Tumi Torfason

Big Ideas, Big Band
– A young composer’s methods and findings on his maiden voyage in the rough seas of writing for big band.

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Abstract

For his graduation project from the jazz department at KMH, Icelandic trumpeter and composer, Tumi Torfason, put on a big band concert with an original program of music and an alternative instrumentation. In this thesis he describes his research and creative process leading up to the concert with insights into his inspirations, compositional methods and approach to arranging. He explores the relationship between compositions and the instruments they are composed with and composed for. In addition, the thesis explores how those findings can then be applied to both the composing and arranging of this new program of music. He also goes into how the artistic side relates to the logistics behind the concert and finally discusses his findings and arrives at some interesting conclusions.

Keywords:
Big Band / Jazz Orchestra
Impressionism
Gil Evans
Third-Stream Music
Original compositions
Experimental instrumentation
Orchestration / Arranging
For

word

My three years at KMH seem to have gone by so quickly and will soon be at an end. It has made me realize how incredibly fortunate I am, so for my graduation project I wanted to make use of some of the rare opportunities that the school offers. Namely the large concert halls, guidance from world class musicians and fantastic up and coming players, both in the jazz and classical departments, willing to take on a new program of music. I therefore decided to write original music for a jazz orchestra with an instrumentation derived from the standard big band. I held my graduation concert in Kungasalen KMH the 28th of March 2023.

A challenge unlike anything I had taken on before and I learned countless lessons from the hands-on experience. I couldn’t have done it without the help of the incredible musicians at KMH both teachers like Klas Nevrin, Peter Danemo and Fredrik Ljungkvist and classmates like Erik Hasselfeldt, Hannes Arason, Maja Svantesson, Bjarni Már Ingólfsson, Olle Lannér Risenfors and many others. My greatest partner throughout the project was my girlfriend, Salóme Katrín Magnúsdóttir, who sang in the big band on the concert. She was always willing to brainstorm ideas, to help me coordinate the logistics around the project and kept me smiling throughout. It was a great team effort that I was honored to organize and lead. I’m happy that I took the chance to make it happen and I’d encourage any future student of KMH to make use of the available resources and make their big ideas a reality.
1. Introduction

1.1 My first big band

Writing, arranging, rehearsing and finally performing my original music is by far the most rewarding task I take on as a jazz trumpeter. To see my ideas come to life in a shared interpretation with other musicians makes all the effort worthwhile. I’m reminded of this every time I follow through with a new project and it has encouraged me to think bigger. I’ve noticed how layered and polyphonic many of my compositions are and how little it takes for me to find the arranging limits of a small jazz ensemble. I realized that I would need a large ensemble like an orchestra or a big band to fully explore my ideas. I only had to find the right time to take the step and scale up the scope of my music. Graduating from KMH seemed like the perfect moment.

Genuinely feeling I had the needed experience, resources and opportunity I set out on my first ever big band project: to seek out resources and inspiration, write a program of original music and arrange it for a big band with an alternative instrumentation, man the orchestra, organize rehearsals and put on my very first big band concert. Despite the scale of the project I felt excited to give my compositions the space and scope I felt they needed. To broaden my palette of timbres and sound color through large ensemble instrumentation.

In my compositional processes so far, I have noticed how both the instruments I use as tools to compose and the instruments I compose for affect my resulting composition. For me personally, the most common example of this is when I write a song at the piano and then hear a dramatic change when I play my melodies on the trumpet. Sometimes the ideas simply don’t translate between the instruments. Realizing these differences in instruments and their relationships to my melodies has helped me sharpen both my composing and my arranging and encouraged me further towards this big project.

I’ve met challenges in the process of all my musical projects and I knew this one would be no exception. On the contrary, making this concert a reality would push my creativity, skillset, patience, nerves and problem-solving abilities to the limits but seeing it through was one of the most rewarding experiences in my musical career.

1.2 Background: resources, experiences and inspirations

This new program of music is a project that stands on its own but is none the less connected to the music I have taken part in and led in the recent past and the music that I will take on in the near future.

My first and second-year projects at KMH were both live concerts on the New Sound Made jazz festival and research projects on the music that I’m most fascinated by. My first-year project was on impressionistic music by French composers Debussy and Ravel and the similarities I saw in jazz compositions by the likes of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. It exposed me to some of impressionism’s characteristic floating rhythms and harmonic cadences that has ever since served as a fuel of inspiration for my composing.

My second-year project was on four of the incredible albums Gil Evans and Miles Davis recorded together around the midpoint of the twentieth century: Birth of the Cool, Miles Ahead, Porgy and Bess and Sketches of Spain. I manned an orchestra of twenty musicians to play the original Third stream arrangements and I put myself on the spot as both the soloist and conductor. In my research I better understood what was behind Gil Evans’ incredible sound, namely his masterful linear and lyrical writing and alternative instrumentations in the big band setting, with classical woodwinds, French horns, tuba and sometimes no chord instruments in...
the rhythm section. This was also the first time I organized and produced a large ensemble concert. It gave me hands-on experience in all the logistics involved like booking rehearsals and finding substitute players. Realising my vision, simply speaking.

The student big band projects I have played in sparked countless useful ideas. Having played swing music by the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams and Tadd Dameron I felt I had a foundational understanding of the classic chapters that make up the typical form of a big band piece: an intro, an exposition, solos, a development and an outro. Trades, shout chorus, soli, solo backgrounds, pyramids, jabs, hits, falls, screams, breaks, cadenzas are some of the smaller elements that come in to play.

To go with my intuition and musical taste I gained a lot of tools, tricks and methods from Peter Danemo’s course on big band arranging. We, for example, went over the ranges and possibilities of the instruments and the so called ‘Basie method’ of voicing a melody in a close-four voicing in the trumpets and doubling it an octave below in the trombones. My final assignment in the course was a new piece I wrote for big band and choir and had the pleasure of seeing come to life at a concert. A feeling I will never forget. All in all, I found myself with a decent overview of the big band tradition and it’s building blocks and general rules and guidelines.

With examples of modern big band music, Peter also showed us how these rules can be bent and broken but listening was not nearly as influential as playing the music live in a student big band. I have for example touched on some incredible arrangements by Thad Jones and Bob Mintzer and even participated in whole concerts in collaboration with fantastic guest conductors Calle Bagge, Maggi Olin and Kathrine Windfelt. Kathrine’s incredibly sophisticated and demanding program of her original music stood out as an absolute highlight for me. Seeing her work ethic and diving into her music inspires me to this day. Her masterful use of polyrhythms, displacements, atonal layering and creative pairing of instruments in unison lines opened my mind to so many new possibilities.

With all these inspirations and experiences, tools and methods, I started working on my graduation project. A brand-new program of music to be played live on my graduation concert in an alternative big band setting. Certainly, my most ambitious undertaking in music thus far but I continued with good faith in that I could in fact see it through. I had everything I needed. I just needed to put in the work.

1.3 Purpose

The core purpose of this thesis is to describe my research, creative process and preparations leading up to my concert. I will explain how I sought out my resources and inspirations and utilized them in composing and arranging for my program with insights into a few of my key methods. I will also list out some of the challenges I met and lessons I learned along the way. Finally, I will discuss and reflect on the artistic result and the process as a whole.

1 “My Ship” from Miles Davis’ 1957 record “Miles Ahead” is a perfect example of Gil Evans’ masterful methods in arranging and instrumentation. His linear voice leading is in my opinion impeccable and he holds the tension with a held back sound and sparse use of instruments. The instrumentation is an alteration of the standard big band: solo flugelhorn, alto sax, flute/clarinet, two bass clarinets, two french horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass trombone, tuba, upright bass and drums. Note that there are no chord instruments. Listen here: https://youtu.be/YZwZgki3ads

2 Kathrine Windfelt’s original big band piece “Orca” is a great example of her inspirational methods in composing and arranging for her modern big band. We played this one at her concert at KMH and I even got to solo on it. It was definitely the most difficult song on the program and I remember how disoriented I was by the polyrhythms and displacements in the song, but after a closer look I felt that every phrase was in a strong relationship with the groove. Listen here: https://youtu.be/t7N8KQjM_vw
2. A report of the work

2.1 Research

To further deepen my understanding of composing and creativity I investigated books like “Jazz Composers Companion” by Gil Goldstein and “Steal Like an Artist: 10 things Nobody Told You About Being Creative” by Austin Kleon. The later contained a chapter on the imposter syndrome that so many creatives suffer.

When I began composing I feared being unoriginal and copying other music. I quickly realized this mindset wouldn’t get me far and have since found the strength in referencing and quoting other artists in my music based on my connection to music history and theory. I feel that knowing what has already been done helps to innovate as one can create something seemingly original out of nothing but carefully chosen references. A new combination of old elements.

When I wrote my first ever big band arrangement, the final assignment in Peter’s course on big band arranging, I tried a new creative method. I made a curated playlist of songs I like, in order to gather all the musical elements I wanted to reference in my piece. It featured vastly different songs that were there for different purposes. It helped me combine old elements for my new piece: voice leading from Bach, harmonic cadences from Kenny Wheeler and Claude Debussy and rhythmic motives from Steve Reich. The resulting big band arrangement was something I was thrilled with and proud of. I was also glad to hear that some of my peers couldn’t recognize where I got the inspiration from and to them it had a strong original sound.

For this graduation project I did the same but with even more influences. As previously mentioned, I looked into the music of Gil Evans and Claude Debussy, in addition to Bach, Steve Reich & Kenny Wheeler. I also sought new influences from large ensemble arrangers like Nils Lindberg, Maria Schneider and Kathrine Windfeld, modern small group jazz artists like Shai Maestro, Kamasi Washington and Tigran Hamasyan as well as Icelandic artists that are close to my heart: Skúli Sverrisson, ADHD, Emiliana Torrini and Björk. The influences I got from these artists ranged from very specific elements in their compositions, arrangements or recordings to the overall aesthetic and atmosphere of the music.

One of the most exciting parts of my research was interviewing incredible artists that can offer some expert advice on specific processes like composing and arranging. I had an hour-long conversation with Peter Danemo, my teacher in big band arranging, jazz drummer and master composer and arranger. We dove into topics surrounding composing methods, work ethics, mindsets, habits, creative flow in writing and calculated analysis when rewriting. It was eye opening and inspiring to hear his ideas.

Here are just two of his great answers regarding composing and arranging:

“When you write music you need to find your place and time of day where you feel comfortable and to find a way to make the process enjoyable. And it’s not only a physical space but also a mental space. Something to be aware of so you can find your way to that place. I never wait for inspiration. I don’t have time to wait. I just start working and then I get inspired.”

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3 A specific element that inspired me for my project was the backgrounds in the trumpet solo of Maria Schneider’s original big band piece “Hang Gliding”. She writes jabs and sweeping melodies that take the dynamics down through the trumpet solo. I’m more used to building up the dynamic through a solo with the backgrounds so I learned a lot from this. Listen here: https://youtu.be/IEJebihJHto
"I think more about colors and then use the instruments to get to the colors I want. It’s good to think about the typical frequencies the instruments occupy and then switch them around. For example to write a bass line in the middle register or to make a wind instrument play a bass line."

The entire interview is attached with this thesis.

This is something that I took to heart. Even though I can get into a creative flow in different places, at school or home in Iceland, I felt it helped to have a main place to focus and work on my project and that became my little home studio where I have just some minimal equipment. Speakers and a keyboard. I can also relate to his point on inspiration. My compositions never simply come to me, I always have to work to seek out my ideas and develop them. His last answer on colours is a fantastic mindset for arranging which helped me a lot in my process like I will cover in a later chapter.

I recently traveled to India and listened to a live performance of traditional Raga music that includes drones, microtonal intonations and pitch bends. I brought back a so called shruti box, an Indian device that looks like an old radio that only plays a drone and metronome that is just perfect for practicing trumpet to, especially for finding these microtonal intonations. This is a practice method recommended by New York trumpeter Ingrid Jensen. Needless to say, I also added some raga music to my playlist of inspirations.

![Image 1: My new ‘Dhrava Nano Zx Digital Shruti Box’ from Radel that I bought in Pune, India. It plays a drone, a metronome and nothing else. My favorite practice tool for intonation and time.](image)

### 2.2 Composing

I set out to write six new songs for this project, but I soon realised it might have been a bit too ambitious given the time frame. So, I decided to cut me some slack and found one old tune “Augu Nætur” (e. Night’s Eyes). I managed to write five new songs, two of which I joined together in one piece.

Here below, I list out the five compositions I wrote and chose for the program in setlist order. The songs in a lead sheet format are available in the attachments.
I wrote this minimalistic piece on my journey in India with nothing but my ears, a pen and paper. It happened on a relatively short domestic flight between the two cities in India, Goa and Pune. I had wanted to write a piece like this for a long time and this felt like the right moment. A strong and sincere melody to be played in unison without a time signature. Just a few phrases with fermatas. No particular chords or harmonic cadences, except for those implied by the melody, just a rushing pulse of underlying rhythms. In hindsight I think this piece is representative of my headspace at the time, the fast pulse being the vibrant environment and the melody being my heartfelt thoughts, that came up so far away from home, about what matters most in my life.

Image 2: The pages in my notebook on which I wrote the first two motifs of Góa-Púne on my flight from Goa to Bangalor. I decided to change the title as I was only stopping in Bangalor for a transit flight on my way to Pune.

**Composing “Hringabrynja”**

This one came to me at the piano like most of what I have written. I worked it out slowly without ever writing it down until shortly before I arranged it for the big band. It goes in 4/4 and centres around one minor key with only a few additional harmonic colours that arrive in syncopated hits. I somehow felt it had a medieval atmosphere, so I titled it “Hringabrynja” which is Icelandic for “chainmail”. First came two sections that went perfectly together but in the middle of the arranging process, that I will go into later, came the idea of surprising the listener with a groove, a hip-hop beat almost, and with it came a new section. This section consisted only of arpeggios to be played in fragments by the large ensemble.
Composing “Augu Nætur”

Like I mentioned before, this is one of my older tunes that I added to the program for a special reason. I wrote it shortly after I was introduced to Wayne Shorter’s music and what captivated me more than anything else was his infamous hard bop ballad: Infant Eyes. It inspired me to write a ballad of my own in a similar harmonic soundscape, a strong melody with some abstract modulations. I would probably not have written it in the same way today, but it holds a special place in my heart as I dedicated it to my sister’s new born daughter, Nótt (e. Night), thus the title Augu Nætur (e. Night’s Eyes).

Composing “Dænó”

Here I joined two songs together, both of which were composed at the piano but the piece as a whole took shape in the notation program Muse Score. These two songs have a similar tempo and key centre but the first one goes in 5/8 and the second in 12/8. The idea to join them sparked when I realised that they could be seamlessly connected by simply adding a bar of 2/4 (4/8) to four bars of 5/8 to equal two bars of 12/8. The equation would look something like this: $4 \times 5 + 4 = 2 \times 12$. This made it possible to layer motifs from both songs over the transitional section between them. They are both built on melodies and bassline and the chord progressions were more of an afterthought. The title “Dænó” is a made-up Icelandic spelling of the word dyno that is short for the term dynamic move from the sport of climbing, my latest hobby.

Composing “Kanón”

Throughout the years I have written a few theoretical, almost mathematical, pieces like this. Not always with good luck but this time I was thrilled with the result. Last summer I tried writing an eight-bar canon in 5/4, with an alternating clave each bar of 2-3 and 3-2, that modulates gradually all the way around the circle of fifths. In my piano lessons, Ann-Marie Henning showed me this method where one writes the next two bars below the last two bars, making a canon. In my first attempt I failed to make it work harmonically and so I tried limiting myself to only three adjacent notes from the circle of fifths (F, C and G for example) followed by a modulation down a minor third to a brighter key. The canon worked out seamlessly but of course it sounded purely mechanical. I left it alone for half a year until I realized in January that I could contrast this canon with a floating melody above and a bowed bass line below. When all that was set the chords came naturally. I did my best to finish the composition with lyricism and sincerity in hopes to find a balance for the piece. To me it felt like a success.

$J = 100$ 5/4 Clave: alternating 2+3 & 3+2

Bass enters!

Gtr. enters!

Trp. enters!

Clar. starts alone!

*Image 3: The canon loop in “Kanón”. Written to be played with a displacement of two bars.*
Melodies by and for instruments

As I see it, a melody has a close relationship with the voice or instrument that conveys it. For the purposes of this project, I roughly divided pitched instruments I most often write for into two distinct groups based on their general differences in articulation. In one group we have instruments that clearly strike a note in tune that then decays gradually: the piano, vibraphone, guitar and bass. In the other group we have instruments where notes are blown to life and the entire articulation, dynamic and pitch can vary in virtually countless ways offering more organic and expressive interpretations: the trumpet, saxophone, trombone and the human voice.

What I have noticed is that some of the melodies I write on piano are heavily dependent on a clear attack and clean tuning and as a note on the piano decays gradually the articulation in the melody is sometimes ambiguous and unclear. This is especially the case with rhythmic arpeggiated ostinatos, that I often write in the spirit of Steve Reich, that suit a vibraphone perfectly and not a wind instrument (See Image 4). On the piano, I also tend to forget to write rests for the horn players to breathe, something that comes naturally to me when writing with the trumpet as my tool.

![Vibraphone and harp from letter C / bar 37](image4.png)

*Image 4: Excerpt from “Hringabrynja”. Vibraphone and harp from letter C / bar 37. [Click here to listen.]*

One of my ostinato patterns. Composed on the piano, perfect for the vibraphone and harp.

When I’m writing with my voice or trumpet as the compositional tool I have some vastly different ideas. The phrasing becomes more organic and I open more dimensions of expression like tone color, pitch bends, dynamic swells and tongue articulation. Not to mention that my “jazz language” becomes somewhat more available through my muscle memory on my primary instrument, the trumpet.

![Excerpt from “Góa-Púne”. Tutti unison from letter B / bar 5](image5.png)

*Image 5: Excerpt from “Góa-Púne”. Tutti unison from letter B / bar 5. [Click here to listen.]*

A floating rubato melody that I composed with my voice and requires an expressive organic performance.
That being said, not all of my melodies are dependent on being played on a certain type of instrument. There are those that neither have to be perfectly articulated in tune nor expressively bent, swelled or tongued. Just some straight-ahead melodies where the pitches, rhythms and note values say it all and the rest is more open to interpretation.

Image 6: Excerpt from “Kanón”. Voice 1 in unison with solo trumpet from letter B / bar 15. Click here to listen. A melody I wrote with my voice and the piano. I think it comes across nicely no matter what instrument it is played on.

2.3 Instrumentation

As previously mentioned, I did my own alteration of a standard big band setting in hopes to find some exciting combinations and possibilities. For those unfamiliar, a standard big band usually has five saxophones, four trumpets, four trombones, electric guitar, grand piano, upright bass and drums. My biggest influence for this is Gil Evans.

When altering the instrumentation of such a large ensemble the possibilities are essentially endless, so I gave it a lot of thought. I even considered reversing the reeds and the brass: replacing the saxes with five brass instruments, two trumpets, two trombones and a tuba and replacing the brass with four clarinets, and four bass clarinets. I also thought about having no chord instruments or no drums.

I finally decided on integrating vocals and clarinets into the sax section, replacing one trumpet and one trombone with two french horns and having the bass trombone doubling on tuba. The realities of what instrumentalists were available soon started to have their effect. I had to give up on the idea of having the baritone sax player doubling on bass clarinet as nobody was available. Likewise, it was like everything fell into place when I learned that there was in fact a harp player in the master’s department. She had a year off when I was looking for one for my Gil Evans project but now, she was back. I had been wondering if I should have mallet instruments instead of piano and guitar or leave out the chord instruments as Gil often did. But now it was crystal clear, vibraphone and harp in the rhythm section. Finally, I was to play the role of a soloist and conductor. The instrumentation was set and my band looked like this:

solo trumpet / conductor: Tumi Torfason
french horn: Zacharias Frato
french horn: Jenny Plupp
soprano singer: Salóme Katrin Magnúsd.
trombone: Olle Arvidsson Eklind
soprano singer: Maja Svanesson
trombone: Tilde Schweitzer
alto singer: Ella Cronberg
bass trombone / tuba: Ville Weréen
tenor sax / clarinet: Fredrik Ljungkvist
vibraphone: Alexander Falkebring
barritone sax: Eskil Larsson
harp: Pauline Burke-Clason
trumpet / flugel: Kevin Admantius
upright bass: Olle Lannèr Risenfors
trumpet / flugel: Hannes Arason
drums: Sammy Hsia
trumpet / flugel: Óyvind Solheim

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I was thrilled with this setting and couldn’t wait to start arranging for this large ensemble. As this is the same number of wind instruments as in a standard big band I was able to write as if I hadn’t changed anything in the instrumentation but most importantly I could make use of the new instruments and combine them with the others in exciting ways. I could have all eight brass instruments play as regular trumpet and trombone sections but also combine the French horns with just the trumpets or just the trombones. I could also play as the fourth trumpet player in the section. If the bass trombone player is doubling on tuba I could still get the sound of a full trombone section as one of the trombone players could double on bass trombone and the French horns play as two of the trombones. Familiar territory with new and exciting possibilities.

The harp was the instrument that I knew the least and the one I was most excited to write for, especially in pair with the vibraphone. I learned about the varying sustain in different registers of the harp and that it’s pedal tuning system offers some special possibilities and limitation. But on our second rehearsal my harp player, Pauline, told me not to worry about any limitations, just to write freely for the instrument and trust her to let me know if something would not be feasible to play. Just that small pointer was something relevant for me because I tend to simplify some of my lines, assuming that something is not playable. After hearing that I opened up to writing anything that came to mind.

2.4 Arranging

Fleshing out my songs into full blown big band arrangements was for sure the most demanding part of the process for me. I was aware of the danger of getting lost in the details and the benefits of keeping a clear overview of the task at hand and the available options. To make things more accessible for myself I wrote out all the different parameters, elements, chapters, players, soloists and instrumental combinations that come into play in a project like this. Regarding tempo, moods, soloists and concepts, I tried to keep the program in good balance, dividing my options somewhat equally between the individual songs.

I had the opportunity to play my music at the famous jazz club Fasching as a part of their collaboration with KMH: Jazzlab. On that special occasion I explored my graduation program with my drumless quartet with Fredrik Ljungkvist on reeds, Bjarni Már Ingólfsson on guitar and Olle Lannér Risenfors on bass. (Click here to listen.) Rehearsing and performing the songs with these fantastic musicians proved to be a beautiful way to dive into the music and enabled me to arrange them more intuitively for the big band.

Arranging “Góa Púne”

In this tune I conducted the experiment of handing every player the same lead sheet, in their respective keys, to play off freely with three options: join in playing the unison melody, play a root or a fifth of the key or play small percussive sounds from the wind instruments. The last being an idea from Björk’s so called microbeats from her album Vespertine. When rehearsing this I felt the band was hesitant to add something to the musical conversation as it is very open and undefined, so I took a moment to encourage them to take the initiative and go for it. It made a big difference, and the arrangement came alive. We tried putting in a free trumpet solo which became a trumpet trade between me and my friend Hannes Arason.
Image 7: Excerpt from “Hringabrynja” from letter J / bar 96: vocal trade. The section is built around arpeggios that I offer certain players to play in short fragments. In hindsight I think some more space for the soloists would have helped this section.
Arranging “Hringabrynja”

The main task here was to balance the song’s previously mentioned medieval atmosphere with a hip hop groove. I felt like I took it a little too far at first, arranging tutti sections with typical hip hop breaks but I knew right away it was simply too much. I toned it down bit by only having the drums hint these grooves and staying true to the songs core. This balancing act might have been what made me hold back the dynamics in the whole arrangement resulting in minimalistic chapters. I set up three solo spots: baritone sax, vocal trade and trombone. They all had their unique character and atmosphere and were built around the three different chord changes of the song.

Arranging “Augu Nætur”

As this was definitely my most traditional piece of the concert. I felt it would be fitting to use the so-called Count Basie method mentioned above for the brass, trumpets in close voicing, trombones and octave below and saxes and voices in a unison counter line. We tried it out on the first rehearsal and it sounded great already. It sounded even better when we tried playing these rich chords with less vibrato. I first thought of giving the vibraphone a solo on this one but I felt the next song “Dænó” would be more fitting. Eventually it was a trumpet solo from me and a bass solo from Olle.

Arranging “Dænó”

After having held back the energy and dynamics in “Hringabyrja” I wanted to make this one an opportunity for the players to shout and play on full blast, to take the big band to the max. While the former piece was all about the low dynamics, this one took the opposite direction. It felt fitting as the song is mostly based on rhythmic intensity and to make it an easier read, I changed the meter of the second song from 12/8 to 3/4. Here I set up two solo spots as trades on one hand in 5/8 between trumpet and vibraphone and on the other hand in 3/4 between trumpet and trombone.

Arranging “Kanón”

One of the challenges with “Kanón” was deciding the order in which the instruments enter with the canon melody. It was so much fun writing out all these chapters, play around with the seemingly endless upwards modulation and alternating clave of the 5/4 meter. I tried my best to bring out the composition’s different layers, both the rhythmic and the sweeping lines and delegate them between individual instruments across sections. In the middle of the process I realised the dense harmony could be stripped down to nothing but roots and thirds creating a minimalistic yet strong voicing of a tenth. I’ve had this voicing in mind ever since I discovered it as a teenager in Paul McCartney’s Blackbird and was glad to put it to use here. We got a clarinet solo from Fredrik Ljungkvist and a drum solo from Sammy Hsia over the canon lines.
Image 8: Excerpt from “Dænó”. From bar 211 leading into a solo section in letter H. Possibly my favourite moment of the concert. Here I pushed my big band to it’s full dynamic potential to build up to the solo trades.
2.5 Rehearsing

Except for minor logistical problems around subs, room bookings, printing etc., our four rehearsals went well and I won’t write about them in too much detail but a couple of things relate directly to the topic of this thesis.

Firstly, my playlists that I previously mentioned came to good use as my drummer Sammy asked for references to drum grooves that I had in mind for this program. I could direct him to my playlist of inspirations that I then fleshed out to individual playlists for each of the five songs. Through these references I could express my ideas more clearly. A lot of smaller conversations like this came up in and around the rehearsals where my band mates helped me spark new ideas.

Secondly, a spontaneous idea arose on the dress rehearsal when rehearsing the tenth chords in letter G of “Kanón”. We were finetuning the intonation in rubato time, with me conducting, and it struck me how great it sounded on its own. We realized the whole chord progression would work perfectly as an intro to the song and the last four individual chords over the drum cadenza. We decided on it on the spot.

![Image 9: Me and Salóme Katrín, my girlfriend and the bands lead soprano singer, on our way to a tutti rehearsal with music stands and freshly printed arrangements.](image9)

![Image 10: Salóme and Hannes, my classmate, dear friend and the bands second trumpet, after a successful rehearsal. The three of us discussed the music on our way home in the train which sparked many ideas.](image10)
After this seemingly endless period of demanding preparation the concert day was suddenly upon us, Tuesday the 28th of March. We sound checked at noon and used the time to rehearse most of the material with a focus on my most demanding arrangement for the players, “Dænó”. It felt a little shaky, not quite ready but so close. We ran out of time and decided to meet on stage an hour before the concert to continue working on it. Then the most amazing thing happened. Most of my players took the time between to practice on their own or in groups and when we got back together everything fell into place. We could suddenly run through the arrangement without any problem, so we even managed to run the rest of the set. We were ready as ever and for the first time in the whole process I felt nothing but excitement.

We played through the concert in this order: Góa-Púne, Hringabrynja, Augu Nætur, Dænó and Kanón. The band sounded beautiful and I felt a strong connection and awareness from the whole orchestra. Of course, I wish I had had the time and energy to practice my part more but was more prepared than I thought. After working on the program for months on end, I felt locked into the music and after all my concerts in Kungasalen I’ve gotten used to the acoustics, especially playing flugelhorn. Everybody on stage stayed focused and gave it their all. So many incredible moments at the concert blew me away, incredible solos, shouts and interplay. I was thrilled to see how my fantastic soloists played over my tricky chord changes and time signatures. As expected, some things didn’t go as planned but as we were all alert, we always found a smooth way forward. It felt great to play for the fantastic audience that gave us so much positive energy throughout the concert. This project has been my greatest challenge in music and the result, this concert, came to be my greatest reward. It was an incredible night and I was overwhelmed with gratitude to all the people that helped make this happen.
3. Discussion

A few weeks have passed after my concert and I have now caught my breath and better understand what took place. I can now see the process more clearly than when I was in the middle of it. I have learned so many different lessons from taking on this project and following it through all the way to the concert. These lessons are of all shapes and sizes that sometimes came from the most unexpected places.

As Peter Danemo advised me, I made a ‘half plan’ in the beginning of the process, the idea being an open-ended plan for the project that welcomes any unexpected changes along the way. Come to think of it, it is much more reasonable than trying to painstakingly plan the whole process throughout and then forcing it to happen exactly as envisioned no matter what comes up.

The instrumentation could for example not have been decided at the starting point as I first needed to develop the aesthetic of my program and investigate what instruments were available at school. After writing four songs I decided on adding an old tune, as previously mentioned, but in fact I first picked a Mingus inspired blues called “Brýn þörf” (e. Urgent Need). My classmate Erik Hasselfeldt pointed out that its traditional swing references didn’t quite fit into my program and suggested that I should simply remove it. I agreed and after some consideration I decided to take it out. I rediscovered and finished writing “Kanón” and combined two of the new songs into one “Dænó. I was happy with how these changes turned out but then came some unwelcome surprises.

Finding subs for rehearsals was to be expected but having to replace players for the actual concert, in some cases with close to no notice, really tested my nerves and cost me some valuable time. When I lost a French horn player a week before the concert and a baritone sax player with only two days before I must have contacted close to thirty musicians before finding substitutes. I won’t let it surprise me the next time I put on a concert like this.

In addition to these logistics, I felt that in the music some things could have been better. In hindsight I for example think that the vocal trade in letter J of “Hringabrynja” had too busy backgrounds and could have needed more space. In “Dænó” I wish I had written bigger climaxes in bars 56 and 80 as well as more refined solo backgrounds in letter H. Regarding rehearsing, I wish we had generally had more time to sharpen details in time and intonation.

All these problems could have been solved with more organization and discipline that would simply have given me more time. Honestly speaking, my timeline was a bit too loosely planned and I easily fell behind on my work which forced me to make up for it, sometimes in a hurry. I would have loved to have all the parts ready a week before the first rehearsal and write out introductions for my concert but I’ll make sure to do that next time.

I won’t let this take away from the fact that this is one of my greatest personal achievements and all in all it was a roaring success. First and foremost, I managed to put on this concert with all its moving parts in place. I wrote and arranged a well balanced program of unique songs performed by an exciting combination of instruments that reference my musical heroes but most of all reflect my personal taste. I’m proud of my vision and proud to have made it a reality with methods I have learned and personally developed.

With the help of all the wonderful people around me I was able to see this project through and it has been one of the most empowering and rewarding experiences I have had in my musical career. It has sparked new ideas and encouraged me to dream bigger. In the near future, I can see myself founding my own big band in Reykjavík with an alternative instrumentation to record and perform this material live. Sometime later on I might be so lucky to be able to work as a guest conductor in student and professional big bands abroad with my own music on the program. Now I’m getting ahead of myself but of course I’m excited to have started out on this journey. This graduation concert has in fact been a dream come true.
References

Books

Spotify playlists
“Góa-Púne” – Spotify playlist (2023),
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5NLRkQ03PKU6ChoVGwM8To?si=1b3f286336c245b8
(visited 2023-04-25)

“Augu Nætur” – Spotify playlist (2023),
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7fpiLXCa8I9fwFKzyQegYz?si=71953bd41c0e426e
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“Dænó” – Spotify playlist (2023),
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/11EyXDCbVc0FzjjeSXEYBt?si=1b1381a2ad6b4d77
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“Kanón” – Spotify playlist (2023)
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0zAl1VIU1hDC27Wa5YJBMz?si=798b886e344d4d61
(visited 2023-04-25)

“Hringabrynja” – Spotify playlist (2023)
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5Ci6u1i9CV81ZiJ7dU4bA2?si=3ec8e28311534521
(visited 2023-04-25)

YouTube video
“Hearing Notes and Harmony” (2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXBiH5EL8x8
(visited 2022-12-16)
Attachments

Original sheet music

Lead sheet of “Song Idea 4” that became the big band arrangement “Góa-Pûne”.

Lead sheet of “Song Idea 1” that became the big band arrangement “Hringabrynja”.

Lead sheet and big band arrangement of “Augu Nætur”.

Lead sheets of “Song Idea 2” and “Song Idea 3” that became the big band arr. “Dænó”.

Lead sheet and big band arrangement of “Kanón”.

Interview

Interview with Peter Danemo from October 12th, 2022.

Stageplot

Stageplot for the concert

Recordings

Entire quartet concert at Fasching 6.3.2023 (Listen.)

Entire graduation concert in Kungasalen 28.3.2023 (Listen.)

Whole take of “Góa-Pûne” (Listen.) and excerpt from letter B / bar 5 (Listen.)

Whole take of “Hringabrynja” (Listen.) and excerpt from letter C / bar 37 (Listen.)

Whole take of “Augu Nætur” (Listen.)

Whole take of “Dænó” (Listen.)

Whole take of “Kanón” (Listen.) and excerpt from letter B / bar 15. (Listen.)