Clinton, Mozart and me

The founder of the undergraduate composers collective recalls how he found his calling

By Nate Shaffer ’16
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Music has always been part of my life. When I was three, I saw Bill Clinton play the saxophone on TV, and I asked my mom if I could have one. Since saxes don’t come in child sizes, she enrolled me in violin lessons instead. In third grade, after appearing as Mozart in a school play, I thought, “if he started composing when he was a kid, why can’t I?” This led me to dive into my first original work, “Nate’s Ocean,” which featured a melody for dolphins, arpeggios for krill and a choice quote from “Jaws.” By the time I was 11, I was playing piano, trumpet, guitar, mandolin, marimba, accordion, theremin, dulcimer and french horn.

In high school, I started writing my own songs for piano and guitar. I was in bands, so I got to experiment with that. But my ability to play outpaced my ability to learn, so there was only one natural choice for impatient 14-year-old me: improvise. By my senior year, those improvisations had turned into fleshed-out compositions.

I came to Brandeis because it seemed like a great place to experiment, to make discoveries, to explore my diverse interests in philosophy, politics, theater, visual arts, math, literature, soccer and, of course, music. It’s been a perfect fit. I’m a declared music major, but I’ve yet to decide between composition and performance. I’ve been studying classical piano as a member of the Chamber Music Ensemble, and I formed a composers’ collective to connect with other undergrads who are interested in writing new music. Off campus, I perform as a singer-songwriter, sing baritone with the barbershop chorus Vocal Revolution, and serve as the music director of ImprovBoston.

For me, beginning the composition is the easiest part. Sometimes a musical idea comes while I’m noodling on a keyboard or singing something to myself. Sometimes I take a pre-existing idea and impose a music form on it. For example, I’m developing a piano suite inspired by the novel “Le Petit Prince.” But regardless of where it comes from, the idea needs to grab my attention and compel my curiosity onward. Every piece of music I create involves some essential element that moves me.

The trickiest part is striking a balance between allowing ideas to develop organically and methodically working stone by stone. My points of frustration come from trying to switch between these two modes — when to trust my intuition and when to question it?

It’s exciting to be on the cutting edge of new music and art and to know that the things I’m doing have never been done before. There’s a thrill to believing that my music could potentially change the lives of others. I have a bizarre hope that real communication can happen outside the realm of spoken language — that I can share what it’s like to be inside my body and mind. Maybe the only rational explanation of my creative process is just this: I love what I do and I have to do it because music is who I am.

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