

Berklee College of Music

**STAND UP
(BLACK LIVES MATTER)**

By

Lavender Looi Ai Hua

Supervisor : Vicente Ortiz Gimeno

**Valencia, Spain
July 2020**

Abstract

This project was inspired by the Black Lives matter movement. After multiple considerations and changes in my CE plans, I was finally sure of the project I wanted to work on. My friend, Michelle Raymond and I wrote and produced, I also mixed and mastered this song. We released it on all streaming platforms on the 20th of June 2020. It took almost 2 weeks to complete the project. I then proceeded to write and arrange parts for the orchestra to be recorded in Air Studios, London. I am proud of this project and I hope this brings hope to people and inspires change. TOGETHER WE STAND!

Keywords : Writing, producing, recording, mixing, mastering, Black Lives Matter, orchestra, orchestration, pop, anthemic, hybrid, choir

Lavender Looi Ai Hua
ID# 0783763
Berklee Valencia SFTV
29 June 2020

Stand Up (Black Lives Matter)

I did my undergrad at Berklee College of Music, Boston, majoring in Contemporary Writing and Production. Little did I predict that my future would entail me interning at an award-winning metal studio in San Antonio, TX, USA as a recording engineer and producer. That experience gave me the knowledge needed in producing other artists and to be able to communicate with them efficiently, bringing their vision to life. That experience also taught me a lot about editing and mixing in ProTools which I believe is an invaluable skill.

I moved back to Malaysia from the States in August 2017 and got a job working as a composer for primarily commercials, at a studio named Grand Theft Records. I had no experience in composing and was reluctant to consider the job due to feeling unqualified but with the support of my friends, and the belief my boss had in me, I jumped straight into composing for commercials and dealing with clients. My first scoring gig was for a short film/commercial for Chinese New Year for Panadol which is a Paracetamol Company. I was part of the team for one and a half years and due to the fast-paced nature of the commercials industry, I remember having a complete mental block during one of the earlier jobs and this taught me to

silence my inner critic when writing and to just trust the process, write and move on. It taught me how to decipher reference tracks provided by the clients, understanding non-musical terms used when describing sonic elements that they desire. Being able to think and write fast was essential in performing well at that job. I have never in my life written so many pieces of music in various genres in such a short amount of time, this helped me tremendously in developing my own sound. In the beginning, I used to get frustrated when clients wanted me to change something in the tracks that I have written which I was already happy with but very soon, I learned to cope with that. I believe that an important skill that is needed for this job is to separate myself from my music because the client is always right, they want what they want even if I am the professional and I do not agree with the direction they are going. When I am composing for them, my music is not mine anymore so do not stress about changes. Get the job done, do it well and move on. My art are the songs that I pour my heart and soul into.

Being an in-house composer fulfilled my desire to write for big companies such as KFC, L'lo L'lo, Grab and many more. The key to a great piece of promo music is to have a catchy hook. My boss had instilled that in me since day one being on the job. I believe that is true for writing a successful song too and I consider myself a songwriter at heart who wants to be able to branch out into other types of music writing. A successful song or promo music should have a memorable and recognisable melody that sticks in the listeners head and is easy to sing back.

As time went by, I started to feel a sense of stagnancy working as an in-house composer which led me to submit my application for the Masters in Film, TV and Video Games program at Berklee Valencia. I wanted to push my boundaries, better myself, develop my skill set as much as I can and expand my horizon by venturing into writing for other mediums. I also really

wanted to live in a country I have never been to, where they spoke a different language so being able to live in Valencia while studying was and still is very enticing to me. After a few months of waiting patiently, I got a letter of acceptance from Berklee and so I happily quit my job at the studio but I was still working remotely, packed my bags and moved to Spain alone about a month before the program started because - excitement!

I got to Spain on the 16th August 2019 with 2 luggages and a guitar, hopped in a cab and managed to get to the realtor's office using my broken Spanish. I noticed how dead the city was and the cab driver explained that it was a holiday. Hence, the cheap flight fare. I picked up my keys and got to the apartment only to realise that I had 7 roommates with one bathroom and one kitchen to share with. This drove me insane for the next couple of months till I finally broke my contract and moved to a better place only a few steps away from that apartment.

One of the main reasons I applied for this program was because I assumed that writing for commercials would be in the same realm of writing for TV or film because they are both writing for visuals but boy was I wrong! As a songwriter, my ears are tuned to forms, 8 bar phrases and strong melodies that stand out. I was honestly really uncomfortable with having to play a "background" role, to make my music more subtle, less noticeable, felt and not heard. I realised that I have an enormous ego that was getting in the way of being a film composer because I am drawn to strong melodies which are too distracting and takes over the dialogue in a scene. I wanted my music to be noticed and to stand out, I had the mentality of a songwriter and producer.

Writing for an orchestra is not my strongest suit. Let me backtrack to talk a little bit about my musical background. My mum was my first music teacher, she taught me how to read but

also how to use my ears and I became proficient in playing by ear. My parents sent me to music lessons every week where I would learn to play classical piano and music theory and I absolutely hated reading music notation, always feeling like I was restricted by the notes on the pages. I was good at it but definitely did not enjoy it to a point where I was skipping lessons and so my mum made me a deal; finish my grade 8 ABRSM examination in both practical and theory and she will not force me to further my music education. So I did and here I am, studying at a music college.

Back to writing for orchestra. I've always found it difficult to remember transpositions and ranges of instruments. I depend heavily on my ears and very little on theory and I notice myself using orchestral instruments like how I would use a synthesizer or any electronic music elements. Sometimes it surprises me how well they translate from electronic to acoustic instruments and sometimes it does not turn out the way I want them to. In our many recording sessions at Berklee Valencia, I've been experimenting with writing for orchestral instruments the way I would write electronic music. I am very curious about what works and what does not and I have had both good and bad sessions and I have definitely learned more for the bad ones. I have been trying to adapt electronic music in a traditional setting. Being able to blend the 2 worlds is very fascinating to me and aligns with the kind of music I believe I strive the most which is a fusion of traditional southeast asian ethnic, pop and rock music. I am very grateful to be given the opportunity to test the waters with real musicians.

This brings me to my next topic, the culminating experience. I knew that I wanted to write something songlike with both electronic and acoustic instrumentation. Initially I teamed up with GEMB student, Meg McCluskey to write music for a 360 video. It was a really cool project

featuring contemporary dancers portraying the state of the earth with a theme on recycling. I was supposed to sample recyclables and use them in my music as percussion, combined with electronic elements and an orchestra. It was going to be a song with a strong hook which was in line with my vision for the CE. I thought it was the perfect project. Then, the lockdown happened. Both her and I had to come to terms with it and devise a new plan since there was no way for us to proceed with the shoot.

After much contemplation, I decided to write a song to Jon Bellion's music video "Luxury" from his 2014 album called "The Definition". The music video is beautifully animated and features Jon Bellion as an animated character and talks about how money and fame does not bring happiness. The message behind the video inspired me and I was really excited to work on it. I am also a big fan of Jon Bellion's music, I love how he does not seem to run out of musical ideas and I love the way he uses his voice and processes them to sound completely un-voicelike and I have always enjoyed watching his writing process which were documented and uploaded onto his YouTube channel. My plan for this project was to write a song that features my voice. The song was going to be about being part of the LGBTQ community and the obstacles I had to overcome to getting to a place of self-acceptance. I finished writing the song in the rawest form but decided to keep it as it is because it is very close to my heart and I plan on releasing it as a single with minimal production. My inspiration for writing using comes from listening to music I like and wishing that I wrote them. I brainwash myself with these songs while having a cup of tea while basking in the feeling that they bring me. Once I arrive at the right mood, I am ready to start writing. Usually I will start by getting a solid hook and then from there I will build an entire song. I was never comfortable with sharing my lyrics until this year when I was encouraged by

Lucio to submit a song for Robert Kraft so coming to Berklee has definitely helped me get closer to overcoming that insecurity.



Fast forward to May 25th, George Floyd, a forty-six year old African American man was killed in Minneapolis by the hands of a white police officer that knelt on his neck for almost 8 minutes. He was arrested for supposedly using a counterfeit bill. His death triggered demonstrations and protests around the world against police brutality and against racism. There were countless cases of brutality against African Americans prior to George Floyd's death and multiple murders after. It is finally being put under a spotlight and being talked about but we have a long way to go in making lasting change. My cousin is married to an African American and he is one of my closest relatives and his family is close to my heart and therefore I felt compelled to show my support in any way possible and what better way to do that as an artist? Write and produce a song.

On May 31st, I received a recording from my friend Michelle Raymond, from the GEMB program, of a song she wrote. She was very affected by the happenings in the United States and decided to write an emotional but anthemic song about it. I listened to a very rough recording of her singing and playing the guitar and immediately had ideas on the instrumentation and production of the song and we started bouncing ideas off of each other.

On June 1st, her and I were supposed to go on a dinner date. When I arrived at her place, we got into a conversation about the Black Lives Matter Movement. We ended up ordering in and writing, revisiting, revising this song and we entitled it Stand Up (Black Lives Matter). We sat and worked for hours to get the lyrics, melody and chords right. Initially, the song was supposed to be a really rough recording of guitar and voice, the entire song was a four chord loop and the energy felt flat. We referred to Johnny Cash's cover of Hurt and I wanted the choruses to sound uplifting so I ended up changing the chorus and melody to differ more from the verses. The song was going to be just a rough recording of guitar and vocals but then we decided to properly produce it in my bedroom. We barely slept that day making sure the hook was exactly the way we wanted it to sound because it is always all about the hook.

The next morning, we jumped out of bed early and mind you, Michelle is not an early riser but due to her motivation to get to work and finish the song, she sacrificed her sleep and we both went back to my place to start on the production of this song. We wanted to capture the pain and suffering in the song like Johnny Cash's cover of Hurt, we also wanted the rawness to be portrayed in the music but after many attempts at trying to record acoustic guitar through DI, we realised that that was not going to cut it. It was sounding too polished. Another song we referred to was Adele's Hometown Glory. Michelle really liked the piano riff and so I started by laying

down block chords as a guide in Logic Pro X. We still could not get the feel right but at least we had a base to work with. I made a really simple beat with stomps, kicks, claps and naps and it was horrible. The first day of production was close to zero productivity so we decided to call it a day after several hours of cracking our skulls trying to come up with something and to no avail.

The next day, I was listening to my Spotify playlist while making myself pancakes and the song O by Coldplay started playing and I love how it made me feel. It is a beautiful, calm, uplifting and emotional song written about his son and I thought the feel was exactly what we needed for Stand Up and so when she came over to work that day, I suggested this song as our reference and she loved the idea and so I pulled up the session from the day before, muted everything else but the piano tracks and started to write a piano arpeggiated line on top of the block chords which you could hear in the second verse with a delay and chorus effect and is doubled by the piccolo. Next, I added the cello line in the verses which came quite easily and then then violas harmonizing the cello which then led into the chorus where the strings are playing 8th notes just to give that little rhythmic movement and then playing pizzicato during the 3rd line of the chorus because I wanted to follow the AABA songwriting form. The song was slowly starting to form now and we are both seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Michelle all of a sudden gets this crazy idea of adding a Chicago Go-go beat and funk guitars to the song which I thought was not going to work but I tried it anyways and it grew on me. I recorded 4 layers of funk electric guitars for the choruses and did some research on the Go-go beat as I have never heard of it before. After watching a few videos on YouTube, I was ready to imitate the Go-go beat. I went on Splice and scouted for different percussive elements and combined multiple samples to get a sound that she was satisfied with. The beat was supposed to only come

in after the second chorus but we experimented with having them in the first and second choruses and it worked surprisingly well with a low pass filter on it. I had suggestions on starting the beat on the first beat of the chorus but we decided to only start on the third bar to make it less predictable. As I was recording and programming the song, Michelle was writing and editing the lyrics to the verses and by the end of the night, we recorded multiple versions of scratch vocals which we were not happy with and so we called it a night.



Day 3. While we both work a lot together, we also work a lot separately in order to get things done efficiently. I spent the day prior to her coming over, arranging the song, adding multiple layers of synths, electric piano, reversing certain samples, subtle counterpoints, cleaning up the session and rough mixing it. Michelle on the other hand decided to go a different direction with the verses. She recorded more than a 100 versions of her speaking the words till she got the final one and sent them over to me to be imported into the session. I like the verses a lot better now and it felt powerful. I re-recorded the guitars from the day before to make it tighter and that night, Helen came over to my place and so I recorded her, Jasmine and myself singing the chorus over and over again. There are 4 layers of the main melody from each of us and 4 layers of 3 different harmonies each. Due to the lack of male voices, I used Little Alterboy from Soundtoys to drop Helen's voice and octave lower with a little bit of saturation and formant shift to simulate a guy's voice. I also do this a lot where I drop the melody by a perfect 4th. I feel like the dissonant adds more power and that might just be a personal taste.



The next 2 days, we rested because we had to catch up on sleep and pushing through was not fruitful anymore. We revisited the

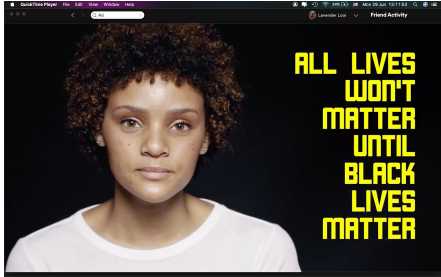
track on the 7th day and Wyatt Cmar happened to be hanging at my place and so we recorded his voice for the choruses and it made such a difference having a male voice in there. We also had some friends who attended the protest here in Valencia and Michelle asked a friend to record the chants I imported the audio into the session and synced them to tempo. There are 2 samples from 2 different protests, the first one that you hear in the track is from Valencia where people are clapping to a rhythm and there are intelligible shouts and the other one that plays right after the first chorus says “no justice, no peace”. I also sampled George Floyd saying “Please, I can’t breathe!” and right after I imported that in and placed the sample right after the line “officer, please I can’t breathe”, I listened to the track from the beginning and that gave me chills and I immediately started to tear up. His voice triggered an emotional response from me. The very last sample is from George Floyd’s daughter saying “Daddy changed the world!” which we thought was the perfect ending since the song starts and ends with him bringing it full circle.

Liz Teutsch and a friend of mine who is a mixing engineer back in Malaysia helped me a



lot with the mix. The both gave me suggestions that took my mix to the next level. I have never mixed and mastered a song for distribution prior to this so I was not confident about my mix but having 2 professionals supporting you, made a whole lot of difference. I learned how to add depth to the choir by panning and sending different amounts of reverb and delay to them. I also detuned some of the tracks and panned them to the sides to give it a chorus effect. My mix sounded a lot bigger after taking their suggestions into account. Liz did mention that the choruses were missing weight and suggested that I add a kick on all the first beats and also a bass and I did that and it pleasantly surprised me. The first person

I showed the revised version to my roommate, Jasmine and she told me that she had goosebumps and the kick and bass were the missing pieces of the puzzle and that's when I knew



that the song was done.

We spent the next day mastering the track and editing the video which is a montage of different footages of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations from around the world which we then released on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. It

took us almost 2 weeks to complete the project, it was very fulfilling despite the countless hours put into it. This song was written in support of BLM - a message of solidarity and support from the LGBTQ+ community and is now out on all streaming platforms!

For my CE I decided to arrange this song for the London orchestra. It took me some time to get creative because I've been working on this song and listening to it so many times that it was difficult to hear it any other way so I had to put it to rest before revisiting it again. I was curious and excited at the idea of expanding the instrumentation of the song. I started by arranging the string section. I removed what I sequenced in the original and re-wrote most of the parts. In the verses, I brought in section by section slowly. Starting with the cello, then the viola and then adding the violins. I also added a double bass playing a simple groove leading up to the chorus. I am actually very fond of that part. I wanted the first chorus to sound flowy, to open up and so I highlighted the string section.

Stand Up (Black Lives Matter) - #0783763 Lavender Looi 14

Musical score for measures 18, 19, and 20. The score includes parts for Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The dynamic marking is *mp* (mezzo-piano). The string parts (Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc.) play a steady eighth-note ostinato pattern. The Double Bass part (Db.) plays a similar eighth-note pattern, with the instruction "arco" written below the staff. Measure numbers 18, 19, and 20 are indicated in boxes above and below the staves.

I had the violas and cellos be the engine (harmonising the ostinato) on the orchestra as Alfons says. I realised that I learned a lot from string motion and applied them here, During the second half of the chorus, I brought in the brass playing a line based off the double bass line.

Musical score for measures 18, 19, and 20, showing the brass section. The parts include Trumpet (Tpt.), Trombone (Tbn.), Baritone (B. Tbn.), and Tuba (Tba.). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The brass instruments play a rhythmic pattern based on the double bass line, featuring eighth notes and rests. The score is written in a grand staff format.

The entire brass section places in octaves and 5ths. I thought that gave a firmness to the brass lines. I brought in the french horn playing a countermelody in a three part harmony because I thought the chorus needed something grand sounding. The cymbal and timpani rolls added to that grandness.

For the second verse, I wanted the energy to drop and the instrumentation to thin out before building it up again. This is where I brought in the woodwinds. I redid this section multiple times because I had a tough time trying to write something that made sense. It was either too busy and distracting or too boring and so I started thinking of ways to make it simple but interesting instead of countermelodies, runs and riffs flying all over the place. What really helped me write for the woodwind section is thinking what a typical line for that instrument would be.

The image shows a musical score for woodwinds and brass. It consists of six staves: Flute (Fl.), Oboe 1 (Ob. 1), Oboe 2 (Ob. 2), Clarinet 1 (Cl. 1), Clarinet 2 (Cl. 2), and Bassoon (Bsn.). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Flute, Bassoon, and Clarinet 2 parts feature a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The Clarinet 1 part features a rhythmic accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *p*. The Oboe 1 and Oboe 2 parts are silent, indicated by a horizontal line with a dash. The score is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines.

I started by writing ostinato in the bassoon line dovetailing clarinet 1 and having clarinet 2 harmonising clarinet 1. I also had the flute 1 harmonising the bassoon line. Later, I brought in the piccolo doubling the arpeggiated piano and the oboes playing a countermelody in harmony. This was where I spent the most time trying to figure out what sounds good and makes sense.

The 2nd chorus was meant to hit harder and therefore I brought in the entire orchestra. I had the flute and piccolo play riffs and runs to make it busier and to help drive the music. I also had the brass section playing a certain groove in triad chorus to highlight the chord changes and to also help drive the song. The grand casa and timpani also aids in pushing the beat and provides weight to the choruses. The final chorus has the exact same arrangement but a whole step higher, ending with a fade out.

The orchestral parts of the mockup were programmed in Logic Pro X using the East West sample library. After organising and colour coding my session, I panned everything to where I wanted them to be and then drew in modulation and expression as I sequenced them. I grouped the violins together, violas and cellos together for easy processing. The double bass was treated on its own. The woodwinds and brass were grouped separately and the percussion were individually treated. I balanced the volume of all the elements and used EQs to clean up the frequencies and add colour to certain instruments. I faced some trouble cleaning the low end as always, I cleaned it as best as I could. I added different reverbs to different instruments to give it a sense of space and depth. The most tedious part of the process was drawing volume automation. Writing, sequencing, mixing and mastering are the things I enjoy most when composing. Preparing scores on the other hand is the bane of my existence. There is something very satisfying about doing it but I am not very quick with it and for me, this takes the longest

time out of all the other elements of music production. All the small little details which I keep missing and having to go back into Sibelius a thousand times to correct minor mistakes because it satisfies my OCD-ness is just a pain in the neck. I hope someday I can afford an orchestrator because I will happily pay them to do a good job at score preparation.

During the writing and producing process of this song, I faced many challenges and one of them is not having a clear idea of what kind of instrumentation I wanted to incorporate and what kind of feel I was going for. It took me 3 days to get to a point of having a clear vision for the song. Our original plan for the song was to record acoustic guitars, piano and vocals only, minimal production but what we ended up with is an anthemic pop with funk elements and a Go-go beat. The good thing about not having a direction is that it keeps your mind opened to the endless possibilities and you might end up with something that you really like, like in this case. I feel like the more efficient way to have gone about this project is to sit with a few of the reference tracks and analyse the elements that I like and dislike about the tracks. That way, I would have had a clearer big picture and a basic idea to follow and expand on.

Another problem that I came across was recording and mixing acoustic guitars. I originally had four layers of acoustic guitars in the choruses but they were not working for the song. It was turning the song into a cheesy sounding pop tune instead of the haunting, emotional Johnny Cash sound from his cover of Hurt. Maybe it was the way I was strumming the rhythm, maybe it was the sound of the guitar. I also live in an apartment where there is constant noise, so I DI-ed the guitar and that might have contributed to the plastic sounding, teeny-weeny, horrible guitar sound that I was getting. I thought I could have solved the problem by layering and panning them but to no avail. I scared the idea entirely and added a strum on all of the first beats

of the choruses using a distorted electric guitar to drive the choruses. I need to get better at recording acoustic instruments. I think it takes a lot of skill to make acoustic instruments sound polished and pristine.

I am disappointed that we did not get to go to London to record the orchestra in early June as planned but I do understand that it is nobody's fault, nobody could have predicted the future and everybody is in the same boat. I think it would be a completely different experience being able to feel the vibrations from the orchestra and I look forward to recording this hopefully sometime later this year. This was the highlight of the program and it was one of the things that attracted me to this program. I plan to release an alternate version of this song and I think the orchestra is a great addition, bringing grandness and liveliness to this song.

Despite taking many turns to get to the CE I have today, I am glad that I have done something that is meaningful to me and being able to collaborate with another student from a different program was a great experience and I hope to keep strengthening this work relationship I have with her. One thing I notice about students in the SFTV program is that we are a very tight knit group since we are constantly buried in work and we lack the opportunity to meet with people from different programs and that is such a pity. I came to Berklee Valencia to study but also to expand my social circle and I definitely made the right decision to get here few weeks before the start of the program because I developed many friendships with students from other programs and I know that these friendships will last a lifetime and Berklee was not kidding when they mentioned that this would be an intensive program. I remember enquiring about doing a double major in MPTI and SFTV and if that was a possibility, I would have never seen the light of day, so thank goodness. This program feels a lot longer than a year, though I wish we could

take a break then get right back into it because I know that I will miss being in class, with my professors and coursemates, I know that we all have to move on.

Lastly I would like to thank all of my professors for their endless guidance and support and I hope we keep in touch and I will always be grateful for how understanding they were during one of the toughest times. My time at Berklee has taught me invaluable lessons in music and in life and it saddens me that it has to come to an end but it is time for a new, exciting chapter and though I am nervous, I am looking forward to whatever life brings me.