

COMPOSING:
FROM LEARNING TO EARNING

a lecture given by
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to the Upper Valley Piano Teachers Association

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I. LEARNING -- Early

You are Piano Teachers, not Composition Teachers. Teaching Composition is challenging even to composers with years of experience and training. It is not an appropriate endeavor for Piano Teachers, whose training is not in the Composition discipline. Thus, I am not here to tell you how to teach Composition (!), but, rather, how best to guide those of your students who express an interest in composing, perhaps at an early age.

In addition, teaching composition in general is a difficult and debatable activity. Some teachers insist on forcing their style of composition on their students, feeling that one can only teach what one knows oneself. Other composition teachers employ more of a 'hands-on' approach of entering into the style of the student-composer, and trying to help him improve upon his own material. This second approach demands flexibility, creativity, sensitivity and hard work. It is how I was taught, and how I have taught others.

However, of relevance to Piano Teachers is my advice to encourage, guide and inform your students about the development of a composer, but not to attempt to offer a 'regimen' of instruction.

There are many possible ways of offering this encouragement and guidance. No doubt, many of you have already evolved these methods through your teaching.

In contrast to the plenitude of positive approaches, I can envision only two negative approaches: excessive strictness and excessive leniency (i.e. 'anything goes').

1. Excessive strictness --

Musical language, forms and performance techniques are meant to be continually re-invented by each composer. This spirit of invention should not be stifled by forcing a creative student to adhere to traditional expectations.

2. Excessive leniency --

Music, as any other art form, must exhibit coherence, care and communication. Improvising a melody is not composing. Shaping that melody into a piece of music is composing. Bringing order to chaos is the artistic impulse. And this requires skill and mastery of the craft.

A few examples of (perhaps) typical teaching dilemmas:

A. Student's music sounds just like Mozart!!!

[ANSWER: Most young composers imitate the music with which they are familiar. In fact, many adult composers do this also. The teacher should, however, encourage the student to find his own musical identity. THIS IS VITAL.

For if composing is not aligned with self-expression, it will eventually lose its excitement and value to the student. So, if the student's harmonic/melodic language sounds like Mozart, at least encourage the student to DO something creative with the musical ideas -- perhaps ending in mid-phrase, or inserting a completely extraneous musical idea in the middle as a 'surprise.' Something new must happen in each piece, or composing becomes dead.]

B. Student is creative but chaotic!!!

[ANSWER: any sound can be a musical sound if used meaningfully. Whatever sounds the student invents are acceptable. Encourage the student to use these in a logical manner of some sort, perhaps integrating them with more conventional techniques.]

In all cases, it is important to notate and/or tape-record the composition so that it exists as a finished work. Once it is 'out there,' no longer dependent upon the student's memory to be played, it can then be discussed, evaluated and appreciated. The student can study his work, and then move on to a new composition.

A written score or cassette tape of the piece will give the student a great sense of accomplishment. And, since learning to notate one's music takes many years of training, it is best to start early, even if only the melody is notated for the first piece. [There is a great danger in becoming a composer who cannot write out his music. This limitation will restrict the composer's ability to structure and analyze his materials. He will not be able to grow.]

And, again, in all cases it is helpful to study the works of other composers to see how they create a work of music from their materials. Discussions of form and harmonic progressions, even on a rudimentary level, are valuable. Perhaps the works within the student's performance repertoire **should be** discussed for their compositional merit as well as technical demands.

Thus, in summation, I would advise you to offer whatever guidance is appropriate to the individual student, while emphasizing encouragement, self-expression and completion (i.e. notation/recording). Do not strangle the child with regulations, but do not fool him/her into thinking that composing is simply 'making up' music. For it is much more -- and needs to be respected for the craft that it is. This craft, if well-learned and put to the service of one's creative spirit, can lead to an exciting life!

II. LEARNING -- Advanced

In addition to the Piano Teacher, the student-composer will be encountering other music teachers in school -- perhaps the band or orchestra conductor, the instructor of a Music Appreciation course or perhaps, if lucky, a Theory-Composition teacher. So, by Junior High School age, if the student is still interested in composing, he/she can receive specific training.

What sort of training?

Theory (Harmony) is very important. This training should be received at as young an age as possible to provide the student with a foundation for youthful musical explorations.

At the Junior-Senior High School age, the young composer can combine receiving basic Theory training with his/her own musical pursuits. This is the time to be free and inventive -- to compose works for friends to play, to arrange music for a school chorus or band, and, most importantly, to hear your music performed. Acquiring some basic training, and experimenting should both be parts of the musical growth. It is not necessary that the student integrate the training and the experimentation -- i.e. one need not arrange music for one's rock band using 4-part chorale harmonizations! These bits of musical knowledge will mesh later.

If the student-composer pursues training at the College/Conservatory level, then he is on his way to becoming a well-trained composer. My experiences at college (Brown University) combined the formal study with my own composing. Thus, I composed works for the university orchestra as well as for my own folk-music group. These two realms of activity reinforced each other, and my composing style was similar between them. Most importantly, I heard my music performed by one group or another on a daily basis.

Graduate School training (such as the training I received at the Hartt School of Music) is more intensive than undergraduate training. It was my experience that I had to set aside my own artistic freedom in order to devote my energy to the course of instruction offered by my teachers. Although I knew that I could always write exactly what I wanted to write in the summers (or for the rest of my life, for that matter!), I dedicated myself primarily to writing what my teachers encouraged me to write (or what was required of me by the course curriculum) during the academic years. Most of these works were what I would describe as 'student' works -- exercises in orchestration and counterpoint. Thus, for nearly a decade, I kept my own 'voice' within myself. I received my training.

Perhaps during that time I composed music that others might say was in my personal style, but my evaluation of the period is that this music was training music -- music by which to acquire the skills that later would enable me to express myself far more effectively than during my college years.

The course of graduate study is extremely valuable, not only in mastering the craft of composing, but also in studying the works of other composers. One learns to UNDERSTAND music, and this understanding offers limitless possibilities for growth.

Thus, it was necessary for me at one point to set aside my own style of composing, and freedom of expression, in order to simply take in the instruction that was being offered to me.

When an experienced teacher of Composition (such as Arnold Franchetti) suggests that I substitute a B \natural for a B \flat in my score, I could have spent the entire lesson arguing with him about why I wanted the B \natural there. Or, I could tell myself that I could keep the B \natural there in the future if I wished, but for the moment, it might be more instructive to ask him why he preferred a B \flat ! That is what I am referring to when I talk about setting aside one's own style for the sake of developing skills.

Sometimes it is better to listen and learn -- to keep one's own artistic 'voice' quiet in the presence of a Master Teacher. Perhaps at the Graduate School level this is appropriate as a course of instruction. But this is not appropriate for a young student who has not yet found a voice of his own. One should find one's musical identity at a young age, and this is why the Piano Teacher is so important in offering creative guidance.

III. EARNING

BEWARE! academia is not all there is to composing!!!
The academic approach can hamper one's musical growth. It can be a self-contained world which not only teaches, but binds, composers. Pursuing a course of graduate study should enable the composer to improve his skills, but should not limit him to an academic lifestyle!!!!

The expected next step for many composer-graduates with DMAs is teaching, not composing! I taught for 14 years.

But if one is not teaching, then how can one make a living as a composer? What other alternatives are offered at Graduate School? None.

Most composers teach, and for many this is the only way to support themselves and their families. They compose in their 'free' time, and many do a fine job of it. You may very well be hearing from one of these composers at another lecture next year, so I will let him tell his story.

Other composers are performers and conductors. They primarily make their living from these other occupations.

But one can make a living from composing if one is prepared to work very hard at it, and if one has some business sense. Beethoven had a great deal of business sense!

Much energy has to go into lining up new commissions and performances of one's music. Perhaps 50% of one's time has to go into these activities, unfortunately. But the end result is that one then can have the thrill of composing music for performers all around the world. Rather than preparing lectures at the University, one might be preparing a score for an orchestra in California, and then travelling there for the performance.

I believe that more music, and more inventive music, can be written outside of the academic walls than within. But the difficulties of making a living in the non-academic world have forced most composers to try to combine teaching with composing.

A full-time (non-teaching) composer will rely upon several or all of the following means of generating income from her music:

1. commissions
2. sales (scores, tapes)
3. performance royalties (ASCAP)
4. competitions (awards for completed works)
5. grants
6. lectures

In summation: one can make a living from composing, if one is enterprising. It may be a modest living, but it's quite a life!

But, before one can earn, one must learn. And, before the learning, must come enthusiasm -- the enthusiasm which arises when one can bring one's own unique sense of fantasy to the music.

Thus, Piano Teachers, encourage your students to express themselves in their youthful attempts at composing. Encourage this expression while showing them that composing is a serious course of study, and a lifelong pursuit of mastering the power of the musical language.