

Guidelines for Student Research on Living Composers

These suggestions are provided as general guidelines for students who are preparing research papers or presentations on living composers. Researching and writing about a living composer can be an intensely stimulating proposition. Unlike writing a paper about Beethoven or Mahler, the composer actually is still active and writing music. Thus, answers can truly be obtained to most all questions relating to the work, since the composer is available to respond.

It can be a tremendous experience to have this sort of interaction with a living composer. Thus, it may be tempting to immediately try and contact the composer and “fire away” with questions. However, this is neither the most appropriate nor productive course of action.

Some careful thought and preparation beforehand will maximize the experience for both the student and the composer.

Begin by finding out as much information about the composer as possible.

- a. Examine the composer’s biography
- b. Examine scores of the music
 - i. Study scores of works in a variety of forms (for example, both orchestral pieces and choral pieces, etc.)
- c. Obtain and listen to recordings
 - i. If possible, listen to recordings that match scores that you have access to examine.
- d. Find any articles and or books available on the composer and browse or read them
 - i. Use the many available bibliographic sources to search for articles and write-ups in all journals (your school librarian can assist you in using these indices and databases)
- e. Visit the composer’s website (if one exists) and explore it thoroughly

Your school library may be the primary source for scores and/or recordings. Many schools will also purchase materials to add to their collection at your request, if it relates to a specific research project. If not, a number of composers increasingly have scores and/or recording samples available online. Also, if your school has performed music of the composers, the conductors/directors may have scores which they would be willing to lend you.

Only after this preparation work has been done, begin to formulate questions that you may wish to ask the composer. Consult with your teacher or research advisor at this stage of the project to see if the questions are well-prepared. Do not re-ask questions which are already answered in other sources – instead quote and cite those sources properly in your work. Also, do not expect the composer to “do your work for you.” It is your job to find as much information as you can through the sources available to you. It is also not the composer’s job to analyze their works for you. You must approach this process of musical analysis and inquiry using your own skills, or skills that your teacher may be able to help you acquire.

Note that there are many questions which are not appropriate for a composer to answer. Questions such as “*What is your favorite work in your catalogue?*” or “*Where do you get your ideas?*” or “*What is your musical style like?*” are not helpful. They cannot accurately be answered by the composer, either because these questions do not truly have “answers”, or because a composer is always “too close” to their own work to truly be able to do things such as choose favorites or analyze their own style.

It is also not appropriate to ask the composer questions regarding their work which you can and should answer yourself – questions such as “*What is the shape or musical form of this piece?*” or “*What are the high and low points of this movement?*”

Instead, construct useful questions that seek to obtain new or original information about the composer or the works in question.

For example, if the composer happened to be a violinist and you were interested in information related to their violin concerto, you might ask: “*What was it like to compose a concerto for your own instrument, the violin, as opposed to composing a concerto for an instrument that you don’t play?*”

If you were researching a choral work based on texts by an author the composer has set frequently, you might ask: “*What keeps drawing you to set the poetry of XXXXXX?*”

These are simply a few hypothetical sample questions based on potential circumstances. These are questions which ask specific information that is not readily available from other sources.

After you have formulated your questions, begin creating your message to the composer. If the composer uses e-mail, you might contact them in this form. If not, send a printed letter either to them directly (if you have or can find their address), or care of their publisher who will be able to forward the letter to the composer.

In these days of e-mail, it is tempting sometimes to become too “conversational” and “chatty” in style. This is not appropriate for these sort of inquiries, and it is particularly never appropriate for initial communications. Remember to approach and treat the composer with proper respect no matter whether you are sending an e-mail or writing a paper letter.

Begin your communication by identifying yourself and explaining your own background and your current project. Then, describe the preparation that you have done (the scores/recordings you have examined, and the sources you have consulted.) Then, ask the composer for their assistance in answering some additional questions. Once again, consultation with your research advisor is recommended in assuring that communications with the composer are presented in a scholarly manner. Include your research advisor in the process as much as possible.

After you and the composer have communicated and your questions have been answered, make sure to thank the composer properly for their time. Many composers would also greatly enjoy seeing a copy of your resulting research paper/project when it is completed.

By thorough and thoughtful preparation, your experience of research and interacting with a living composer can be an exciting learning process. Most composers are very willing to help interested students who approach them in a well-prepared manner.

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