

*The Craft of Music Composition*  
A METHOD BOOK FOR THE CONTEMPORARY COMPOSER

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# *Table of Contents*

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
I. MUSIC LITERATURE .....	1
II. VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES .....	4
III. APPLIED STUDIES .....	7
IV. GROUNDED MUSIC THEORY .....	9
V. PURPOSE .....	10
VI. ACHIEVEMENT .....	11
VII. RHETORICAL STUDIES .....	14

## *Abstract*

This personal essay serves as a retrospective on the development of an artistic approach to music composition and my developing philosophy towards the craft of music composition. I have encountered a wide range of composers and musical styles which vary between composers. Some of my professors are published as classical music arrangers and composers; yet none of them possess identical approaches to their pedagogy or compositional styles.

To gain a greater understanding of the musical identity of living composers, I embark on an investigation into the personal philosophies of composers at all skill levels. I will be referring to the skill level of composers as Beginning, Intermediate or Advanced like the terms that refer to skill levels of instrumental or vocal performance. The term “*concert*” will refer here to music composition in contemporary styles of classical, neoclassical or traditional music forms; the term “*commercial*” will refer here to music composition in popular styles such as Rock, Jazz or Pop.

The contents of this text will provide rudimentary instruction for the novice composer and some supplemental context for the more experienced craftsman. The primary intention is to allow the reader to develop an understanding of contemporary music composition for both concert and commercial music. The instruction in this text is intended for those with a clear understanding of basic musicianship. Much of the language around the subject matter will proceed with the assumption that the reader is a musician beyond the beginning grades and has extensive instruction in the applied studies of music. This text while meant to be accessible to the amateur musician should be approached with the comprehension that you may need to research the individual topics or concepts referred to in this text to fully grasp some of the ideas presented in their entirety. This should not dissuade the reader for continuing past this point. It should encourage them to prepare themselves for the way in which the instruction approaches music composition in exciting and inventive ways while remaining practical and grounded in the reality of writing vocal or instrumental music.

I have been singing, playing piano and composing for about five years at the time of starting this personal essay. While I intend to include the perspectives of my peers, colleagues and instructors, the bulk of information will be my personal insights on the subjects and the ways in which one should approach writing new repertoire in a way that expresses their intentions through music. This will include, but is not limited to, the exploitation of musical elements in a way that constructs the form of a piece of music.

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## I. Music Literature

The first step towards a greater understanding of your own musical style and compositional approach is to study others. One must first analyze music written by others whether it be thoroughly and rigorously or leisurely. Some musical ideas are not apparent when you listen to a piece of music; inversely, the written notation may obscure the context. For example, the form of a rondo I wrote for harp and piano is not immediately apparent when listening, but the notation of the piece makes it instantly obvious. This is done through the use of tempo changes. *Accelerando* and *Ritardando* are used during the transitions and the tempo of the thematic repetitions are different from its exposition. Many musicians play by ear; whilst this is a good skill to have on its own, it does not compensate for the lack of access to information that occurs when someone is musically illiterate.

In my experience, I ran into the opposite obstacle. I learned to read and write western music notation but lacked the means to play or even understand the notes when I heard them. Thus, I discovered that a composer would struggle if they cannot clearly and appropriately understand music when its heard or read. A wealth of knowledge in music theory, music history and music literature accelerates a person's progress as a developing musician. If you cannot consume the medium you wish to write in, then you will lack the necessary competency for writing it well. For the average music student who starts their musical journey early or for those like me who arrive later in their life, the amount of exposure to specific types of repertoires may vary. The non-musician will most likely have a greater relationship with and appreciation of commercial music and limited experience with concert music. Concert music tends to be the type of repertoire that the early musician or any music student at the college level or higher will be experienced in performing. This generates a clear separation in the types of music literature that a person is comfortable with approaching.

I suggest however that the reader discard any apprehension they have of any genre of music and attempt to think of music in terms of musical structure. Every song has a direction to it or emotional context it is attempting to convey, whether it be of deeper substance or shallow pleasure, the true determining factor of a song's quality is whether or not it is successful in conveying its intent. In this way, we might think of music literature as 'literature without words' or 'sound poetry'. Either of these approaches communicate the natural way in which music reflects the same basic principles that we explore in writing fiction, personal essays or poetry. Like any novelist or essayist, writing styles differ and even change over time.

As I am a poet, one example of how I approach composition like poetry is in the form of a piece. In music we refer to groupings of phrases as periods. The most basic periods are 2-phrase periods. I tend to write periods in the shape of a poetic form. I have developed my own approach for 3-phrase periods where the phrase lengths reflect a haiku's syllable count. Evolving from this, I applied this idea to limericks borrowing the phrase lengths of five measures and seven measures from my earlier 3-phrase periods as the structural component to a type of 5-phrase period that employs the alternating phrase length of limerick lines. The application of such concepts allows one to easily conceptualize the point that music is literature. In order to write any form of literature, one must also read the type of literature they wish to write. In the case of music however, one must also listen to and identify the specific traits of music. In order to be able to effectively and accurately analyze music, a

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strong foundational understanding of music theory should be applied.

I often encounter both professional and amateur musicians with a disinterest in or strict avoidance of anything they consider music theory. It would be misguided of a beginning composer to take this approach and disingenuous of an advanced composer to advertise some interpretation of music theory. The resourcefulness of music theory as a composer allows you not only to write something that both you and your audience may enjoy, but it also supplies you with the most expedient route towards communicating your musical ideas to a performer. Sometimes a songwriter will need to communicate to their sound engineer or their producer specific requests. Without a strong understanding of music theory on both ends of communication, it will require significantly more time and thus, far more money, to accomplish your specific goal.

I suggest not to think of music theory as a restrictive set of rules. Instead consider it a series of patterns and trends that one can follow to achieve a desired result. The type of cadences a person employs at the end of a phrase should be determined on the type of mood they wish to present. I have come across people who think of chords as words; I disagree in this way. I think a single chord could be thought of like a character in Japanese Kanji. They can be read differently depending on context and are formed from the combination of other smaller symbols. Like learning katakana or hiragana, learning the basics can feel tedious at times when there is so much to learn in terms of the expansive language of music. Music is a universal language, but the language of music is not universal. A dedicated composer will need to learn not only music theory from a western perspective, but also research the idiosyncrasies found in music of other cultures. A nonrestrictive free approach to music theory requires extensive research and perpetual curiosity into the unknown. Personally, I have found fascination with Japanese modes and African rhythms. I am not proficient in playing the Mbira, but I do possess one. An African percussion instrument that was the inspiration for the Kalimba is called a Mbira. It comes from Zimbabwe. My sister and brother-in-law gifted me one of these unique instruments.

You might find yourself exploring a different scope of the world's music, but it is important not to concentrate only in one location or another. The exposure a person has with many types of music will be evident in their music. Commercial music can at times employ excellent examples of cultural differences in music which still appeal to a wide range of audiences. This can be seen in the popularity of K-Pop groups in the United States and in the Irish band "The Script". A greater understanding of how different styles of music differ arms a composer with the ability to implement a wide variety of tools in their own music. This is not to say that the study of classical composers is wrong or unnecessary. It is to suggest the study of music from everywhere. I am quite fond of the musical style of Franz Joseph Haydn, whom I knew very little about when I began my classical musical instruction at eighteen.

In my unique perspective, I feel that I have benefited from learning music theory first and applied music second. This allowed me to have a clear understanding of what my private instructors intended to teach me. I discovered; I inquired. This began a cycle of exploration. Ultimately, composing music is a form of exploration that changes you. This should be an exciting development where the shackles of ignorance in regards to music rust away; claimed by the passage of time.

I come to many conclusions as someone who occupies the spaces of English composition and music composition simultaneously. Much of creative writing can lend itself to music composition in terms of craft; this also applies in the opposite

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direction. Thinking in terms of plot, character, story, etc. can be enlightening when writing a piece of music. Observing a sense of harmonic progression in story beats can also be fruitful when analyzing a piece of fiction. Something that is often discussed for writers, but could receive greater attention in the study of music composition is pacing. The artistic approach to pacing within music far exceeds meter and tempo markings. Pacing should be thought of at the rate at which motifs develop and unfold into larger ideas. A faster pace - one where you constantly add new material every few measures, - provides a developmental function and provides tension. As musicians and music theorists, we familiarize ourselves with tension and resolution in harmony. As composers, we must familiarize ourselves with a wider sense of narrative than simply chords and non-chordal tones.

A handful of the terms found in the vocabulary and theory of music parallel those found in standard literature. Some of these terms originate in literary use; they were later applied to music in the ways we are more familiar hearing them. Likewise, music uses many mathematical symbols as short hand. It should be immediately apparent that a music composer need strive to understand both numbers and letters in order to obtain greater prowess over this art form. To truly engage with a music is to draw connections between music and other subjects which seem bizarre to the common observer and profound to the rare expert.

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## II. Various Perspectives

To gather as varied and diverse viewpoints as possible, I asked a collection of seven questions to colleagues, friends and professors that compose and/or teach composition as a vocation.

- 1. When did you start composing? And in what context did you begin composing?*
- 2. At what point did you realize you wanted to be a composer?*
- 3. What style of music do you typically write? Commercial or Concert? Classical or Pop? Chamber or Orchestral?*

*Instrumental choices?*

- 4. What major point of advice would you give to a beginning composer on how to begin the process of developing their approach to the craft of music composition?*
- 5. What does music composition mean to you? And its value to both others and to yourself?*
- 6. How best would you describe the relationship between the music and its composer?*
- 7. Do you have any additional thoughts you feel might have relevance or ideas that you'd like to elaborate on?*

I certainly do not intend to dissect all responses received for each question. I hope to highlight insightful experiences from experts to impart a high quality of knowledge to readers.

For instance, Adelaide Coles wrote the profound notion: *"Each note needs a purpose, and if you don't give it one, no one will."* Knowing her character, I find it unsurprising she would share this type of sentiment and yet, this statement is astoundingly moving to me. Music cannot be purposeless. It must serve some form of function. This is the 'creative intent' aspect of any art form. Sound organized without creative intentions would be sonification (the conversion of data points into sound). Sonification is not music, but rather a kind of graphing system that uses sound in place of visuals. It is to standard graphs and charts what music is to art.

With this distinction made, it highlights the depth of Adelaide's statement. She has described the fundamental responsibility of any composer: instilling our work with artistic intent. This artistic intent need not be something stoic or deep; it can be simple basic pleasure. It needs to be there in some element or there is no 'point'. Commercial music and concert music agree on this subject. Despite the stigma around a lot of commercial music, the material needs to have an intent. The desire to have fun and dance; that's a purpose worthy of expression. Coles writes an equal amount of concert and commercial music; both in equal parts vocal and instrumental. This even distribution for hers and many others should be inspiring to the novice composer. 'Yes, you can do it all; no you don't have to choose just one thing'. Yet, any composer will eventually specialize in what moves their heart the most. This will not be a genre or medium, but their own unique style which incorporates everything they learn. Adelaide spent a significant amount of time with her parents going to theatrical productions; her mother eventually opened her own theatre company. A correlation can be made observed between her exposure to theatre (most likely musicals or operatic works as well) and her writing show-tunes for commissions.

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Many composers begin their journey as composers at different intervals. I am on the later end of the spectrum. Many of the composers I interviewed started much earlier. In the case of Thomas Joseph and Adelaide Coles, they began composing seriously around grade school and middle school age. Adelaide according to her own testimony:

*“had a penchant for ‘noodling’ on any instrument I could get my hands on.”*

*- Adelaide Coles*

The sheer number of instruments she learned to play over the years is evident of this natural curiosity. She began composing at ten years old; at the time she had wanted to be a composer, a writer or a magician. She stated that she feels that two out of three were successes. Seeing her performance as a teacher; I’d say that she is quite the magician as well. I look forward to seeing the debut of her music on Broadway someday.

For Thomas Joseph, it was a bit of a slower more accumulative process from third grade onward. He began teaching himself through a collection of various resources; he has also remarked that “I knew I wanted to write music even before I even thought of myself as a composer”. This began an interesting course of dialogue in which the two of us considered the reasons why some people never even consider writing music and others write immediately after learning the basics without many outliers in between these two extremes. Thomas sought out musical instruction and found that being surrounded by genres such as Concert Band, Motown, Rap and R&B due to his stepfather’s work as a DJ influenced his taste in music as well as his compositional style. In many respects, he exemplifies the fact that no one does this alone. He had many people who invested in him and gave him the tools to grow. I see some of this mirrored in my own experience from my old choir director, Dr. Michael Sundblad, to my voice teacher, Ellen Petko. I have known many different people that have invested in me and seeing that this is not an isolated instance reminds me of something I read in a fortune cookie:

*‘Seek out those with the skills to help you succeed.’*

Professor Joseph received his first manuscript book from his church organist. This may sound insignificant to the common observer; I hope that those who have actively sought out texts like this one understand the significance.

Suppose someone believed in you enough, believed in your words enough and in your music enough to provide you with a gift knowing that you would use it and that it would provide you with a place to rest your soul. That is what we do as composers. We write down and express the very essence of ourselves onto a score for the world to receive us as our honest selves. It may not have been the organist’s intention to do something as profound as this; I do not know the extent of the deeper sincerities of a person’s heart. I do know the man that Thomas Joseph grew up to be and I am grateful to this organist to whom I am a stranger. As Thomas developed as a composer, he learned to compose for a wide range of ensembles. The style in which he writes has specific influences from both concert and commercial music due to his formal training at university and his relationship with his stepfather. For example, Professor Joseph frequently arranges music and writes original works for ODU’s steel band ensemble.

A composer I have recently made acquaintances with and hope to strengthen a friendship with is Melvin Lauf, Junior. Melvin began teaching himself to compose in high school (age:16). He typically writes contemporary classical and jazz



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music. Melvin writes pieces to requested instrumentation for commissions.

*“Being an architect of sound so to speak, the relationship is so close that it comes with a huge responsibility. As composers we have the enormous responsibility of not wasting people’s time. ...be it the performer’s time as well as the listener’s time. If we are going to take the time to create an audible trip for someone, we should make sure it is a worthwhile trip to embark on. Ask yourself, “What am I trying to say with this?” So many ideas have never been developed, because I did not have a good answer to this question.”*

*- Melvin Lauf, Jr.*

It is always important that we do not write purely for ourselves. Melvin’s sincere words outline the heart of music composition and reinforce Adelaide’s remark on page . As composers, we write for others as much as we write for ourselves. If we were to lose sight of such an important part of our craft, we would write superfluously, and it be no different than the bland lifeless husk that is sonification.

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### III. Applied Studies

While I had always dreamt of writing my own songs and had written lyrics for years, I had never approached music from the perspective I do now until I began piano and voice lessons in pursuit of my associate degree. Any composer should consider learning an instrument or a collection of instruments as it assists us in our understanding of the compositional process. It is exceedingly more difficult to write a piece outside of the means of an instrument (in good conscience) if you are aware of its limitations.

Even without studying an instrument in the traditional sense, it is also important to research the instrumentation before writing a piece. While both Professor Joseph and Professor Coles of Old Dominion University (ODU) play a variety of instruments, they are also knowledgeable on a wide spectrum of instruments that they themselves do not play. The same can be said for many other composers. Both Thomas Joseph and Adelaide Coles studied at Old Dominion University for their undergraduate degrees in composition. I am privileged enough to have them as instructors during my undergraduate program and pursuit of a greater understanding of musical expression.

Art is a difficult thing to define with perfect resolution. It becomes more difficult when you discuss specific types of art. A method that helps me when approaching the advancement of my own compositional style is to think about all art forms as interconnected. Professor Coles recommends trying something new in each piece a person composes; this can be achieved in small doses by integrating a variety of other artistic mediums into your composition (See the poetic phrases discussion on pages 2 and 3). It is important to always approach music from a different perspective than you have before.

*“At the start, perhaps counterintuitively, quantity over quality is key. Aim to write 10 complete pieces as a first goal. This is your compositional practicing. And “complete” meaning complete! Craft your pieces with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Developing a feel for structure is one of the most important skills a composer needs. And this large-ish quantity is important, too; sure, anyone can write two or three short pieces. But around piece five, something important happens, and they realize, “oh, these pieces all sound very similar! I need to do something different.” And then they make new musical choices, which, in turn, starts the development of their individual compositional voice. One could distill a composition simply into a “collection of musical choices”, and in order to make the best musical choices possible, it is vital to start building a toolbox of varying techniques as early as possible.”*

*-Adelaide Coles*

I agree with Professor Coles here. Composing is just as much a part of applied studies as performance or conducting (i.e. it's listed as one of the concentrations under the degree for Master of Music Education in Applied Studies). Perhaps then we can understand why she describes it as ‘compositional practicing’. It needs to be practiced and studied the way a person practices their instrument or practices the cues on a score. Composing is about skill; not inherent talent. It does become something of a talent eventually, but not initially. Composing takes time to get accustomed to. I would suggest taking her advice a step further and implementing something she does with her students. Write a collection of miniatures; single

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movement pieces that feel complete and whole. This is essentially writing flash fiction first before writing larger narratives.

Write in short bursts and practice developing them into different styles. This trains a composer to see the various possibilities and feel confident deciding which to pursue further. Referring to the earlier discussion about the purpose of music, a student should be encouraged to think less about whether something is good or bad. This thinking is counterproductive in the earlier stages as it causes an individual to continuously second guess their intuition. Replace this with a line of logic of whether something successful achieves its objective. This allows a student to compose more freely without the same limitations provided by their own insecurities. There are many ways to approach something; the best option is contextual. Learning to discern the appropriate musical elements for a given scenario allows for the student to achieve the answer to the question they so frequently pose: “but is this good or not?”

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## IV. Grounded Music Theory

A theory in science and a law of science are two sides of the same coin; a law cannot become a theory nor the inverse. A law is a mathematical expression of a natural phenomenon or phenomena; a theory is an explanation of a natural phenomenon or phenomena. A simplistic analogy that would encompass this is that a law is a formula; a theory is a word problem. Thus, Music Theory should be thought of as math; in which you mostly have word problems and need to be able to effectively decipher the formulas and mathematical relationships with accuracy and precision. It takes time and requires a significant understanding and comprehension of the basics of music theory. I find it helpful to expand my math skills and my comprehension of mathematical principles that on average a person takes for granted. For instance, the time signature is a fraction. It is simultaneously a unit of measurement. This is why we refer to the time signature as a meter as it outlines the metric by which we measure each measure. The more you understand about music; the more music theory you know.

Music theory appears to people to be this complex otherworld, distant from the music we hear. I am convinced this is due to the stigma around math and thus it leads to a stigma around music theory. It encompasses a wide range of things we use daily as musicians. We use them perpetually as composer. Thus, a strong foundational understanding of music theory will be exceedingly helpful to any composer. The beginning composer will quickly advance if they understand music theory intrinsically. This does not mean that you need to rush to learn as much music theory as you can. Instead, I urge you to take a small amount of time each day to try and learn something new about music that you never knew before.

Music theory is fun when you're a composer because you can experiment with things and experience music that sounds different from anything you've ever heard or discover how some of your favorite songs or pieces achieved the sonorities that you adore. I started composing as a result of taking basic musicianship with a wonderful woman by the name of Kwisuk McDonald. She is a composer, pianist and vocalist. As a result of her instruction in none of these categories, and only in music theory, I am now a composer, pianist and vocalist. Others have helped me along the way, but it is really telling that the beginning of my musicianship did not only begin with basic musicianship. As a musician and a composer, I began with music theory.

Music Theory is derived from actual music, such as Grounded Theory in rhetorical studies, music theory should be music first and analysis second. It is important to study forms of musical analysis, but an important aspect of being a composer is identifying and understanding musical phenomena. This relates to generating a 'grounded' approach to theory. We learn how musical analysis has been coded previously, but compositional techniques change over time. Our study of a wide variety of musical disciplines expands our understanding of how music functions.

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## V. Purpose

We have discussed a lot about the ways in which we involve artistic intent in music and the ‘purpose’ of a piece. The purpose of a piece is for you to decide as the composer. The fear of taking the first steps is the only thing holding any of us back.

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## VI. Achievement

A common discussion in the philosophy of music and its psychology is the relationship between musical aptitude and musical achievement, but I strongly believe that this is a chicken before the egg paradox. This belief stems from my experience with music pedagogy. It appears to me that this idea that people are somehow born musically gifted or that music is inherently genetic is perpetuated due to child prodigies and musical families. This is not unique to music. The trend for people to excel in the field of their parents is well documented and has been constantly reviewed as a given expectation. If this is so 'naturally engrained', then there would be no reason for parents to sign up these children for lessons.

This repeatedly argued subject matter is 'nature vs. nurture'. Both of these options leave out the topic of choice. It assumes this idea that a person is a product of their nature or a product of their environment. These are both rooted in very deterministic mindsets. The difficult reality is that impossible does not mean 'not possible'. It refers to something that has a probability of zero. This immediately sounds to most people like it would be the same thing as something not being possible. However, in statistics probability of zero refers to any probability that cannot be determined due to a lack of information. The specific type of missing information is any form of precedence.

Impossible means it has not happened. It does not mean that it cannot happen. This is different from something that could not happen. Something is impossible until the first example of it occurs; setting a precedent. Something that cannot happen will always be impossible because it will never occur, but that means there are also things that can occur that have not occurred up to this point. Something can also have the potentiality to occur or not occur. This is all to say that even if something appears to be determined prior to the instant at which it occurs, it never truly is. The future is riddled with possibilities.

The null hypothesis is the hypothesis that two things are not related. A  $p$  value is an integer calculated by determining how probable it is that the null hypothesis is true. Essentially, a  $p$  value represents how likely it is for two pieces of information are to be relevant to each other. Drawing the connection between these two ideas from mathematics and applying them to musical pedagogy, I believe that aptitude may have nothing to do with achievement. I believe the most important in musical achievement, especially music composition, is agency.

The choice to compose far outweighs any natural predisposition due to upbringing or due to genetics. A musician must choose to be a musician. They choose it in the way they study their field of interest, the way they treat the subject matter, the attention they give to music, and they choose to love music. It is a decision to prioritize practicing a musical instrument over spending time with friends and family. It is an active decision that a person must make to learn to read sheet music. It is an active decision that a composer makes when they study music theory and literature. It is an active decision to concentrate hours of your day to designing the most appropriate way of notating some experimental idea.

It is a conscious choice to actively seek out knowledge. Diligent study of a subject matter is difficult. Free time diminishing, your work ethic augments. Musicianship at its core is a labor. It requires a person to give time and energy. It gets easier over time, but the achievements that you rack up do not diminish the work that you have to put it; they are the result of

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the work that you have already done. For a composer, musical achievements are reflected in their comfortability with composing. The easiest way to measure this would be to look at their portfolio. Comparing their works from earliest to latest, a composer can quickly see their progress and their improvement. Composing is as much of a skill as it is an art.

To train a skill, we must first know what to do; then we choose to do it. There is little room for error in a performance, but composition allows for frequent review and improvement of our choices.

A large part of our vocation as composers involves other musicians. In essence, we all hope to have our music performed or shared in some way that allows others to hear our works. The preparation for such performances begins with our score and parts. Parts should be written in a way that makes the most sense to the performers, but full scores should be catered to what is most feasible for a conductor. Most of the time score study will prepare you for the basics. More complex compositions require a greater deal of refinement which can only be achieved by receiving instruction on notational idiosyncrasies of other instruments.

Achievement for a composer relates to our collecting of information. The greater wellspring of knowledge the better, but there are limited resources that can provide such instruction. This is why we must always remember that the people for whom we write are also our greatest source of input. When unsure about a specific instrument's strengths and limitations, ask an instrumentalist. When unsure of how a voice types might affect an overall choir, discuss this with choir directors and vocalists of each voice type. Something my instructor of many years, Andrey Kasparov, once told me:

*"Always go to the source"*

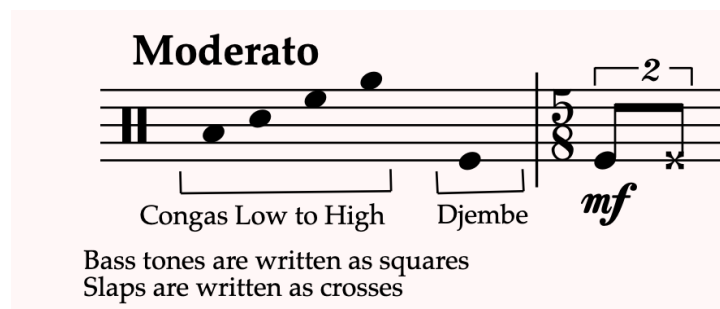
When you are uncertain of where to begin, the best place to start is at the beginning. Most instrumentalists will have been instructed in notation for their instrument as well as their instrument's technique. Notation does not translate identically between instruments. The differences between instruments are comparable to two languages which use the same lexicon, but the combinations are different or mean different things. For example, a forte-piano marking to a pianist suggests an agogic accent and suggests a loud attack and quiet decay to a woodwind or trumpet player. These interpretations are very different aurally; it is important not only to know what you want; a competent composer knows how to request that specific sound from the performer both verbally and notationally.

Continued pursuit of knowledge requires an open-mind, a strong-will, a willingness to adapt and a desire to listen to others. Allow for yourself to be a conduit of knowledge by listener to the experiences, insights and opinions of others with the same humility as you listen to your own.

Growing accustomed to critique takes time for any creative. The first thing to learn is that if you are going to be your own worst critique, at least be a good critique. Always give yourself constructive criticism the way you would any other piece of art. Look at each piece you write with an objective fairness. Consider the ways in which one might improve. Decipher meaning from that which others consider meaningless. Search for reason when there is none. Look too deep to see the way out of the rabbit hole. Learning should never be surface deep; mine every lesson for the upmost raw material that you might shape from that ore more tools to serve your purposes.

Do not simply discard your constructions. I often write using a combination of Djembe and four granulated Congas

from low to high. Rather than generating a new key every time for this multi-percussion set-up, I re-use the map from the first time I used this instrument combination. The drum mapping was suggested by the director of percussion studies at Old Dominion University, David Walker.



This image of how I set this percussion key is an example taken from my piece: *The Pendulum and The Guillotine*. Player 2 plays 4 granulated congas which are all on spaces and a Djembe which is on the lowest line. This set-up is a reasonable combination. For a similar set up of granulated woodblocks and a bass drum, I use the lines for woodblocks and the space for the bass drum. Spaces are typically used for membranophones. Idiophones (such as wood or metal) typically use lines. The types of noteheads can also be important for the means of playing an instrument or the type of instrument played.

Analysis will always require critique. The example given is not the first key that I drew for this piece. It is only through critique was I able to discover a new tool that could be easily re-used. This then led me to implementing this same map for other pieces. Congas and Djembe pair well together and by using the same map and re-using this set-up for other pieces, it sets a precedent that will be easily recognizable. Criticism is like metalwork. Careless criticism leads to poor craftsmanship. Precise and accurate criticism refines the quality of a piece. The development of a composer can be measured by their familiarity with constructive criticism. Unwillingness to change stunts a person's growth. Unwillingness to listen to others clouds a person's judgement. Never allow yourself to be so blind as not to see the other person's perspective; you do not need to agree with every perspective, but comprehension of others allows for a wider view when configuring information into artistic expression.

Art is subjective and subjectivity demands critique. We are often our own worst critics, but if you're going to be your own worst critic, at least be a good one. Offer yourself the same level of compassion that you would hope to receive from others. Each critique need provide an opportunity for continued growth.



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## VII. Rhetorical Studies

Rhetoric is a fundamental part of how we talk about music. Rhetoric here refers to the specialized communication that surrounds discourse. We discuss music with other musicians as a regular part of our study. This also applies to the type of instruments that composers play and study.

The instrument or instruments that a composer specializes in has unique notational practices which will inform their use of notation. I have seen this occur both in my own writing and the writing of peers. The instrument you are most familiar with will eventually have some influence on how you compose. The degree of influence will change as you develop more understanding of other instruments. A composer that fancies themselves a conductor will have the greatest ease in composing for multiple instruments, but their solo repertoire might become too complex. A percussionist that specializes in many instruments will have the least struggle with this issue as they are familiar with the work of many different instruments and the adjusting from one notational style to the next.

Concert percussionists are probably the most versatile and disciplined group of musicians. Compositions written by percussion specialists tend to have the most intricate and fascinating approaches to rhythm and timbre.

Now, compare this to modernist composers who fancy themselves inventors of music. The idea is very different. While modernists will attempt to discover something that “does not exist”, a contemporary composer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should seek something far more interesting. Do not disengage with the past or try to achieve the impossible. Very few people achieve the impossible by seeking it out. Rather the fastest path of discovering something new is expanding upon what already exists.

In this vein, I discovered ways of notating hyper-meter and inscribing hyper-metric modulations into my pieces. This isn't some grandiose concept by any means. Hyper-meter is a concept that already exists. Metric modulation is a concept that already exists. The novelty is from how I combined the two ideas. Juxtaposition of multiple ideas already exist, but which ideas do you choose to juxtapose is entirely up to you. As composers, we must consider constantly the ways in which we think about music. To do this effectively, I encourage every composer to study English Studies and the theory surrounding such scholarship.

Rhetorical Studies and Critical Theory have been pivotal in my growth as a music theorist and as a composer. From my experiences with Adelaide Coles, she teaches her piano students to use metacognition as a tool for improved practice. I suggest this principle is applied to how we consider composition as well. Rhetorical devices already exist within Music Theory, alongside tools for analysis and critique. Rhetorical and Critical Theory are studies of scholarship that could be influential in any composer's development.