

The Harmony of Nature

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ABSTRACT

This article is an exploration of the award-winning piece *Earth's Lonely Heart* composed by Jeremy West. More specifically, a description of his influences, beliefs, and techniques, combined with his passion for the environment, his technical expertise, and his musical talents are presented. It was only after joining MacEwan's music program that Jeremy realized his passion for composition and became more than *simply a drummer*. His inspiration for the piece was humanity's symbiotic relationship with the Earth and how we as humans, treat the Earth.

The Composer



Composer Jeremy West

It sometimes seems like the smallest things in life can often become the most pivotal— those tiny nudges that subtly direct us in new and unimagined paths. I started off my music career as a drummer. Throughout the process of my first two years at Grant MacEwan's Music Diploma program, I learned a lot about myself as a musician.

All throughout first year, my main focus was to get into second year Performance, because drums were my only way of communicating my musical ideas. Once in the

second year performance program, my mind started to expand from being simply a drummer and into a full-fledged musician. I was intrigued by the process of writing music and was inspired, so much so, that I decided to come back for a third year, majoring in Composition. I have learned that this was my intended path and that I can express myself, musically, a lot more accurately through composition (Jeremy West, personal communications, March 30, April 10, 2012).

The Composition

Like many artistic creations, this piece started in a humble place. It began as a project for a Music Technology Class. As part of the requirements of the project, Jeremy was tasked with creating an ambient piece of music. And while he did have his inspirations, Jeremy did not start out knowing exactly how he wanted the piece to sound. Rather, he let his talent and the music itself create a piece that finely balanced synthesized melodies with the raw, natural beauty of the human voice. This approach provided a solid basis for his piece, and *Earth's Lonely Heart* was selected to be performed at the Composer's Concert, an event celebrating the best compositions created that year by graduating music students.

When creating his original composition, *Earth's Lonely Heart*, Jeremy began with a synthesizer program known as Omnisphere to transition and co-ordinate various sound and music samples (or patches, as they are known) in order to create the ambient background melody. As listed on the Omnisphere manufacturer's, Spectrasonic, website, Omnisphere contains a "vast core library-Over 40GB with thousands of sounds" (2010). Because of this large library of sounds, a composer or musician is able to transform a multitude of everyday sounds into something ethereal.

By using the synthesizer, a composer such as Jeremy has greater flexibility and control in how his piece is created. Omnisphere allows the user to layer or "stack" sounds seamlessly and with great precision, as well as apply up to twelve different special effects to each sample (2010). To set the tone of the piece, a technique that was applied involved "reverse reverb," which was defined as "a reverb that runs backwards. So [sic] instead of the reverb starting with the sound and gradually decaying, it starts quietly and gets louder until the original sound is heard" (Reverse Reverb definition. Loopblog, 2012).

There are two vocal parts in this musical composition: the first is a choral sample — "a sound or short piece of audio stored digitally in a computer, synthesizer or Sampler" (2007, sonicspot, glossary of musical terms, 2012) — and the second part: a solitary



Composer Jeremy West and Writer Katie Delay

female voice, sung by Jeremy's classmate, Sydney Leverenz. The piece begins with the choral sample that applies the reverse reverb technique, which to the listener suggests the following phrasing: "Not gonna stay". To Jeremy, that line "Not gonna stay" relates to his belief that "the Earth will not stay the same if we keep treating it the way we are" (West, p. 2. 2012). The solitary human

voice, subdued at the beginning and building with a crescendo at the close as the music transitions from a highly synthetic sound to a more natural quality, is seen by the composer to represent the incomparable beauty of nature. That, "even though the natural beauty of the human voice and the use of electronics can be considered two completely separate entities, they come together in harmony and create this comfortable environment that we can all love and enjoy in the meantime" (West, personal communication, 2012).

This ability to combine two seemingly disparate influences or sounds into a harmonious balance is at the core of what it means to be a composer. To truly create takes not just technical aptitude or musical talent but also ingenuity—to draw links between opposites— and perspicacity—to be unafraid of taking risks and pushing boundaries.

The Inspiration

Inspiration can sometimes be the most elusive of the muses. For Newton (1726) it was the apple, for Darwin (1835) it was the Galapagos Islands. Like scientists, musicians and composers draw their inspiration from the objects, places, and ideas that surround them. A source of inspiration for this piece is how Jeremy views the world as a living entity, one that humans are meant to be living harmoniously with. That, like in the movie *Avatar* (another of his inspirations), all energy is shared by everything that exists on this world; that because of humanity's greed, our relationship with the Earth is becoming more parasitic.

This theory has been most recently popularized by the movie *Avatar* by James Cameron. A movie which, according to Taylor and Ivakhiv (2010) "raises critical

questions for anyone concerned with the clash between industrial-extractive capitalism and the health of environmental systems, or between capitalism and its nature-allied victims” (para. 1, p. 390). In the film, a technologically advanced human race plays the role of the invaders and usurpers, bent on destroying the paradise planet of Pandora, all for the sake of commercially valuable minerals. To Jeremy, this movie represents the core of how humanity abuses the Earth for the sake of greed.

While *Avatar* has generated fresh awareness of this belief of the Earth as a living entity in mainstream culture, it has been around since the 1970s and is known in the scientific world as the Gaia Hypothesis. Initially presented in 1965 by Lovelock (2000) in his paper *A Physical Basis For Life Detection Experiments*, and later formalized and expanded upon in his seminal paper *Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the biosphere: The Gaia Hypothesis* (1974), Lovelock postulated that “the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH, and possibly also climate. The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis [is what] we are calling the 'Gaia' hypothesis” (1974, para. 6. jameslovelock.org).

With *Earth's Lonely Heart*, this self-regulating system is given a voice both triumphant and sorrowful. While Gaia strives to be in harmony with the human world, humanity does not strive to be in balance with her. Greed has blinded humans to the natural beauty that surrounds them, cutting them off from the natural world.

Earth Song and Earth Science

Lovelock (2000) called atmospheric radiation “the unceasing song of life...audible to anyone with a receiver...”(p. 7). For a man of hard science to liken radiation with music is no wonder. Like radiation, music surrounds us almost wherever we go. Whether it is a symphony orchestra or the wind blowing through sycamores, music is everywhere—a person just has to listen and allow it to change them. While a piece like *Earth's Lonely Heart* or even *Avatar* may inspire an individual to change his or her perceptions, the arts alone will not change the world. It will take people from all fields: from scientists, politicians, environmentalists, and the arts to cause true change and create harmony on Earth.

Jeremy West's original musical piece can be heard by visiting either of the following links: <https://journals.macewan.ca/index.php/earthcommon/about/index> or at his account on Soundcloud, <http://soundcloud.com/jeremy-west-1>.

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*Composer: Jeremy West is a recent graduate of the Music Program at Grant MacEwan University. Majoring in Performance as well as Composition, Jeremy is planning on continuing his education in composition and is hoping to write music for films in the future.

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