

An abstract artwork featuring a dark, textured blue background. In the center, there is a bright red, irregularly shaped area that resembles a torn piece of paper or a wound. The red shape has jagged edges and a small notch at the bottom. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative.

INTO THE VOID

BY MICHAEL SAMUEL-BRYAN

Contents

Page 1	Acknowledgements
Page 2	Preface
Page 3	Creating Something From Nothing
Page 6	Mother and Son
Page 8	Into The Void
Page 10	Blaze
Page 13	Composing The Soundtrack
Page 17	Recording
Page 20	Mastering
Page 24	Artwork
Page 28	One Last Thing

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank everyone involved in this project:

Liam Hejsak the director, for allowing me to use his film for my project.

Matt Read who so willingly played cello on the soundtrack.

Timothy Blinko for his support and guidance as my project tutor.

Jennifer Samuel-Bryan for creating such wonderful pieces of work for the album cover.

University of Hertfordshire for their continued support and guidance of their students.

And finally,

My friends and family.



Preface

This workbook is a way for me to demonstrate the concepts behind the soundtrack. Through use of scored ideas, production sketches, and photography I will briefly document my journey from the start of the project to the completed article. I will touch on how I came to write my musical ideas, and all the rejects that came along the way. There will be some sections on my methods in the recording stages and my use of instrumentation within the score.

I found that during the process of scoring I often start by creating a sound palette, something to lay down as a foundation of the track, and usually from that, the music comes. During this initial stage of composition, mixing becomes an important method to create the right 'sonic environment' to work with. This is something to bear in mind during the later sections 'Recording' and 'Mastering'.



Creating Something from Nothing

During the inception of this project my only reference was from the conversations that had been had between the director, Liam, and myself. What was made clear from the start was that this was not a film that focused on its environment. It instead made use of its environment to give gravity to story's main focus, the relationship between the two main characters, Robby and his mother.

Armed with his information I had a clear view of what needed to be achieved in the soundtrack; music that captured the bond between mother and son, but used textures and sound-scape's that reflected the tough dystopia the characters lived in.

The natural first step in this project was to find the right instrumentation for the soundtrack and as a pianist I naturally gravitated towards using piano to write the film's main theme. Before writing, I had approached the director with the idea of using the main theme as a leitmotif. The theme is designed to reflect the relationship between mother and son. Using this as a leitmotif enables me to bring this theme back into the score as the relationship changes on screen. When the theme comes back in, it too, will have changed slightly, following the subtle changes in the characters.



The director and I expanded on this further, with the final idea of having three recurring themes. The 'mother and son' theme which is described in the previous paragraph. The 'into the void theme', which is tasked with reflecting the dystopian environment and feeling of melancholy underlying the film. Finally, the 'Blaze' theme. Blaze is the 'villain' in the film, following the tracking device placed inside the bag that Robby took, trying to get it back from them. This theme is something that the director and I thought should be all together more abrasive with a heavy feeling of uncertainty and dread. This theme would most likely be textural rather than melodic.

6.

8 EXT. FOREST (CENTRAL) - MORNING

8

Water is poured from the iron kettle into ROBBY's water bottle.

The two walk through the vastly dense forest whilst silently reading in unison; map in one pair of hands, book in the other. ROBBY walks at a leisurely pace behind his MOTHER. He continues to immerse himself in his book and consequently begins to slow down. The MOTHER realizes ROBBY's fallen behind and can't help but notice the beaming smile on his face. There is a moment of tranquility. The MOTHER gently whistles to grab ROBBY's attention. ROBBY's head slowly raises. The MOTHER gestures again with her head that they need to keep moving. The mildly aggravated ROBBY rolls his eyes as he places the book in the side pouch of his rucksack; attached to which is the flashing shark keyring.

9 EXT. FOREST (CENTRAL) - MIDDAY

9

The pair are sat on a tree trunk. ROBBY continues to read his book as the MOTHER unzips her rucksack. She takes out the water bottle and rolls it towards ROBBY's boots. ROBBY, however, remains focused on his book.

MOTHER

You know, you've got all the time
in the world to read that, Robby.
That's the good thing with books.

ROBBY

Oh I know.
(a beat)
I've read this four times already.

MOTHER

Four?

ROBBY

Four.
(stern & insistent)



Mother and Son

The theme for the mother and son relationship in 'Into The Void' is very simple. Written in G Minor this theme is designed to reflect the intimate relationship between mother and son, whilst also carrying the feeling of melancholy associated with the films' dystopian environment.

A lot of experimentation went into finding the right timbre for the theme. Through playing with different microphone positions and processing techniques, I settled on a fairly simple setup.

Two Native Instruments plug-ins, 'The Giant' and 'Una Corda'. The giant contains a lot of depth in the low register. Coupled with high compression and gain, and low velocity gave the instrument a very intimate but deep sound. I took this and combined it with the 'Una Corda' which, when close mic'd, has an incredibly raw and intimate feel. You are able to hear the mechanics of the piano and the hammers hitting felt in extreme detail. I then panned the 'Una Corda' left and 'The Giant' right to give the theme width and depth.

This piano combination is something that recurs through the soundtrack outside of the 'mother and son' theme.

Piano

1 5 9 13

17 21 25

'Mother and Son' theme, for piano.
Composed by Michael Samuel-Bryan



Into The Void

The 'Into The Void' theme was tasked with reflecting the environment in which the short film is set. A barren grassland with little clean water and limited shelter. This theme had to be something raw and gritty, whilst also being musical. I set upon writing using guitar, and when I played with different musical ideas I came across the idea of using a violin bow. After borrowing one from a friend, I stated to experiment. I found that using the bottom two strings produced a sound not unlike a violin (or at least a nasty violin). Due to the flat neck of the guitar I could either have access to the outer most two strings, or play all six at once. I decided upon using the two bottom strings for the theme. The sixth for the melody while the fifth acted as a drone.

The theme itself steps down from tone to tone, with a bend in the note from each note to the next. Playing it this way really gave it gravity, an emotional pull to project onto the film as a whole. The best example of its use can be heard in track nine, "Into The Void".

♩ = 97

M.Samuel-Bryan

36

Violoncello

mf

45

Vc.

52

Vc.

p ————— *ppp*

'Into The Void' theme, for cello.
Composed by Michael Samuel-Bryan



Blaze

The film's villain, Blaze is a brutal and determined character. He is unpredictable and volatile, and as the composer I had to make sure his theme would reflect these characteristics

I decided it best to reflect these characteristics through timbre and texture rather than solely through melody. Again, I used the bowed guitar on the lower two strings. The high, screech like, sound produced really gives the theme edge. This sound combined with the simple melody (a semi-tone step from a to b flat) brought the scenes to life when Blaze was on screen. The music added an extra level to the on-screen presence of Blaze and his menacing intentions.

Acoustic Guitar



The musical notation is written on a single staff in treble clef. It consists of eight measures. The first measure contains a half note G4 (first line) and a half note F#4 (first space), beamed together. The second measure is a whole rest. The third measure contains a half note G4 (first line) and a half note F#4 (first space), beamed together. The fourth measure is a whole rest. The fifth measure contains a half note G4 (first line) and a half note F#4 (first space), beamed together. The sixth measure is a whole rest. The seventh measure contains a half note G4 (first line) and a half note F#4 (first space), beamed together. The eighth measure contains a whole note G4 (first line). The piece ends with a double bar line.

"Blaze" Theme, for bowed acoustic guitar
Composed by Michael Samuel-Bryan



Several pieces of artwork were commissioned for the soundtrack album cover. This is one of the designs created by my sister, Jennifer Samuel-Bryan.



Composing the Soundtrack

The final cut of the film was handed over to me in the late weeks of December 2016. I had known from speaking to Liam that each page in the script was around one minuet of 'screen time' (give or take ten or twenty seconds). Despite being armed with this information in the former stages of the project, composing to the script meant that I had a tendency to 'overwrite', or at least write a track far too long for its intended scene. When it came to composing to film for the first time, it struck me that I would have to seriously rethink the pace and structure of the tracks I had written. For instance, there is a scene where Robby runs off, and his mother panics thinking Robby has been kidnapped and so, goes searching for him. It's naturally a scene that holds a lot of tension and the music needs to feed off of that and give the scene pace as Robby's mother runs in search of him. The problem that I had with this was that this scene follows quite a long sequence where Robby and his mother have a rather touching conversation about Robby's book, and their respective futures. Coming from such a family orientated scene that lasts around a minuet and a half, and having to transition (almost immediately) to a really tension heavy, pacey scene proved very difficult to balance.



Knowing that I needed to rethink the pace of the original ideas I composed, I set about changing the way I would use the three main themes (mother and son, into the void, and Blaze). The first track is following the introduction of the two main characters, Robby and his mother. It seemed like an obvious move to play the 'mother and son theme' here, but that took a risk of being heavy handed and too forward in the balance of the sound. Instead I chose to play a very small section of the theme, teasing it. For the listener, this track is as much an introduction to the characters as the film is.

The same theme comes along again when mother and son are sat by the camp fire. This time however, the theme is far more present but played in the upper register of the piano. The theme comes to the forefront as we (the audience) get to know the characters, but the timbre of the piano keeps any feelings of solidity between mother and son in check.



The 'into the void' theme gets a similar treatment. The first time the theme is heard is during a fairly dialogue free scene, when Robby and his mother are playing football.

Much like the camping scene, the theme here is stripped back, played by a lone bowed guitar. The timbre of the piece is designed to be raw, and a little harsh. My reasons for this seemed to centre around one idea, why would you make a theme about a barren and difficult environment sound nice? Keeping that in mind, the mix in this piece (track 5) manages to keep a good balance between reflecting the environment whilst keeping the track pleasant to the ears.

I treated the same theme in a slightly different way on the last track which features over the credit sequence (track 9, 'Into the Void'). For this I decided that it would be best that it had a far richer production than the previous appearance of the theme. As the piece would be stand alone, and without any visual stimulus (other than a credit role) it needed to be interesting, both texturally and melodically. So the initial theme in track 5 was given a wider arrangement using solo cello, viola, and piano as well as the original bowed guitar. This gave the whole section a lot more depth and impact as well as have a far wider sound stage (also adding to that impact). The theme was also given harmony in the second half, which is followed by the cello and viola section, again, just adding that little bit more to the emotional pull of what is the film's defining track.



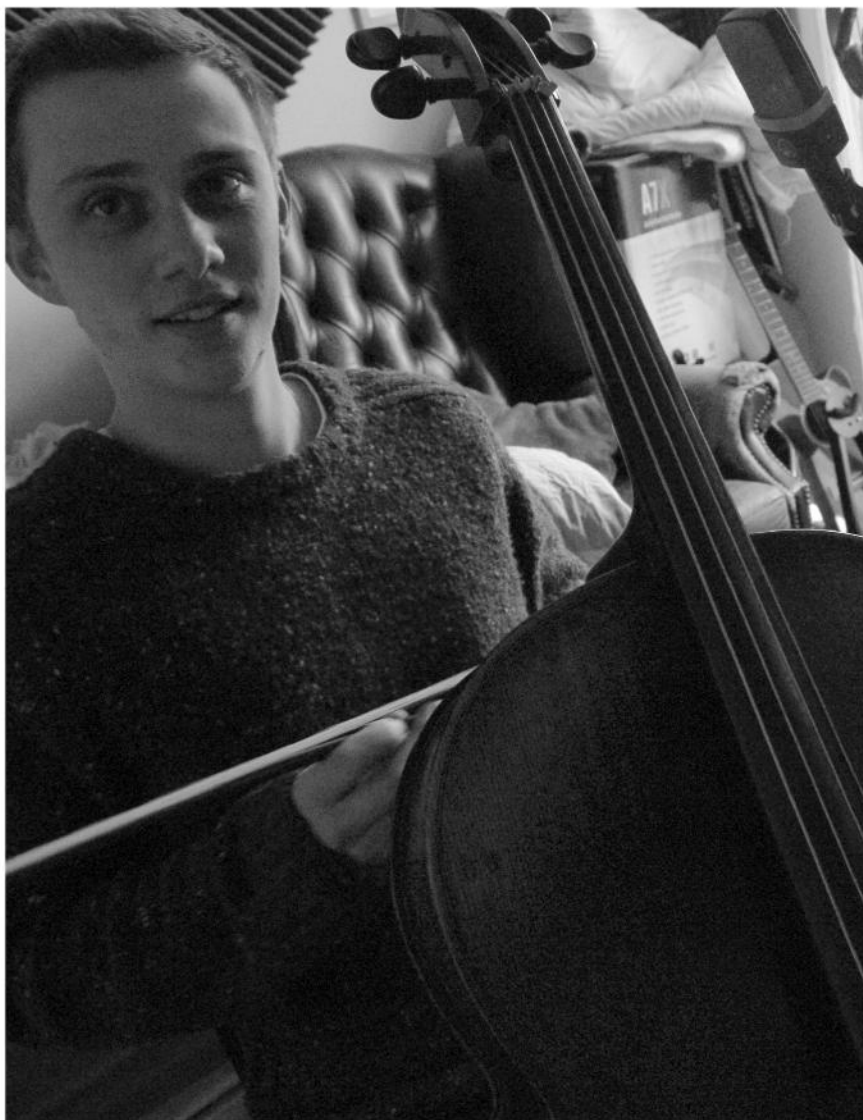
I asked the album artist, Jennifer, to keep journal of pictures as the process of creating the artwork for 'Into the Void' went on. This picture shows a little insight into Jennifer's work.



Recording

The recording process was fairly simple in the fact that there were no large scale recording set-ups needed. I had one microphone to record guitar (AKG-2000B) and a matched pair of AKG 212's for recording cello.

Despite only recording guitar in mono, it gave me a huge advantage in creating stereo width in the mix. I have great difficulty with this when using 'perfectly recorded' VST instruments. The fact that each VST is played back in stereo means that once you reach around 10 individual instruments the mix can become very ill-defined. Each track competing with each other on each side of the stereo field, everything becomes 'too stereo' which has the funny consequence of making the whole track sound a bit mono. With that in mind, using mono stems from the live guitar allowed me to pick and choose the precise location each piece of audio should go in the mix. Once you layer up more and more recordings of the same line to create a bowed guitar ensemble, the mix really comes alive, and despite having lots of VST instruments, the few live instruments I did use trick the listener into thinking that the track (on the whole) is full of live instruments.



Matthew Read. Cellist, during the recording session for 'Into the Void'.

The microphone placement in the cello recording session was fairly simple also. One places over the shoulder of the cellist, around 20cm from the neck of the cello. Another placed around 1 meter in front of the cello, pointing at the bridge. The over-the-shoulder mic is places as such to get the higher resonances of the strings. A lot more treble was picked up and included some detail in the sound of the bow. The front mic was placed to take in all the rich sound coming from the f holes. This mic picked up a lot of mid to low mid, and some warm detail from the bow.

Unlike the layered up recordings of the bowed guitar, the cello would act as a solo instrument - rather than a pseudo ensemble. The two mono recordings where treated slightly differently. The front mic is far more present in the mix, as I wanted a lot of the warmth it offered from the cello. This was then coupled with the over-the-shoulder mic, which was mixed in at a much lower volume, which added just enough high end and detail to the cello mix.

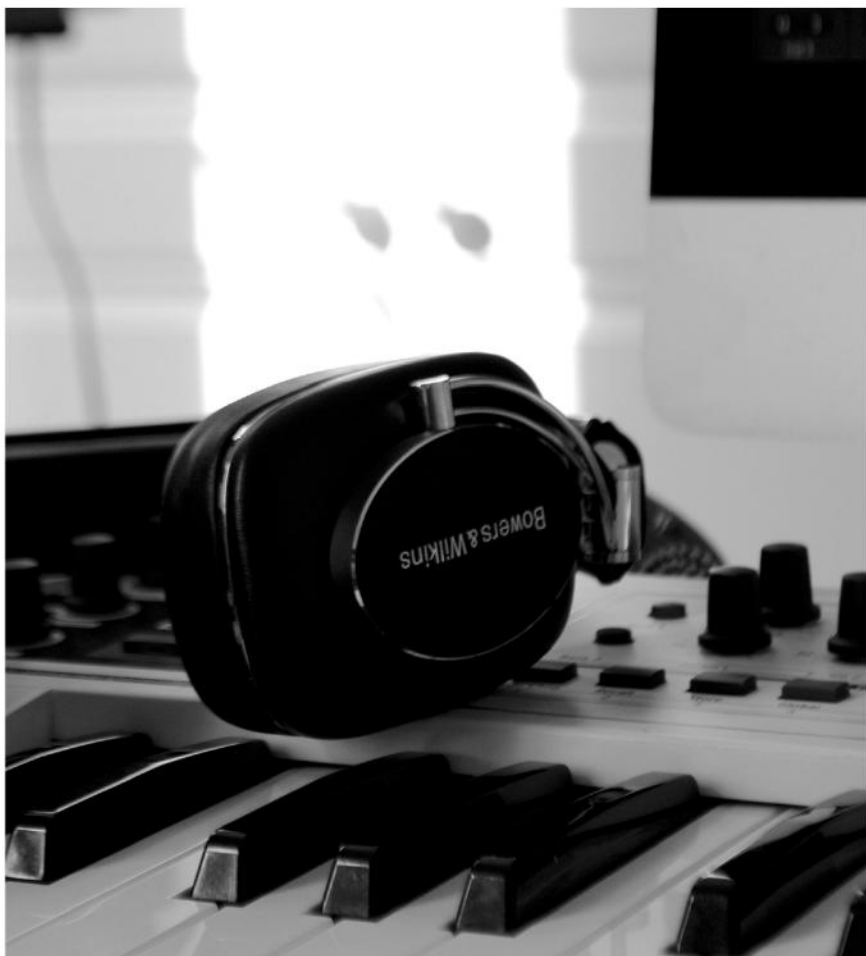




Mastering

By the time I had completed the final mix of the score, the Easter holidays had come. I had hoped to have used the critical listening space at the University of Hertfordshire before I went away, but I would have to re-schedule.

Thankfully however, I am lucky enough to have grown up in a family with a great appreciation for music and high quality playback, which meant I had use of some very good speakers (Bowers and Wilkins CM10 S2's). Although they are passive speakers and by no means placed into an acoustically treated environment, they are high performance and offer an incredible amount of detail in their low-end and mid range as well as a fairly accurate sound-stage. Having this equipment to hand meant that I was able to do an initial master for the whole score in order to subsequently listen back to, and tweak where necessary, in the university's critical listening space.



Each track required a slightly different approach, but the mastering chain is the same for all of them, only the parameters are different. For this section I'm going to take you through each stage in the chain and tell a little about why I chose each of them and what their inclusion achieved.

Each pre-mastered track was exported at a standard level of -6dB at 96kHz/24bit. This gave me ample head room to work with when it came to the mastering stage. When starting off, I like to set the output volume of my computer to a standard level (exactly half the maximum) and then I apply gain to the track until I reach, what I feel, is the ideal 'loudness' or volume of playback. The second stage is a linear phase EQ (a standard plug-in within Logic Pro X). I do two things with this, first I look at the visualiser which shows the general range of frequencies within the audio file, and their respective volumes. Looking at this graph I can see where in the frequency range the track is lacking, or a little too prominent, and I adjust accordingly.

For instance, some tracks had piano in, and because I had processed the piano to have a low velocity-high gain sound, it meant that at times the low-mids would become rather boomy, and a little too overpowering in the whole mix. This can be easily fixed in the mastering process, with a little EQ and compression the specific frequencies troubling the whole mix can be tamed in and controlled within the whole sonic space.

I paired the linear EQ with a Waves plug-in called the PuigTec EQ which is modelled on a rare Pultec EQ. Surprisingly I found that if I applied the EQ with the default setting (or essentially everything turned to 0) the internal coding of the EQ coloured the sound ever so slightly on the warm side. It took off a little high end and boosted some frequencies between 100-300kHz which gave the track a lot more depth and warmth. It managed to make the bowed guitars and the cello become a lot more velvety in timbre. Keeping the PuigTec EQ to the default settings was a popular choice for many of my tracks, but some required a lot more help in the high frequencies in order to expose the bowed guitar. This was especially useful in the tracks that featured the 'Blaze' theme, where the high, and raspy bowed guitar would be complemented by the changed parameters in the PuigTec EQ.

Once I am happy with the EQ, I will move onto the compression stage. There is a lot of debate on the topic of whether to compress first or EQ first. Neither are more correct than the other, but for me, being able to establish a frequency palette I'm happy with and then compress the audio enables me to establish a far more cohesive sound. For the compression stage I again use a Waves plug-in, the SSL G-Master Buss Compressor. This is a seriously powerful plug-in that manages to cope with a huge diversity of audio. From some hard hitting percussion, to some really delicate piano, the SSL gives me the ability to bring out detail from every track, and control any peaks or troughs without any noticeable effect on the sound. That being said, when I use the compressor it is used sparingly, with very slight effect. The nature of the score is delicate and too much compression takes all the subtleties of the mix away. So keeping the amount of compression I use to a minimum, allowed me to keep the heart of the score alive whilst also controlling anything that is too dynamic.

Following compression would usually be a limiter which would bring the overall volume level up a notch, so that the track is still relatively loud compared to some industry examples. On occasion though, I will use a stereo imager in order to give the track a little more stereo space. Again, not too much, but enough to allow the track to breathe within the soundstage.



'Into The Void' was primarily filmed in at The New Forest. It includes one of the largest remaining tracts of unenclosed pasture land, heathland, and forest. Such a raw and untouched environment made The New Forest a prefect location to shoot at. Its vastness allowed the production to team to immerse the film in its setting. Using the beautiful landscape to help tell the story of mother and son.





Artwork

When I first contacted Jennifer to ask for her help, I had a few ideas in mind. I had gathered examples of album covers I loved and, personally, felt complemented the project well. My initial thoughts were for it to be a monochrome design. The first port of call for an example was Johann Johansson's 'Oprhee' (as shown on page 26). It's unfocused central sphere, and thin, bisecting line really appealed to my eye, and become the foundation on which I drew together visual palette to hand over to Jennifer.

In late March, Jennifer and I had a video call to look over what she had created. I was surprised (and probably quite thankful) that Jennifer had taken a very different approach to the process. I had sent her the scrip for 'Into the Void'. Looking over it she had said that she picked out certain key words or elements from the script and looked into how those could play a part in the artwork.

The use of maps in the film as a future hope and salvation is one of the things used for the artwork. Jennifer had looked at some old maps and incorporated the look and arrangements of them with the texture and landscape of relief maps. Using card, ink, and differing types of paper Jennifer created a very textural and raw piece to complement the soundtrack as its cover artwork.

I asked Jennifer for some comments about her work, she said:

"I focused on texture and colour, as well as trying to keep in mind the setting of the film. Whilst experimenting with inks and printing I stumbled upon the front section of the piece, which to me brings to mind a map of a city that's been weatherworn. From there, I played with the textures of the torn paper and how it soaked up the ink to varying degrees depending on the marks and textures of the surface. These were then shifted around together until I found a layout that just stood out to me".



Anders Ladegaard's artwork for
Johann Johanson's 2016 album, Orphée.



Jennifer's studio desk featuring on going ideas
for Into the Void's album artwork.



One Last Thing

When in conversation about my studies and practice as a composer I am often asked the same question, 'Do you enjoy what you do?' Sometimes there is an easy answer, "yes".

At other times however, I often hesitate to answer. The real issue with this question is that my answer is usually dependant on how well things are going. Often after writing a new piece I think its my best work, which is a great place to be. To constantly see improvement is very encouraging and drives you to keep on going. But with peaks come troughs. When you cant find the right chord sequence or you're stuck writing in the same damn key signature, it really drains you of any impetus to keep working. I often give up for the day in hope of making a difference tomorrow.

Eventually that day does come. Suddenly, out of no where, the right note appears, you find just the sound that's been in your head for days. And just like that, you're back in the swing of things, as if nothing had happened. Knowing that eventually the dry spell will end is a great comfort and its a knowledge that helped me through this project.

During the first stages of composing for the project a lot of what I was writing was, to be blunt, shit. I don't think that's particularly uncommon, it's just annoying when you realise your work wasn't up to scratch. Having your first three, maybe four, passes be under par just keeps you moving in the right direction (silver linings and all that rubbish).

Looking back at the project, there are a great many things I am proud of, and still enjoy listening back to (which is a rare thing) but with hindsight there are things that I would have changed. Some intense scenes where Robby runs away or chased by Blaze required tense music. At the time I had used a lot of percussion to give the scene a gravity and impact, but looking back, I am leaning towards giving it a slightly more subtle treatment, using discordant timbre, and synthesis to incorporate rhythm. Alas, what's done is done. Being concerned with what could have been is in no way helpful, but applying what I noticed after the fact, to my next work is what is important.

If this project has taught me anything, it's that if what you're doing now is hard, just remember that eventually inspiration will come, and the things that you could have done better, you will do, next time.



Into The Void soundtrack composed and arranged by
Michael Samuel-Bryan

Performed by Michael Samuel-Bryan, *guitar*
Matthew Read, *cello*

Recorded and Mixed by Michael Samuel-Bryan

Mastered By Michael Samuel-Bryan at the
University of Hertfordshire

Artwork by Jennifer Samuel-Bryan

Into The Void written, produced, and directed by
Liam Hejsak