

Task 1

November 10-30 2015

RESEARCH TASK:

The topic chosen for the second unit is 'Storytelling'. The Global Context for this unit is 'Personal and Cultural Expression: Artistry, Craft, Creation, Beauty'. There are three main Inquiry Questions to consider:

- Factual: How do artists tell stories? Does culture define aesthetics?
- Conceptual: Can artists shape the world through storytelling? How does culture influence the interpretation of the story?
- Debatable: Does culture determine aesthetic preference and understanding of the story?

In order to consider the effect of storytelling in real life pieces, it is beneficial to compare two pieces which I find to be relatable and impactful to my personal life, emotions or aesthetic. The pieces to be compared are 'Cell Block Tango' from the musical Chicago and 'Man in the Mirror' by Michael Jackson.

'Cell Block Tango' is a piece originally debuted in the 1975 musical, *Chicago*, as a collaboration between composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb. The musical follows a satiristic storyline on corruption in the distribution of criminal justice, as well as addressing the idea of a 'celebrity criminal'. The main idea of the piece is that it features the '6 Merry Murderesses' of the Cook County Jail singing about the reasons that they were arrested and put in jail. The song has 6 female characters, named Liz, Annie, June, Hunyak, Velma and Mona, but referred to throughout the song as Pop, Six, Squish, Uh-Uh, Cicero and Lipschitz. Their stories are as follows- Pop's husband used to pop gum, Six dated a mormon with six wives, Squish's husband accused her of cheating, Uh-Uh is a Hungarian ballerina who is actually innocent, and Cicero and Lipschitz's husbands both cheat on them. As a result, all the women, except for Uh-Uh, kill their respective men. They all state numerous times that the men "had it coming" and that they deserved to die for scorning them. The message of the song is seen as controversial by many, as it speaks about the issue of domestic violence, but from the unpopular perspective of husbands being abused by their husbands. The musical, however, discusses the crimes as crimes of passion and love, or crimes that the men were deserving of. As a whole, the musical is one of controversy because it deals with the issue of celebrity criminals.

Michael Jackson released his single, 'Man in the Mirror', on the 9th of January 1988. The song was written by Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett, and peaked at number 1 in the United States at the time of its release. It is one of his most critically acclaimed songs, and still continues to be praised by critics worldwide. 'Man in the Mirror' continues to be an inspirational song to all with a crucial meaning that can everyone can learn from (BBC News).

Aside from the various compositional techniques and skills included in the piece, 'Man in the Mirror', one of the most important factors that helped it to become critically acclaimed and so well-received was the meaning of the song. The purpose of the song is to inform the audience that if one changes themselves, they can make a difference in the world, and that before one tells others to change, they should change and improve on themselves first. The tone of the piece is one of motivation and inspiration, as can be see when Jackson sings, "It's gonna feel real good, gonna make a difference, gonna make it right". This section in particular is very inspiring, and allows the

audience to feel that they can have a sense of pride and accomplishment if they make a change by working on themselves, or “starting with the man in the mirror”. The theme of the song is self-change. The uplifting message led to a positive reception. The song’s music video shows clips from major news events such as the Civil Rights March in Washington, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War and included notable people such as Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa (Leaf And Letters). It is clear from the music video that Jackson wants the song to be affiliated and associated with social issues, such as racial injustice, civil rights, and poverty. He was known for his charitable involvement towards social justice. This connection was a core reason for the success of the song, as many people, especially ones feeling oppressed, could relate to the song, or found closure and comfort in its words (Shmoop).

To begin with, ‘*Cell Block Tango*’ falls into the genre of tango, which is a style of music that originated in European immigrant tribes and groups of Argentina and Uruguay (Termine). Tango is usually played on a solo guitar, guitar duo or an ensemble of instruments, referred to as the *orquesta típica*. The ‘*orquesta*’ is inclusive of a minimum of two violins, a flute, piano, double bass and minimum of two bandoneóns, with an optional guitar and clarinet. Tango music is played in 2/4 or 4/4 time (McLean). The main features of tango usually include syncopated ostinato, accented notes, nostalgic lyrics that mourn cruel destiny and lost loves, as is in the case of the ‘*Cell Block Tango*’. A tango is also normally an intense piece of music with a melancholic mood, which uses clave rhythms to provide a rhythmic foundation. Typically, a piece in the tango genre would make use of melodic and rhythmic syncopation, as well as simple harmonies based on chord patterns and often in a minor key. Finally, tango music usually has a structure of simple melodies which is followed by improvised sections known as the *coro*, and uses call and response vocals, wherein the lead singer sings a line, known as the call, and the chorus responds, known as the response (BBC Bitesize). Overall, the tango is a very romantic piece, which usually is used to lament the loss of a loved one, but in this case, the storyline juxtaposes the roots of the tango, as the narrative takes a very violent approach and discusses the reason why the men deserved to be killed- a feat that is ironic, considering the music is very provocative and sultry (Termine).

On the other hand, ‘*Man in the Mirror*’ falls into the genre of soul, a popular music genre that originated in the US, around the time frame of the 1950’s to 1960’s. The genre typically combines elements of African-American gospel music with rhythm and blues, as well as jazz. Jackson’s song used the aspect of gospel music by incorporating a gospel choir for the purpose of backing vocals (Mojapelo). In relation to the techniques used in the piece, Jackson used a technique that made him stand out as a vocalist in a majority of his songs and gave him a distinct voice. This technique, nicknamed ‘vocal hiccups’ sounded generally like he was gulping for air or gasping. He also incorporated ‘breathless stutters’, also known as staccato where he divided the syllables of a word or sentence and said them in a manner that made it appear as if he was shouting the syllables in a rough tone of voice (Critic of Music). These techniques are ones that are unique, and therefore difficult to imitate, however, I can see through his use of the defining and exaggerated techniques, which parts of the melody have more focus and emphasis than the others, which shows Michael Jackson’s own personal expression as a singer, as not only is he adding his own distinctive twist on the piece, but it is easy to then see which lines and lyrics Jackson relates to most, and which pieces he feels passion in when he sings.

In *Man in the Mirror* the technique of ‘hiccupping’ can be heard throughout the entire song, with an example being between each line of the first verse. The technique of ‘breathless stutters’ can be most notably heard in the last line of the pre-Chorus; “That’s why I want you to know” and “That’s why I’m starting with me”. Furthermore, Jackson uses his chest voice in the majority of the song to create a song, powerful soul ballad. These techniques and incorporation of the gospel choir were factors that contributed towards making *Man in the Mirror* such a powerful and impactful single (McLean).

‘*Cell Block Tango*’ is played in the key of F Minor, a key defined by Glenn Gould, a Canadian pianist, as a key that is “rather dour, halfway between complex and stable, between upright and lascivious, between gray and highly tinted...[with] a certain obliqueness”. F minor is a minor scale based on the note, ‘F’ in which the harmonic minor raises the E \flat (“E flat”) to E \natural (“E natural”), and the key signature has 4 flats.

Moreover, a number of techniques also contributed to the success of Jackson’s single. Firstly, the song is played in the key of G Major, a key typically identified as rustic, lyrical and magnificent (Bite Your Own Elbow). This can be heard through the higher notes of the piece, in which the passion and energy of the song is apparent. The piece is also set at a tempo of 100bpm, making it moderately fast paced, and the vocal range is A \flat 3-C6 (Sheet Music Direct). Combined, these elements create a piece filled with intensity.

The song itself is one that does not rely heavily on backing music or instruments, but rather on the vocals of the singers, as when they are singing, the accompaniment is diminished. This is for a number of reasons, mainly in order to highlight the vocals and narrative, which helps move the story onwards. Due to minimalism in the instrumentals, the piece is vocally challenging. It also includes the musical technique of ostinato in two ways. Firstly, the phrase of “He had it coming” is continually repeated throughout the piece to help the narrative, and explain to the audience that the women believed that they were not at fault for killing their lovers. There is also the traces of rhythmic ostinato in the piece, wherein the beat of the piece is consistent throughout. This is because the beat is generated by vocals, where they repeat the phrase, “He had it coming” in the background when the characters perform a solo portion to tell their story.

In relation to the musical elements used in *Man in the Mirror*, the ones that made the most impact included the structure, tonality, rhythm, texture, melody, harmony, articulation and dynamics. First, the structure of the piece is strophic, also known as ‘verse-repeating’ or ‘chorus form’. This form means the piece is structured with a verse and a chorus that are sung to the same music. Typically, it consists of a verse, chorus, pre-Chorus and bridge (Tilmouth). This piece in particular follows the structure of a verse, pre-Chorus, chorus, and verse, pre-Chorus, and then 3 choruses. The reason for the absence of a bridge in the song is because in the final chorus, the song goes through a modulation. *Man in the Mirror* uses a semitone key change, and is known as an abrupt modulation, as there has been no previous build-up to the song or attempt to create a smooth transition using a common chord or tone (Ewer). Rather, the change in key is sudden, which creates new energy for the song, and makes it exciting and powerful once more. The change in key can be seen in the switch from 1 sharp (#) next to the treble clef to 4 flats (b) in bar 66. Furthermore, tonality refers to the character of a piece or its key center. The tonality of this piece is tonal, as opposed to atonal or modal, because it is in a minor key (BBC Bitesize). Moreover, the rhythm,

which refers to different note values being put together, is quite scarce in this piece. There are some instances wherein there are bars that have a collection of crotchets and quavers. There is also the presence of rhythmic ostinatos, for example in bars 21 and 22, where the same note progression is repeated twice in a row. This just creates a piece with note value diversity, which aims to make the piece non-redundant and keep it interesting (Marx). In addition, texture is a key aspect in the success of this piece, as it changes throughout the piece. For instance, a keyboard is used in the introduction of the piece, meaning the texture is monophonic, however, when the first verse begins, snapping sounds are integrated to help keep a steady rhythm, which made the texture polyrhythmic. The technique of syncopation is also used regularly in the piece. This aims to create a different, more exciting and intense melody. When Jackson begins to sing, harmonies, as well as a keyboard or synthesizer join his vocals, making the texture homophonic (Man in the Mirror). Also, melody, which is a tune or motif that is used or repeated in the piece, can be found in the chorus, as well as in the introduction of the piece. The note progression is identical in bars 29-36 and bars 57-65, for example. Further, harmony, which is when two or more pitches are played together, is seen from bars 33-36, bars 63-65, and bars 72-75. Articulation is present in the form of slurs in bar 5 from a B to an A, which enhance the legato characteristics of the melodic line. There is also articulation in bar 9 from D to C and from C to B, as well as G in bar 10 to C in bar 12 and from F in bar 16 to E in bar 17, for example. Also part of articulation, staccato, in which the note is played as short, is present in bar 36 on the two notes of C. Finally, dynamics, which indicate how loud or soft a piece is, are very common in the piece. There is forte (*f*) in bars 29, 57, 85, 93, 98; mezzo-piano (*mp*) in bars 5, 8, 92, 110; mezzo-forte (*mf*) in bars 12, 13, 16, 18, 41, 94; pianissimo (*pp*) in bar 110 and fortissimo (*ff*) in bar 66. These 8 compositional techniques were combined skillfully to create a memorable performance that highlights the singer's vocal skills (Virginia Tech Multimedia Music Dictionary).

Furthermore, the piece, '*Man in the Mirror*' greatly reflects the Western culture of music, which can be seen in the number of characteristics connecting the Western style and the piece. For example, the melody stands out above the rest of the music, in which the melody is derived from scales that are most commonly major or minor. In addition, the harmony present in the piece involves two or more notes being played simultaneously, and the rhythm contains specific patterns of short and long durations, accounting for a majority of the genre and feeling of the music, and mostly established through a regular pulse in the piece of the music, known as the beat, occurring at any speed as long as they are equal in their duration.

The piece, '*Cell Block Tango*' can be connected to the Global Context of 'Personal and Cultural Expression', Key Concept of 'Aesthetics', Statement of Inquiry, which reads 'Personal and cultural identity is expressed through stories', and finally the factual (How do artists tell stories? Does culture define aesthetics?), conceptual (Can artists shape the world through storytelling? How does culture influence the interpretation of the story?) and debatable (Does culture determine aesthetic preference and understanding of the story?)

Inquiry Questions:

Global Context- 'Personal and Cultural Expression': The song, '*Cell Block Tango*', is very reliant on personal and cultural expression, as not only do the vocalists use the song to tell their stories to the audience, and develop the narrative, but the instrumentals are symbolic of the different cultures present in the musical. This is because with each new nationality in the piece, the accompaniment

changes to reflect the culture of the character. For example, in the accompaniment for the Russian character, the instruments used are more of the brass section, with the use of trumpets and saxophones, as well as cymbals to define the strong and jazzy underlies of the culture. On the other hand, when the vocalist of Hungarian origins performs, her accompaniment consists mainly of violins, cellos and flutes to create a softer, more feminine and calm backing, before returning to the fast-paced and powerful chorus. This could be greatly drawing on the relevant Hungarian musical style of verbunkos from the 19th century. The verbunkos style consisted of slow music, followed by faster music, in order to portray the contrasting aspects of the Hungarian character.

In relation to *'Man in the Mirror'*, the piece contains many elements of Western music, which reflects the Western heritage and culture of Michael Jackson, thus creating his cultural expression, including the melody, harmony and rhythm of the piece, which contain elements of pop culture pieces. The piece also draws great influence from Jackson's personal expression, as it is centered around how he sees himself as a man, and how he wishes to change himself as a person. This shows that he is using the obvious metaphor of a 'Man in the Mirror' to reflect how he sees himself.

- Key Concept- 'Aesthetics': The pieces are both very focused on aesthetics. To begin with, the *'Cell Block Tango'* switches from a fast-paced and romantic tango to a slow and serene ballet piece to create a juxtaposition between guilty and innocent, dark and pure. This adds to the aesthetics of the piece as well as aids in the development of the narrative as a whole.

'Man in the Mirror' is a piece that is not very reliant on the general aesthetics of the vocals or the instruments, but still focusses on the concept. For example, Jackson includes a number of personalized vocal techniques to add a unique touch to the piece. He also includes a transposition between keys to keep the piece interesting.

- Statement of Inquiry- 'Personal and cultural identity is expressed through stories': The *'Cell Block Tango'* relates more to the statement inquiry than the *'Man in the Mirror'*, as the first piece expresses the story through the use of differing instrumentals for each character as a means of expressing differing Personal and Cultural Identity, and it can be clearly seen that there is a difference between the American culture of the 5 murderesses and the culture of the Hungarian ballerina. On the other hand, the second piece relies mostly on lyricism to express the story and the personal identity, whilst the cultural identity is expressed through the vocals and accompaniment.

- Factual Inquiry Question- 'How do artists tell stories? Does culture define aesthetics?': I am of the opinion that the artists can use their talent to tell a story or push a narrative along, as was the case in both pieces. The *'Cell Block Tango'* relied on the lyrics and artists to push along the entire narrative of the production as a whole, whilst *'Man in the Mirror'* relies on the artist to describe the link between the title of the piece and the piece itself, as well as to help push along the artist advocating for change. In both cases, the narrative and intention of the piece were linked with the aesthetics of the piece, as in the first song, the cultures of the performers, which were shown through the music, influenced the aesthetics of the piece to reflect the nationality and characteristics of the musicians. Whereas this piece relied on the accompaniment to enhance the vocals, the second piece relied on the vocals and the lyrics to help enhance the message of the song, and the accompaniment was not very influential to the piece.

· Conceptual Inquiry Question- ‘Can artists shape the world through storytelling? How does culture influence the interpretation of the story?’: As previously stated, the pieces are greatly shaped by the accompaniment of the piece, and the culture of the characters reflect how the story is interpreted by the audience, and how it is received. As a performer, it is my aim to achieve this competency, wherein I am able to put across an intended message or story through simply the music.

· Debatable Inquiry Question- ‘Does culture determine aesthetic preference and understanding of the story?’: I believe that there can be a preferred aesthetic, and that culture does influence the understanding of the piece by the audience. For example, the the aesthetics of the piece are determined by the culture of the performers, which will in turn create an alternative way for the audience to relate to the piece, and will allow them to view it from a different perspective, with the use of differentiating accompaniment and instruments, which enhance the piece.

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