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A MUSICAL EXPLORATION OF ASTROLOGY

By

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ABSTRACT

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Music Composition

A MUSICAL EXPLORATION OF ASTROLOGY

Faculty Mentor: Emilie LeBel

For both my senior composition recital and honors project, I composed eight different pieces that musically represent eight of the twelve zodiac signs. This paper is an explanation of how each piece relates to each sign that they individually represent. It starts by explaining what inspired me to create this collection, and how each piece is relevant to each sign.

A MUSICAL EXPLORATION OF ASTROLOGY

For the first twenty years of my life, I thought that astrology was a ridiculous concept that had no scientific basis behind it. One day, I picked up a book about it and went through the long and tedious project of determining my birth chart. I always knew I was considered a Virgo, but that only means that my sun sign is in Virgo. I was surprised to learn that my Mercury was in Libra and my Venus is in Leo, among other designations. As I read the descriptions for each one, it was incredibly personal. I felt like the book looked straight into my soul and knew secrets about myself that I had never told anyone. After that experience, I discovered the birth charts of my closest friends, only to find that their charts matched them frighteningly well. From my scientific perspective, the results were too consistent for me to ignore. From then on I became increasingly interested in astrology, which led me to compose eight pieces that were inspired by eight zodiac signs. As a beginning composer, I wanted a project that pushed me out of my comfort zone. This project encouraged me to sometimes write in ways that were challenging and unnatural to me. Each sign is inspired by individuals under that zodiac, characteristics of that sign, and sometimes visual interpretations of each sign.

The Precession of the Equinoxes was a piece that I would not have composed without this project. Usually, I am inclined to write for longing melodies for string instruments, but this piece required something out of my comfort zone because it embodies Aquarius. Riske explains, “Aquarius is an unusual mix of old-fashioned and progressive, rebellious and conventional, friendly and aloof. All this makes it tough, if not impossible, to predict what the sign will do next” (84). To match this description, I picked a rather odd quartet instrumentation that included a trumpet, french horn, cello, and tuba. The addition of a cello creates a very peculiar instrumentation that is uncommon in music. Another descriptor of Aquarius is, “impractical” (Bloch and George 222). Having the cello in the ensemble is impractical because of the volume capabilities of each instrument. The volume of each of the three brass instruments at their loudest is much louder than the cello. I wanted to overcome this challenge in the Aquarius spirit because according to Riske, “This is also the sign of the inventive mind that sees obstacles as both a challenge and an opportunity” (84). To compensate for the odd instrumentation, I would have the cello play soloistic lines only when the texture was very thin. At other times, the cello played a more supportive role by doubling one of the brass instruments to create a subtle

coloring to the sound. I approached the unpredictable aspect of Aquarius through rhythm by specifically alternating time signatures. At the very beginning of the piece the first measure is in 5/8, the second in 3/8 the third in 5/8, and the fourth in 4/8. This unpredictable altering of the time signature continues for the first seventy-eight measures, and returns during the end of the piece. I included a continuous 4/8 section in the middle of the piece to make the unpredictable time changes stand out more when they occur and in a sense, add unpredictability to the entire composition by making the constantly changing time signatures stay consistent for a section of the piece. This piece was also inspired by two Aquarius's that I know. One individual inspired my use of the trumpet because he has such a powerful and unique presence. He also plays the trumpet with a moving amount of emotion, so he played the trumpet part for the performance. The other Aquarius I knew was very comically annoying to me. I made the piece comical and annoying at times by randomly inserting rests into parts of my melodic line to build subtle and sporadic pent-up energy within the listeners. Overall, these astrological guidelines and personal experiences pushed me to create a piece that stretched my compositional skills. It was uncomfortable for me to start, yet a successful piece that represented Aquarius quite well upon completion.

FuBen//Benri was inspired by the visual aspects of Gemini, Walt Whitman, and by a Gemini acquaintance. The Twins are the symbolic representation of Gemini (Riske 43). This symbolism is represented by my instrumentation of a duet for soprano and alto singers. Since Gemini is one of the few signs represented by humans, I thought the human voice would be perfect for this piece. The text of the piece was taken from a very famous Gemini, Walt Whitman. One of his most famous lines sums up the Gemini condition quite well, saying "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (Whitman). The alto begins the piece by singing "Do I contradict myself? I contain multitudes." Judy Hall writes, "Gemini is the original dual personality. Bright, communicative and charming at one moment, this person can be sullen or acerbic the next" (45). The soprano is the voice of the optimistic Twin of Gemini, while the alto takes on the role of the more pessimistic Twin. Their lines are often intertwined, yet constantly set up these two dualities that together create the Gemini personality. At the very end of the piece the soprano sings "I am as good as the best," and at the exact same time the alto sings, "I am as bad as the worst." This text comes from Walt Whitman's quote, "I may be as bad as the worst, but, thank God, I am as good as the best." My

Gemini acquaintance once told me in the same conversation, “The world is on fire,” and “Everything will be okay forever.” Both sentences were said in the same humorous, sarcastic, yet serious voice. At one point in *FuBen//Benri*, the soprano sings “Everything will be okay forever,” then continuously sings “forever” on three ascending pitches. On the offbeat of these pitches, the alto sings a descending three note line singing “on fire.” They interact musically and complete each other, while also completely contradicting each other. The soprano’s rising line and text represents the positivity, while the alto’s sinking notes and text show negativity. The name of my Gemini friend is Ben, and shows the meaning behind the title. In Japanese, *fuben* means inconvenient, and *benri* means convenient. (Beginning Vocab: Adj.). It places meaning to both his name, and the dual characteristics behind his Gemini personality according to astrology.

Taurus is an earth sign represented by the Bull (Hall 36). In honor of this symbol, I named my Taurus piece *Stubborn Steed*. The instrumentation includes marimba, a bass drum, and tom toms as an ode to the earth aspect of Taurus. These three instruments have a very earthy timbre in my opinion. The time signature of this piece is in 4/4. This time signature represents the steps that a bull takes with his four legs. “Taurus represents the ultimate in patience and is steady and reliable. This sign plods along at an even pace, reaching the finish line in its own time, with everything in order” (Riske 39). To represent this steadiness, the entire piece moves very slowly with the quarter note moving at 55 beats per minute. The bass drum beats a constant quarter note the whole time, displaying the stubborn persistence of Taurus. Riske notes that Taurus, “...tends to cling to the familiar, to stay in a rut, rather than take a chance on something new” (40). The tom toms musically do this by one eighth note per quarter measure 5-12, then two notes per quarter measure 13-24, and three notes per quarter from measure 25 to the end. This change happens very gradually, and is not very different from what happens before it. Another characteristic of Taurus is, “There’s something very calming about Taurus energy. It can relax the most uptight, high-strung people by just being in the same space” (Riske 39). The timbre and melodic material of the marimba creates a very soothing forefront for the persistent beating of the other instruments. For this piece there was no inspiration from any Taurus acquaintance that I know, since I am not very close to anyone under that astrological sign. The next piece ties into astrology as well as some social aspects of part of our society.

Scorpio is the only piece of this project that represents Scorpio while also focusing on an interesting aspect of our society. For this piece, I had my Scorpio friend read sentences that we

created about social media. I then electronically altered only her voice to create my piece titled *Assthetic*. For this piece, I focused more on the darker characteristics of Scorpio to make a more effective piece. Scorpios can be: sarcastic, obsessive, secretive, and overwhelming (Bloch and George 221). My friend and I created statements that mirrored interpretations we have of people on social media. In our experience, social media is a platform that many of our peers seem to use just to validate their ego. Genuine human emotions seem to be masked by a desire to be validated by the society around us. The first statement of the piece is “I want to post these pictures of my face to see how many people validate my physical appearance.” The words continue in a mesmerizing, fragmented, and repetitive way to mirror the fixation that some people show when using social media. “Scorpio is a master at digging beneath the surface to unearth information. This is the sign of the detective, the researcher, the investigator” (Riske 69). The making of this piece was inspired by that investigative spirit of Scorpio. The goal was to unearth the real reasons behind human’s social actions on the internet. The second sentence of the piece is “I want to show you this picture of myself because I’m not completely confident of my physical appearance.” That sentence is eventually electronically reworked to say “because I’m not confident.” It seeks to explain the attention-seeking behavior that people display with more realistic human emotions than what is on the surface. The last statement is, “The more followers and friends I have on social media is directly correlated to how interesting I am.” That sentence is fragmented, and eventually becomes “I am correlated to social media.” Scorpio is very mysterious and intense (Riske 70). This piece shows a perspective about social media in a very intense way while also acting in the mysterious and researching spirit of Scorpio. I approached this topic with Scorpio only because it is something me and my Scorpio friend have been intrigued by for a long time.

Alexithymia is the piece that musically represents my own zodiac sign. My creative approach was to create something entirely driven by my own emotions and desires at the time. A Virgo is practical and economical (Bloch and George 220). The instrumentation for this piece is solo violin played with a loop pedal. I am a violinist, and it was practical for me to create the Virgo piece for myself so it could be performed by a Virgo. I also had a loop function on my multi-effects pedal, so I made my first loop-based piece with my newly acquired pedal board. According to The American Heritage Science Dictionary, the definition of Alexithymia is “An inability to express emotions in a verbal manner.” I have always had a hard time expressing my

emotions verbally, so it was nice to dedicate a piece to musically expressing my emotions. This piece was the only one without set guidelines, since as a Virgo I was creating a piece based entirely off of my own intuition.

The Moon Goddess is another loop-based piece that embodies Cancer. This piece was inspired by a close Cancer friend that plays viola, so I wrote a viola piece with loop pedal. Cancers are emotional, sensitive, gentle and receptive. The beginning of this piece starts with a very emotional and rubato melody that is very contemplative and emotional. I intentionally left a lot of musical decisions such as bowings, musical shaping, and speed up to the player in order to incorporate a Cancer's intuition into the piece. The piece then progresses to pizzicatos that are part of the beginning loops. Riske says, "Cancer is an intuitive and receptive sign, easily picking up on current vibrations, a trait of the sign's water element. At times, Cancer can be overly sensitive to small slights and upsets." (Riske 49). The performer creates the all of the loops, so they have to be receptive to what their own playing in order for the piece to be cohesive. "Sentimental and nostalgic, cancer treasures everything from the past" (Hall 54). The piece incorporates this idea extremely well because the past playing of the piece is just important as the current material. The looping makes the past extremely relevant, and can affect the rest of the piece depending on the performance. The material is sometimes more difficult to play, but I did this because the Cancer performer is a very talented musician. I wanted a piece that represented his sign well, while also challenging him musically. There is a personal backstory from my Cancer friend that shaped the title of the piece, but the moon is also the ruling planet of Cancer (Riske 48). Overall, the melodic material was aimed to represent longing and sensitive emotion throughout the piece.

*K*Woo* was inspired by an Aries I know that has many characteristics of this zodiac sign. An Aries is assertive, dynamic, impatient, and energetic (Riske 31). At the very beginning of the piece, the quarter note equals 110 and the organ begins playing sixteenth notes to represent this energetic quality. I also used chromatic motion many times throughout the piece. My Aries friends has a lot of anxiety and excitement to his personality, so I felt that fast chromatic motion was a good choice to showcase this nervous energy. Several times throughout the piece I use strange sounds as an ode to my Aries friend. He's a wonderful and unique personality, so I included Nintendo-like sounds and turkey noises as small tributes. These are not necessarily Aries qualities, but they represent his personality well. The Nintendo sounds occur at the very

beginning of track one, and around the 11-second mark of track two. I included organ in the piece as an ode to Bach, since he was an Aries. In measure 47, there is a seemingly contradictory part that is slow, patient, and bittersweet. It contradicts the solely Aries personality, but it reflects more of the relationship I have had with this friend for almost a decade. Each sign inspired me to take different creative directions, which led to very unique and different pieces.

The final piece for this project was *The Lonely Star of Autumn*. There were multiple facets of inspiration for this Pisces piece. The instrumentation for this piece was inspired by the Pisces tendency to be imaginative and dreamy. (Bloch and George 223). There is a flute, alto saxophone, bass clarinet, bassoon, violin, and viola. Together they create a very dreamy timbre that mixes well together and washes over the listener. They are strong, yet subtle instruments. Pisces is a water sign symbolized by the Fish (Riske 88). The piece begins with moving sextuplets in the bassoon and bass clarinet that visually look like tiny currents on the score. This musically creates a flowing effect that represents the amorphous energy of this water sign. The timbres of these two instruments create a dark and dreamy beginning for this piece. The Pisces acquaintance that inspired this piece had a way of going from one positive and transcendental experience to a bout of delusional rage in a short amount of time. In honor of this shifting personality, the sections of the piece are shorter and move from incredibly relaxed and poetic to chimerical and suffering in a short amount of time. “Some astrologers believe Pisces is the sum of all parts, that it embodies all twelve signs of the zodiac. There’s some merit to that opinion, as this sign almost seems to operate on a different level, being highly spiritual and in touch with the universe” (Riske 89). I gave this piece a mystical feel because Pisces to me are very powerful, interesting, and intriguing personalities. There is a certain wisdom that my Pisces friend seemed to have, yet not acknowledge that I tried to embody musically through this piece. The wisdom stemmed from having experience many different states of being within such a short lifespan. The varying emotions of this piece attempt to represent that experience.

“The Babylonians are generally credited with the birth of astrology. Their astrological charts enabled them to predict the recurrence of seasons and certain celestial events. So in the beginning and for more than 2,000 years, astrology and astronomy were the same science” (History of Astrology). Astrology is an ancient art form that holds a lot more merit than many give it. It is not about reading about your future in the paper; I am not interested in that at all. It is more about the personalities and the tendencies of people. Studying astrology has taught me a

lot about myself and the people around me. Composing pieces that musically represented eight of the twelve zodiac signs has opened my eyes to so much more empathy and creativity. Most every piece was inspired by a person in my life, and these pieces allowed me to represent them through my own experience of them. I grew compositionally by expanding my own aesthetic that would not have grown to that extent without this project.

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