Music and Emotion: A Concept Album Employing Emotion and Tragedy as Central Themes

Michael Ryan – MFA, Recording Arts & Technologies
Advisory Committee: Bill Crabtree (Primary), Michael Hanson (Secondary) & Dr. Joseph Akins (Secondary)

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 tragedy as inspiration, a musical concept album was

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 Holmes, 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.

Conclusions
• The incorporation of a leitmotif did help create a unifying musical 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
1. Overture
2. I’d Rather
3. Ring
4. Go Out
5. Interlude
6. Only One
7. I’d Rather (Part 2)
8. Lost (Ring Reprise)
9. Tomorrow

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.

Piano Tracking – MTSU Studio A – Murfreesboro, TN – 1/16/21
• 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.

Interlude

Rearrangement 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.

References
Fertel, Rien. Drive-By Truckers’ Southern Rock Opera (33 1/3) (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018). 5
Shute, Gareth. Rule-based Emotion Detection on Social Media: Putting Theory into Practice. (Cambridge University Press.) 12-286
Stearns, Garland C. A. Album. (Place of publication not identified: Createspace, 2015.), 10-200

Acknowledgement
Special thanks to my advisory committee of Bill Crabtree, Michael Hanson and Dr. Joseph Akins. Your expertise, experience and mentorship were invaluable to me this past year. I’d also like to thank the Department of Recording Industry and Middle Tennessee State University as a whole. The university’s diligent work to open safely during this pandemic made this project possible. Lastly, I’d like to thank my friends Justin Kinibell and Brooks Hubbard. Your musicianship and creativity are a continuous inspiration.