

This is the Art of Composing podcast episode number 2: *The Process of Composing*. Welcome to the Art of Composing podcast. We are back with another episode.

## FEATURED CONTENT

Have you ever thought about what is going on in the mind of a composer while they're actually composing? It's a strange thing to think about. How is it you get from the beginning of a piece to the end? This episode is all about the process of composing. I like to think of it as happening in five stages. I'm going to talk you through a typical session.

The five stages are:

- 1 pre-composition
- 2 starting-point
- 3 composition/re-composition
- 4 stopping-point
- 5 post-composition

**Pre-composition** is the period that leads up to composing. This is your preparation period. It covers everything from setting up your composing space, to exercising outside, whatever you need to do to get yourself into the right mind-set.

**Starting-point** is the moment at which you start to compose. When you choose to start can make a big difference for how the rest of the process goes.

**Composition/re-composition** is where the magic happens. You go through the act of evaluating, editing, adding, and changing what you've created. Some can write straight through. Others have to move to different areas. I like to go from my piano, writing by hand, to the computer, and back and forth.

**Stopping-point** is the moment at which you make the conscious decision to end your composing period. It doesn't have to be the end of a piece. It might be, if the piece is short. If you're writing something long like a symphony, you're not going to write that all in one sitting. The key is that you have to make the conscious decision to stop, give your creative side of the brain a rest.

**Post-composition** state ends the process; this is where you allow the music to stew in your subconscious. You may have to take an extended break from listening—a day, a week, maybe even a year. Just stick it in the drawer. If you decide the piece is finished, post it to something online (SoundCloud), or play it for someone.

Sometimes you'll go back to the music to make changes. At that point, the *post-composition* state kind of merges into the *pre-composition* state, and you'll start the whole process over. I

look at that as a new period of composing. You'll find if you move back to a piece, the act of creation goes a lot smoother—you've already done the hard part (coming up with the basic material).

Let's go over how I structure a typical composing session. I'm going to try and compose in pseudo-real-time on the podcast. I think it will be beneficial for you to hear me come up with ideas as we go. This should help clarify any new terminology and take away a bit of the mystery that goes along with composing. Let's get started.

My *pre-composition* state usually starts around 3 AM. I find that I'm most creative then. The key for me at this stage is that the house is quiet. I try to prepare my composing area beforehand. I like to practice what I call *zero friction composing*, which means that I don't want any artificial roadblocks. I make sure that I've got staff paper, a pencil, and an eraser. If I'm using the keyboard, I've got headphones, the computer turned on, and whatever [notation] program I'm going to use to write out the music. A notation program is a computer program used to write and playback music. I use a program called Sibelius.

Sometimes I set limitations for myself during the composition process. These limitations include a time limit for composing. I complete them in 30 minutes. Other things I like to limit myself on are key and time signatures, meter, general length, traditional form (small ternary, sonata form) and instrumentation. These limits take a large portion of anxiety away and answer composing questions you have before they come up. For instance, if I know that I want to write a piece for a string quartet that's in 4/4 time, and it's in the key of D major, and it's going to be approximately three minutes long, then my subconscious already starts to mull over that information before I start to compose. This is the *pre-composition* state.

If I add further restrictions like, I want an opening theme that's very active and bright with a lot of movement, and then I want a flowing, contrasting middle section—that all just continues to focus my subconscious. And the subconscious is key in all of this. Once I get everything setup, that's when I make the decision to start. This is usually a difficult decision, as it's easy to get caught up procrastinating and tell myself that I have to do more preparation. After starting, that's when I enter the stage of *composition/recomposition*. It usually follows this pattern: I begin to play the piano and start searching for a simple idea. Once I've come up with a simple motive I write it down. Then I'll make it conform to what I know are standard musical forms, especially at the beginning. This tends to be a basic idea, which is a two-measure unit of music. The benefit of this is that it's slightly different and a more intellectual process than just trying to come up with something that sounds good. I'll move onto developing that into a longer form called the main theme.

I'm going to compose what's called a period, which is a very common theme type. With the period, you've got two different phrases, an antecedent and a consequent phrase. In the antecedent you've got a basic ideal. Then I need to compose a contrasting ideal. Together, these two ideals, the basic and contrasting ideal make the antecedent phrase. Following this, I know that a period repeats the basic idea so that it's already taken care of in the next phrase,

the consequent phrase. I can change it a little by adding ornamentation or other aspects. It ends with another contrasting ideal and leads to what's called a cadence.

A lot of times you can move to what's called a V, VI, IV or a I, VI, IV chord depending on what school of harmony you're from. When I talk about dominant harmony there's three categories. They're called *tonic*, which is basically off of the I chord. Then you've got *predominant* (subdominant), which is the IV chord. And then you've got *dominant*, which is based off of the V chord. The last part is called the recapitulation. The recapitulation is the exposition with a few things taken out. That's basically it. That is a complete piece of music in small ternary form.

Then I'll move to the computer. One of the benefits is I can put it in the notation program which will give me quick feedback. You can play the music and not worry about mistakes. You'll lose a bit of the human feeling but end up gaining a good perspective. It's a lot easier to make changes when you're in the computer, plus the computer can play it back perfectly. It allows you to get out of this problem that composers call the *tyranny of the fingers*—you're stuck with what you can play through your fingers.

I've reached my stopping point. I'm done composing. I can export it. I can put it online for people to listen to. I'm going to listen to it again. I'll go back and change it. That's everything that goes into composing a piece of music.

## Takeaways

The music composition process is a somewhat messy, linear process. Everything you do leading up to composing makes a difference. The process generally follows five steps:

- 1 *pre-composition* is the period leading up to composing, preparing your environment, having a pencil and staff paper.
- 2 *starting-point* is the point you make a conscious decision to come up with musical ideals.
- 3 *composition/re-composition* is where you come up with new ideals, change, edit, or scrap them.
- 4 *stopping-point* is where you make a conscious decision to stop creating new ideals.
- 5 *post-composition* is where you're subconscious takes over and you may have insights that weren't possible during the composition/recomposition stage. You also make the decision to make the composition public or keep it private.

I hope that helped you understand a little bit about what goes on in my mind when I compose. If you enjoyed this episode please let me know. Leave a 5-star review in iTunes. It helps to get me exposure in the iTunes store and ultimately for more people to listen and learn about composing. Until next time this is the end of episode two.