

COMPOSING 101 FOR MUSIC TEACHERS

2013 MIDWEST BAND & ORCHESTRA CLINIC - DR. ROB DEEMER, SUNY FREDONIA

Issues for Teachers

- **Issue #1:** There is a growing need for composition instruction at the pre-college levels, both from the student body (spurred on by the easy access to tools through technology) and by administrators (soon to be spurred on by the new NCCAS Music Standards).
- **Issue #2:** Teachers often have little exposure to theory pedagogy – and even less exposure to composition pedagogy – in their undergraduate and graduate training.
- **Issue #3:** Teachers understand the basics of theory, but are often almost as inexperienced in *composing* as their students, much less in teaching composition.
- **Issue #4:** Teachers will be less likely to compose or teach composition because of this inexperience, primarily due to the perceived risk/threat of “doing it wrong”.

Solutions for Teachers

- **Solution #1:** Teachers can avoid the trap of “going it alone” by creating support groups of like-minded colleagues as well as experienced composers.
- **Solution #2:** Begin with low-impact composition projects that stem from experiences that most teachers may already have (arranging) or projects that have stringent limitations on most if not all of the creative parameters (melodic material, form, harmonic content, style, tempo, meter, etc.).
- **Solution #3:** Gain experience in composing by *composing*; take part in composition projects that are assigned to students either on an individual basis or in groups.
- **Solution #4:** Create a healthy, creative environment by allowing students to critique the teacher’s composition while the teacher critiques the student’s composition. While this may seem counter-intuitive at first, the student will learn what to look for (after modeling off of the teacher’s critiques) on the teacher’s compositions and subsequently begin to incorporate those critiques into their own works. Not only should the student gain confidence by this leveling of the student-teacher relationship, but with care and thoughtful critiquing techniques, both teacher and student should improve as composers.

What do we start with when arranging? Melodic Material/Pre-existing Music (Find a tune!)

Simplicity is a good thing...the simpler the tune, the easier the arrangement.

Musical parameters of the pre-existing melody:

- Melodic Shape (global) and Motivic Shapes (local)
- Formal Structure
- Harmonic Language
- Meter and Tempo
- Style Characteristics (ex. Both rhythmic figurations and rhythmic interpretations)
- Intangibles (what makes it “catchy” or memorable?)

Example #1: Christmas Carol (*Veni, Veni Emmanuel*)

- Melodic Shape (undulating line vs. repeated pitches)
- Motivic Shapes (triads, m.2-3, m. 5-6)
- Formal Structure (uneven 3-measure phrases, ABCADB structure)
- Harmonic Language (modal – Aeolian, emphasis on lowered 7th)
- Meter (simple duple/quadruple with possibilities of metric variation)
- Tempo (slow to medium – allows for flexibility)
- Style Characteristics (chant-like, lyrical)
- Intangibles (repeated pitches, triumphant “peak”)

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Basic Arranging Strategies

What to add?

What to change?

What to remove?

- Melodic material & shape should stay recognizable
- Texture (how many ideas at once?)
- Form (basic formal structure - start with one or two statements of the tune)
- Harmonic Voicings/Flavor (try thinking vertically - scales - first)
- Rhythmic Motives (repetition is a good, good, good, good thing...)
- Meter & Tempo (best to choose one of each and stick with 'em...simple)

Example #2 (Basic Arrangement)

- Quartet Rendition of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, homophonic and heterophonic textures.

More Arranging Strategies

- Historical/Cultural Context (do you go with or against what is expected?)
- Textual Concepts (what can the lyrics of a song suggest to the arranger?)
- Rhythmic Concepts (how far can you push rhythmic interest and still keep the tune clear?)
- Form (creating introductions, transitions, codas, contrasting sections is basically “composing”, or at least planting the seeds of composition)
- Harmonic Substitution/Voicings (examples include juxtaposing more than one scale at the same time and adding “color” notes to standard harmonies)
- Counterpoint (creating counterpoint to pre-existing melodies is usually how arrangers “discover” composing)

Example #3 (Intermediate Arrangement)

- Quartet setting of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, much more contrapuntal and complex in texture.

Taking the first steps from Arranging to Composing

- Arrangements are tied to their melodic content; compositions can be free to explore abstract ideas as well as musical content.
- Remember, simplicity still holds true for composing as well as arranging – if you start with simple material, the more options you will allow yourself to investigate.
- If you feel the need for new material, try to find the seeds of it in the material you’ve already written down – even the most innocuous fragment may spawn a host of new ideas.
- There are really only three decisions to make while composing – repeat what you’ve written, vary what you’ve written, or write something new and contrasting. Repeating material in slightly different ways is very much allowed – and quite similar to arranging.
- Don’t worry about whether or not it’s good or not – write it down and you can always change it later!

Example #4 (Basic Composition)

- 1-2 compositions based on *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* for saxophone quartet

Building a composition with five 1-measure motives

- Select 3-5 diatonic pitches that create an interesting melodic shape.
- Using various rhythmic durations and metric placements, create 12-15 1-measure motives using just those pitches. (Use common time for starting out - that can always be adjusted later on.)

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- Techniques you could use include:
 - Inversion
 - Retrograde
 - Augmentation
 - Diminution
- Do that four more times (you'll have 60-75 motives to work with).
- Once you have these groups of motives (I call them "buckets", you can create your own measure-by-measure melodic blueprint (For instance, a four-bar phrase could be AABA' – one motive from the "A" bucket" repeated, followed by one from the "B" bucket and a different motive from the "A" bucket.)
- Inexperienced composers will not instinctively add rests, dynamics, or articulations.
- The "character" of each motive should vary; some may want to lead into the following bar because of a pick-up note, while others may settle into a cadence on a strong beat.
- Later on, you could include the following techniques:
 - Expansion (vertical)
 - Contraction (vertical)
 - Octave Displacement
 - Transposition
 - Mode Mixture

Example from my Beginning Composition Course

- First assignment from MUS 129 Beginning Composition; create a 36-measure solo work for viola, working within structured guidelines in the assignment.

Critiquing Each Other's Works

- Stick to objective criticisms at first (notation, instrumentation, etc.) and as the comfort and trust level rises, subjective suggestions may be offered.
- Don't leave it open-ended; explain what the critiquing parameters are at the outset and don't be afraid to enforce critiquing boundaries when necessary.
- Model a "safe-zone" approach where criticism is constructive; questions are better than statements and suggestions are better than demands.
- When the student asks you why you chose to write your music the way you did, be careful to strike a balance between explanation and personal taste; you want to demonstrate that what you've created is one option, but the only option.
- Once mutual respect and collaborative dialogue set in, you're on your way.

Questions, anyone?

If you do have any questions in the future or would like to get PDFs of the music you've heard today, feel free to contact me at deemer@fredonia.edu!

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The Evolution of Melodic Material from Pre-existing Music Phrase from "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" and its retrograde (Var. 1)

Original phrase and its retrograde (Var. 1) in 4/4 time, marked *p*. The original phrase is in D minor, and the retrograde is in B-flat major.

Var. 1 with modal shift throughout and 2nd 3 bars inverted (Var. 2)

Var. 2: The original phrase with a modal shift to D major throughout and the second and third bars inverted. Marked *p*.

Var. 2 with first attempt at development (Var. 2a)

Var. 2a: The original phrase with a first attempt at development in the bass line, including a triplet. Marked *p*.

Var. 2 with second attempt at development (Var. 2b)

Var. 2b: The original phrase with a second attempt at development in the bass line, featuring more complex rhythmic patterns. Marked *p*.

Var. 2 with third attempt at development (Var. 2c)

Var. 2c: The original phrase with a third attempt at development in the bass line, featuring triplets and more complex rhythmic patterns. Marked *p*.