

ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA

Jazz, identity and sound design in a melting pot

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ABSTRACT

In this piece of artistic research the author explores his musical toolbox and aesthetics for creating music. Finding compositional and music productional identity are also the main themes of this work. These aspects are being researched through the process creating new music. The author is also trying to build a bridge between his academic and informal studies over the years. The questions researched are about originality in composition and sound, and the challenges that occur during the working period.

Key words:

Jazz, Improvisation, Composition, Music Production, Ensemble, Free, Ambient

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1. Introduction:

1.1. Background:

The following work is partly based on the conversations I've had with Anders Hagberg¹ & Anders Jormin². Anders Hagberg had experienced a turning point on his artistic expression after his music studies, when traveling in India. During the trip he started to value his own Nordic musical roots and Scandinavian folk music more. I started to question myself: "what is my folk music"? I've been around electronic sounds since I was an infant, feeding from many different sonic outlets. Scandinavian folk music doesn't play a distinctive role in my own history, since I have been born in the early stages of music streaming in the internet - therefore having my roots spread out in numerous musical styles and sounds. When I started to produce my own music, I noticed that slowly I might be going towards a fusion, which would incorporate both the improvisational and electronic aspects of music.

I started out with western classical music, having lessons in guitar, voice and piano. I was practicing electric guitar from the age 13 onwards, playing mostly rock music. Quite soon I was forming my own bands and creating music with fairly limited knowledge on music theory. At the same time I was exploring music with a production software called Fruityloops, which was my first contact with electronic music production³. During these years my older brother introduced me to jazz music. I had no idea how to approach it, and it took me a while to find a proper teacher to help me with my studies. I then started to study jazz music formally at the age of 20, recording my own playing and making songs out of it. When the jazz studies started to take more time on a daily basis, I left my recording habits aside for some years.

Moving from Helsinki to Gothenburg in September 2017 I found myself naturally doing the same things that I did before of my formal music studies, with more knowledge and tools to

¹ Informal discussion in February 2019 with Anders Hagberg, b. 1958, Professor in Gothenburg University

² Informal discussion in February 2019 with Anders Jormin, b. 1957, Professor in Gothenburg University

³ Fruityloops, Digital audio workstation, https://www.image-line.com/flstudio/

work with. In 2018 ended up investing into a small modular synthesizer and a drum machine to approach these sounds in a live setting, mixing a Finnish grammy-prized album and getting influenced by electronic ambient music and its variations⁴. Realizing that my interests towards sound-design are strong, I decided that this has to be a part of the music that I make. This culminated into recording & producing an album for a band that I play in (UNYA), and really studying the craft of record engineering and applying experimental sounds into my music⁵.

Working with the aforementioned albums has been relatively effortless to me, but the gap between my academic and informal studies has always been missing. I hope that with a more active mindset I will be able to reinforce the bridge between the academic improvisational music I have studied and the elements of my previous works. Using more intuition and embracing all of the tools that I have obtained working between these different fields would be the key factor.

1.2. Goal and questions

The goal of this artistic research is to find elements and sounds from my solo pieces and to try to incorporate those for my new project. The new compositions are going to be a part of my exam concert.

-How does working with my solo works differ from ensemble work? What kind of challenges occur?

-How does one combine these elements seamlessly without genre-labels to create something "original"?

⁴ Litku Klemetti – Juna Kainuuseen, 13. Januray 2017, Luova Records

⁵ UNYA – UNYA, June 2019, Eclipse music

In this thesis I'm not going to review other personnel on how they experience my music as a whole, since these aesthetic ideals tend to be subjective. The main goal would be for me to feel that I can stand behind my work, and to gain personality in my expression. I'm also trying to focus on finding new tools for creating music.

1.3. Method

In the following paragraphs I'm going to examine three of my old solo tunes, and to use some elements of them as a starting point for my new pieces. This could be something that was a strong inspiration for me, and that satisfied me in the final result. In the attachments you will find the recordings of the new tunes from the rehearsals, and my older solo pieces. I will also shortly analyze and reflect upon all that has been created, to pinpoint the up- and downsides of the pieces.

2. Pre-recorded material

2.1. "2417"

This piece was recorded in Kiikala, southwestern Finland. The core of the track was performed live with a sampler⁶ and a Line 6 m9 multi-effects unit⁷. The whole piece came together fast as I worked in the attic for a day, the synthesizers I overdubbed later in Gothenburg. The piece operates within the key of C-minor throughout. I worked first on

⁶ Roland SP-404, sampling workstation, https://www.roland.com/us/products/sp-404/

⁷ Line 6 M9, multi-effects unit, https://line6.com/m-series-effects-pedals/

analog tape, and then exported the tracks on to Logic, just to add the synths & digitalize the process. The static harmonic elements are being contrasted with dense arythmic synthetic drum sounds. The korg ms-20-based synthesizer, functioning as a "synthetic pad sound" has an added noise oscillator to it, to make it more organic and to create more of a vocal-like impression. As a sound effect, the sampler is also playing small bits of an another ambient work of mine with excessive delay. The background of this kind of track is the infusion of familiar electronic music sounds in a more improvised setting. Getting exposed to electronic ambient music was a big factor in the creation of this piece; one could say that the song represents ambient electronica. As an example, this "ambient" or "environmental" music mentality has been represented already in the early 20th century, with composers like Erik Satie. He has been an influence for many musicians, and is to be considered one of the originators of "ambient music", which he himself described as "furniture music":

In his music for the ballet Parade (1917), a collaboration between Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso and Leonid Massine, Satie had combined melodies from American and French popular songs with the sounds of pistol shots, typewriter, steamship whistle and siren. He intended his furniture music as a programme to be ignored, and speculated on a future in which music might mask dissonant ambient noise, fill awkward silences and add background sound to wedding ceremonies and house interiors.⁸

2.2. "Sakin"

Sakin is a piece written for vibraphone, bass drum, gongs, crotales, voice and acoustic guitar in B minor. I performed all the parts in the classical percussion room at HSM. The rhythmic pattern in the background is a slow 4/4 while the piece is in 5/4, the polyrhythm in the slow tempo was the first element that I started the composition from. The bowed guitar sounds are

⁸ Grove music online, s.v. "Environmental music" by David Toop, accessed in 20. January, 2001 https://doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.43820

created with an E-bow and an acoustic steel string guitar⁹. I came up with the different stems as I went along, so the song wasn't necessarily planned to repeat any structure, the song ended up being almost like an improvisation. For this track I also set myself a time limit, everything had to be composed, recorded and performed within one day. This way I had to work effectively and disregard bad ideas fast. Playing all of these instruments myself was also a restriction – to reach for virtuosic performances was out of the question in this case. The main core of the song is the sparse and scattered sounds with the modal harmonies.

2.3. BLE

The song BLE was created during the fall 2018. The song operates modally with jazzinfluenced harmony. It started out as an experiment on my new drum machine and monophonic synthesizer. I was exploring the drum beat programming and the sequencer of the device. I had Aleksis Liukko playing the keyboards on the track, and Pauls Pokratnieks playing the acoustic drums. The whole track was just an experiment, but it ended up sounding convincing. I thought that this kind of instrumentation would be nice to try out in my exam work, and to be put in a more experimental setting. The acoustic drums and the drum machine - combination was the most pleasing part of this experiment. The track was created without any notation, overdubbing guitars on top of the bassline & electronic drums.



Example 1. The chordal harmony of the song BLE

⁹ Musical instrument, Ebow

http://www.ebow.com/home.php

2.4. The Selected Elements

In all the elements I'm going to pick out from my previously introduced songs, there has to be two things in common:

• Originality

The element has to appear to be something I've discovered myself through experimentation.

• Effortlessness

The element has to have appeared spontaneously, to embrace the natural flow of ideas.

These are the basic factors to be taken in consideration, when starting to work with a composition.

From the song 2417, I found the calm atmospheric nature to be something to try to incorporate into my new compositions. The synthesizer and sampler elements are the key in this one, and I decided to give instructions to the piano player (in this case Aleksis Liukko) to search for similar sounds from his own synthesizer setup. This would end up being the core synthesizer sound of my improvising ensemble. I find that working with electronic instruments can be tricky at times because of the vast possibilities within that field. I am looking for to narrow down the individual sounds, maybe to have only one main keyboard sound, to make the ensemble sound more coherent.

The song *Sakin* utilizes the 5 against 4 polyrhythm, and I wish to compose something similar for my ensemble. This I found out to be blurring the barlines, and making the overall feel of

the song more abstract than the common 4/4. The uneven melody-cells within a modal context are also things I wish to use. The acoustic archtop guitar sound is also an element that I will borrow. The reverberated sounds of this track really please my aesthetics, and I will be keeping that in mind when working.

In *BLE* the overall rhythmic accompaniment, as I previously mentioned, sounds like an element I would want to use in my music. The Roland 606 - based drums and the brushes create a sound both a abstract & steady¹⁰. One could play with these details even more, and I wish to achieve that. Also the lead sound from the Moog - synthesizer will be used in the process. Combining these things in a more dissonant and spacious setting might give me the results I'd be seeking for.

I will pinpoint these parameters and how I'm trying to use them in the next subtitle. Since the previous examples have been made in a studio context, performing live with the electronic devices is going to create some challenges, and I wish to find a way with these challenges which would not interfere too much with the interplay of the musicians.

3. The Compositions

3.1. Mobile

In the song *Mobile* the 5/4 pattern of my previous piece *Sakin* was being used as a springboard. The instrumentation was Bass Clarinet, Electric Guitar, Bass, Percussion and Keyboards. The compositional starting point for the piece was to let the ideas flow freely on top of the odd-meter. The harmonies alter between atonality and different tonal centers. The

Roland 606, a drum machine released in 1982

http://www.vintagesynth.com/roland/606.php

free flowing piece with keyboard & bass unisons and rhythmically scattered parts is supposed to blend in elements of my ambient pieces with a more complex song structure. The song utilizes artificial harmonics both on the bass and the guitar, to make the most out of both of the instruments registers. Also synthesizer sounds from the track *2417* were kept in mind in the compositional process, blending them softly with the acoustic piano. The track has a free collective minimalistic improvisational section after the theme. In this case the music is propelling around an A-drone, letting the musicians be free to build a soundscape, in the style of the piece *2417*.



Example 2, the artificial harmonics & polytonal feel of *Mobile* (bar 5 in the example, Ab major & D major)

After the theme, the song includes a modal bass solo, which proceeds into an ambient collective improvisation.

3.1.2. Rehearsing process

This time I decided to let the drummer be free and without any notation with the music, I was curious to hear how the musician (Axel Larsson) would interpret the composition

spontaneously. In the song I plan to utilize the bowed functions of the bass & guitar, in the same way as the E-bow guitar patterns work in its precedor. I was pleased with the first try of the song, although I noticed that the aesthetics of the piece would need more work. This time I realized the importance of the backgrounds of the musicians in an ensemble. Playing with renowned straight-ahead jazz musicians will result into a more idiomatic "jazz" - sound, either one wants it or not, at least on the first takes of the song. I found out that the challenge is to how to present your ideas and visions outside the sheet music. Also, my ensemble ended up being divided 50/50 to free and more traditional musicians, me falling in the middle. This mixture of musicians would need a lot of work in the rehearsals and bringing in audio examples of my previous works would be a key element in getting the aesthetics right. In this piece, the main point was for everybody to be able to know their own parts in relation to the composition, the scattered melody lines of the piece demand it for the composition to flow.

Before the concert I was feeling uncertain about using the synthesizer sounds during the themes, and decided to instruct Aleksis Liukko to use only the acoustic piano in in these parts. During the collective improvisation though I gave him the option to use any sounds he wants. Somehow I felt that he hadn't thoroughly mastered the sound for this piece, and to avoid confusion in the concert I had to make this decision.

3.2. ONEHE-274

In *ONEHE-274*, my plan was to incorporate more abstract harmonies with the Roland 606 - sounds of my previous song *BLE*. I started to build up the composition with a drum machine, coming up with the melodies and the dissonant harmonies. The instrumentation was again Bass Clarinet, Electric Guitar, Bass, Percussion and Keyboards. The song starts out with a 4-bar bass figure, which is then repeated in other sections as well. The figure works within the chords Bbmaj7#11#5 and Abmaj7#5#11. Both the drum machine and bass underline the tempo, leaving the drummer to be free to improvise on top of this static background. In the beginning guitar plays a melody in the high register, leaving the middlefrequencies open for the drums to operate in. In the bar 13 guitar comes in with a melody/chord function, revealing the modal/dissonant harmonies of the piece. This is then followed by a bass solo on a 2-bar repetition. I wanted to blend in sections of the theme to improvisational aspects, to create a more free and abstract structure to the song. After the bass solo, the synthesizer & bass clarinet interpret the first theme and evolve it forward. In the first B-section, the guitar, bass clarinet and synthesizer play rhythms on different beats of the bar, to create a wide rhythmic sound underlining the harmonies. The solo section for the bass clarinet is interrupted with a more complex melody to make the feel of a solo more abstract. After the clarinet solo, enters a guitar solo on an open vamp. After the guitar solo, the drums enter in time on the song structure in B for the first time to resolve the tension of the solo. After this, there's a piano solo on the chord structure of A, coming out to the coda of the melody in B



Example 3, the augmented lydian modal section in ONEHE-274



Example 4, the dissonant chordal harmonies in ONEHE-274

3.2.1. Rehearsing process

After the first rehearsal I had a practice session for the rhythm section only. Operating the drum machine and playing the guitar would be a big task to master, so I thought that we should need to zoom into these problems. One of the biggest challenges was to cue in the looped material in at the right tempo, since I think that the ensemble shouldn't have to worry about a click track while playing improvised sections. I have found out that to be extremely restricting. At this stage I decided to play the track *BLE* to my fellow musicians to get a grasp of what I'm looking for. I felt that the song was lacking some lightness in it, and thought about bringing the drum machine back to the equation, blending in the dissonant chordal work with more static percussions, leaving the drummer to be more free improvising over the tune, rhythmic feel of the piece. During the last rehearsals I was discussing with the band that should we use the drum machine or not, eventually coming back to the conclusion that the song is actually composed for the electronic sounds, leaving something out might have not ended up sounding interesting.

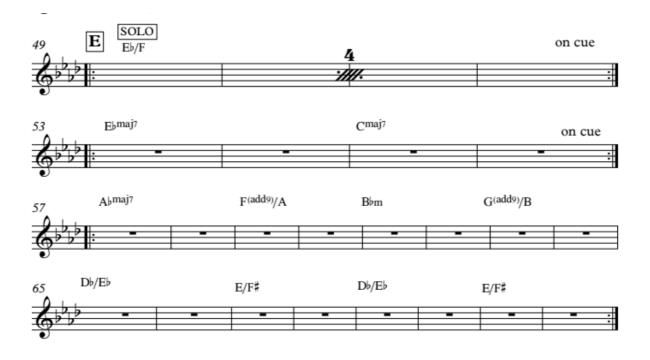
3.3. "Turbulence"

This song came more from a rhythmic background, I wanted to do something which emphasizes the funk and progressive rock music I've listened to as a young musician. The instrumentation is the same as in the previous two compositions. The song is quite straightforward, with an easy structure and lots of emphasis on the improvisations and sound choices. The song was created melody first, then arranging the chords and second voices to the piece. I left the basslines open for the player to interpret, trusting that the song would flow more organically like this. The main idea was to keep the soundscape in the themes soft, emphasizing the melody and chordal work. The song propels around the key Ab-major, having modal tonal shifts around the melody:



Example 5, of the tune *Turbulence*

The solo sections of the piece include cord changes which are cued forward, opening up with a free F-pedal solo for the players to play more dissonantly. That resolves to outlining the changes, bringing the tune back from the more abstract section.



Example 6, the soloing changes in the song TURBULENCE

After the solos the guitar cues in chords and the band plays rubato, making it easier to end the solos with movement to an another time feel. Also, this makes it easier for the ensemble to get back to the same tempo with the drum machine after the solos.

3.3.1. Rehearsing process

The first rehearsal we had was only with the drum machine. I did this choice for to record demos to ask a drummer to join the group. The music ended up sounding not quite I imagined it, but we ended up being able to try out the song for the first time.

In the second rehearsal I decided to do just the opposite. Instead of the electronic drums, only acoustic sound sources were used. This took the song dynamically into a louder direction,

which would have been aesthetically questionable regarding the other pieces. I felt the need to bring the dynamics down, but felt trapped in this soundscape that was created within this rehearsal. Would this piece only work and make sense in a louder, more expressive context.

The third time I decided that we should focus more energy on this tune, to try to arrange it together with the ensemble. We didn't have the bass clarinet (Ville Lähteenmäki) with us this time, and I felt that the song had potential to be worked towards lower dynamics. I decided to bring in both of these worlds, mixing up some louder sections within the solos and keeping the overall core of the song in a dynamically lower level. We decided that in the following rehearsals we would need separate monitoring for the drummer to make it easier for him to follow the electronic sounds, since they would after all work in the similar fashion as a click track.

3.4. Rehearsing with electronics only

After a few tryouts with the band, I decided to meet up with the personnel without the acoustic bass present. My goal was to find a set of sounds for the bass clarinet, piano and drums which would be used in the songs throughout the concert, to lock down the productional sides of the tunes. I would focus on individual synthesizer parts, drum machine sounds vs. acoustics, monitoring and bass clarinet effects. I would also write down the sounds used on the guitar on certain sections of the tunes. I also wrote graphic scores for the drummer to follow with the drum machine, when to be in a improvising role and when to follow the rhythmic pattern of the machine. When working solo, these things don't need to be discussed, since I make all of the decisions myself. I found it more time-consuming to have other people in the mix of this process, but more rewarding hence the broader sound spectrum and input to the pieces.

We worked a lot with the drum monitoring, to keep a hold of the acoustic soundscape of the

ensemble, I wished not to use in-ear monitoring, because that would isolate the player too much from the ensemble. Placing the monitor next to the drummer, giving him the possibility to have control over the dynamics of the sounds would be optimal. One of the problems we encountered was the bleed of the ensemble to the clarinet microphone (results into unwanted reverb and feedback), and that had to be thought out well. We decided to have a A/B switch for the effected signal of the bass clarinet to mute the effects completely in the louder sections, then we could use reverberated sounds when playing in softer volumes, and also some pitch shifting. These would be used only in the softer parts of the pieces, like *Mobile* and *ONEHE-274*.

The synthesizer parts needed a lot of work, since the keyboard player Aleksis Liukko is specialized only on acoustic piano, and I needed to have a clear vision on how the parts should sound like. We decided to run the synth through a guitar amplifier, to have the sound source next to the piano instead of the PA-system. This would also help the monitoring problems with an ensemble like this and bring the two blending sounds together in a more pleasing fashion. We had to create presets for each individual tune, only to make him worry about the dynamics of the sounds. The problem with the choices of sound was more of an equalizing issue, we would have to find a way how the synth sounds would not take too much space in the sound spectrum, and to avoid too highly produced and clean sounds. These choices would make a big impact on the music, and I wanted to be a part of the sound design process. Aleksis used an iPad software called "Audiokit synth One", which turned out to be a really flexible freeware synthesizer platform. We met with Aleksis before the other people came in, going through the parts one at a time, coming up with three core sounds which were altered regarding the result that we wanted.

Two weeks before the set date for the concert other members of the group were out of town, and we decided to rehearse intensively with the drummer Axel Larsson, to find more grooves and approaches when he plays with the electronics. The primary focus was on the parts where he keeps the time with the drum machine, I realized that we would need a bit of work with this to not to have the percussional sounds overlapping with each other. We focused on all of the tunes played with the drum machine, mainly just playing through the songs to get a better sense on how to improvise within the different sections of the pieces.

4. Conclusion

After the rehearsing period and the concert, I felt that the overall concept to revisit my old compositions was a success. Even with the solo works, the limitations that I used were really comparable to the ensemble work, in both of these cases the biggest limitations came from the instrumentation. The major difference is of course time management, when working alone one can just work when feeling inspired, as a bandleader that might not be the case when a set rehearsal time is about to occur. This can be luckily compensated when composing, I tried to work only when I felt motivated. The obvious clash becomes from the live performance vs. studio environment. Sometimes a sound engineer would be needed to achieve a pristine sound, and usually in the marginal music - field and in small venues this might be a hard thing to obtain. One should think about hiring a sound engineer as a member of an ensemble for this reason.

Getting a good group sound together can be challenging, and this is why I felt like that these ideas should be worked with an ensemble for a long period of time. This would enable the leader to have a clear view on the different musician's strengths and preferences, and the opposite way around, to enable the musicians to know the aesthetics of the composer and to find a common ground this way. Also picking out musicians who would be up for the task is an another thing to consider. Making demos of the songs is a key element as well, this is why I recorded all of the rehearsals, and tried to list the pros and cons of each take. Once a solid take was obtained, one could start focusing more on the details of the tune, sound design and so on. One drawback of this might be that one gets too focused on a particular take, after all improvised music is in constant motion, and to accept changes is a must in this occasion. I felt that trying out different soloing and accompanying methods for the tunes was essential, and

respected the musicians who had the time to put into the process. With material like this, it was clear that the improvisational elements were had to be put under a spotlight and thoroughly examined. I think that the overall process was good, but more work will be needed in blending in the improvisational tools of jazz in to the context of my original music.

On retrospect I can criticize my own work especially regarding time management, even though with set rehearsal times, the pressure to bring in something is a really positive thing. I could have been a couple of days ahead of myself, planning the rehearsals well in advance. In a nutshell, coming to the rehearsals better prepared. The main point would be to trust that the songs work, and to not alter drafts between sessions. I should have also let go of bad ideas, I ended up wasting time in working with tunes which were not played even once with the ensemble. I could have certainly still abandoned these ideas earlier in the process, and to not still try to work with the songs which started out from a bad idea. I reckon that this is a skill that one learns through the process, since this was one of the fewer times that I've been the only bandleader in a group.

5. Afterword

Did the music turn out original? I would think that it succeeded, at least the final result turned out to be a combination of things that I rarely hear together. The genre-idioms which have been present in my earlier works, were avoided in the compositions I presented in the concert. Some of these results even left me a bit confused, but I would consider it a good sign that I was surprised with my own work. This project will work as a springboard for me to try to reach out for different soundscapes in the future, it also gave me direction and confidence to work with the tools I've obtained during the years. The fact that I wasn't aware of the question "is this jazz?" during the process was a great thing to achieve.

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Hardware

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Line 6 M9, multi-effects unit https://line6.com/m-series-effects-pedals/

Ebow, guitar sound manipulator <u>http://www.ebow.com/home.php</u>

Fruityloops, digital audio workstation https://www.image-line.com/flstudio/?

Referenced recordings

Litku Klemetti, Juna Kainuuseen, LUOVA RECORDS, 6 430015 105485, 2017, CD

UNYA, UNYA, ECLIPSE MUSIC, 2019, CD

7. Attachments:

Audio Files:

- 1.2417
- 2. SAKIN
- 3. BLE
- 4. MOBILE rehearsal take
- 5. ONEHE 274 rehearsal take
- 6. TURBULENCE rehearsal take

Music Notation:

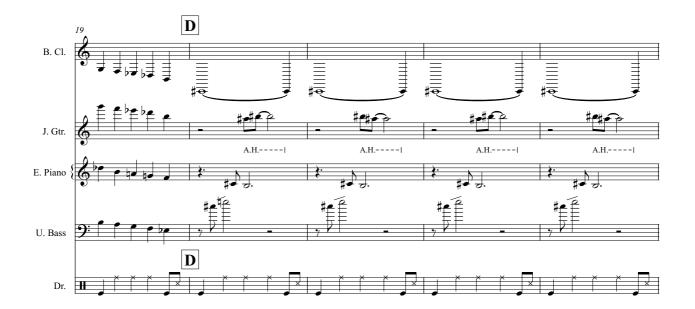
- 1. MOBILE
- 2. ONEHE-274
- 3. TURBULENCE

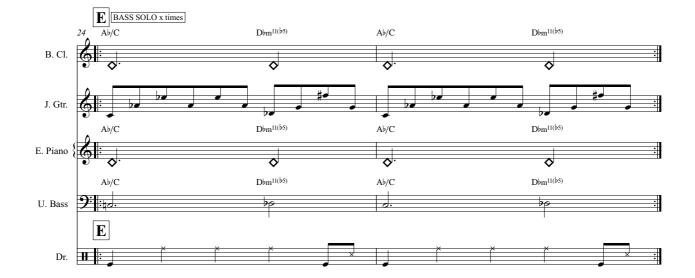


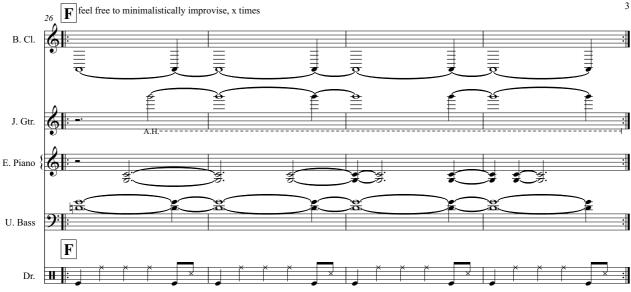










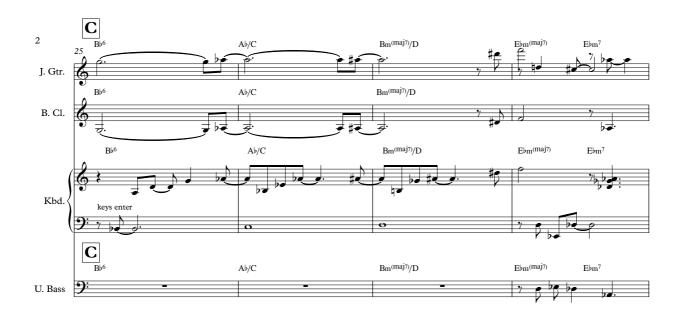


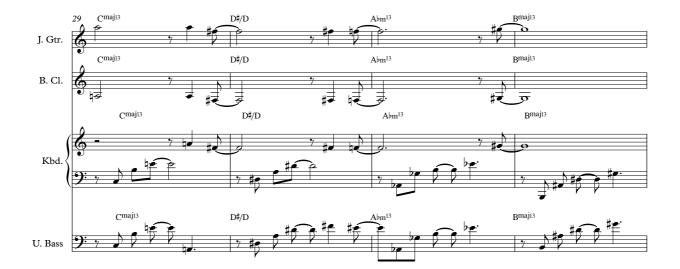


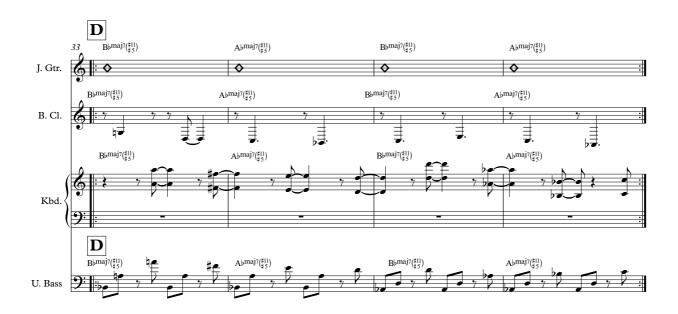




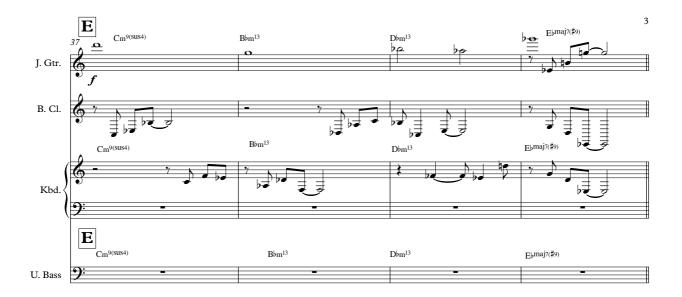
ONEHE-274

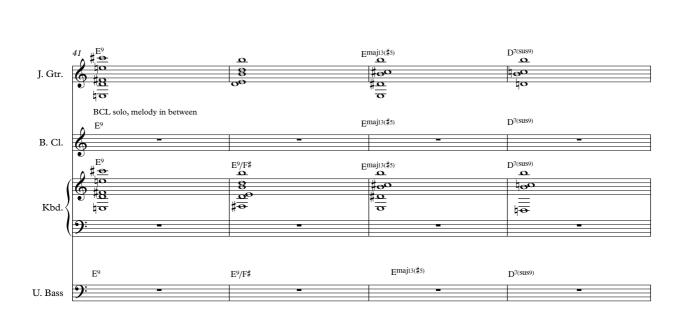


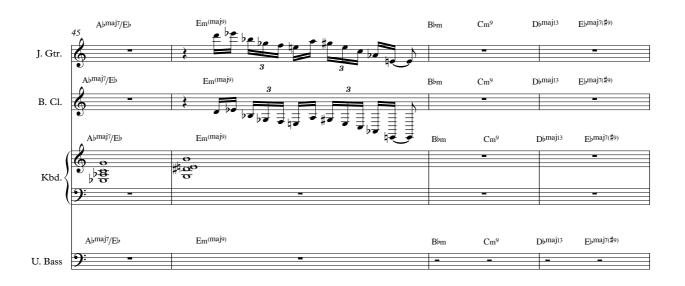




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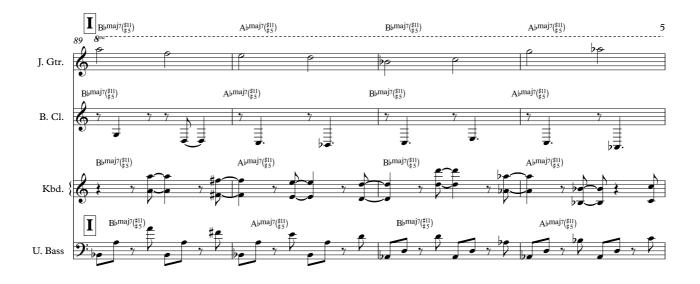


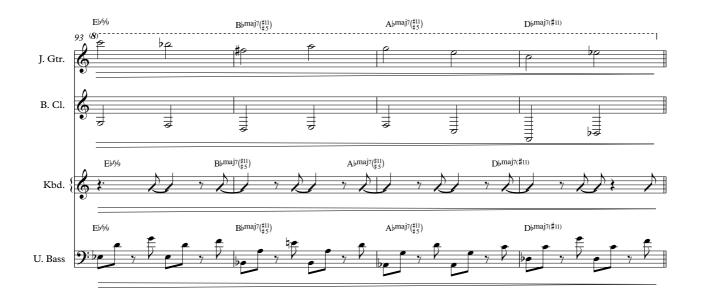


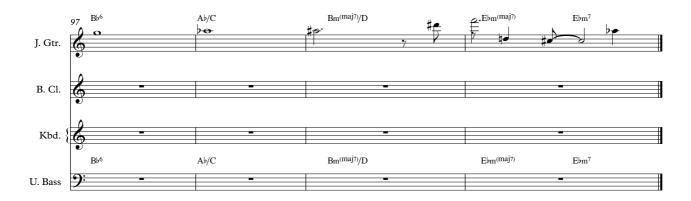


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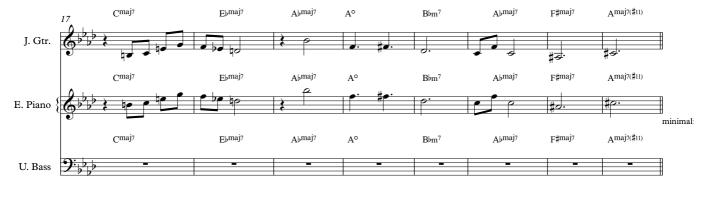








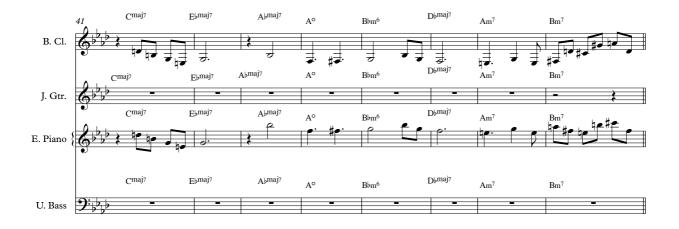






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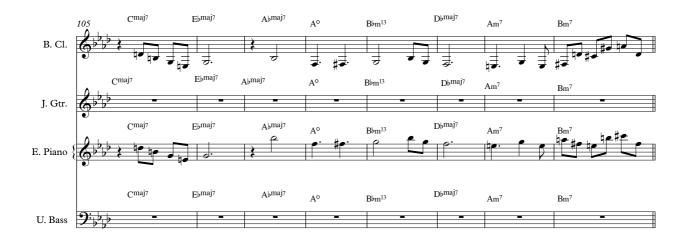








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