

Chapter 25: Speech, Invention, and Reflection: The Composing Process of Soundwriting

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4. Alphabetic Process Note #8 (out of 9) by Carolynn

Putting all the sound elements together!

Creating the first segment—Music, Volume, Silence

I am wiped, so I am going to do this in writing or I am afraid I will just ramble into the microphone . . .

This section turned out to be 3 minutes long, but it took 2 plus hours to create—WOW!

Typically, I might blame something like this on being a perfectionist, but I think that this may be the nature of editing sound. It is time intensive to make small adjustments and then replay clips repeatedly to check the effect. The experience reminds me of editing poetry in some ways. I felt similarly engrossed in minutia that needed to be checked and rechecked against the segment as a whole. Also, like poetry, timing and rhythm have an enormous effect on what is emphasized and felt.

The things that were most time consuming:

- **VoLUME:** Getting the right volume for the music under the speaking so that it is was truly background for the words rather than competition. I am still struggling to understand how each unit (dB) of “gain” effects relative sound. For a long time, I simply wasn’t able to get the music soft enough and the voice loud enough without a massive amount of clipping.
- **MUSIC:** Music has a huge effect on the mood, so huge that I think it may be the most important choice I make. This is very different than when I am writing an essay or story, where the words primarily matter. So, I spent a very long time downloading and playing various short clips of music to find one that I felt worked. I wanted to create a gentle sense of anticipation, but in general I don’t want the piece to ever be too self-serious given that it is describing a fairly common experience. In addition, I was wary of using Bensound because they were so immediately recognizable to people in class. I wanted music that created mood without triggering particular memories, which would vary so widely for different audience members that I wouldn’t be sure of the effect.
- **Silence:** The second thing that required a lot of attention was timing. I think my theater training has really sensitized me to how much a split second of silence can do. At first, the segment seemed jumbled because there was not enough space. Then I spread it just a bit too far and it felt cumbersome and boring.

Creating the second segment: Audacity Effects

I am not getting much faster—took an hour and a half to create about a minute and a half—but I continued to learn new features within Audacity that will improve the quality of later segments. In particular, I played around with “effects.”

First, I spent a LONG time on the music, as with the first clip. At first, I used different selections for each segment, which meant that the music was changing about every thirty seconds. This was both jarring and distracting, so I went back to the drawing board. I decided to use the same piece of music under this entire section. The idea was to create a sense of coherence but also a little bit of tedium, since that was how the search for the apartment felt. Hopefully the effect isn’t irritation or distraction for the listener; I’ve replayed the clip so many times that it’s a little hard for me to tell.

I have the feeling that this is a little over produced. On the one hand, that makes it feel sort of campy. On the other hand, it avoids the feeling of self-seriousness. I want this to be light and a little silly.

I spent a lot of time trying to correct for “clipping” which I read about in the audacity manual when I was trying to figure out smoother ways of adding background music. I realized that my ear is not great at picking up peaks in volume or relative volume. I am relying a lot on the visuals in audacity.

One effect that I discovered while reading Audacity tutorials is the “auto ducking” effect for dimming the music under speech. It is less time consuming than using the envelope tool, but gives you less control and less ability to “undo.” I can’t tell whether the uniformity it creates is worth the lack of control.

Creating the third segment: Sound effects and setting

This one took an hour. Background music is now so much faster to mix, though I dispensed with “auto ducking” in favor of envelope tool again because I wanted more control of when the music did or didn’t appear under the voice track.

As with previous sections, I put a lot of energy into finding music that was different in tone than the clip before yet allowed for a smooth transition. I wanted something that was upbeat but with a bit of suspense, given that this scene is all about finding the place... but while Adam is away. Music was easier to find this time—thank you Free Music Archive!

The best part about this section was adding sound effects. I found car doors opening, blinker sounds, engine sounds, and car starting noises. Oh and an incoming text message sound. The search function on Free Sounds isn’t wonderful, but for any given effect, there are at least four options, so that makes it worth using anyway.

Not only does the final effect seem more realistic than the voices did on their own, it also has a lot more sense of motion and drama than the clips I worked with earlier where there was just the clean voice audio and background music. If those earlier scenes were set somewhere with recognizable background noises, I would definitely edit them to contain more sound effects than just the typing I used. As I look toward the next segment, I am going to figure out a setting that allows for background. I think that being able to visualize a setting is part of what will keep this engaging.