

Internal Strife to Audible Art: A Composer's Quest to Unravel Life through Music

By Emily Matthew

Fear, pain, sadness- they come in waves with shifting intensity, sometimes so powerful that your breath feels like it's escaping. Surprise, excitement, and joy sweep through you like a flood. It pushes through your whole body and exits through the extremities.

These emotions can be described and explained, but the communication and understanding of more complex emotions are complicated by individual intricacies. Although relatability through experience can help, putting our emotional state into words can be difficult. Words sometimes simply cannot encapsulate the power and chokehold our emotions can have on the body. But music can.

Joel Kirk has found his interest in composing music to help define and experience these complex emotions. Music helps clarify ambiguous emotions that our words cannot encapsulate. "Music modifies moods and emotions by interacting with brain mechanisms," said American neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp. In other words, music makes you feel.

Kirk grew up in Huddersfield, UK, on the outskirts of Manchester. Music has always been a part of his world. He first played the trumpet in school at 8 years-old, drawing inspiration from his mother who played in her youth. His father, also active in his support, helps fundraise and can be seen driving his son and equipment to performances.

Kirk continued with trumpet throughout his schooling and played in several local brass bands, a British tradition. His talents took him all the way to the Leyland Brass Band, one of the worlds' finest. They played in competitions, focusing only on traditionalist music: strong brass sections, heavily notated pieces and ones following years of precedent.

The brass band's deeply held traditions repressed Kirk from his more contemporary interests. It was at this time that he began his university education.

"When I went into my undergrad at Huddersfield," he said, "I was in a world where I could explore my identity as a composer."

Musical repression was a tipping point in finding his path as a composer. However, it was not the first time Kirk had compounded feelings. He spent the first fourteen years of his life with a speech impediment, unable to properly pronounce his own name. He faced public mockery and embarrassment, and the internal pressures of anxiety and shame, but was determined to work through this conflict and overcome constraints.

“I had to come to terms with my identity,” he said in an interview. His experiences brought more questions than answers, so Kirk turned to music.

“I like to use those feelings of repression and those complex emotional states to fuel the material I generate,” he said.

Pieces of his such as *miasma* (2020) and *my brain itches; why am i floating?* (2021) encapsulate the nagging, unpleasant, ugly emotions of anxiety and shame and replicate the swirling repetitious feelings they supply.

“The music is confrontational in a certain kind of way,” he said. “It forces people to listen and become aware of their perception of hearing it.”

Kirk also draws inspiration from his experience as a gay man, looking to instrumentally represent, in his words, “the lived experience of the queer community and LGBTQA+ identifying individuals.” Pieces like *enfoldings* (2020) take a deep dive into these complex emotions and create art that truly evokes proportionate feelings.

Kirk’s compositions serve as a complex analysis of our mediatized society. His inspiration comes from French sociologist John Baudrillard’s belief in the precession simulacra — the idea that humans are manufacturing inauthentic authenticity and that the so-called human experience is a simulation of a reality we’ve constructed.

It’s a lens commenting on our society’s “universal fakery” on social media, as Kirk describes it. The repeated image of success and happiness is seen across platforms, but also the awareness of society’s need to seem authentic and distinct.

“When something repeats a lot, and you resign yourself to the fact that it’s repeating, you then start to hear it differently every time,” he said. “You become aware of your own perception.”

Contemporary music being nontraditional in nature is difficult for some to unlock the first time.

“I think you need to give people an access point,” Kirk said. He often prompts his pieces with poetry, drawings, or key words, framing it in the audience’s mind so they can become fully immersed and listen actively.

“At the end of the day, I write my music for people to listen to. I want people to get something from it,” he says, “even if they hate it in some way.”

The creation of Kirk’s compositions is a process of writing and rewriting. Drafts are fully completed and thrown away. He carries out his ideas through multiple perspectives and a variety of lenses.

“All the other drafts eventually find their way in some shape or form into the actual thing,” he says.

Kirk does more than musical composition. The industry has experienced a shift in the last few decades and is forcing composers to wear many hats.

“You can be the best composer in the world, but if you can’t show that you’re multifaceted and you’re versatile, you’re not going to get the job,” he said.

Administrative work, communications, marketing, writing, and other key business skills have been added to the list of skills necessary for successful 21st century composing.

“We live in a multimedia world now. Your work doesn’t stand up for itself anymore,” Kirk explains. “You have to be able to sell yourself.”

With internships and other jobs, Kirk has jumped at the opportunity to expand his skills. He knows the business side of the industry, networking, communications, web design and event organization. He also has curated a brand and theme for himself, and is currently working on the multimedia aspects of marketing as a composer.

Kirk can be found teaching undergraduate courses at the University at Buffalo, where he is currently working on his PhD in composition.

“I’m very pleased that I have found that I really do like to teach,” Kirk says. He plans to continue after he’s received his degree.

Kirk’s journey to encapsulate and define complex emotions through music came from a place of personal intent, to help him reconcile his own struggles. Through his experience and personal growth comes a new drive.

“I think if you're going to do something artistically oriented, you have to find a way of making it beneficial for people,” he said. Kirk aims to make contemporary music more accessible and leave a meaningful impact on society.

He's interested in bringing contemporary music to the amateur level. With ideas to hold classes for community groups, he wants to focus on workshop sessions for children and those suffering from mental illness.

Adding societal value to his work and the work of fellow contemporary composers is just a part of his drive. Music can help people work through, share and experience what goes unsaid when it comes to the complexities of human emotions. It all comes back to his original inspiration—working through his own conflicts.

In his promising words, “Making contemporary music, or non-traditional forms of music, can be cathartic to one's expression of identity and one's expression of one's mental state and complex emotions.”