Composition and Adaptation: Making “Charlotte” into a Musical

Samuel Waterbury ’11

My project was to compose the score for an original musical. The show is based on “Charlotte,” a short story by Tony Earley and features lyrics by Louis Weeks ’11. “Charlotte” is about the dissolution of a professional wrestling association in Charlotte, North Carolina and about the fractured relationship between the story’s narrator and his girlfriend.

In musical theatre the responsibility for the vast majority of the storytelling falls upon the shoulders of the composer. While there is usually a collaboration with a book writer, it is in song that the genre deals with its conflicts and resolutions. The climaxes are sung; the denouement is left to the text.

While composing this summer I learned how to use music to tell a story. I learned how to create dramatic tension through chord choice. While people sometimes simply describe major triads as “happy” and minor triads as “sad,” I have come to understand that there is a much wider array of emotions that can be conveyed through music through the use of a deeper, more complex palate of harmony available.

A large part of my project this summer was figuring out exactly how to create the moods that I desired through the music. The texture of accompanimental music shapes what the audience will experience as much as its harmonic language. Changing a chord’s density, register, duration, or rhythm can drastically change the way people perceive the music even though the same notes are being used.

While much of the music encapsulated in the musical theatre genre is glorified pop music, I found that using more mature compositional techniques were equally if not more effective at setting the scene. Bringing a musical theme or motif back at an unexpected moment can tie two characters together in an audience’s mind. Using a familiar theme in a new way, perhaps with added dissonance or in a darker mode, can purposefully undercut the theme and make the audience reconsider the previous times that it was heard.

I am excited and hopeful about seeing Charlotte performed. I believe that the story really lends itself to the stage both through the pageantry and masculinity of professional wrestling and through its double love story. Some of the themes explored in the show are Cynicism vs. Idealism, Superficiality vs. Depth, and the physical aspects of Love vs. its emotional aspects.

I really enjoyed working on this musical and look forward to continuing work on it. I think that the hands on experience of composing that I had is the best way for me to learn the art. I had a wonderful summer at Bowdoin. To me, there is no better way to spend my time than immersing myself in music.

Faculty Mentor: Vineet Shende

Funded by the Edward E. Langbein Sr. Summer Research Award