

Application Essay, 2022 Self-directed Learning Award

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When I started university, I was not sure the exact direction my life would take, but I thought I had a good idea. Growing up as a classically trained violinist, I practiced hard and earned entry in the Music program at MUN in 2018. I was ecstatic. Playing the violin wasn't just my passion, it was something deeply tied to my sense of identity. I practiced for hours every single day, with hopes of becoming a professional violinist. In the summer of 2018, I started to experience some back pain and went to get medical help, but figured it was a small issue that would go away soon. But by the time I entered my second year of studies, I was experiencing constant nerve pain in my shoulders and arms, as well as muscle fatigue. I was forced to cut down my practice and playing time, and despite attacking the problem from every avenue available, I was forced to drop out of my private lessons and ensembles in March of 2020. I was devastated. Not only was my passion being taken from me, but that innate sense of identity was too. If I wasn't a violinist, who was I? At the same time, country-by-country in quick succession the world was shutting down in reaction to the initial spread of the COVID-19 virus.

A few days before the lockdown I realized that would mean being stuck at home for weeks (which turned into months) with very little of the familiar structure that keeps me feeling fulfilled. I learned a long time ago that if I'm not working towards a clear goal, I feel incomplete and I struggle to cope. I knew that I would need something to keep me fulfilled and productive. Over the year prior to this sudden upheaval, I had become an avid follower of electronic musicians posting online content. I was fascinated by this world of creativity, engineering, and a seemingly infinite number of possibilities. The DIY aesthetic that these creators had tapped into deeply fascinated me. I made the decision on that day of self-awareness, just a few days before lockdown, to source a MIDI keyboard from the local music store. With all my courses abruptly finished, and nowhere to go, I dove headfirst into the world of electronic music. That night, I downloaded the trial version of Ableton Live, a piece of music software for creating, recording, and editing music. I watched a couple of hours of tutorials and messed around with the different pre-set instruments, and by the end of the night I had recorded a piece. It wasn't very complex, well mixed, or long, but it was a piece nonetheless. I had a tangible result from that night of exploration, and it gave me a bit of something I felt like I'd never have

again: identity. When I finished the piece, I made a SoundCloud account, posted the piece, and shared it on social media. I learned then, that not only was this something that could fulfill my need for creativity and productivity, but something that could fulfill my need for outward expression, later leading to the most fulfilling thing to come from this, collaborations. I wasted no time over the next few weeks getting more and more comfortable with the software. I downloaded plugins, explored tutorials, and experimented constantly. That last aspect is a huge one, because experimentation and the curiosity that fuels it, are the cornerstones of electronic music. I started to think about how I could connect this to what I was doing in school.

That winter semester, the one that ended so abruptly, I had started composing music, and even been accepted to start a composition major in the fall. In my time at Memorial, I had seen performances of electroacoustic pieces from students and faculty and was always intrigued by them. I decided, despite my still beginner-level knowledge of the software I was using, to take on a large-scale electroacoustic project. I was in talks with my friend and classmate Cassie Woolfrey, a wonderful clarinetist, about writing a piece for her. I came up with the idea for a piece exploring a topic I felt strongly about: mental illness, and how its portrayal in media and society at large affects those who deal with it. That was the foundation of what would become my first electroacoustic piece, *Accessorize*. For this piece, I conducted a dozen hours of interviews with people over the internet who had reached out to me in response to my posting a call for volunteers on social media. These volunteers agreed to have recorded conversations with me talking about how the portrayals of mental illness in media and society at large affect them on a personal level. This was a multi-step process including getting research ethics approval from the university. I then took representative snippets from these interviews and interlaced them throughout the composition. There were so many things I learned throughout the process, and largely through mistakes. There were entire interviews recorded so poorly that the audio was unusable, there were file formatting issues where I would corrupt files, and almost anything else you can think of going wrong probably did on that project. Despite constant issues, I was undeterred. Every setback was an opportunity for growth and improvement. Repeated mistakes became less and less common, as I researched and discovered solutions to my problems through forums, tutorials, and experimentation. By the time the project was ready to be performed, I had become extremely comfortable working in Ableton Live.

The fun thing is, even after using Ableton Live constantly for the past year and a half since that project, I continually discover new things. I still have so much more to learn, and with the constant updates and reformatting of software, I always will.

By this point, it was fall 2020, we were online, and things weren't looking any better on the injury side of things. I was determined to finish my BMus. as by this point, I was deeply attached to the composition program, and knew that composition was my ultimate goal. By that point, I had posted a fair bit of electronic music online, and I had even recorded a session in a program called VCVRack, that was performed in a MUN Welcome Week event. I struggled to identify an applied aspect in order to finish my degree, and decided to audition on Voice, which meant essentially restarting my applied lessons after completing two-years of my B.Mus. program. When the audition time came around, I was unable to secure a spot in the voice program, but I was offered an incredible opportunity instead.

For years, Dr. Andrew Staniland had advocated for an electronic music based applied study, and finally, there was a great opportunity to try it out. The then-current Dean, Dr. Ian Sutherland, and Dr. Karen Bulmer reached out to me to schedule a meeting. In this meeting, they proposed a way forward for me. Pending CUGS approval, I could potentially enter a 2-year program with Dr. Staniland as my applied instructor, with my applied focus being the performance of digital music. I was thrilled at this incredible opportunity, a way to combine my newfound passion of electronic music making, with a way to complete my degree program, and an opportunity to work in an incredibly enriching environment under Dr. Staniland's direction. I leaped at the opportunity, and after heavy petitioning from many people at the music school and collaboratively working on a syllabus with Dr. Staniland we were given approval from the committee for me to begin my special topics applied courses in the fall of 2021. Finally, after a full year of personal crisis, I had reclaimed and reshaped my own sense of identity, through hard work, perseverance, and the recognition that was given to that hard work by members of the School of Music. If I hadn't made that decision to start posting my music online, if I had given up on that electroacoustic project, or if I had decided to quit after hours of trying to understand frustrating tutorials, I likely would have never gotten this opportunity. When Dr. Staniland took me under his wing, I learned another

valuable lesson.

Self-directed learning isn't about doing everything alone. It's about finding and maintaining your innate desire to explore. It's about putting yourself out there and dedicating time and effort to something new because you believe in a power that it holds to enrich your life, and potentially the lives of others. With the help and guidance of Dr. Staniland, I have made massive improvements in my technique and practice as an electronic music performer and composer. I've been introduced to new concepts and ideas, and improvements to my workflow and performance techniques. The greatest thing about these lessons though, is their self-directed nature. Instead of just giving me a listening list, or telling me exactly how to do something, my weekly assignments involve my own research, my own exploration, and my own creativity. Dr. Staniland provides guidance and help when I need it but encourages me to explore on my own and to find my own workflows. Beyond simply teaching me the concepts of the course, this has given me the blueprint to becoming a life-long learner. I've maintained that drive to create and continue learning even when it isn't a part of structured schooling. Over the Christmas break for example, I decided to teach myself basic animation, and made an animated video for an electroacoustic piece I wrote in the Fall called Lost in Communication. This project was driven by my curiosity surrounding mixed media, and I know this will lead to similar projects in the future.

Since I began this program in September 2021, I have performed both solo and collaborative electronic music improvisations at a Sound Symposium event, I've organized and recorded a series of distanced improvs between myself and various exceptional musicians in my life, I've recorded a brand-new electroacoustic piece for the Newfound festival in February 2022, and I've become confident that no matter what, I will always have a path forward. By this point in time, I am completely accustomed to random and sudden setbacks. I've learned how to cope with them, and I'm ready to take on anything that comes my way. When you have the determination and position yourself to act if you get a bit lucky, you can accomplish almost anything. Since the day I brought home that MIDI keyboard, I've learned a lot about myself as a person, and about how I want to live my life. Through this process of self-directed learning, I've discovered what makes me feel fulfilled, what makes me feel content, and what drives me to keep going even when things seem hopeless.

What started as a hobby to keep me preoccupied during a scary, isolating, and unpredictable time, has turned into a passion I can follow as part of my future career, a tool to connect with those around me, and an outlet for my own creative expression.

I was very fortunate to have the support from the School of Music, but that recognition would never have come if I didn't first put myself out there and demonstrate a strong desire to learn and grow. Giving up on something is often one of the easiest things you can do, but when you can encourage yourself to keep going, you can end up somewhere you never thought possible, and the things you learn along the way can transform your life