in Ableton, just jamming around with different instruments until I landed on things I liked. It began with the synth pad, then the bass came, then the 808 drums which have a max4live delay patch to create the bouncy feel. Once I had the groove locked down I became stuck and let it rest for a while (and attempted to sleep).

On the next leg of the flight I was chatting with the my bandmate Nic about the idea and we joked of recording lots of quiet and weird plane sounds to use in the track. He fell asleep and I set about doing that, recording myself whispering into the computer. I tried to capture some take off sounds also. I built these sounds into an unsettling soundscape at the beginning of the track and also wove some whispering, “everybody is trying to sleep” into the rhythmic part of the track.

Lastly I wrote some lyrics and sung them into the laptop.

We’ve been flying
For one day and night
Babies in a tin can
In the sky

This was particularly challenging as everyone was asleep around me and there is a lot of background noise on planes, particularly aircon sounds! So they don’t sound the best but I really like that all of it was done this way and funnelled through the laptop.

As per usual, I would love to spend more time on this idea. I would also like to explore non-traditional methods of audio capture more – phones, laptops – as I think this has relevance to the themes of this project. I am spending the next few days on holiday in Rome and I’m thinking that it would be great to do a Transit 2 but use sounds I have collected from around the city. Let me know any thoughts in the comments, and thanks for reading and listening.
This week I am reminded that it is so fruitful to work within restrictions. I spent 2015 exploring this concept in my honours work, finding different ways to place restrictions on my creative process and then trying to work around them. Being in Rome, not having access to all my gear but then still managing to create something interesting through experimentation and perseverance was refreshing and invigorating.

In the tour van, somewhere between Paris and Rennes, our Euro drummer and old mate Andrew Noble put on this album from 2014 by Dwight Sykes. I am one of those people that misses everything, I am rarely current in my listening habits because I don’t hunt the new tunes, so I find those friends and tastemakers in my network very valuable for showing me great music! So of course I am hearing this excellent album for the first time two years late, driving down some French highway, the sun is setting at around 3:30 because it’s winter and there is a low hanging mist everywhere. The album kind of became the soundtrack to my subsequent trip in Rome; I had many wonderful mornings wandering cobbled laneways with it floating from my headphones.

During my time in Rome I collected samples of sounds that interested me. I used my iPhone to record everything, this felt congruous with last week’s work and this vibe I have of channelling everything through my personal tech devices. I was lucky enough to be wandering the streets on the day of The Feast Of Immaculate Conception. I had no idea this was on, or even what it was. Turns out the Pope walks through the city and visits the Column of the Immaculate Conception (a little bit of phallic phrasing/image fail there…) to pray and whatnot. I just happened to pick that day to head up to The Spanish Steps and wandered through all the celebrations. I ended up using three samples in my work – a recording of the bells tolling in the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, prayers at the Column of the Immaculate Conception and a recording of this incredible running (yep, RUNNING) marching band called the Bersaglieri.

The process was fairly intuitive. I experimented with the samples until I built an organic rhythmic element. This came about by experimenting with various max4live patches. I then built an 808-drum groove around it. My inspiration for this came from the Dwight Sykes
album and the drummer from No Zu’s playing – mainly placing an open hi hat on the first beat of each bar. I also dropped a beat from the time signature because I am really trying to avoid 4/4 time signatures in this project.

I tried to compose this work on the return journey to Australia, probably about 20 hours of travel from Italy. It was a really difficult process; I wasn’t vibing on what I was doing for some reason on the flight, possibly because it was really uncomfortable! But I managed to pull something together. Once I had been home for a bit and recovered a little, I opened up the session to have a listen and found that I really liked what I had done…it’s funny how drastically your mood can effect your perception of your work. This experience re-enforces my opinion that it’s often best to just push through during the creative process when you are feeling weird, as often the results are good when you check it out later on. Thanks for reading as always, and get in touch if you have any queries.
As I tend to do, I was reading the Guardian Australia on Monday morning. Since I’ve been doing this project I always have half an eye out for interesting science and technology stories.
So when I saw the headline “Star met spectacular fate: death by supermassive black hole” I was interested.

Supermassive Black Hole

The article describes the fate of a star passing too close to a supermassive black hole in a galaxy 4 billion light years away. A team of scientists trained a telescope at the event for 10 months and watched as it moved through three phases of spaghettification…that’s right, a supermassive black hole 100 million times bigger than our sun at the centre of a really far away galaxy ripped apart a freaking STAR.

The event was named ASASSN – 15h, which I decided to try to turn into a musical theme. I used a method of transferring alphabet letters into note names I used previously in #14 Coffee. The result of consulting the below table using the phrase ASASSN is the notes A, E, A, E, E, G. Amusingly, I read it wrong when I originally did it and ended up going with A, E, E, A, E, G…a little different. I was a fair way through composing when I noticed so I just left it. Bummer!

Intuitive Harmonisation

I have a method that I like to use sometimes when composing from a harmonic standpoint, I haven’t used it much for this project but I tried to for this work. It’s not particularly original but I wasn’t ever actually taught it and I feel like it’s idiosyncratic of the way I write sometimes. The way it works is I take a theme, such as the one above and harmonise it however I like. In this case, I placed it over a C6 chord (C, E, G, A, C). I then experiment with the theme and try and find a way of changing it slightly and reharmonising it with a chord that is very unrelated to the first. So in this case, on the first time through I repeated the theme but changes the chord to an A (A, C#, E). On the second round of the entire melody, I change the A’s in the theme to a G# and reharmonise with a C# minor chord. This is a very intuitive method for me, I am just playing around with sounds until I find things that I like.

Stella Orchestration

After finished the melody and its various harmonisations I orchestrated it using voices and strings. I really like the differences in timbre you can get from a group of voices just by
moving from mouth closed singing to mouth wide singing, or in this case “oooh” to “aaah”. I chose to use a strings section because I haven’t used it for ages and had an itch. And it was fun. I think I will try to include it more.

I think it’s the time of year, but I really don’t seem to be able to put as much time into these as I would like at the moment. I feel there is a lot more to do with this piece but I have to put it down for now. I’m nearly halfway through this year-long project. Thanks for reading, and please get in touch if you have any thoughts or questions.

#22 Crash Report
December 27th, 2016

It’s Christmas and New Year time. So this will be a very short chat regarding this week’s work. I am in northern New South Wales soaking up some sun and getting some quality time away from the composing…mostly.

This week I was inspired by the crash reports that our phones and other device’s log when they have a software or hardware issue. I opened up some of my phone’s reports, which you can find stored on your computer with a bit of digging. After playing with the words and generally staring at the report for a while, no inspiration really came so I left it and tried a different track.

I found a stock recording of the original iPhone ring tone and mangled it in Ableton, creating a 3-minute bed to work with. I then picked a palate of instruments to write over the top with. For some reason I am listening to contemporary chamber music again so I wanted to work with these sorts of instruments – strings, brass, percussion and piano. I played the backing bed I had devised and just composed intuitively over the top. It all came out very quickly. The vocals came to me while walking home in the sun, listening to an Alan Vega album. Happy holidays all. It’s been a really crazy year. I’ll be knocking out one more track but I probably won’t post it until the new year. Say safe, have fun and thanks for reading.

#23 Twenty Sixteen and Seventeen
January 3rd, 2017
Earnest Hemingway advocated a creative process that involved stopping when you’re going well, or stopping when you are sure what you need to do next. I often try to stick to this ideal and as I was on holiday this week, with limited time, I focused on keeping composing short and stopping when it was going well.

*The most important thing I’ve learned about writing is never write too much at a time... Never pump yourself dry. Leave a little for the next day. The main thing is to know when to stop. Don’t wait till you’ve written yourself out. When you’re still going good and you come to an interesting place and you know what’s going to happen next, that’s the time to stop. Then leave it alone and don’t think about it; let your subconscious mind do the work.* — Earnest Hemingway

I experimented with turning the year numbers 2016 and 2017 into chord progressions. I converted the numbers into scale degrees, in this case I chose 0 to be the root, 1 a semitone above, 2 is the second and so forth. As I’ve mentioned before you can do this however you like, I just go with what produces a result I’m in to. Using C as my root note produced this notes sequence: 2016 = D, C, C# and F# while 2017 = D, C, C# and G. I jammed around on the keyboard with different qualities of chords (major minor etc.) and finished with D minor, C major, C# major and D major (the F# being a part of this chord).

Once I had established my chord progression the rest of the process was very intuitive. I wrote a drum beat on the Linndrum using my usual technique of finding somewhere to skip a beat while still maintaining a danceable groove. I then used a vintage synth sound with an arpeggiator set to quarter note to outline the bass line. I added in audio I captured during my New Year’s Eve celebrations on the beach.

During my next session I worked on emphasising a groove element at the beginning of each chord cycle. The rhythm is hitting on beat 1, beat 2&, and beat 4. Generally beat one is emphasised with a high guitar hit, the 2& with a Linndrum clap and beat 4 with a low guitar chord bend. I gradually introduced this over the course of the work.

Next I added a bass melody that is finished by the saxophones. The first time this enters it is incomplete until the saxophones join later in the work. The saxes were done in one take and some synth flourishes were added at the end. When it was all said and done, this is probably
three hours work. I’m looking forward to spending more time with this piece in the future and happy to end the year on a high note. As always thanks for listening and reading. Let me know if you have any questions or comments. Happy New Year!

#24 Answer
January 9th, 2017

One of my best friends lives on the other side of the world. We have known each other for over 20 years now. So alongside the deep affection of long friendship we also piss each other off with a level of skill and subtlety that no one else in our lives is capable of, barring possibly our siblings. This week I was thinking about how enraged I used to become when he would read my Facebook messages to him but not reply, so I wrote some music reflecting on it. It was all the more infuriating because I could see that he had read them. I’m sure you’ve experienced this in some way, it can really drive you nuts if you let it. Since he moved overseas a few years back I have had to learn to not care but something I read this week reminded me of it and I wrote some words on Monday reflecting on the idea.

György Ligeti is one of my favourite contemporary classical composers and is considered one of the most important avant garde composers in the 20th century. My first introduction to him was through the work Lux Aeterna (this is actually one of my favourite pieces of music), a work for 16-part choir that uses clusters of sound and obscured rhythmic development to the forefront the texture and timbre of the work. You may recognise it from the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick’s 2001:A Space Odyssey. The main compositional technique used in the work is one Ligeti developed himself and called “micropolyphony”. One way to think of it is many melodic lines occurring together like a canon and therefore producing a variety of chords and clusters vertically. György puts it a little more poetically:

“The complex polyphony of the individual parts[,] embodied in a harmonic-musical flow in which the harmonies do not change suddenly, but merge into one another; one clearly discernible interval combination is gradually blurred, and from this cloudiness it is possible to discern a new interval combination taking shape.”
I experimented with this idea on a much smaller scale this week. The opening line for #24 Answer uses the word ANSWER as a musical motif by transferring the letters into numbers and then the numbers into notes. The resulting line is C, C#, F#, A#, E and F. I created a single line and then staggered the entry of the other instruments. I was pretty happy with the sounds I was producing but I wanted another layer of texture over the top. Considering the Facebook link/theme, I searched for some stock sounds of the sending and receiving message functions. I played around with time stretching these sounds and then layered them with the opening texture and was happy with the results.

The jagged strings motif in the middle was inspired by a moment about 10 minutes into Ligeti’s 2nd String quartet. I enjoyed how this part began in a complex polyrhythm and then somehow stumbled into a tight rhythmic motif. I spent quite a while trying to produce this idea using the different grid settings in Logic’s piano roll. In the end I decided it was easier to just play in what I heard.

I’m not entirely happy with the outcome of the work. I find that when I start experimenting with denser avant garde ideas that a week is not enough to see things through to my satisfaction. It also took a lot of time to program the midi string elements, especially as I was writing and experimenting at the same time as programming. I can’t believe that next week will be the halfway point! Nothing special planned, just going to let it flow out and not think too much. As always thanks for listening and reading.

#25 (Nearly) Halfway

January 17th, 2017

I have spent all week thinking that this was the halfway mark. And then I sat down to write a blog post and realised NEXT week is halfway. Ha. HAHAHA. Oh well. This week’s work was written with no preliminary planning, no data wrangled ideas, no maps or any other of the composition devices I have used so far. In honour of being (nearly) halfway I decided to just write, have a bit of fun and see where inspiration led me.

Beginning
I began the week with a jam on synth. I’ve talked about the idea of Shoshin or ‘beginners mind’ before on the blog and this came in to play as I had bought a new pedal this week. The Ana Echo is an awesome little delay unit by Mooer Audio and it seemed likely that messing with it would bring about some interesting sounds.

In the end though, I found myself basing my jams off of the opening synth line of this track by Canadian band BADBADNOTGOOD. Their album IV has been getting a big spin this summer and I particularly like the vibe of Speaking Gently and Confessions, Pt. II (feat. Colin Stetson). They have a great sound that strays into jazz territory but remains on edge energetically. Anyway, I was jamming with this descending synth riff over a DMX drum groove and ended the session with a few ideas but a little unsatisfied.

Middle

I became worried over night that maybe I did need to find some sort of conceptual basis for the work as my original session didn’t seem to go that well. There are two things at play here that I think are worth noting –

The weekly deadline puts a lot of pressure on every writing session I have. All too quickly Monday turns in too Wednesday and then shit – it’s Friday. Looking back over what I have done so far and how things usually progress in the writing process, if I don’t have a solid direction in the first couple of days it doesn’t bode well for the work. There are exceptions, but this plays on my mind during the first couple of writing sessions.

The second is a general observation I offer to anyone reading: Don’t over think your experimental sessions too soon! It’s natural to look forward, to imagine how a work might play out or to judge if a motif is worthy. But I say sleep on it before you judge too harshly. I find that I often know straight away when something is good but I am also often very wrong when I write-off ideas immediately.

So I listened back the next morning and realised I had a great little riff and that I was worrying over nothing. I jammed around on guitar for a bit to find a chorus progression - Am, Bm, CMaj7 - then jammed a sax line over it with a bit of reference to Careless Whisper. I
jammed as many ideas as I had time for on any instrument that took my fancy as I was heading to Sydney and would need to arrange and mix on the road.

End

Arranging and mixing these works on the plane and in hotel rooms has become a bit of a theme really. It’s incredible that we can do this now with laptops and software. I definitely would not get as much finished as I do if I couldn’t lug around my computer and snatch sessions in various odd places.

I finished (Nearly) Halfway in the air and mixed it in a hotel room next to Hyde Park in Sydney. One of my bands was house band for the Sydney Festival village. The aircon was broken in our room and the window would only open 2 inches. One of the guys had to keep getting up in the night to breathe through the window gap, it was a sauna! We had an excellent weekend though - special shout out to my friend Jo who took Steve the drummer and myself surfing in Manly.

Next week is ACTUALLY halfway. Can’t really believe it. This entire process has been so beneficial for me in all sorts of ways and I will try to discuss some of them next week. In the meantime, stay well and thanks for reading!

#26 C’est Jolie

January 27th, 2017

I went and saw La La Land with my wife last week. Don’t let the sappy trailer turn you off, it’s great. Really great, I loved it, even had a bit of a teary. I was charmed by the musical numbers and really taken in by the two leads Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling. Gosling’s efforts learning the piano really paid off, he looks like he’s really playing all those crazy lines and by all reports he did.

*Mild Spoilers – maybe don’t read on if you’re really excited about seeing the film*
The thing that grabbed me most was the use of the piano theme for Mia and Sebastian (Stone and Gosling) throughout the film. It’s a nod to old Hollywood, much of the film is. But I love the way it draws them together and re-enters their lives individually at significant turning points to provide direction. I also love the final montage beginning with the piano solo in the jazz club – the implication that Sebastian “plays” what could have been between them through the song that brought them together in the first place. So nice!

So I had very limited time this week and set out to write some sort of piano piece. I literally put this together in half an hour, had a break to write some lyrics and then finished it off. “C’est Jolie” means “it’s pretty” in French, I learnt it this week from my French language app Duolingo. Highly recommend this if you’re looking for a fun way to begin learning a language! The spoken word elements are scenes I imagined – seeing someone staring intently at their phone in public, at night on the train, the light reflecting back and then out the window…

This project has been so beneficial for my practice and myself in ways both foreseen and unforeseen. For instance I have tried to journal after every composition session, to reflect on what happened on a technical level, an emotional level and an experiential level. At first this was a real drag, and to be honest it still is a lot of the time. As things have progressed though, it has given me insight into macro and micro aspects of my practice that I didn’t expect. It’s also just really grounding to reflect for a moment on a couple of hours of creative activity. I find it useful to take stock of what I did and even more useful to vaguely plan what I will do in my next session.

I think it’s pointless and subjective to question whether my music is “better” now than it was half a year ago. My skills at dealing with process aspects like writing blocks, musical output per time spent composing and idea generation are quantifiable. My musical output has almost doubled in terms of part complexity per minutes of finished music. That is, at the beginning of the project I could output approximately three minutes of three-part music in six hours of composing time. At this point in the project I can produce three minutes of six-part fairly complex music in half the time. There has been a shift in the nature of the conceptual elements, which I discuss below.
The conceptual rigour of each work has shifted as the project has progressed. In the beginning I would often devise frameworks to compose within that were constructed from direct relationships between information and musical notes, texture and form. Over time I have become less concerned with these creations. This has mostly been a product of time restrictions in the later half of 2016 and early 2017 and “process fatigue”. Time restraints mean I have to get writing as quickly as possible, I can’t spend a day toying with a concept and beating it into some sort of compositional process. Also, it’s been downright tiring coming up with new sets of rules and ideas every week! As the project has progressed I’ve been much happier to allow more abstract links thematically, or to just write and not think too much. So refreshing!

So halfway. I’m looking forward to the next few months. I think this project is at the point where I can keep carrying it forward while also introducing some composing that sits outside of it. I’m really keen to start performing live for a solo project and to release some music. Hopefully I can find the time! Thanks for reading and listening.

#27 Mighty Puke

*February 2nd, 2017*

It was an excellent week in the country, Birregurra to be precise. On a writing retreat with good mates Mighty Duke and The Lords. Had absolutely no time for composing for myself, so I whipped up this little number by sampling bits and pieces of the recording session. Not my best work, but fun.

So my mac charger is dead, and my computer is about to die, AND it’s my birthday so this is all I’m writing this week. Have a great one, xx

#28 Camping

*February 7th, 2017*

A few years ago I started having panic attacks. The first time it happened I had been storming around all morning, running a bunch of time-sensitive errands that were foiled through tardiness and bureaucracy. The last was a futile visit to Melbourne Uni library where a book was missing from the shelf…so I stalked from there to a pub date with a mate for lunch, raging in my head about this and that (I’m pretty funny when I’m grumpy). I arrived, ordered
myself a pot and sat with my friend. Within ten minutes I had turned white, then green and was lying on the floor of the Great Northern Hotel with my heart pounding so fast I was convinced I was having a heart attack or dying somehow. I made my friend drive me to emergency, who were very nice but could find nothing wrong. My very concerned partner picked me up later that evening and I spent the night battling the rising feeling of panic. I had no idea what was going on and this only made things worse. I wore a halter monitor for 24 hours but nothing turned up. It kept happening, mostly when I was alone, but eventually in a performance situation - which was the last straw. Over time I began to suspect that it might be anxiety based and decided to seek help. The first guy I saw was useless, the second more helpful, but the best help I got was talking to friends and all sorts of people about it. Just being really open and honest if I was having an attack. It turned out that it was a really common thing for men in their late 20’s and lots of people have experience with it. Eventually I learned to manage it through breathing and it just sort of stopped.

The most important thing I learnt out of the whole affair was that I can’t do everything. Well, maybe I didn’t quite learn it but I’m at least aware of it and very conscious of how important it is to balance my work/goals with recovery/fun and fulfilling life shit. Like hanging out, going for walks, listening to music, reading books, hugging my wife…and camping!

This week’s piece is another quick one. Because I can’t do everything and I have a hell of a lot going on right now. I had the pleasure of getting away for the weekend with friends for a bit of a birthday camping trip. I can’t believe I’ve lived in Victoria for over ten years and haven’t been to Wilsons Prom…it is beautiful! If you haven’t been, go. If you went in school but haven’t been as an adult, go again. It’s just so great.

I decided to make a soundscape out of audio and video I collected this weekend. The form of the piece juxtaposes a sample of drunken campfire singing with other gentler moments of nature and people hanging out. I lined them up pretty haphazardly but was a bit stuck where to go next. I remembered I had downloaded an app of Brian Eno’s called Oblique Strategies. Oblique Strategies is a deck of cards created by Brian Eno and Phillip Schmidt. Each card contains directions or limitations designed to break writers’ block particularly for musicians. Examples of sentences:

“Change nothing and continue with immaculate consistency.”
“Go outside. Shut the door.”

“Imagine the piece as a set of disconnected events.”

So on and so forth. I gave it a go and the first thing to come up was “Mechanicalise something idiosyncratic.”

I had been thinking about using my pedals to do an improv with the audio. I consider my use of my pedals in my music fairly idiosyncratic, especially the tape delay sounds so I decided to try and do a rigid, repetitive version of how I usually use them. The results were good, possibly not as mechanical as they could be but still good.

I really like the cards and will be experimenting them with next week’s composition at the very least. Which I actually have a bit of time to write! Thanks for reading as always, and get in touch with any questions.

#29 Robo-Debt
February 13th, 2017

The automatic debt recovery system is an algorithm that matches data collected by Centrelink and the Australian Tax Department to determine if anyone has been a little naughty with their income reporting. Problem is, the algorithm is a bit of a turd and combined with the removal of human oversight mid last year, said turd has turned weightless and flown straight into the fan, covering the government and public service along the way. I mean, a 20% error rate is completely unacceptable and that number just comes from the fact that 80% of people don’t contest and just pay the debt…I don’t know if any of you have tried to use myGov.com recently but let me give you a hot tip - just go and sit on a tram and listen to some guy on a phone trying to talk to his friend with poor reception for a few hours and you’ll be getting somewhere close to the vibe.

Anyway. Great example of the perils of modern times. We’re not even at the mercy of an actual robot here, it’s an algorithm, a set of rules to define a sequence of actions. Kinda even scarier.
This week I used the Centrelink “Robo-debt” scandal that’s been making headlines these past few weeks as inspiration. Most of the music of Chimera_52 is thematically concerned with technology (and by technology I mean new technology and the challenges presented by it). So this incident is ripe for a little poking.

My first idea was to use an arpeggiated synth. I decided to make the words “robo-debt” into notes. I divided 3 minutes of time into 8 even sections which each contain one note from the series developed from the words Robo-Debt - D, B, Bb, B, C, C#, Bb, E.

ROBO DEBT becomes 6323 4528. These numbers were used as scale degrees, with 1 being A, 2 being A#, 3 being B and so forth.

I then consulted the Brian Eno card system I mentioned last week for some inspiration and the card I got was “Repetition is a form of change”. So I decided to keep on with the repetitive nature of the work so far and I created a house style drumbeat. I added a version of the series of notes as a melody later in the piece, deriving the rhythm again from the numbers by using them as an amount of quavers per note. Lastly I created some chords from the numbers by stacking them vertically in fours and treating them as you would chord voicing indications.
And that was about it.

Thanks for listening and reading. For the next week I happily have time to compose and am hoping to work on something a little more substantial as the past few weeks have been very thrown together. Wish me luck.

\textbf{#30 Pocket Fritz 4}

\textit{February 19th, 2017}

I’ve become quite addicted to playing online chess. I’m not playing it particularly well mind you, but I find myself getting jacked up on a couple of long blacks and playing six games at once with random people from around the world. The app is from chess.com and well worth a look even if you’ve never played. It has great tutorials and if you want to play a person can link you up with others at your skill level. Hit me up for a game at citizencayn!

With chess on the mind I got thinking about human-computer chess matches. The most famous story is of Deep Blue vs Garry Kasparov in the late 90’s, but I was more interested in recent games, especially but software running on mobile devices or consumer technology as opposed to hardware purpose built for the game.
Pocket Fritz 4 - Rodriguez Vila,A (2522) [A44]
Mercosur Cup Villa Martelli ARG (6), 09.08.2009
1.d4 c5 2.d5 e5 3.e4 d6 4.c4 Ne7 5.Qb3 Ng6
15.Qd3 Rb8 16.b4 Nd4 17.Nxd4 exd4 18.a4
cxb4 19.Nxd4 Ne5 20.Qg3 Bh4 21.Qb3 Bf6

Watch the tiny handheld PC outplay a 2522
grandmaster: 22.Ne6 Bxe6 23.dxe6 Nc6 24.e5
dxe5 25.exf7+ Kh8 26.Be3 Na5 27.Qe6 Qc8
28.Qxc8 Rbxc8 29.Bg6 b3 30.Rab1 e4 31.Rfc1
Rxc1+ 32.Bxc1 Be7 33.Be3 a6 34.Bb6 Nc4
35.Rxb3 Ne5 36.Bxe4 Nxf7 37.Rc3 Bf6 38.Rc6
Ne5 39.Rc2 Kg8 40.Bb7 Nd7 41.Bc7 Re8 42.Bxa6
Re1+ 43.Kh2 Ra1 44.a5 Be5+ 45.Bxe5 Nxe5
46.Rc5 1-0.
Pocket Fritz 4 is a chess playing program designed to run on handheld PCs. In 2009 Pocket Fritz won the Copa Mercosur tournament in Buenos Aires running on a 528 MHz HTC Touch HD mobile phone. Pretty cool huh? It reached grandmaster level. I hunted around for the moves that were made during one of the games and managed to find Pocket Fritz 4 VS Rodriguez Vila, A. My idea was that maybe I could use the chess moves to make notes somehow.

When I had a look it turned out to be pretty easy. The moves have names like “d.4 c5, d5 e5” and so on. I decided to use the letter names as note names and the numeric as an octave indication. I ignored the extra letters that are used to indicate which chess piece is being moved. I also had to deal with H which is obviously not a musical note so I decided to use G# in its place.

I copied the first 44 moves of a 92-move game into my piano roll in Logic and the got thoroughly bored doing it. Listening back it was ok but not really lighting any inspiration fires for me so I decided to work on some rhythm things for a while. I made a groove in 5/4 on the 808. I then jammed around with the first twelve or so notes of the game with a Harp sound until I had a riff I enjoyed.

Returning to this a few days later I ran the Harp riff through a bunch of different max4live patches in Ableton, with the intention of making a really weird version of the riff. Things like Doppler shift effects, filtered delays and auto panning. I then cut these back into the original logic session, blending them together. At this point I added a Juno bass line made from the first few chess moves of the game.

The clarinet came on the last day, along with the guitar, shaker and guiro. I was intending to add vocals but decided against it. The chess move stuff kind of went out the window after the Clarinet line that has all the delay on it. From that point on I was just jamming and enjoying the tune.

I’m off on holiday for two weeks, so the next two works will be out upon my return. I’ll still be writing but most likely won’t have time to blog. Stay well and thanks for listening.
#31 Tools

March 15th, 2017

“We no longer own ourselves. We are digital serfs.”
- Hannes Grassegger

I intended to write a little on my holiday and upload two new tunes when I returned, but the minute I hit the beach in Ahmed I knew it wasn’t going to happen. After 30 weeks of a track every week I’ve broken my run but I really needed a break. So here I am, very refreshed but writing now from the other side of the world in Austin at SXSW.

Having two weeks off from everything was amazing. I really tried to embrace a bit of a tech blackout, mainly from my emails. This is something Tim Ferris bangs on about a lot and I’ve been keen to give it a go. I made it nearly a week without checking but eventually I couldn’t help myself. It was pretty refreshing mentally though and I’d really like to try and work in some bigger “tech holidays” into my life. I’m sure that my wife would also like it if I put my phone away for a week…

“You want proof? If personal data is the oil of the 21st century—a commodity companies pay billions of dollars for—then why aren’t we, the source of such data, the oil sheiks?”
- Hannes Grassegger

Reading an interview with Holly Herndon led me to a book by Hannes Grassegger called I Am Capital. The main theme is that our digital data is a part of us and we shouldn’t be giving it away for free. I’m not really doing it justice with that breakdown, so be sure to check it out. I was especially interested in her analogy of medieval serfdom as a comparison to Internet companies offering us “free” services (or land) in return for using our data (the fruits of our labour harvest). She notes that it is a deal as old as the hills and we are being scammed…

All of this got me thinking about the things that connect our physical parts with our digital parts, the conduits and tools that tie together physicality, ideas and virtual selves. I recorded keyboard sounds and screen tapping and effected them in Ableton. I tried to record as much as possible before I jumped on the plane to Austin but found myself with no motivation on Friday.
“Go ahead, throw away your cell phone and your laptop, quit Facebook. You’ll see: there is no opt-out anymore.”
- Hannes Grassegger

I finished what I have on the plane and in a hallway in the Austin Convention Centre. It’s in three sections, with the first exploring the keyboard sample and delayed effects, the second expanding on this with a bouncy groove and whacky intersections of sounds. The last introduces a simple melody that builds through to the end.

Composing on the move is difficult. I actually left my headphones in Melbourne and ended up using the crappy ones they give you on planes so I kinda have no idea what this really sounds like. Oh well, it’s all part of the process. Thanks for reading as always and get in touch if you have any questions.

#32 SoundBow Improvisation
March 23rd, 2017

This week I left my laptop at the security check-in at Austin airport whilst heading back to Australia. Luckily the trip went through San Francisco and LA, and double luckily I noticed I had left it behind when I was in San Fran and managed to convince a friend to bring it to LA for me as they were on the same flight back to Oz. So I had to find a way to make some music this week and I chose to have a look for an interesting iPhone app…

G’day from Austin, Texas! Yes when I travel to the USA I can’t help but ham up the Aussie accent a little. Well, a lot really. Everyone gets a kick out of it and to tell you the truth, when I speak with my normal inflections no-one seems to be able to understand me. Especially my name, I must have some strange way of pronouncing it because it’s always a small saga to get people to understand it. And then of course I am very conscious of it every time I introduce myself so I overcompensate with a ridiculously over-pronounced version.

I had the pleasure of traveling to Texas for the inaugural South By South West (SXSW) music showcase festival. It was an eclectic experience of epic schlepping, multiple shows in difficult circumstances, tech showcases, art installations, conferences and networking. I was over supporting my friend Sui Zhen and really only partook in the schlepping, playing and
viewing of art and tech stuff. I resolved upon leaving to sit back and watch how everyone else approached the fest, as I’d like to go back on my own terms at some point.

The Austin Convention Centre played host to an enormous technology showcase that I was lucky to have time to explore. I was particularly interested in checking out any VR and AR stuff I could get my hands on alongside any other emerging and interesting technologies. The highlight for me was the NASA stand but I must admit I found the rest of the display’s a little underwhelming and pointless.

VR and AR are the new sexy in tech it seems. Much like the 90’s when it seemed that VR would be in every home and have a massive impact on our lives we seem to be back in this place again with affordable commercial units available and every developer and his dog trying to pedal games and ways of using it. But for me it still doesn’t seem to have found its feet, or at least nothing I experienced in this session was very mind-blowing. The games were all clunky and limited. The only things I found really impressive were AR and VR environments created from actual places – in particular the Mars Rover footage (yep, you got to stand on Mars and have a look around) and the Australian environments (kind of like being a bird flying around looking at stuff). Speaking of birds there was one stand I didn’t get to try that suspended you in the air like a bird, you flap your arms and fly around a VR environment while a fan blow on your face to simulate air. This would have been cool I think.

I found most of the tech kind of pointless or un-practical. For example there was this pair of shoes that you could put on that would then analyse your gate and walking style. The shoes had these little vibrating points that would buzz on the sole of your feet to apparently correct your gate. It was a very weird experience and I think it would actually drive me crazy over an extended period of walking.

All of it made me think about our attitudes today toward innovation and then the commercialisation of these ideas. For me it is always important to explore new ideas thoroughly. But it seemed to me that most of the things on display were all trying to be exciting and big and sexy ideas but not really hitting the mark because they were too concerned with being all those things rather than actually being innovative. Anyways, I am so unqualified to talk about this but it got me thinking.
So after leaving my laptop and having nothing to compose with I scoured the net in search of experimental music apps and stumble across SoundBow. SoundBow is a drawing based music app that turns your phone into a tactile instrument. You really need to watch it in action to understand it properly, but I had a blast with it. The piece you hear for this week was an improvisation begun by recording my voice in to the app at LA airport and then experimenting for three minutes. Very simple. For next week’s work I plan to use the app in conjunction with some grooves and see what I can come up with. Thanks for reading!!

#33 SoundBowl and Groove
March 27th, 2017

One of the cool things about doing this weekly composition for so long is that I have ended up forgetting things about why I started it and what I set out to do. It occurred to me today that I tend to enjoy the final product of these experiments the most when they are a combination of ideas from disparate sources. The more elements that go in to the blend, the deeper and fuller the piece feels. This all hinges on whether I can cram the ideas together in a seamless manner. And then I remembered that this is why I called the project Chimera in the first place, because I’m curious about what happens when odd musical ideas are smashed together.

Chimera Definition
1a: a fire-breathing she-monster in Greek mythology having a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail
b: an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts

This week I set out to combine an improvisation on the SoundBow app I mentioned last week with some sort of groove and melodic element. Firstly I worked on the groove element. I was stranded at Sydney airport on Wednesday after returning from LA, tooling about on Facebook. A trailer for a Tyler the Creator documentary grabbed my attention and I was really in the song that played over the last half of the clip. I googled the lyrics “So in love, I give it all away” and was surprised to find out it was a Beyoncé song called Party from 2011…anyway, fricken loved the groove and set about mimicking my favourite elements – the Voyager synth bass line and on-the-beat shaker line. To give it a “me” twist I changed the
time signature to 5/4. I developed an A and B section, with the B section being more melodic and containing an arpeggiated Juno riff.

2: an illusion or fabrication of the mind; especially: an unrealizable dream

“a fancy, a chimera in my brain, troubles me in my prayer” — John Donne

“His utopia was a chimera.”

My next experiments came on Friday afternoon whilst hanging about at VCA. Sitting in the (very quiet) library I recorded a whistle and a hum into the SoundBow and performed a couple of improvisations. This was very intuitive and straightforward, I didn’t think very much. It took me a couple of goes to get a hum that was loud enough and I may have pissed off some studiers next to me.

3: an individual, organ, or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution. A hybrid created through fusion of a sperm and an egg from different species is a chimera.

I put both elements together on Sunday. I doubled the synth melody in the B section with Saxophone, which added some life to the part. It wasn’t a case of just whacking the impro over the groove from here on; I had to mess around with how to fit everything together a lot. In the end, the first minute or so of the piece is the impro over the groove, then once the Saxophones enter it is mostly groove with parts of the impro slotted in (hopefully) tastefully. I effected the impro in Ableton Live with my favourite max patch the buffer shuffler. I hope you enjoy the piece and thanks for reading!

#34 Planet 9
April 4th, 2017

Being someone who thrives on activity and achievement I am discovering over time that it is essential for me to book in “nothing” time. Some of you out there with similar dispositions might be thinking why bother? I know that there have been times when I have railed against the fact that I need to sleep for 8 hours (when I am exercising a lot) as I perceived sleep as wasted hours when I could be working on music or some other goal I was after. But now I am beginning to see that this sort of down time is one of the most important aspects of creativity and producing creative work. Sleep, meandering walks, dozing on the chair – all of this
allows time for “deep thinking” to occur, unconscious processes that in my experience tend to lead to revelatory moments and interesting ideas.

Listening to this podcast featuring Ricardo Semler, I was inspired by how he structures his work-week. Semler is a Brazilian businessman famous for his unique style of democratic corporate structuring. He did things like tell his workers that they can come and go as they please as long as they meet their sales targets. Ricardo takes one weekday per week where he has nothing scheduled. On this day he does as he pleases, perhaps he stays in bed reading all morning, or he moves to a sunny couch and doses for a few hours letting his mind wander here and there. His reasoning is that he needs this time to absorb and process various events in his life and get some deep thinking done. I love this idea and need more of it in my life!

On Monday morning I decided to give this a go. I had been reading this article about Planet 9 and how the search has been extended to the public in the hopes that someone will spot it. I pulled up a couch in the sun and let my mind wander on the topic and wrote down whatever came to me. Still a bit goal driven but definitely on the correct track. I ended up with this:

_I discovered planet 9_
_I called it Vonnegut_
_Millions of eyes combed the sky_
_While it giggled in the darkness_
_These eyes gazed so earnest and bright_
_They pushed back the light of the stars_
_But none could see nimble Vonnegut_
_Large and content in the dark_
_All of the Earth came together_
_To build a giant eye_
_With a pupil so large and sensitive to light_
_It would see to the dawn of time_
_With an iris that flicked from brown through green_
_And lashes from Sydney to Perth_
_When it finally saw it shed one tear_
_So large it flooded the earth_
The rest of the week I was so busy with work and uni I had no time to work on the piece. When I did come to it I had about an hour to finish it. I worked quickly to create a drum track in 7/8 and a minimal bass line in the style of My Disco or The Bad Seeds. The result is a slightly weird but interesting spoken word piece. Hope you enjoy and thanks as always for reading.

#35 Human-Pig Embryo

April 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2017

I have a bit of a new outlook at the moment with these tracks. I had been experiencing a lot of guilt and stress when I didn’t feel like I had enough time to commit to making music each week. After a bit of soul searching and some conversations with my supervisors I decided to try and cut myself some slack, so this week I knew I would be busy and I decided that I would dedicate Friday morning to doing as much as I could and then leaving it. SO this is what happened…

“The creation of this so-called chimera – named after the cross-species beast of Greek mythology”

I have a collection of possible themes for Chimera tracks in my Evernote. I had a scroll through and found this article I had saved about the first ever Human–Pig embryo ever created. The technical term for this is a Chimera. I chose the name for this project initially based on a group of people described in one of my favourite Sci-Fi novels – Revelation Space. The subset were Chimerics - heavily bio-engineered and cyborgized human splinter groups. This led me to research the word Chimera and the idea of something that is a combination of many different things spoke to me, so I named the project after it.

I walked to the shops to buy some coffee beans and put my iPod on shuffle. The first track to grab my interest was Arkestry by Flying Lotus. I decided to make a texture map from the broad strokes of the track (pictured below). On the return trip one of my favourite songs from the Twin Peaks soundtrack came on – I’m Hurt Bad by Angelo Badalamenti. I’ve always loved the driving 12/8 drum beat and resolved to experiment with the feel in this work.
“The idea of having an animal being born composing of human cells creates some feelings that need to be addressed.”

After creating my map I began by making the drum groove. I chose 9/8 to change the feel a little. It just so happened that a friend had left a Juno – 60 synth at my house. I decided to use it to create as much of the melodic material as possible and composed pad feel derived from a C Lydian Dominant mode. The bass line highlights the move between the diminished harmony and major harmony.

For the textural elements I opened an Ableton live session and found a bunch of clips I liked the sound of. I used a bunch of different effects and max4live patched to create a bizarre soundscape. I then bounced this over to the logic session and added it in as per my map. The final touch was the pig sample, so cute and maybe a little disturbing considering the content. Thanks as always for listening and get in touch with any thoughts or questions.

**#36 Date Night**

*April 18\(^{th}\), 2017*

This week was a very intuitive composing week, not much conceptualising or thinking. I had the luxury of some holidays from teaching which means a couple of more day’s spare time. But instead of going nuts and trying to do something epic I settled back and let it happen.
Surprisingly I managed to compose a little bit every day which hasn’t happened for ages with this project. It was productive, but looking back at my journal the most work really happened in the first and last sessions. For the first session, I jammed around on the guitar for an hour or two. I have this great beat-up nylon string acoustic that I got god knows where. It’s my favourite guitar for writing as it is super gentle to play.

When I am writing on the guitar with the intention to add vocals I often improvise chord progressions and vocal melodies at the same time. This means that I sing these ridiculous garbled phrases of gibberish. It’s really funny to listen back to, I have no idea of what I am saying because I am absorbed in writing the music. Often entire sentences come out and I listen back and cringe. But it’s the only way to get all the music out before it runs away. I can always come back to the lyrics later. Having talked to some of my songwriter friends about this it seems it is a common method for writing.

The next two sessions I made small edits to the main chorus and verse ideas that I had written. This entailed making what would become the horn/synth theme a little more rhythmically active by dropping a beat from the second entry. I also recorded a guitar line on the third day, but this ended up on the cutting room floor.

Thematically I was a little stuck. I was really inspired by Darren Hanlon’s performance of his song Halley’s Comet at our friends Glen and Jamie’s wedding. The song is about a family all getting out of bed to see Halley’s Comet…I really loved the idea of this astrological event becoming a family moment, sort of bringing them together and the rest of the neighbourhood as well. So, I had a little search on the net for rare astrological events and came across this alignment of the planets in 2040. The idea of writing this song about my future self on that night was interesting to me! So I wrote these lyrics very quickly:

_On a night in_  
2040  
_A rare alignment_  
First comes Mercury  
Then Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Moon  

_I’ll be in my_
Early 50’s
Have some kiddies
We’ll head down to the beach
And chase the light across the dunes

I wonder where we will be?

On a night in
2040
It’s 20 dollars
For a space trip
Date night spent in orbit round the Earth

You’ll be sneezing
Star Treks obsolete
Solar Power
Come down on a beam
And there’s a circle, Jupiter

I wonder where we will be?

Apparently, the pollen count will be double today’s level, thus the sneezing remark. Also the great red spot on Jupiter will have become circular, but I couldn’t get that line right so we are left with whatever the hell that one means. Lastly on Friday I exchanged the guitar line for an arpeggiated synth, I like the way it sits much more.

On the last day, I smashed everything out. I have much more time to commit and it really shows I think, it’s so important to have that dedicated 3 to 5 hours of creative time to really go deep on some ideas. Thanks for reading!
The muse should always be discreet

My friend lent me a PS4 for a few weeks while he went on his honeymoon. I’m borrowing it for market research of course…well that’s what I tell myself. It’s a great console, games have really come a long way since I played them regularly on my Super Nintendo. The ergonomics of the controller are very cool too, the different vibrations that occur in tandem with gameplay happenings are a great touch. My favourite game that I played was called The Last Of Us, a zombie apocalypse first person shooter with an incredible story and amazing voice acting. Totally sucked in.

During another game this week, a Debussy piece called Nocturnes for Orchestra: I. Nuages came on. I had never really listened to it before and was immediately into it. The harmonies and orchestration are beautiful, on the edge of ‘functional’. In fact, after the premiere the piece received little praise from critics and is considered very difficult to analyse harmonically.

The slow, solemn motion of the clouds

Nuages is a cloudscape. To my ear, Debussy captures the gentle undulations of dusk sky, the work swirls softly and unexpectedly in formal and harmonic directions. Inspired by this I set out to make a form map of the piece to see if I could abstract some of the ideas into my own work. I should note here that I began this on Friday…I was feeling worn down and not up to composing for most of the week. All of what I composed was done in two or three hours on Friday morning. I think this is reflected in the work itself.

I wrote my A Theme, the opening, by experimenting with the sixth mode of limited transposition. I jammed around and harmonised until I found something I liked. The process continued like this, essentially I was colouring in my map from the Debussy piece. I intended to ad synths and other things to this piece to really change the sound palate and hopefully
make it less recognizably referencing Nudges, but I ran out of time. So what you hear is unfinished, and a little too close to the piece it’s modelled off. But hey you can’t win them all…thanks for reading.

#38 15 Minute Composition 1
May 1st, 2017

Just a short post. This week I tested how much I could get done in 15 minutes. I selected a sample of a Lyre Bird, set a timer and went at it. You can listen to the results below. It is really hard to get very much done, and in this case I think that mastery of the tools is essential otherwise you waist time. I didn’t pick instruments beforehand but I did pick a sample to work with and I had some idea of what I wanted to do. I think if I had gone in completely blind I would have had much more trouble. I would like to develop the idea further.

#39 iPSc
May 12th, 2017

One of my composition teachers told me once: the larger a piece of music is and the more instrumental forces involved, the smaller the original idea needs to be. I have found this to be very true across a lot of disciplines and am no longer surprised to find the technique present in some of my favourite pieces of music. Like Ligeti’s Lux Aeterna – the number three permeates the work in different ways from his use of trichords (Ligeti signal chords), the form of the work, the concept of the holy trinity…As this project becomes larger with time I think it’s important for me to reflect on the original idea that spawned it.

Origins

The title Chimera_52 originated from the science fiction novel Revelation Space by Alistair Reynolds. The novel is part of a sub-genre of science fiction called space opera. The main story-arc is irrelevant but Reynolds details the “emergence of “chimeric” factions: heavily bio-engineered and cyborgized human splinter groups” within the Revelation Space universe. The largest group were known as Ultras, short for Ultranaut and served aboard interstellar
spaceships as workers making many modifications to their bodies to adapt to the conditions of interstellar travel and for aesthetic concerns.

I originally read the novel long before this project began and the word *chimeric* intrigued me. There is no glossary in the book and Reynolds is vague in all things, slowly releasing information about his world as the story line progresses. I searched the word on the fan wiki website and found no direct explanation, only it’s use in conjunction with words such as “heavily augmented”. A broader Internet search revealed its root in the word chimera, which I have defined below:

**Noun**

**chimera (plural chimeras)**

1. *(Greek mythology)* Alternative *letter-case form* of Chimera (a flame-spewing monster often represented as having two heads, one of a goat and the other of a lion; the body of a goat; and a serpent as a tail).

2. *(mythology)* Any fantastic creature with parts from different animals.

3. Anything composed of very disparate parts.

The third entry intrigued me but it was not until I began this masters project that I would find a use for it.

My practice has always drawn inspiration and influence from a broad range of sources. I am excited by many different styles of music. I have always been fascinated with combining disparate elements in my music – 12 tone themes over bigband jazz grooves or unsymmetrical time signatures in dance music for example. I am challenged by the idea and energized by the results of such experiments. At the very beginning of the entire masters process I determined to explore a project that allowed my practice to continue to develop in line with my personal aesthetic. Upon deep reflection it was apparent that these juxtapositions were integral to my practice and their origins and how they interacted within my work merited further exploration. It was at this point that I returned to the word and the concept: chimera.

*Now*

If you’re wondering why the tone changed a little in the above paragraphs, it’s because it comes from some of my formal writing for Uni. It’s important for me to reflect on these ideas.
more and more as I begin to try and frame my research findings in an academic paper. It’s also important from an artistic setting. As I said, the work is becoming unwieldy and I am struggling to keep up creatively as my priorities are shifting. But reflecting on why I began and what I am exploring helps ground me in times of doubt.

This week begins with the concept of Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells, which are stem cells that can be generated from adult cells. Obviously this is a huge step forward for stem cell research as it negates the issue of embryos being destroyed in the process. It also opens the possibility of personalized stem cells. This composition features all the usual tricks, chords created from the letters iPSC, from derived from this and so on. There has been road works outside my house all week so the recording has been very stunted and I chose to work more with samples and synths. I hope you enjoy, and thanks for reading.

#40 Signal
May 24th, 2017

Busy busy busy busy…

This week I really wanted to experiment with some atonality, or maybe a better term would be non-tonality. I encountered two problems that fed in to each other – my lack of experience writing in this manner meant that I needed time to experiment to find the sounds I was after, but I didn’t have any time. The result is half baked but I value the experiment. I say non-tonal as opposed to atonal because I feel that atonal implies a complete lack of tonal centre, or that each pitch be classed as equal. While there is no clear diatonic explanation of what’s going on in this work I think there is at least some gravity towards certain pitches, meaning that some are perhaps points of rest harmonically and others are points of tension, indicating a kind of harmonic structure.

The experiment was inspired by Ligeti’s “signal chords”, which feature in many of his works but perhaps most prominently Lux Aeterna (also one of my fav pieces of music). A Ligeti signal chord is a stack of a major second and a minor third. The sound is pretty open…I experimented with a palindromic line in the harp, which then turns into a sort of canon a semitone out. The goal was to obscure any sense of tonic. Re-amping through the guitar
pedals added some extra colour to the sound. The piano line was an improvised line based on the original riff, also with pedal effects.

Interestingly, I began this work with one of my form maps, or abstraction maps and ended up discarding it. I’m kind of over that process I think. At least for now. I’m feeling the urge to keep pushing into more experimental areas for the end of this project. I am very conscious of the quality dropping as I become busier and the focus turns more to writing the dissertation, which is causing me some stress. But all I can do is push on! Thanks for reading.

#41 PLAYspace Improvisation

May 29th, 2017

This week I had the pleasure of creating an installation at Abbotsford Convent with my good friend, collaborator and all round mad genius Glen Walton. Glen created an art business called Playable Streets a while back. We build interactive installations that connect people with their surroundings and each other through touch…or in other words, we wire stuff up so that when you touch it, it makes sounds. I have been the composer for a couple of projects and it has been a blast.

For this installation Glen pitched the idea of playable plants. I learnt a lot from my last work at the In Touch exhibition and I wanted to focus on simpler sounds, fuller sounds that provided instant tactile gratification. I began with a set of piano tones in a pentatonic scale but quickly shifted to the idea of using the harmonic series. A little background –

The harmonic series is a collection of pure tones contained in every sound you hear. Without getting too deep into the science of acoustics, all notes contain a series of overtones at exact ratios – an octave, an octave and a fifth, two octaves, an octave and a third and so forth. Take the note C1, the overtones above this would be C2, G2, C3, E3, G3, Bb3 and so on. Here’s where it gets cool – the amplitude or volume of these overtones is what creates timbre or the way that something sounds. Humans do not perceive these tones separately, we hear them as a note that sounds like a piano, or a note that sounds like a saxophone. Pretty cool!

Clearly, I like to nerd out on this. There a few things that you can draw from these artefacts and one of them is important for this project – these ratios represent a stable harmonic basis for building chords in an orchestration sense. Put another way: if you play all these notes

lx}


together it ought to sound pretty good, rich and sonorous even. We put this to the test in the PLAYSpace installation. We had 12 notes to play with, so I mapped up to the 11th partial – C1, C2, G2, C3, E3, G3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4. Some of you may look at those notes and feel that the F# and Bb should sound pretty weird...but they don’t. The resemblance to a Lydian Dominant mode lends the sound all the attributes that come along with this sonority; a sense of wonder and playfulness.

Thanks a bunch for reading. I am heading on tour again this week so I expect to continue with the Transit series of works I began last year. Wish me luck and please get in touch with any comments or questions!

#42 F
June 15th, 2017

I think I’m a week late with this post but it has been unavoidable. Right now I’m in a tour van about to cross the border from France into Switzerland...we’ve been on the road for a week now, it’s been pretty relaxed as far as these things go. By the end we will have only done six shows, but it’s great to be in Europe again and I excited to have some down time in Berlin after.

Three disparate things came together to influence how this piece turned out. One, I’ve been really enjoying the new Twin Peaks. It’s one of my favourite TV shows and it’s so good to have it back and see Lynch given a complete free reign to do his Lynch thing. Somewhere in the media roll out I saw an article saying that the intro theme is actually in the shape of the Twin Peaks logo – two sloping mountains. How cool! I wanted to use the idea, but wasn’t quite sure how to implement it.

I listened to this Sam Harris podcast featuring Zeynep Tufekci, an academic whose work focuses on AI-controlled marketing and the potential for Facebook and other social media structure to be used by tyrant states. There were many things in the podcast I found interesting, but the take away was that I wanted the work to have something to do with these themes...in the end I just decided to use the F as a dynamic map or some such in a similar way to the Twin Peaks theme. What this turned in to was making the shape of an F in the Logic X session.
So beginning with the F again – the third influence was that I have been listening to a lot of Donnacha Dennehey’s music again. He is a composer who uses a lot of spectral elements in his music and I wanted to try my hands with some of these ideas. Every time I’ve tried in the past it’s led me down an unsatisfying hole where I didn’t really know what I was doing, but this time I think I finally managed to pull something off that sounds good.

I recorded a low F on the piano and did a spectral analysis of it. I chose notes within the C3 to C5 range to experiment with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>-24</td>
<td>-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D#3</td>
<td>-35</td>
<td>-36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>-50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G#3</td>
<td>+28</td>
<td>-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>-24</td>
<td>-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D#4</td>
<td>-37</td>
<td>-37.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>F#4</td>
<td>+11</td>
<td>-46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>+28</td>
<td>-44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>+22</td>
<td>-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>-42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C#5</td>
<td>-49</td>
<td>-52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea behind this is that these “notes” being present in the spectrum opens new possibilities in terms of harmonic content. You take the note and corresponding cents and balance them in an orchestration setting with the db levels. It creates some interesting timbres and harmonies. The piece turned out a bit derivative of the post-minimal style but I like what I did and am happy to have gotten out a spectral piece than actually kinda worked.

**#43 and 44 – Transit 3 and Transit 4**

*June 19th, 2017*

On tooooooour! Two weeks in the van with NO ZU family has fried my brain. Many highs and lows, I am waiting for the dust to settle so that my memory quietly blocks out the lows and I look back on the entire experience with fondness. For me, our first and last shows were best. The first was a pre-show for Primavera Sound in Barcelona. Packed to the rafters, we went on stage after Kate Tempest. Her band produced this enormous hop hop/trip hop sound that was very intense. Her rap/poetry was equally intense and everyone was very into it, which made us a little nervous as our vibe is a little more…silk? Cowboy hat? I suppose
more about an ecstatic dance experience which seemed pretty contrary to what the crowd was
digging. But then we went on and they went nuts and it was great! Our last show was a club
show in Berlin at my friend Josh’s venue Urban Spree. I think nearly every member of the
band had 4 or 5 old friends pop out of the Berlin woodwork and it was a stellar night and
show. Especially after a 10-hour drive from Lucerne!

I’ve decided to combine the blog post for these two tracks because I’m late posting one and
they are thematically linked. A mini-series of works that have run through Chimera_52 has
been the Transit pieces, with #19 Transit 1 and #20 Transit 2 being composed on the way to
France and on the way home from Italy respectively, and #31 Tools on the way to the USA.
Sonically these pieces are linked, they tend to be on the groovy side, mostly electronic and
quite fun. These two new works don’t buck much from the trend.

#43 Transit 3 was started and finished on the flight to Spain and the in the van between
France and Switzerland. Although I usually try to avoid 4/4 beats, this one is quite straight.
But to combat that I messed a lot with the drum grooves, never quite letting it sit for too long
in the same place. The inception of the work was the arpeggiated chord progression and
plastic bass line. I literally played the bass line in one take and stuck with it. After that initial
session on the plane the rest was just arranging and effecting. I should mention the end, the
drum beat displaces by one semiquaver each round in an additive fashion…quite off putting
but oddly groovy at the same time (at least to me).

#44 I began at the end of the 10-hour drive to Lucerne. I had an idea of creating a drum
groove in 4/4 with an extra bar of 1/8. It all unfolded pretty quickly, including the bass line.
But just as I was getting into it I got asked to drive! At this point I had nutted out the first
bass line and groove. So I passed the computer to my band mate Becky of Sui Zhen fame and
asked if she wanted to try some stuff. Becky made the spacey pads, choir stabs and epic synth
lead theme that enters at around 1:42. I didn’t have any chance to check it out until I was on
my return flight to Australia 4 days later! I had heaps of fun arranging it and adding extra bits
and pieces.

For the next couple of works I’m going to be exploring the idea of reterritorialization through
omission…and I’ll let you stew on that. Thanks for reading!
I sent my phone to get repaired this week, so was phone free for 7 days. As someone who has jumped on the “I should use my phone less for my mental health” bandwagon (and someone who is guilty of using it way too much) I thought this would be an interesting experiment. This week’s work is suitably strange and disconnected.

I watched a TED talk by artist and writer Austin Kleon earlier this week and was impressed with his newspaper blackout technique. Every day for years Kleon would take the day’s newspaper and blackout most of it, kind of like a classified CIA document, leaving only a few chosen words. These words form a poem. The idea of taking something large and noisy and sifting through the clutter to find something minimal and poetic really appeals to me, so I gave it a go.

Before I get to that though, I should point out that in Kleon’s TED talk he bangs on about a favourite subject mentioned here many times – the idea of stealing in art. He draws a line backwards in time from himself to many other artists that have pursued similar projects, some of who he knew nothing about. He mentions William Burroughs and his cut-up technique, which I have mentioned before in this series of blogs. I still stand by my belief that all art is a very small step forward from something done by someone else, and if you spend all your time worried about being too much like something else you are shooting yourself in the foot. In time, you will grow into your own thing, which will most likely have a history you don’t even know about yet.

I grabbed an article from The Guardian about climate change and made my own Newspaper Blackout. I’ll be the first to admit it’s not my best poetic work but it was fun to try. I am interested in expanding the idea into a collection of sound, but not sure how I will go about it yet.
Back to the phone thing. It was great to be without it in social situations. I have a habit of checking it for no reason in groups of people and I am trying to work on being more present in general. But I must admit, I felt generally less connected over this week and I think this is a legitimate response. Communication through certain forms of social media, texting and calling form an important part of how I communicate with my friends and loved ones. And I felt a little lost! Does this mean I am a true millennial?…

#46 Pugs In Hats

July 4th, 2017

After listening to this podcast I have been thinking a lot about the “suggestion” paths we get led on by search engines and machine AI in general. YouTube is a great example, you can begin with a quite innocent search topic but if you keep following YouTube’s suggested “next watch” you often get led to very extreme examples of what you began with. This is because the algorithm, the AI, is trying to keep you interested. And humans are interested by extremes, outlying information on all topics. You may begin with “amazingly high taekwondo kicks” but it’s highly possible you will end up at “Taekwondo Master tries to kick apple off head and fails” …and you will probably watch it.

This is not always an insidious mechanism, but it is one that functions across all social media and many websites. They are designed to capture your attention and keep it. Keep it for that one click extra, or that next scroll down. And it’s not humans doing this, it’s algorithms
working autonomously. Algorithms that can detect your mood and try and influence you accordingly.

In a world where we already invest so much in our virtual selves I feel we need to be aware of these things. Through a stupid argument with a friend recently I realised that I have begun too invest to much of my self-worth in online goings on. And I had no idea I cared so much. I think these virtual elements are becoming extensions of our cognition and that we need to periodically check in with ourselves to evaluate where our priorities lie. But at the same time, I think that these environments have begun to mean SOMETHING as expansions of our animal surroundings, virtually. It’s just a shame that they are controlled environments with dubious intentions now, and not the free virtual playground intended. I’m sounding a little dramatic but regardless the entire idea is fascinating and I explored it this week with a song about “search rabbit holes”.

I’ve only got six more of these to go and I can’t quite believe it. Hopefully I don’t fall off the edge as I am trying to finish my dissertation at the same time, but a mad dash to the finish seems appropriate for this project. Thanks for reading, as always, and wish me luck.

**#47 Darknet**

*July 12th, 2017*

I’m buried under a mountain of writing at the moment, so instead of writing to much more I thought I would just share pieces of it here. You’ll have to excuse the tone, it’s a little on the academic side, but these are the hoops we jump through. Before I jump on though, this week’s work is inspired by Darknets…networks that can only be accessed with specific software or protocols. Darknets make up the Dark Web, where you can go to get all sorts of naughty things.

I turned the word Darknet into a cryptogram and pulled out the corresponding musical notes. I then messed with these until I had a progression I liked, which turned out to be the reverse of the word plus a bar or so. I improvised a wonky groove and added it some repetitive monotone vocals that were somehow inspired by King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard whom I just saw at Primavera Sound in Barcelona. Not quite sure how it is, but it is in my mind. Enjoy.
Here’s a little bit about Holly Herndon, whose ethos influenced this project greatly: Holly Herndon is a composer, electronic music performer and PhD candidate at Stanford University. My first interactions with her music occurred during my honours year upon the release of her second album *Platform*. I was engaged by her explicit combination of experimental, techno and pop music techniques and further intrigued by the depth of process behind each work on the album. This paralleled my own practice and my appreciation of her work suggested areas for further experimentation in *Chimera_52*.

In her creative process, Herndon has remarked that, “There is always some kind of conceptual framework.” The interaction between conceptualisation, musical inspirations and ways of making inform her work in varied ways, as “some tracks start with concept, others start with a musical idea – or an atmosphere or emotional pull. But there is always some underlying concept”. Herndon’s ideas resonate with my practice and the experimentation with conceptualisation I began in my honours research. Moving forward, I wished to explore the interactions of these elements and how they influenced my practice by making conceptualisation a part of every piece.

Herndon’s music makes extensive use of found sounds, it “samples her Skype activity, YouTube clicks, and fridge door slamming; it also flaunts original coding in the visual programming language Max/MSP. Her music takes cues from the compositional theories of German electronic music pioneer Karlheinz Stockhausen, as well as her instrument, the computer, and its ability to annotate modern life.” Expanding on Herndon’s integration of experimental music within techno and club music, I experimented with integrating pop, folk, jazz, electronic, experimental and classical composition techniques in my practice. Furthermore, the use of found sounds, self-sampling and environment sampling were explored, inspired by Herndon’s work.

**#48 Conductive Improvisation**

*July 24th, 2017*

This week I’ve been experimenting with a bare conductive touch board. Sounds a little off, but it’s actually very fun. The touch board is a modular circuit board that can be connected to various conductive things including conductive paint, metal, organics and even people to
trigger sounds of your choosing. You can load the board with code that lets you trigger audio files, or code that makes the board send-off midi messages. So for example you could wire up a plant, as I have done with my friend Glen at Playable Streets in the past, to trigger and audio sound when touched. Or you can make a midi trigger instrument, which is kind of what I had a go at.

I’ve wanted to try and hook one of the boards up to my Saxophone for a while now. I thought, wouldn’t it be cool if I placed triggers in spots were my finger where already pressing keys down, so that when I play certain notes as well as the note sounding a midi message or audio file would be fired off at the same time. I gave it a go but was very disappointed to discover that the saxophone is TOO conductive. It’s such a large piece of metal that it just constantly sets off the triggers. Why not just place the triggers on other material and the on the Sax? I think this will be an experiment for the future, as what I am really interested in with this idea is the rhythms that are already being produced by keys being depressed while playing something on the saxophone, as opposed to having triggers that are separate to these keys. Modding the Sax in this way is definitely on the cards though, and perhaps a later Chimera experiment.

With the Sax not working I turned to the Clarinet. The Clarinet is mostly made of wood with the keys being metallic. After a little experimentation, I managed to wire up the bottom keys and the middle keys, marked in red in the below diagram.

I connected the instrument to Logic X and experimented with various Alchemy synth sounds being triggered. There is a lot to play with, including the possibility of triggering more rhythmic samples or entire beats or chunks of melody. I settled fairly quickly on a drone type sound, and used only the tonic and fifth triggers. I performed two improvisations using a Lydian mode vibe, with the occasional accidental for a bit of flavour. With more time, I would like to expand the tonal palate of the triggers, and play more with the possibility of
rhythmic interaction between the triggered sounds and acoustic sounds. Thanks for reading!
Entangled began with a very simple idea. Well actually, an extremely complex idea that led to the word entangled which is in itself a simple theme. I was intrigued by an article about a new distance record set for the teleportation of an object. Pretty sci-fi at first glance, but by object they actually mean a single particle and by teleport they mean quantum teleportation which is the transference of the complete properties of one particle to another. In this case 300 miles away. Still pretty damn sci-fi when you look into it. This sort of stuff has implications for a sorts of things including quantum computing.

Cause to become twisted together with or caught in

From here I started toying with the idea of entanglement, in my layperson manner. Aesthetically I was attracted the idea of two separate things that synchronise for a time and then separate again. Kind of like a dance I suppose. I imagined two different themes for a piece of music. One at the end of a work and one at the beginning, locking together in the middle for a time, harmonising or integrating and then breaking apart.

I turned to the cryptogram again, and by comparing the letters of the alphabet to a chromatic scale produced the notes C#, A#, E, A, A#, D#, G#, C# and C from the word ENTANGLED. I experimented with a bunch of ways of arranging these notes as chords and intervals and finally settled on the guitar theme you hear in the middle of this work. I recorded the theme and edited the rest of the track on a flight to Hobart for a holiday with my wife.

I have to make a slight detour here to mention that we spent an amazing day in MONA while at Hobart. It was particularly poignant as I am nearing the end of this project and one of the inspirations for Chimera_52 occurred on a previous visit to MONA. To see Sidney Nolan’s cumulative artwork SNAKE again was special and I know that there is still more work that I will produce that connects back to that artwork.

Back to the piece, the first and third sections of the work are the interlocked lines from the middle section of the work run through my favourite Ableton plugin Granulator II. I
performed an improvisation with each part expanding and contracting the sample size and effecting a few other elements. Only three more pieces of music to go! Thanks for reading.

**#50, #51 and #52 The End For Now**

*September 11th, 2017*

This experience has been polarising in many ways, like all good experiences I suppose. The effects on my practice and me as a maker have been extremely positive. I have defined a sound, improved my composition skills, I can write no matter mood or circumstance, see ideas through without thinking too much, meet deadlines, and my tech skills on Logic X/Ableton Live and general sound engineering abilities have seen a pronounced improvement. On the flip side, I put a lot of pressure on myself emotionally that I didn’t notice until the end of the project. Chimera_52 has been a constant in my life while a million other events occurred, and this consistency allowed it to fade into the background of my weekly tasks so that I essentially forgot that I was engaged in a massive undertaking. I began to come apart emotionally and berate myself for not being able to keep up with my commitments. And this thing hung in the background, and I berated myself even more when a week passed and the piece of music I produced didn’t meet some undefined internal standard I had set for myself.

A million other things is: five international tours, teaching privately, teaching two days a week at KDC, teaching at the VCA, rehearsing multiple evenings a week, just being in three bands, around 50 shows, working with playable streets across two installations and a series of virtual workshops, maintaining my relationship and friendships, my physical and mental health. But I wouldn’t trade all of that for anything. I may not do it again the same way, but I wouldn’t give it up.

So what next? I hope to find something to do with this massive collection of music I have. Most likely whittle out the ones that have a sound, or can be tweaked to fit in a certain vibe. Create a live show, an album, put it out and see what happens. I am looking forward to the prospect of sitting with a piece of music for longer than a week, to go really deep with something and create subtle tweaks, and finally finish. I have already begun this process with #31 Tools, which I’ve reworked into a full-length dance track with the help of Rowan Mason AKA Sanpo Disco. Hopefully it will be seeing the light of day in the coming months.
I will keep up the blog. I’ve been delighted to discover this medium, and even if few people read it I find the process cathartic and enlightening. Time permitting, I would like to keep up the Chimera’s also, but I will most likely do this during writing periods. I would like to experiment with a fortnight format, and do a series that is released properly. But this is all after I deal with this lot of material!

I want to thank my wife Anna, who has proofread every single blog post and listened to every single track. She has dealt with me at all ends of the spectrum during this process and always supported me and given excellent advice. Unfortunately, it’s not completely over as I have a year of dissertation writing coming up, so, sorry bella. I’d also like to acknowledge those few friends and Soundcloud followers that kept up with the project and gave me encouragement along the way. Your comments were often very influential on my musical decisions and general emotional overtone. So for now, goodbye and thanks for engaging.
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