

A Concept Album Employing Emotion and Tragedy as Central Theme

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the population in a myriad of ways. Consequently, the emotional responses to this crisis vary as well. Fear and sadness are obvious reactions. However, emotions such as trust, love, joy and anticipation have also presented themselves. Utilizing this idea of multi-emotion complexity within tragedy as inspiration, a musical concept album was written/composed.

The implementation of this concept album required research from several disciplines including musicology, psychology and philosophy. The primary purpose of this study is to understand emotion and how it can be represented as the central theme in a musical work. Psychological and philosophical theories are used to aid in the formulation of a lyrical storyline which is underscored by the accompanying instrumentation and production. Compositional techniques from other large-scale musical genres are employed as well. For instance, the album features a leitmotif. This compositional device is commonly found in opera and film scoring.

The final product is a nine-track concept album featuring both lyrical and instrumental compositions. The storyline introduces three characters as they encounter the pandemic. Each subsequent character offers a new and evolving emotional vantage point. The album begins with underpinnings of fear and anger. It then cycles through various emotional states, eventually concluding with acceptance.

Preliminary Research - Key Points

1. Concept albums of all genres tend to include an overture. This opening piece introduces musical themes which are later revisited.
2. The songs and instrumental compositions within a concept album can be unified by an evolving narrative and/or a songwriting theme. For example, The Who's *Tommy* uses a storyline as the central concept. However, an album such as John Mayer's *Battle Studies* is held together by the concept of a "War of Love".
3. The leitmotif is a popular compositional device used in film scoring and other large-scale theatrical works. It is a recurring musical theme which is developed over the course of a piece. The inclusion and development of this theme cues the listener into the emotional intensions of the composer.
4. Psychologists Juslin and Vastjall have conducted studies on the possible stimuli in the creation of emotion during the musical listening process. One of the more common theories is that of "musical expectancy". They define this as "related to the gradual unfolding of the musical structure and how unexpected continuations may evoke emotions". This concept ties directly to recurring themes such as a leitmotif.
5. The underlying harmonic structure is a huge indicator of the implied emotion. This can be seen in pieces such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. His use of a descending bassline creates complex/dissonant underlying harmony. Because this harmony is often associated with sadness, the bassline is often termed the "lament bass".

Compositional Needs

Based on this preliminary research, a concept album seeking to encapsulate various emotions needs the following components:

1. An overture which introduces musical themes to be later revisited.
2. A leitmotif whose theme can be revisited and manipulated.
3. Other thematic changes which work on the theory of musical expectancy.
4. A carefully devised harmonic structure which gives shape to the emotion at hand.
5. A lyrical storyline which utilizes emotion within tragedy as its central concept.

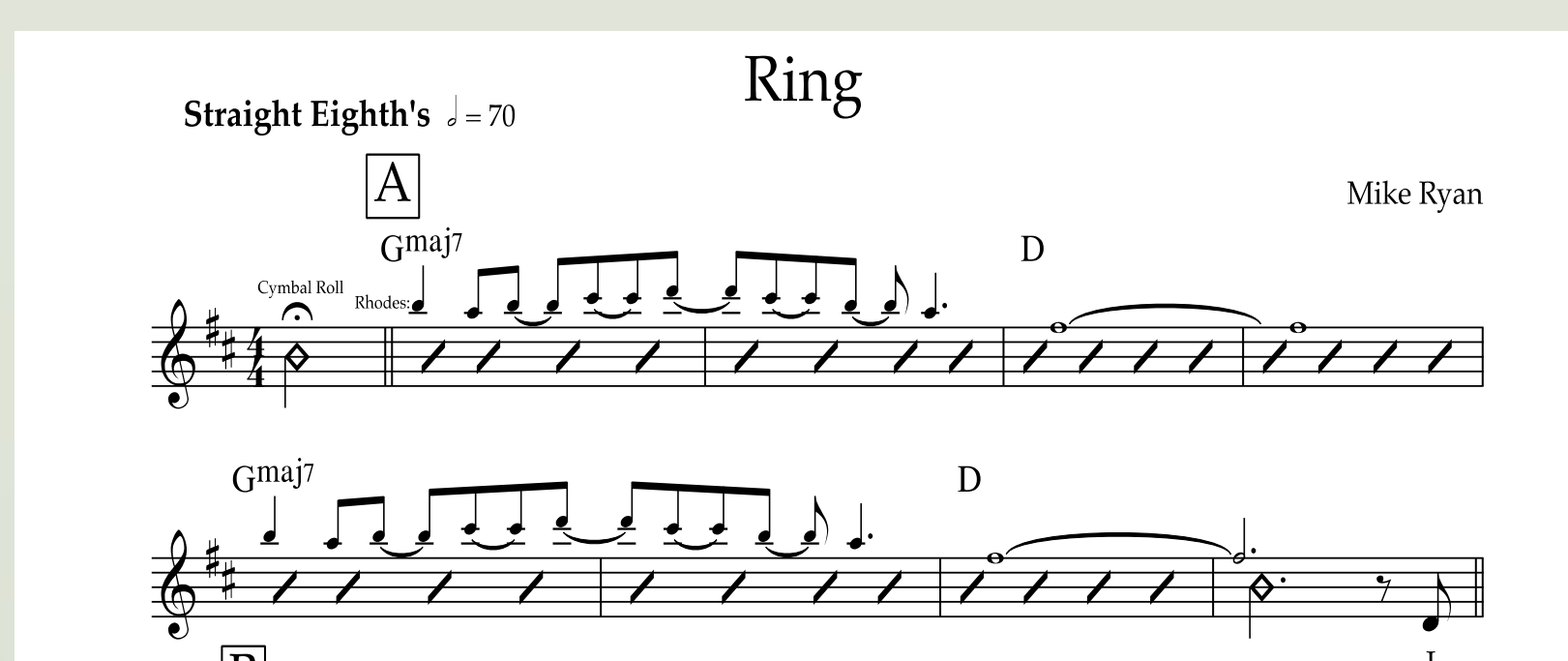
Songwriting Storyline

This album consists of 9 tracks about emotion in the face of tragedy. The current pandemic is used as inspiration. There are three main characters whose experiences are detailed in song. These characters are voiced by Katie Blomarz, Mason Caviness and Brooks Hubbard.

The album begins with a jovial overture. However, the story quickly takes a dark turn as Brooks catches the virus. From this point onward, the songs focus on this tragedy and how it affects each person differently. As the album reaches a close, Brooks passes. The final tracks exemplify reaching a state of acceptance.



(Excerpt from Overture. Glockenspiel is playing the leitmotif in section D. Simultaneously; the French horn introduces a melody to reappear later in *I'd Rather* (Track 2).



Re-appearance of the leitmotif. This time it is played by a Fender Rhodes electric piano.



Further development of the leitmotif is exemplified in the Interlude. The piece modulates from C Major to F# Minor. This excerpt shows one of the more complex harmonic movements in the album.

Recording

- The recording of this album took place in two states and over 5 different recording studios.
- Due to Covid-19 restrictions, much of this album was tracked one instrument at a time.
- Most instrumentation was recorded and mixed at different project/home studios.



(Drum Tracking – Q Division Studio A – Somerville, MA – 10/6/20)



(Bass Tracking – Various home studios - 08/20 – 02/21)



(Piano Tracking – MTSU Studio A – Murfreesboro, TN – 1/16/21)

Conclusions

- The incorporation of a leitmotif did help create a unifying music work which cycles through various emotions.
- During the production and recording process, songs will progress in unexpected ways. Often, the initial demo will have little resemblance to the final product. Because I needed to make a set of tracks which fit a presupposed emotional context, creative exploration and deviation was often not possible
- From an audio-mixing standpoint, working on a multi-genre large-scale work is difficult due to various needs within each genre. In this album, I tried to employ instrumentation which crossed genre-lines. During the mix process, constant referencing of each track within the album sequence is necessary to preserve playing continuity. This is not often a consideration in today's singles-driven music releases.

Track Listing

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|----------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 1.) Overture. | 4.) Go Out | 7.) I'd Rather (Part 2) |
| 2.) I'd Rather | 5.) Interlude | 8.) Lost (Ring Reprise) |
| 3.) Ring | 6.) Only One | 9.) Tomorrow |

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