

STEPS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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The evolution of a musical composition may be a lengthy or brief process. For some composers, ideas which do not need revision seem to flow quickly and freely. For others, like Beethoven, composition seems to be an effort. In his book, *The Golden Encyclopedia of Music*, Norman Lloyd reports:

Beethoven never composed quickly and easily....When he sat down to write he always seemed to have a struggle....He would spend months, even years on one theme. 1

I believe that composers who write freely and easily like Mozart (he wrote three symphonies in one summer, 1788) and those who, like Beethoven, compose with effort go through similar steps in their creative process. These steps include having a reason for the composition, getting an idea, planning the composition, writing the details, and critically evaluating and editing the final product. Although any person with a knowledge of music can follow the outlined steps and create a composition, the piece will be dull and uninteresting if inspiration is absent. For some, the reason for composing a piece of music may simply be the need to express an idea that is inside the composer. For others, a contest, a commission or contract, the desire to write music for a particular student, group or event or the wish to create something where a void exists may supply the reason that starts the creative process. For example, a music teacher may feel that there is very little modal music for beginning students. Therefore, s/he may decide to create music to fill this void.

Composers in the Baroque and Classical periods often worked for a patron. Much of their music was created for particular events or because their patrons had ordered it. I have had students write original compositions of good quality because they wished to enter a contest. Arletta O'Hearn, Portland jazz composer, told me that she is first motivated by need. She wishes to compose for a particular student or her publisher has asked for a new collection. My first musical composition was a song for young children. A friend who was attending Marylhurst College with me mentioned that she composed songs for her primary church choir. I reacted by thinking that I could do that, too. The first step in the creative process of this song, therefore, was the need to emulate my friend.

The second step in the creative process involves getting an idea. Some years ago the composer, Eric Funk, formerly of Portland, gave a workshop on composition. He suggested that people who wish to compose could stimulate their imagination by creating a dream house. Young students could substitute a dream castle for a house. One should take time to imagine every little detail related to the house or castle. Now the person will be in a creative frame of mind and will be inspired to imagine his/her composition. What will be its length, instrumentation, mood, key or mode, rhythmic feeling and range? It is amazing to me that when Eric led the people attending the workshop through the outlined process, my ideas started to flow. I was able to hear a piece with my inner ear.

The next step is to plan the composition. Eric Funk suggested that the composer draw a time line which would include many details about the composition. He said that he used this process in creating his own compositions. The following is a time line for a piano piece that I recently composed:

Title: Jules

by Kari Nicholas

Section:	A	B	C	A ¹
Instrumentation:	Flute and piano	----	----	
Tempo:	Fast	Mixed-up	Fast	Fast
Mood:	Cheerful	Fun	Crazy	Cheerful
Key or tonal center:	F major	G major	D minor	F major
Special effects:	None	Sounds of outdoors	High shrieks	None
Program:	Two sisters getting cats and thinking up names...The joy of a new pet...	Disneyland... The sounds and feelings of a carnival...The happiness of a family trip	The craziness of the senior year...The stress. The helpfulness of a sister	Pleasant memories of times together

When I compose, I do not make a time line. I am, however, conscious of form. For example, I might think, "Now I have an A section. I need to modulate to a new key and create a contrasting B section."

For Eric Funk, the next phase or the writing of the music was separate from planning the composition. For me, the two occur simultaneously. I have read that Mozart composed so quickly that all of the categories seemed to be fused together. No matter how quickly composers work, their compositions will have to be written if they are to be used.

Once compositions are written, composers usually critically evaluate and edit them. As mentioned in the first paragraph, Beethoven spent months or years in this process. Some people ask others to read their pieces and offer suggestions. Arletta O'Hearn said that this stage of the creative process is the most tedious for her. She added that it is difficult to keep the freshness of the idea while one is reworking it, and she has to resist her natural inclination for getting tired of the music.

I believe that inspiration plays an important role in the creation of a composition. It is possible, however, for people to write compositions without being inspired and without using their imaginations. At times, I have led young students through the exercise of composing. I tell them to put their hands in a specified five finger pattern. Then I tell them to do something specific. For example, I may tell them to play an ostinato bass with the left hand and make up a melody with the right hand. Although I am able to pull a composition from a child in this way, it will be dull and uninteresting if the child is not at all inspired from within. A better way of working with children is for teachers to introduce activities that will help the youngsters become inspired. For example, the children may be encouraged to talk of their vacations, their pets or other animals. They can listen to sounds and discuss how sounds are made. How do spooky things sound? How does a baseball sound when it is being thrown? What about the sound of a bouncing ball? A child can be asked to write a story or draw a picture that will serve as inspiration for his/her musical composition. Many examples of well-written compositions, which the students can easily understand, should be played. When I have a reason for writing a composition, ideas surface at unexpected times. While I am working on a composition, I often think about the music. Every now and then little flashes come to me. I believe that these flashes are bits of inspiration.

As teachers, we have an awesome responsibility. Besides teaching the mechanics of our instrument, we should encourage students to develop their creative powers. Including composition in our music program allows us an opportunity to help children think creatively. Even if a student does not write more than one or two compositions, s/he will gain an understanding of music and creativity that is denied to those who are never exposed to composing. Furthermore, I believe that students who are encouraged to be creative and experience the excitement of receiving inspiration will be better able to form a relationship with the Master Creator, the Creator of the Universe.

Notes

1 Norman Lloyd, "Beethoven, Ludwig Van," *The Golden Encyclopedia of Music*, (New York, 1968), 57.