

This is the Art of Composing music podcast, episode number 1: *What is Music Composition?* This is the inaugural episode. My name is Jon Brantingham and I'm the founder of artofcomposing.com. What I hope to be bringing you with this show is a podcast that's really devoted to the process of becoming a composer and learning to compose music. I've found that there's nothing out there that really talks about the nuts and bolts of what it takes to compose music, music theory, and the process of creativity.

FEATURED CONTENT

What is music composition all about? Let's start off with a definition. This definition is actually the definition of 'compose,' from dictionary.com. 'Composition is to make or form by combining things, parts, or elements.' I like this definition because it's not about creating something out of nothing. It's about combining things, parts, and elements to actually compose something. When somebody composes they're creating out of a store of knowledge and experience they've gathered their entire lives. Everyone has heard music. It's everywhere, the internet, iPods, radio, TV. From the day you're born, until the day you die, it's going to be around. Nonetheless, it's what you grow up with which informs what you think about music. If this is all you have and you start to write music, you're probably going to find that it's pretty hard. And the reason is because you're not leaning on a lot of ground work that really makes music composition more pleasant and enjoyable. What is this knowledge that I'm talking about? It's called the Trivium.

The Trivium is an ancient system of learning that originated with the Greeks. It divides the process of learning into three distinct steps and forms the first three arts of the several liberal arts. These steps are *grammar*, *logic* and *rhetoric*. These three must be followed sequentially and mastered before moving on. Grammar is the nuts and bolts of language. It encompasses reading and writing and is really about the mechanics of putting together a language. It's what prevents you from creating incomplete sentences. If we were to translate grammar into composition then the grammar of music composition would be things like reading music, understanding notation, the basics of music theory—scales, notes, chords, musical terms, and simple harmonies. These are the basics. Furthermore, the grammar of music is learning to play an instrument. I play a couple different instruments. You have to learn grammar first or else the following steps of learning to compose won't really make much sense. Once you've learned grammar, then you can move on to logic.

Traditionally, with logic students would learn to put together a sound argument. This takes you beyond the basics of how to read and write, and just creating a sentence. You start to learn things like propositions, axioms and syllogisms. Bringing it back to music composition, if grammar is all about the fundamental building blocks, then logic is about how to put those building blocks together to create things that actually make sense musically. Things like sentences, periods, phrases, themes, and transitions within your themes. These are the kind of things that allow you to put together your music so that it doesn't sound like a bunch of random notes. For instance, a syllogism in regular logic would be something like 'all mammals

have fur; cats are mammals; therefore, cats have fur.' This is a sound argument. It's not something that's too difficult to understand but it's something that you've got to understand to create. If you wanted to create a musical, logical statement it would be something like a two-bar basic idea followed by a two-bar contrasting idea, which makes an antecedent phrase. If you're not familiar with these terms don't worry. I do cover that on my website, artofcomposing.com. The key is to understand that there is a logic behind music. It's not random and it doesn't just come out of thin air.

Once you understand logic then you can move on to rhetoric. The definition of rhetoric is 'the art of effective, or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other compositional techniques.' If we look at this once again in respect to music, rhetoric of music is the ability to truly connect with people on a deeper level by tapping into the music that is ingrained in all of us. Everybody growing up in a country dominated with traditional Western Classical music knows what a cadence is, knows a period, knows small ternary form, even if they don't know that they know it. You know what they sound like. It really helps to study them and to understand them for your own composing.

The key is to internalize them to the point that you don't have to think about it. This is kind of the way they used to do traditional rhetorical training. Once you go through grammar and logic you would start to practice writing your own speeches. And a big part of it is you would transcribe the speeches from famous orators. You would write it out, memorize it and practice saying it yourself. Another exercise was to try and write it out a hundred different ways. You're trying to explain something with a particular audience in mind. The same goes with music. You're trying to write music, not for a vacuum, but for people. And you want people to listen to your music, even if those people are just you. This is the reason that true masters of composition can be so prolific, profound, and have beautiful music to listen to. Their brains have learned the grammar, logic and rhetoric of music so well that they don't even need to think about those parts. They just focus on what it is they want to say and then say it.

Takeaways

I like to say that the definition of musical composition is the process of making or forming a piece by combining the parts or elements of music. These parts or elements fall into three categories also known as the Trivium. *Grammar* is the basic elements that make up all of music including notation, notes, scales and chords. This must be learned so that you can understand the logic of music. *Logic* is the way grammar is put together to form small sections of music like periods and sentences. These are the equivalent of syllogisms or logical statements in language. Mastering logic would give you the ability to understand and use rhetoric. *Rhetoric* is the art of effective or persuasive composition using musical figures of speech and other compositional techniques. Rhetoric allows you to connect with people on a deeper level and then join the great conversation of music that has been going on since the dawn of time. If you've liked this episode I'd love to hear from you. Stop by in iTunes and leave a review. If you'd like to learn more about composing, head over to artofcomposing.com.