Extreme Arranging: An Autoethnographic Reconciling of Differences and Exploring of Similarities Between Seemingly Incompatible Genres
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Abstract

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'Extreme Arranging' is a term used by the author to define musical arrangements that cross a wide gap between two musical styles, whether that gap is conceptual or the physical distance between their geographic locations. The inspiration behind 'extreme arranging' came from various popular and classical artists who reached across genres in a similar manner. Connecting two 'distant' styles in one arrangement necessitates choices by the arranger as to which elements of the original song and arranged style should be retained or discarded. Throughout, the author uses his autoethnography to explore his interest in 'extreme arranging' and the choices made in his arrangements to his background of being an American raised by American parents in Japan. The author explores the development of his arranging process and two recent arrangements using similarities that appealed to him and decisions in reconciling differences in form, harmony, rhythm, text and melody. The author draws connections between his intercultural background and the process of arranging songs to a seemingly incompatible genre.

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Keywords: arranging, Baroque, music theory, popular music, Renaissance

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Abstrak

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Introduction

'Extreme Arranging' is based on a roughly 14-year process I have developed since I was an undergraduate student. This article originated as an oral presentation at the Music-Performing Arts (MusPA) conference at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim, Malaysia on 2 December 2014. The original presentation focused on the musical techniques used to achieve the sound, focusing mainly on music theory and history. The autoethnographic connections between the arranging process and my background as an American raised in Japan is an entirely new development presented in this article.

How 'Extreme Arranging' Was Developed

When I was a child, my parents moved our family to Japan. I was raised by parents from one culture (and the culture of my passport and citizenship), while residing in another culture. I was a typical 'Third Culture Kid', child raised outside of his or her passport country, coined by Ruth Hill Useem (Useem, 1999), stemming from the idea that the combination of two cultures forms a mixed, hybrid, or 'third' culture for the child. In retrospect, I see a connection between my 'third culture' upbringing, the music I enjoyed as a child, and the style that I eventually call 'extreme arranging'. One of the first cassette tapes I had as a child was 'Weird Al' Yankovic's *Off the Deep End* (1992). I distinctly remember having the polka medley of songs popular at that time, 'Polka Your Eyes Out', memorised quickly. On every major album since his second album *Dare to be Stupid* (1985), Yankovic has included a polka medley consisting of songs popular within the last few years of the album's release. 'Now That's What I Call Polka!' (Yankovic A. M., 2014) is his latest polka medley arrangement of songs by current popular artists such as Miley Cyrus, Pitbull, Psy, Carly Rae Jepsen, and Macklemore. The initial appeal for me was the contrast of the most popular music of the day and the polka, generally considered unpopular in the places I have lived. 'Folk music', let alone 'polka', did not make the top 10 genres of the 2014 U.S. sales report. The category of 'Classical' comprised of 1.4% of all sales. Conversely, 'Country', 'Rock', 'Pop' and 'Hip-hop' (the genres typically covered in the polka medleys) made up 72.3% of all sales in 2014 (Nielson.com, 2014).

The musical groups that I took interest as a teenager and young adult were those that would play arrangements of popular songs in the same vein as 'Weird Al' Yankovic. Hayseed Dixie originally specialised in bluegrass arrangements of AC/DC songs and later expanded to other popular music. Richard Cheese specialises in lounge and big band jazz arrangements of popular songs. For me, the humour arises from cognitive dissonance of a 1940s jazz combo or bluegrass arranging songs from the 1990s onward. The lyrics of the original songs contain more profanity and open references to sex and drug use than songs associated with the arranged style. Arranging songs in a style significantly older than the original is like a musical 'fish out of water'.

> If you feel safe in the area you're working in, you're not working in the right area. Always go a little further into the water than you feel you're capable of being in. Go a little bit out of your depth. And when you don't feel that your feet are quite

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touching the bottom, you're just about in the right place to do something exciting. (Bowie, 1997)

Explanations of 'Extreme' Arranging and Selection of 'Incompatible' Genres

Definitions. 'Extreme Arranging' is a term I have applied over the last four years to a song or piece of music ('original song') arranged as a style ('arranged style') that seems incompatible. I primarily use this term because it is concise and eye-catching. What qualifies as 'extreme' does not follow an exact formula. It relies heavily on judgment based on what genres could be considered 'incompatible' within a culture and therefore all judgments in my case are influenced by my autoethnography.

'Incompatibility' is a concept my family encountered as part of living in Japan. One phrase we heard frequently was 'you are not Japanese—you will never understand'. To Japanese eyes, we could never be fully compatible with Japanese culture, and yet, we lived there safely without major incident. We adapted to the surroundings and learned the language, and to a lesser extent, the Japanese people learned from us. We were never close to being considered as Japanese but figured out a way to reconcile the differences in culture. This reconciling of differences while never fully integrating is a similar goal of 'extreme arranging'.

As to what is 'incompatible', I frequently select two genres that do not 'share' certain aspects such as history, culture, prestige, popularity, audience and music elements such as rhythm, melody, mode and instrumentation. I typically begin selecting the original song, which is most commonly a popular song where I live. As I lived in the United States from 2000 to 2014, and a majority of my YouTube viewership is from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (see Table 1), much of what I determine to be 'incompatible' with the original song comes from a perspective from the United States or an English-speaking country. I then select the arranged genre based on the above factors of 'incompatibility'.

Table 1

YouTube.com breakdown of viewership and subscribers of 'jimlapbap' (author's account name) by nation as of 2 April 2015

Nation	Views	Subscribers	Likes
United States	595.192	1.325	5.994
United Kingdom	107,000	193	877
Canada	74,706	172	707
Japan	55,969	21	147

The development of my barbershop arrangement had a similar parallel to my adjusting to Japan as a child. When I first moved to Japan, I was unable to read signs or navigate the crowds and it took several years for me to begin to understand the culture. When I began 'extreme arranging', I was not successful in capturing the

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essence of the arranged style. My first attempt at an 'extreme' barbershop arrangement was 'Barbershop Star' (Johnson W. A., 2008) an arrangement of 'Rockstar' (Adair, Kroeger, Kroeger, & Peake, 2006) by the band Nickelback (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Author's lead sheet transcription of Nickelback's 'Rockstar'.

Use of Counterpoint. Both Renaissance and Baroque music can have counterpoint, and there is very little counterpoint in "Dark Horse" and "Fancy," so I found ways to add it into both arrangements. In "Dark Horse," I chose to stagger entrances of phrases about halfway through the verses and to provide a contrast to the homophonic entrances at the beginning of each section. For "Fancy," I decided to make the bridge of the original into a fugue using existing themes found in both the bridge and chorus. The melodic phrase structure of the bridge in the original song is *a-a-b-b*, but I assigned *a* as a subject and *b* as a countersubject played as a melody. This was a hybrid choice to retain the melody as the focus but rearrange the phrase structure to *a-b-a-* to give the impression of a traditional fugal exposition (but is not historically accurate).

Conclusion

This entire article is autoethnographic. I can clearly speak for the cultural influences of my arrangements. Naturally, I cannot speak for all arrangers, because they have their unique backgrounds that influence their musicianship, which in turn influence their arrangement choices. I am not the first or only person to arrange in the manner that I do, but I may be the only person who arranges popular songs as barbershop quartets, Irish jigs, and Western classical music who grew up in Japan, so I can speak with authority on that aspect. I have discovered that while people may not have lived on two different continents, many experience multiple cultures. When living the U.S. I worked in the fast food industry while being a music graduate student. The two worlds were physically 20 minutes apart, but conceptually much farther, and the music played in the workplace (rap and American country music) was vastly different than the George Crumb and Bach I would hear at the university. Hybrid genres like postmodernism, totalism, and polystylism in music are the hybrid combinations of genres of similar "incompatibilities." Ideally, my hope in "extreme arranging" is to

build a bridge between the differences and highlight the similarities between popular music and the arranged style.

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Biography

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