

Improvising in Frozen Time: Approaches to Freeing the “Artist Within”

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Abstract

In this paper, the author shares his views on music composition and the teaching of composition, stating, first and foremost, his firm belief that “composers cannot be taught.” A person has to be born with a passion for musical expressions as a prerequisite for potential to become an effective composer. “Exposure,” “skills,” and “insight” are the key factors for compositional success. Since *creativity* does not arise from a vacuum, maximizing exposure is a must before any creative action can take place. Skills are required to bring forth an artist’s internal *inspiration*. The third, and perhaps most important aspect of all, is insight into life and the complex relationships at work in one’s surrounding world. Without such insight, the music will have no meaning. An artist serves as a *prism* to reflect and enhance the often undetected wonders of life and creation. Only through art (including music) are these connections experienced and felt by the audience at large. Finally, the author shares his approach to teaching composition: to set free the artist within, as if one is improvising, albeit in frozen time.

Keywords: composing; composition pedagogy; musicking; artistic inspiration

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Introduction

I would like to share some of my views regarding approaches to the teaching of composition. First of all, I don't think a person becomes a composer solely by being taught composition. A person has to be born with a passion and motivation for wanting to express in sound in the first place before he or she can produce touching and meaningful music. Such a person does not need a systematic education in composition but, rather, proper guidance in engaging fully with both outer and inner environments. Nurturing a composer's ability to internalize and engage with the environment out of which he or she arises should play a central role in educators' efforts to mold and bring forth the "artist within."

Academic curriculum to encourage and train people to "compose" is most effective when educators take a comprehensive approach to instilling in students a holistic understanding of the practice and phenomenon of *music*. With that as a given, how best do we engage gifted and motivated individuals in ways that will enable them to become effective composers? In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Composers (of which I am the Founding Chairman) recently received a substantial commission from the Education Bureau to design a training course in composition for secondary school students. As a result, we have been having numerous meetings to consider the best ways forward in terms of pedagogy, content, approaches, etc. There have been extensive arguments about whether students need to model masterworks and do exercises in different techniques or receive a more direct introduction to the basic ingredients of music—pitch, rhythm, texture, etc.—and be shown how to manipulate these elements within the contexts of different established musical styles. In the debate, the question of adequate exposure has been emphasized, as has the need to free students from the straightjacket of a traditional "work"-centered concept of

music and the supremacy of tonal treatments in music. Given the committee's ongoing efforts to develop effective curriculum, it is fortuitous that the current forum is focusing on these topics, and I look forward to hearing others' thoughts on these issues in our discussion.

In my opinion, even with the best methods and curriculum, we cannot expect to turn out "real" composers if they don't already have the "right stuff," so to speak. In this session, rather than talking about teaching technicalities or pedagogical approaches, I would like to share my views on composition, in general, and how one can develop one's creative potential as a composer, in particular.

I think that there are three important aspects of (or prerequisites for) "becoming" an effective composer: 1) exposure; 2) skills; and 3) insight. I will elaborate on these three aspects one by one.

1. Exposure

All composers arise out of the environment of their upbringing and the cultural and musical ambience in which they develop. Although people have instinctive physiological and emotional reactions to different sounds (i.e., a quick tempo usually evokes excitement, danger, happiness, urgency, etc., while a slow tempo arouses the opposite feelings), much of our individual musical preferences are formed largely through "nurture"—that is, the music, cultures, aesthetics, and social norms we've been exposed to. We think *a* is great, not simply because it is great in itself, but because we have been exposed to *a* for such a long time that we have grown "used to" *a*—hence, we like *a*.

With this understanding, it would seem important for a budding composer to grasp both the limitations and boundless potential inherent in the "nurture" effect, in order to try to make the most of it. Aspiring composers must expose themselves to as many different

musical styles, cultures, and aesthetics as possible. In our youth, we are like sponges that naturally absorb the world around us, and it's important to try to extend that as much as possible into adulthood—to broaden our horizons to cover as many varieties and diversities as possible. This isn't limited to musical experiences. All other experiences will eventually contribute to one's personality and will help mold the perspective and outlook eventually reflected in one's music.

There are, of course, natural limits to how well we maximize opportunities for perpetual exposure to new things. At some point, a tendency to prefer one thing over another emerges and a person begins to select what she or he likes, thereby creating, then reinforcing, a cycle that cultivates a particular musical persona (or pathos), which might guide one's development throughout the rest of a lifetime. I do not see this emergence of restrictive persona as something to be afraid of. Sooner or later, we all create an identity or persona as unique as a fingerprint, which directs our inner “self”—the artist within. And that's what makes art so invaluable. It is the unique expression of individual experience. Although, in reality, we always make choices and filter out things, composers should aspire to expand the perimeters of their experiences and to keep their borders open. The wonders of life and of everything will not stop taking place just because you have stopped looking or trying to be surprised. An effective composer will endeavor to infuse a sense of discovery and adventure into each work. Try not to shut out anything that is not to your liking so soon.

To incorporate this notion into teaching practice, we must encourage students to listen to as many different styles of music as possible. If one's genre is written (scored) music, try to listen to music with scores, so as to develop the subtle link between visual (scoring) and audio (musical) impacts. Creativity does not mean inventing something from nothing “out of the blue.” A creative mind is one that can re-associate, re-assemble, and

re-link different seemingly unrelated past experiences/ideas/concepts/memes into new ones. In music, it's the same: the more diverse experiences you have stored in your brain, the more creative you'll be, as you will be able to link and remix from a larger pool of experiences.

2. Skills

As in all human endeavors, practice makes perfect. If one has been tremendously exposed and is full of inspiration and innovation but has developed no facility to express her or his inner feelings, all of the experience and inspiration will lead to little. The “skills” I’m referring to must include performance as well as compositional skills, as music is primarily an art of sounds in time. Through practice, trial and error, repeated execution and refinement, etc., one will be able to polish and refine one’s skills, making extension of the musical self—from within to without—second nature. In notational composition, understanding and practice in different compositional techniques, forms, instrumentation, scoring, extended techniques, manipulation, and theories of pitch, rhythmic, or textural parameters, etc., are all important and significant, depending on what type(s) of music you are aiming at creating. In improvisatory music, your abilities as a musician—your control and understanding of rhythm, pitch-related materials (scales, runs, etc.) and your control of subtle changes in your instruments’ colours, sonority, and nuances—are also important. Without possessing skillful means of expression, you will not be able to adequately represent your inner artistic feelings, no matter how inspired you may feel. I always like to quote a poem by Chinese poet Yu Kwong-chung to represent the inner angst of artists who feel that, no matter how hard they try, they are always handicapped in their ability to represent the full extent of the inner beauty they perceive. Here is a rough translation:

Inspiration

Such a beautifully enchanting bluebird!

I'd love to take it home and show it to the world.

Alas, when I tried to grasp it – it slipped away from my fingers

Leaving only a lovely blue feather.....

Reluctantly I put it on my hat – for all to see when I walk the street.

They throw envious and admiring looks on me ...But alas....

They never ever know

The full beauty which I had the luck to glimpse.

With enough experience and the right skills, may we expect that a good composer will emerge? What is good music? How do we define a “good” composer? Of course there is no answer. The third aspect of becoming an effective composer is perhaps the most difficult.

3. Insight

This last element is fundamentally philosophical. But here we are dealing with art, with music. Isn't music the most abstract and philosophical of all human endeavors? I am using “insight” here to mean “true understanding”—a kind of internalization of knowledge or concepts into a pseudo-belief. An artist must have vision and belief; without these, she or he might as well just be a craftsman. An artist's belief springs from an inner self—a most personal conviction and understanding of one's surrounding world. Only with a truly inquisitive mind and the consistent pursuit of life's answers—albeit answers that satisfy only you—may a true artist emerge.

By this I am talking about more than aesthetics, more than stylistic preferences. An effective composer must develop an inquisitive mind toward life, the world, and his or her environment—not so much as a philosopher approaches the world, but in the manner of an explorer—to try to communicate, engage, and interact with one’s surroundings, be they concepts, knowledge, scenarios, mountains, rocks, trees, people, etc. Interconnectedness between one’s inner self and the universe of outer things that surrounds the self is what truly generates fuel for the creative engine. Only when one is in contact with the rest of the world can one reflect what is there in some kind of artistic creation.

To me, an artist’s prime function is to reflect the subliminal wonders of our world and our existence, like a prism reflecting and deflecting beautiful unseen colors of light so that all of us can see them. People have different sensitivities, and different artists are usually more sensitive to particular kinds of stimuli. A composer (or musician) must be more sensitive to and expressive of sound media, just as a painter is more sensitive to visual colors and shapes. Most of us have, at one time or another, experienced this feeling of humility and admiration when encountering a great work of art—whether a painting, a symphony, a sculpture. The feeling is not so much one of being impressed by the technical refinements and qualities of the artwork itself, but of being awestruck by an encounter with the subliminal—the ineffable beauty of artistic insight entering us through our senses. An effective artist, through hard work, experiences this strong impact through sensitive senses and natural talents and is able to translate the experience through art (much as the above “Bluebird” poem describes), delivering to audiences some awe-inspiring remnant. Through her or his work (performances), the artist helps to amplify such subliminal feelings in all of us (audience members), inspiring us to see, to perceive, to feel. That’s the mission of a true artist.

4. Pedagogy of *Musicking*

If I had to summarize my approach to teaching composition, I would say the key is to first endeavor to set the student free—free in the sense of transcending environmental limitations and pre-conditions. With music education nowadays so influenced by millennia of western academic influences and cultural presumptions, we tend to treat the practices and norms of western classical music as givens. We introduce to students first the stylized and “etiquette-ed” norms of notation, scales, and harmonies, without caring to explain how these came about. We tend to emphasize more the transfer of knowledge (“know-how”) than the importance of understanding through direct experience and internalization. In music education, there is a lack of actually *making* music or, as Christopher Small puts it, *musicking*—treating music as an action-based event.²

I think composing should be a tool to enable one to express in sound as an individual. Composing is meaningless if it is just paperwork. The traditional definition of composing (as a composer) assumes a tripartite relationship of creator-executioner-receptor (i.e., composer-performer-audience) in which the score takes on a dominating role as an “unchangeable” artwork. A post-modern approach to music creation could take on more diverse paths: from improvising to sonic sculptures to interactive co-creations. With this approach, young composers may be encouraged to take on whatever paths they naturally incline to—while being reminded of the need to immerse themselves in diverse musical experiences as much as possible.

² Small, C. (1998). *Musicking—the Meaning of Performance and Listening*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

In teaching composition, we tend to ask students to learn how Mozart or Beethoven or Brahms wrote—to learn the “rules” of harmony or counterpoint, set-theory, tone-rows, etc.—without helping them to internalize or formulate for themselves a basic understanding of how music works. To this end, my approach has been to introduce aspiring composers first to the basic elements of sound/music—how pitch, rhythm, colors, and textures come about—and then to show them what makes music work, through an understanding of the eternal conflict and synergy between *repetition (similarity)* and *change (surprise)* in all communication and understanding. Once they understand such concepts and practices, they are better equipped to select and make use of different building materials from various musical styles and cultural heritages to construct their “musical arts.”

Conclusion

Creating a musical work (in any format) requires giving up as much as taking in: to allow the mind the freedom to improvise. We cannot remind students often enough that there is no right or wrong in “music”—your creative flow should not be hampered by guessing what is “right” or “wrong” in the next utterance of your creation. That’s probably the most common mental fallacy of composition students when confronted with a deadlock. They tend to try very hard to “perfect” the music by continuing with what has been written, mentally guessing what the “right” next note should be. The essential trick is to free one’s mind and take charge. You are not a slave to the music you have written! On the contrary, you are master and creator of your own music. Write (or continue) whatever you like as if you are performing in real-time, improvising. The essence of the composing act is to spontaneously and conscientiously improvise your own performance—albeit in frozen time.

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