

Thoughts on composition Pedagogy

Mara Gibson, 2012

Composers have a strong history of teaching but it would seem anomalous to call us pedagogues. I am not sure if that is because we no longer hold as much of a stature in academia or if it is something more inherent to our field. I suspect that it is a combination of both. US institutions have now overly specified areas of study to such a point of specialty that composers actually find it difficult to acquire teaching jobs. This seems ironic because historically, it was the composers that were known to teach multiple areas of music. They were the mentors, and taught young composers and musicians theory, history and perhaps some basic keyboard skills and certainly analysis.

As a composer interested in collaboration, my teaching encompasses a variety of musical skills, including composition, performance, theory and history. I believe that without the merger of all these media, the language of music is unbalanced and can potentially sway toward the overly intellectual or creatively unchallenged. In music education, instructors frequently separate these elements; however, as musicians, we draw on these various musical experiences in tandem, recognizing how each subject reinforces the others. To prepare students for what is required of musicians and critical thinkers, I try to provide students tools to think about these seemingly separate aspects of music simultaneously. In addition to following a more traditional music curriculum where the student studies theory and ear training, history, piano, and their primary instrument and/or specialty, I synthesize these “independent” subjects into each class by taking various slants using each musical skill. For example, piano class can easily be taught through theory, as an ear-training tool, through history, as well as through composition and improvisation. Often times it is a new, perhaps alternative technique that will engage a performance student to think about their instrument differently. When all of these approaches are taken, a student not only gains insight into the importance of these parameters, but also can begin to discover that none of them is a truly separate entity. In the long term, this prevents students from becoming narrow minded while it demonstrates that performance, composition technique, historical context and theoretical understanding are all vital in cultivating a creative and thoughtful musician. By actively practicing what I encourage my students to do, students discover a fundamental skill for music and scholarship: how to learn through doing. Teaching students how to ask questions and find solutions is more valuable than regurgitating textbook facts. In creative fields, the answer is most always found in the question. If a sincere answer is to be discovered, the student can be the only one to ask the question.

Teaching demands dedication similar to that of writing music and playing an instrument. I believe that a balance between being a musician and a teacher strengthens knowledge and encourages inquiry on behalf of both student and the teacher. The most successful atmosphere for the student and teacher exists when

both parties are thinking, creating and being stimulated by one another's ideas and artistic solutions.

Teaching composition requires:

1. Teacher's understanding of the creative process; some composers do not "teach" composition because they are not sure whether or not this can be taught, and frankly it is questionable. In this sense, a better term might be to teach through modeling creativity. Modeling encourages more interaction in the process of learning.
2. The student's reflection on creative process. Again, this is a back and forth process between the student and teacher.
3. Teacher's design of individually tailored tasks for student. While I am sure that some learning will come out of using a more standardized approach, to teach students how to be their own unique creative individuals, requires a less formulaic approach.

Strategies for Invention: are not so separate from one another for composition students and teachers, as students help teachers to reassess core aesthetic values; therefore roles of teacher and student become somewhat blurred in the process of making intuitive knowledge explicit. Composers are in effect lifelong students.

Margaret Barrett breaks down the process of teaching composition into 12 strategies for invention. I propose that these strategies work in conjunction with one another, not necessarily chronological, but certainly all present at one point or another.

1. Extended thinking, providing possibilities
2. Referenced work to and beyond the tradition
3. Set parameters for identity as a composer
4. Provoke to describe and explain
5. Question purpose, probe intention
6. Shift between micro and macro levels - MACRO/MICRO; Success for me has required a balance of both reflective introspection and interaction. I suggest that this is the most important attribute to instill in students.
7. Provide multiple alternatives from analysis
8. Prompt to engage in self analysis
9. Encourage goal setting and task identification
10. Engaged in joint problem finding and problem solving
11. Provide reassurance
12. License to change – the power of the eraser

Each of these strategies helps to define language and lifestyle (a model), an enterprise encouraging initiative and imagination and in effect, helps to solidify a composer voice, with or without experience.

Whether in teaching, a collaborative or individual project, within one medium or more, specific aims in any given composition are consistent for me.

- I try to match units of perception within a concrete reality; For example, when I was asked to write for the Bugallo/Williams Piano Duo, Amy Williams and Helena Bugallo, I knew they were very interested in playing and transcribing Nancarrow's player piano transcriptions. These pieces became an interest for me musically and metaphorically. Over all themes then emerged, such as the idea of moving from the mechanical to the human (machine to man), from the imaginary to the real, a music box vs. performer, and approaching two performers as one fused. These themes are then inherently connected to how the players approach my piece.
- I also try to find the right length for ideas and know where "demons" belong in order to draw out the voice, to stretch it without exhausting it.
- Perhaps most importantly, I aim to balance inward and outward focus – mirror self reflection within a sound world, even a more broad concept
- Finally, I aim to work at multiple levels of structure, musically, even theatrically, in time and space. As composers, our best teaching advice often comes through the reality of being a composer, and sharing the decision process.

Further Suggested Study, Reading, Listening:

1. Játékok ("Games") (since 1973, 7 Volumes as of 2007), for piano, by György Kurtág.

http://www.carnegiehall.org/article/sound_insights/kurtag/art_works_kurtag.html

2. Creative collaboration': an 'eminence' study of teaching and learning in music composition, Margaret Barrett, University of Tasmania, Australia. *Psychology of Music*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 195-218 (2006) DOI: 10.1177/030573560606185

<http://pom.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/2/195>

3. Daniel Deutsch, Mentoring Young Composers