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Progress report #1

At the beginning of December, I started going through the script that Nelson had sent us to familiarize myself with the show, the story, and the various magic tricks he would be performing. I read it a couple of times and tried to associate emotions, instruments and tempos to each trick. I also took the time to research the references that Nelson had mentioned, mostly the podcast "This American Life" on NPR. I then created a reference playlist of songs that I liked in styles I thought I would be able to replicate, and tried to match each trick with at least one reference song. I went through the script and annotated it with all of those ideas and reference songs, and also tried to come up with unique concepts for some of the tricks.

On 12/16, I met with Nelson over zoom and we went over the entire script together. I had sent him the reference playlist prior to us meeting to make sure our visions aligned in terms of music for the show. We agreed on how many pieces of music I would need to make, where they would go, what instruments I would use and what emotions they would need to convey. For the most part, Nelson agreed with what I had imagined for the tricks, and gave me a lot of freedom when it came to the creation of the music. He mostly gave me very broad and general feelings he wanted the songs to convey and left the rest up to me, which I really enjoyed.

Over the course of the next few months, I started working on creating the songs, and thinking about some technical aspects of the show. Considering it is February, I was expecting to have made more progress on the music, but I had other outside obligations that prevented me from starting on the project as early as I wanted. I currently have 2 demos done and ready to be sent to Nelson, and 1 song in progress.

The first song I recorded is for a trick called the rope routine. Nelson requested the song "Parlez moi d'amour" for the trick itself, then requested I make a similar song for the explanation of the trick. I came up with a melody on the piano and recorded it into protocols, then ended up replacing everything with midi because it sounded better. I used a free plugin called Labs, and used the soft piano preset to get the emotion that I was looking for in that specific song. The second song I finished is for the trick called multiplying bottles. For this song, because the trick involves glass bottles, I decided to sample glass bottles as an instrument. I created a flute like sound and some percussion sounds and built the song around that.

I will be sending these out to Nelson hopefully by the end of the week to get his approval, and will continue working on the rest of the songs. I am aiming to improve my time management skills as well.

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Progress report #2

We had a first production meeting on 03/13 with the entire team and Nelson, and we discussed some technical questions that each designer had for the show. We also revised the rehearsal schedule and Nelson informed us he would be making some changes to the script. While waiting for the new script, I continued working on the music for other tricks. When Nelson uploaded the new script to the google drive, I took the time to review it and annotate it again. I realized that he had cut some of the tricks and that I had made extra music that I didn't need anymore, so I started working on making even more songs as fast as possible, and thought about potentially reusing songs I had already made for some of the new tricks.

I met with my technical advisor multiple times to discuss timing issues, technical questions, mixing questions, and the rehearsal schedule. I also met in person with the Qlab operator for the first time and we discussed ways he could be more involved in the whole process. I explained to him my vision for the sound design, sent him the reference playlist I had as well as the songs I had already made, and we started talking about making a cue sheet together for the show. We discussed how I wanted everything to be programmed in Qlab as well.

I also talked to my technical advisor about getting some time during one of the technical production classes to use the mixer and to familiarize myself with it. I listened to the way the room and the microphones sounded, and saved a scene for my show. I also spoke to the tech production crew to put together a schedule for the rehearsal week, as my main A2 wasn't always able to attend rehearsals and I needed help with deck audio / board operating at times.

I finalized 8/8 songs, as well as my crew schedule, system block diagram, first cue sheet, and any other paperwork that needed to be done. I also mixed and mastered all the songs in the recording studio and sent over all the files to the Qlab operator so he could start programming Qlab for the day of the show. I wasn't feeling too confident about my music, as I wasn't able to get a hold of Nelson before the deadline so he wasn't able to approve of what I had made before the show.

My next steps at this stage in the project are to finalize some of my documents and start getting ready for rehearsals. I made a note of some equipment I need to test as soon as I'm able to get access to the theater for rehearsals, and I will be troubleshooting everything to make sure that I can get the best sound possible for Nelson during the show. I also need to attend paper tech to confirm all the cue numbers and where cues are in the script with the rest of the team, and the final step is rehearsals and the show!

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Final reflection

Since the last progress report, the entire team met for paper tech over zoom, with our technical advisors. We reviewed the script together, agreed on where each team should have cues, agreed on cue numbers and clarified some things. It was very useful for me and made me feel more confident about starting rehearsals. It also allowed me to edit my cue sheet with all the triggers for audio cues, and I made sure we were on the same page with Jan Roy, the Qlab operator.

Right before starting rehearsals, I took the time to get behind the board again and check my scene. I also took the time to troubleshoot the equipment again, as I felt like one of the headset microphones sounded pretty “thin” compared to the rest of the microphones I had available. I set my EQ on my vocal tracks, and experimented with compression and de-essing as well. After that, I met with Jan Roy to check the Qlab file and start setting levels for rehearsals. I knew they would change later on but wanted to save time during rehearsals.

Throughout the entire week, we worked our way up from a cue to cue rehearsal to a full invited dress that we managed to complete without any interruptions. This whole rehearsal process really taught me that no matter how confident you are about something one day, you will most likely end up changing it again and again and again. I kept remaking my cue sheet with different audio levels every single night because I wanted to make some changes, I switched some of the songs around and replaced some of them as well, and I ended up adjusting some things on the fly during the last show, but it was very useful to have approximate levels set. I also found that it was easier for me to follow cues that I had written in my notebook rather than following the spreadsheet.

The show was about an hour and a half long without including pre show. There was a good amount of people in the audience on both days, and they seemed to enjoy the show. I also heard a lot of good feedback about the show, and especially about the music I had made. During both days of the show, I encountered some minor technical issues. These issues did not prevent us from running the show but they were bothering me as a sound designer because I knew I could make everything sound better and that would ultimately improve the audience’s experience watching the show.

The first issue I solved was a level issue. When Nelson first came in for rehearsals, he informed us that he had added a new song to the google drive folder, and he wanted it played really loud right after the reveal of one of the tricks. Throughout the entire rehearsal week, I worked on finding a good level between the music and his voice, making sure that he could still be heard without straining but also that the music was loud enough to have the impact it was supposed to have. I got to a pretty good middle point but I still felt like I could push the music more. After talking with my technical advisor, they showed me a trick where I could use multiband compression

to make room for Nelson's voice in the music, allowing me to push the volume up while still hearing Nelson clearly. I compressed the middle frequencies of the track (between 200Hz and 5kHz), right where the human voice sits. This allowed me to reduce the peaks of the track on those specific frequencies. This results in the lows and highs being completely unaffected, while the mids are being compressed when they're too loud, creating a pocket for the voice to cut through without the audience noticing a difference. I ended up using this trick on a couple of other songs that I felt could be louder as well.

I ran into a second issue during the first show, when I heard loud pops in the speakers coming from Nelson's microphone. Before the show the next day, I tried to rule out as many plausible causes as possible. We ended up determining that the issue wasn't coming from the microphone itself. I looked at the specs of the specific microphone that we were using for him and used the frequency response and polar pattern graphs to try and find the best mic placement for him. I wanted to find the perfect placement where the microphone was close enough to his mouth that he could be heard clearly and bass frequencies could still be picked up, but far enough that there weren't any pops. We also had to take into account the fact that Nelson has a beard and that the microphone rubbing against it made a lot of noise. We found a good mic placement for him, reduced the gain on the mic pack and on the board, and because his voice isn't too low, I was able to adjust the EQ during the show and cut some of the lows without changing the tone of his voice. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get rid of the pops completely, and I am still not sure where they came from as I wasn't able to replicate the issue during tech time, but I managed to lessen the issue enough that it wasn't distracting to the audience.

My last issue was the fact that the god mic I had set up for the stage manager could be heard over the speakers during the invited dress rehearsal. I could not hear it at all from the mix position, but I was made aware of the issue by my technical advisor who was in the audience. I reduced the gain as much as possible but it still didn't fix the issue, so the stage manager and I agreed to mute the god mic on the board, and he would just have to ask me over comm to unmute it if needed. Ultimately, that is not the ideal solution to this issue but with the time and the equipment we had, that is the best we could do for the show.

Overall, working on this show taught me a lot, from time management skills to deck audio skills, live mixing, troubleshooting, and paperwork skills as well. I learned some new techniques that will be very useful for the next shows I mix, and I now am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses when it comes to sound designing a show. I definitely need to get better at time management, and leave myself more time in my schedule for last minute changes. I still managed to get everything done on time, but allowing for buffer time in my schedule would have definitely saved me a lot of panicking and anxiety when it came to finishing all the songs and the paperwork on time. Last minute changes happen all the time in live entertainment, and I need to be ready for them, no matter what other prior commitments I have on the side. I am pretty happy with the way I handled technical issues I encountered, and all the troubleshooting I did to fine tune the show and make sure it sounded exactly how I wanted it to sound. Even though I wasn't able to completely fix some of my issues, I believe that I did the absolute best I could do and I am very happy with the way the sound came out and the way the show went.