

Viola Soundscapes

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Music
in Contemporary Performance

by

Rachel Lanskey

Supervisor: Casey Driessen

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Preface

I believe that particular stereotypes associated with certain styles of music constrict access to varied audiences and therefore prevents the growth and development of new and exciting musical possibilities. One area where this has happened is in the world of classical music. Accessibility to concerts is often hindered by the cost of tickets, which tend to be very expensive no matter the quality of the performance. As a classical performer, the amount of time needed to practise and become sufficient on your instrument is higher than ever before and maybe for this reason if you are seen to start diverting from this area of music, it is not uncommon for the belief of your ability on your particular instrument to drop. I speak from past experiences where I have seen eyebrows raised from certain colleagues of mine if I were to mention my enjoyment for playing and arranging strings for music that does not fall into the ‘classical’ genre. Other musicians who fall into my bracket have had similar experiences. Oliver Coates, a classically trained cellist who explores contemporary looping has been awarded in the past for his classical studies but his contemporary music has not been ‘well received’¹ from classical reviews. The idea that certain music should be played and heard a particular way happens not only in classical music but in rap, jazz and many other styles. It is an elitism that must continue to be fought against by artists such as myself, who seek only to express their emotions as truthfully as possible through any sound that inspires them and not allow musical politics to hinder their creativity.

¹Hazel Sheffield, “The New Classical: How the next generation of composers and labels is challenging classical music’s status quo”, *The Independent*, September 20, 2016, accessed June 3, 2017, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/nils-frahm.

1. Summary

My culminating experience has resulted in an EP of five pieces of music using the viola as my main source of inspiration. The intention is to show the numerous possibilities that the viola and other acoustic instruments have in an evolving, electronic world of music.

Each track uses viola, voice, piano and midi instruments with each having a different textural perspective for the instruments. ‘One’ and ‘Swarm’ use the viola melodically with the structure created in live time. These two songs could, theoretically, translate to the stage or be integrated as part of a classical performance. ‘Paracetamol’ explores the viola percussively while ‘High’ looks at using the viola as the bass. All five tracks use different viola effects to create many harmonious palettes. The voice and piano have also been used throughout the EP with elements of the audio being chopped, pitched, reversed and warped. These various explorations have resulted in a collection of pieces that contain very individual and differing sounds, while still working together successfully. As a result, I feel I have created a unique sound and a musical story that I am proud to share.

2.Process

Overall, the results of my project have been successful with particular aspects extending beyond my personal expectations. Although I was aware that I would be able to create sounds that could be used in electronic music, I was still dubious as to how far I would be able to take it and whether the sounds would work in this particular genre of music. I have, however, created a number of sounds that I believe would work in many styles of music, many of which sound nothing like the original audio source. The process comprised of four stages: the compilation of a sample library using Ableton; song writing, translation of the songs into charts and live performance preparation.

2.1 Ableton Sample Library

The first plan of action was to create a sample library using a variety of different viola sounds. I made a list of the sounds I wanted to record before using three different microphones (DPA, AT4081 and C414) to record the material. In figure 1 I show an example of the ‘Viola Sample Library’ list that I recorded in November 2016.

Ableton Sample Preparation

* C major scale for 3 seconds over 3 octaves (3 second gap in between)
 1 x VIB
 1 x NON VIB

* C major scale for 10 seconds over 3 octaves (3 second gap in-between)
 1 x VIB
 1x NON VIB

* C major scale for 30 seconds over 3 octaves (3 second gap in-between)
 1x VIB
 1x NON VIB

* C major scale slurred over 3 octaves (3 second gap between octaves)

* Staccato over three octaves

* Chromatic Trill over 3 octaves

* Normal scale trill over 3 octaves

* Harmonic over 3 octaves (3 second gap)

* Harmonic over 3 octaves 10 seconds (3sec gap)

* Pluck over 3 octaves (3 second gap) p

JUDDER SCALE OVER THREE OCTAVES?

COLEGNO.

ROMANIAN sound.

Hitting sound on different parts

sound on wrong side of bridge

open string bow things.

Figure 1. Ableton Sample Library.

I created almost 350 different samples using the viola percussively and melodically. Some techniques proved more inspirational than others. The samples consisting of long and slurred notes over three octaves were not as helpful in my creative process as I had predicted. I believe on reflection that this is due to my natural ability to create a melodic line on the viola, meaning the attempt to create one using the computer was a struggle and until recently, these particular samples did not spark as much creative interest. Other samples from the audio where I explored textural possibilities rather than melodic ones were more enriching. The sounds of pizzicato, harmonics, glissandos and numerous percussive timbres in combination with different plugins all help to build diverse sounds throughout the EP. Perhaps it was to be expected that the less traditional way of using the viola would be a more interesting route of exploration in Ableton.

Although the outcome of the sample library proved successful, I believe that if I were to create another sample library, which I intend to do in the future for voice and piano, there would be areas that I could improve upon. More attention would be given to the organisation of recorded material, with more

focus on textural sounds rather than melodic. Ableton provides the option to pitch a note over an octave to the accuracy of a cent - 100 cents making a semitone. The accuracy of this tuning means that it is not necessary to need as many recorded acoustic notes of the chromatic scale when creating a sample library. Although the timbre does change when pitching a note, I am not looking to replicate the sound of the acoustic viola as much as I am looking to create new sounds using different plugins. Therefore, the very slight change of timbre would not be an issue.

Another issue with the library was the accuracy to which I cut the samples. I would often need to go back to the main audio to re-trim it as there would be a moment of silence before the sound. This is particularly off-putting when creating polyrhythms with audio as it means the sound does not occur exactly when expected and therefore the timing sounds wrong. For future reference, I now know how accurate I need to be when sampling audio, particularly percussive sounds. On the other hand, the lack of accuracy I had when making the library meant that I became aware of sounds between the intended audio. These sounds can be sources of inspiration. One point where I noticed this was in a silence before the note begins where I groan just before playing. I realised that I could use the sound as part of the rhythm section to my song to change the timbre slightly from the other viola sounds and make it into a sample. This groan can now be heard as part of the polyrhythm in 'Paracetamol'. It was this sound that inspired me to start looking at how I could manipulate the voice to create riffs and different resonances. Now I am more inclined to listen to the audio with higher sensitivity to see if there is any sound captured in between the expected audio that could be used in my music.

Overall, the creation of the sample library has been more beneficial than I anticipated at the start. One of my favourite methods of creation that has resulted from the sample library is having the sounds assigned to different letters of the computer keyboard and just typing anything in to see what sounds are made. Occasionally the random sounds will create an idea for a song or a riff. This is exactly what happened with the beginning sound in 'One' where I randomly touched some letters on the keyboard and the pattern that was produced sparked the idea for the first song on the EP. It is the use of these libraries that has brought a distinctive and original sound to my music that I love.

2.2 Songwriting

The second part of the process was to create at least ten songs by February 2017 before narrowing them down to five songs in March that would become the EP. This part of the project diverted furthest away from the timeline plan as I did not have enough knowledge of Ableton to create songs I was happy with in early December or January. Although I created small pieces and sounds, they were never complete songs and were often left unfinished. I used my classes in Ableton to expand my knowledge of the programme itself and focused on developing techniques and my own proficiency with the programme rather than finessing particular songs. Outside of my Ableton class I focused on acoustic songwriting and although unintentional, this was an extremely beneficial creative method in the long run. It meant that as my knowledge of Ableton improved I started to think about my classical pieces and how they could work in electronic music. I would hear particular parts in my acoustic pieces that would spark an idea for a remix of that song. The piano part in 'Paracetamol', for example, is a sample taken from a piano composition of mine that I was working on in February 2017 called 'Falling'. I was always aware when I was working on an idea that I wanted on the EP and when I was working on a piece with an outlook to develop my proficiency on the program so I never had to narrow down the selection of songs. Certain ideas were started and left for a few months until I felt I had enough proficiency to develop them the way I wanted. The first harmonic passage in 'One' that was the first sample created from my sample library in January is an example of this. I learnt from this progress that inspiration will come from many different aspects of my musical creativity but that I tend to know straight away when I have an idea I want to output and share with people compared to ones that I pursue for other beneficial reasons. For example, I spent a few weeks in March making writing a song in Ableton using a Bach violin prelude that I had been practising on the viola. Even though I was not very proud of the song, which is named 'No words', I continued to work on it as it helped me to learn more about different ways I could play with this classical piece using electronic music.

2.3 Charts

The decision as to how to best translate these songs to charts was a challenging one. Electronic music tends to comprise a number of simple patterns repeated throughout the piece rather than a particular set of chords and I had predicted from the onset that standard charts would not be the best way to transcribe my music. Although the main acoustic melodies could be written as expected, other sounds were manipulated using just one particular bit of audio to sound very different from the original source. In addition

to this, I was unsure whether charts were even necessary as these were not tracks I expected others to play or to imitate and so was unsure of the benefit they would have in the longterm. Ableton provides its own chart reading when you are creating the music and so when opening a set it is easy to see what sounds and plugins you have used on a particular track. My aim was to create a sketch (rather than a detailed portrayal) of the motifs so that the sounds would be understood by other people who read music, therefore making my work more accessible.

2.4 Live Performance

The intention to perform my tracks in live time was the final part of my plan. I invested in a Keith Macmillan Softstep foot pedal in order to develop a set that I could create while playing the viola at the same time. Although I have only been able to try it a couple of times, there are songs I have created which would transfer into a live performance easily. ‘One’ and ‘Swarm’ are all viola led sounds with easy melodic lines so I am confident that these two in particular would work. Although I have attempted to try ‘One’ using the softstep, I have not had enough time to sit down properly and familiarise myself with this tool, which is a whole new world and instrument in itself. The other three tracks would need more time and thoughtful planning put into them. With the basic charts I have created I now have a start up method if I were ever interested in creating alternative versions of the tracks using my looping pedal instead of the Ableton samples. I predict that certain plugins that warped the audio would be too complicated to perform live so it could be that if I were to tour and perform with these songs I could think of different versions that may result in a better live performance rather than trying to replicate exactly the sounds as heard on the tracks.

3. Outcomes

Musically, this project has helped me to develop skills that I will continue to pursue in a number of different ways. I plan to create more sound libraries for voice and piano, which are the two other instruments I use most when writing music. This will open up more possibilities when working in Ableton. I am also keen to write a set of ‘viola’ pieces accompanied by midi instruments and effects. I am aware that you can link an instrument or drum rack to every key on a keyboard and so my idea is to create a set of viola and piano pieces where the music works both acoustically and electronically - the viola melody would be the same but the accompaniment would change when using the keyboard as a midi instrument. I intend to create a set of sounds or sample library for each movement. The idea of this would be to perform the piece in both

formats so that the audience has the chance to appreciate the altered soundscapes. This project would be something I may be able to seek funding from such places as the Arts Council England². I hope that with the help of my EP and other works that I intend to create later this year, I will be able to use these as examples of how acoustic instruments can be used in alternative ways and how this is beneficial to the musical world as it helps to branch the gap between classical music and electronic music. I am always driven by my passion to make classical music and instruments more versatile and accessible to wider audiences.

I see this project as the start of my future career as a composer and an artist. The EP will be used as a testing ground for a start up limited company that a friend is beginning, which means I will be able to work closely with the company to discover different ways to promote my music while still owning all the publishing rights. The plan will be to release the EP towards the end of 2017.

3.1 Impact on the Student and Professional Contribution

The pieces on this EP have contributed to the professional world as they continue to show the possibilities that classical instruments have with electronic music. The crossover between electronic music and classical music is not a new phenomenon. For several years artists such as Nils Frahm and Ólafur Arnalds who are seen to be ‘at the forefront of a musical movement’³ have explored the keyboard family to create sounds that they find pleasing and inspiring. The result of their music, which combines classical and electronic sounds beautifully together has helped to spark a new movement among young composers such as myself to create new soundscapes that feel true to their musical identity. On the other side of this crossover spectrum is dubstep artist Caspa who remixed a track using the violin as a melodic instrument in 2006⁴. This was the first time I had heard a violin used in electronic music in this way and from it grew my belief that I could find a way to make music I wanted using my instrument. Now I am using the viola as my inspiration to create sounds that have not been heard before on such an instrument and this is my unique contribution to the profession. My music spreads over a wider variety of genres than many artists before me with some sounding more classical, some more electronic and some more commercial. I am happy that my music shows

² The Arts Council England official website: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding>.

³ Peter Woodburn, “Nils Frahm & Ólafur Arnalds Conversational Interview: Modern Classical Composers in the New Electronic Age”, *Redefine Magazine*, October 21, 2013, accessed June 3, 2017, www.redefinemag.com/NilsFrahmOlafurArnalds.

⁴ Caspa, *Cockney Violin/Dub Warz*, iTunes track, 2006, DP006, streaming audio, 4.42.

the versatility of the viola across various styles of music as all I want is to inspire current and future musicians to look at the open ended possibilities that music has to offer.

As a musician who loves extremely different genres of music, the ability to integrate my classical instrument successfully with another style of music is an underlying achievement in itself. I always felt disappointed that I had trained for so many years on an instrument whose niche was predominantly stuck in the classical music world. I often fantasised about working with various people in contemporary music I looked up to, only to be brought back to reality with the fact that the sound of the viola was not one that most rock musicians or hip hop artists would be interested in working with. I used to wish that I had studied the piano, drums, or guitar, so that I would have the opportunity to play a greater variety of music with others. However, my skills on a less familiar instrument have enabled me to create a unique musical soundscape which may enhance the potential for collaboration with other artists.

As a result, the personal impact this project has had on me is huge. I am creating very different styles of music using the viola; music that I love and music that I would not have been able to create if it wasn't for my own proficiency on the instrument. It feels like the first time in my career that I am able to breathe freely and I believe my music will give me opportunities to work as a composer and collaborate with artists across many fields of music, which is all I ever hoped for.

The biggest impact this work has had on me, however, is the curiosity and drive to continue creating. Before beginning my masters at Berklee, I did not allow myself to think of myself as a composer or an individual artist. I had created my own personal barriers as to what I could achieve. The work this year culminating in this project will be remembered for the rest of my life as a game changer. I am extremely proud that this will be the first release of my music as an artist. It shows a true image of where I stand now in the world of music - someone who wants to create honest music, true to myself, that will hopefully one day inspire other musicians to experiment with their ideas and to use any assets they have available to them to make music they are proud of.

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