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This article explores how pedagogy in music composition in the United Kingdom has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century, and suggests a model which is effective in facilitating the development of today's student composers in Higher Education, but could also be applicable for younger students. Firstly, I will examine a range of writers' approaches to outlining how the act of music composition can be taught. I will then suggest a pedagogic model which is based on aspects of these approaches but informed by my own experiences as a composition teacher.

When I first started composing as a teenager, I taught myself composition largely through the text *Teach yourself to compose music* by King Palmer (1947), and composed music which was sub-Beethoven pastiche.[1] This was part of a series of 'teach yourself books' on a wide range of topics; Palmer wrote in the preface that

> cookery and musical composition have little in common, yet both are included in this series under the general title "Teach Yourself". It is important, therefore, to draw some distinction between them lest the enthusiastic but unmusical reader should imagine that a piece of music can be produced as easily as an omelette. For whereas the cook has all the necessary ingredients to hand the composer must invent his material. Almost anyone can learn to cook, but only those with some degree of creative talent can hope to compose music.[2]

I think Palmer is right that composing and cookery are quite different activities, however there are in fact many similarities between cooking and composing—you do need technique and raw materials for both. In cooking, creativity is when you change the given recipe to produce a new and original dish. That is similar to one approach to composing, in which you base your work on what has been done before, but transformed or twisted in some way to create new work.

In an earlier book on composition by Frederick Corder written in 1909 entitled *Modern Musical Composition*, he states "that the student finds the idiom of the past irksome and repellent; it is the vernacular that he desires to learn: he does not wish to take

1 Music which is a pastiche of Beethoven but obviously lacking the creativity of the original model.

2 Palmer (1947, v).

as his models the unapproachable gods of antiquity, but his immediate contemporaries."[3] This is quite a forward-thinking attitude and closer to today's approach to composition. You could change the word "vernacular" to "popular music" and it would be even more pertinent. Corder also states that concerning originality and teaching in composition that at this point I fancy I hear the reader saying: 'but all this toil and trouble cannot avail if one has not true originality; it will only enable one to write *Kapellmeistermusik* which nobody wants.' Is that so? Let us consider what this objection really means. The commonest of all delusions – one which is hopeless to combat in the true amateur—is that the world's great artists—Beethoven—Liszt—Paganini—Raffael—Shakespeare—were never taught, but came into the world fully fledged, always absolutely perfect and beyond criticism.[4]

His point is that teaching and learning technique is vital for the composer, and that this needs to be in place before originality can flourish—there are exceptions to this, for example John Cage, who was an experimentalist from the start in his work, but he is unique.

A more recent text is *Musical Composition: A manual for training the young composers* written by George Thaddeus Jones in 1963. This includes sections on basic compositional techniques but also more forward-thinking topics such as multi-tone scales, bitonality and serial technique in a tonal style. In Jones's introduction he says "it is intended that this manual will be used by the young composer under the guidance of a teacher who is himself a composer. This is the only way composition can be taught."[5] I think he is right, but these ideal circumstances are not always possible, and most music teachers in schools in the United Kingdom are usually not composers. Even in higher education it is not possible to provide much one-to-one teaching in composition in most institutions—most is in large groups or seminars until at least the final year, unless the institution is a conservatoire, such as the Royal College of Music, where funding is much higher. Jones's book was important for my development as a composer, as it made me aware that sub-Beethoven pastiche was not what living composers were writing—the book included works by Jones's student composers as models, which made me more aware of what 'modern' music could be, and at the time I found them quite dissonant and challenging.

Other later texts on how to compose include Reginald Smith Brindle's *Musical Composition* (1986), which is wide-ranging, quirky and not at all methodical, and it is he who inspired the provocative quotation at the start of this article. He explores a larger range of contemporary music and ideas but not in much depth. The most recent textbook on

3 Corder (1909, 1).

4 Ibid., 84.

5 Jones (1963, vii).

composition is Margaret Lucy Wilkins' *Creative Music Composition: The Young Composer's Voice* (2006) which is focused on contemporary and twentieth-century repertoire and is methodical in its structure. It has less focus on specific techniques and more on providing inexperienced composers with helpful stimuli, including analysis of relevant music.

Personal experiences of composition teaching

My own more formal composition teaching before going to university was organised through the Professor of composition at my local university and involved some one-to-one teaching with an ex-student of his. He introduced me to a wide range of music, including serial music, and his teaching was inspirational. The official approach at Manchester University where I studied as an undergraduate was that composition couldn't be taught until the final year—we had to attempt to imitate the music of dead composers up to that point, such as Palestrina, Haydn and Wolf. There were, however, clandestine classes in composition run by the composer Geoffrey Poole, which did not feature on the timetable, but were the most exciting and stimulating educational experiences on the course—not assessed and not on the curriculum. The teaching of composition in music degrees has grown since the 1980s on the back of work by the music educators John Paynter (1970) and Keith Swanwick (1988), and now it is a significant part of the music curriculum both in schools and Higher Education in the United Kingdom.

One of the most valuable learning experiences I had at Manchester was when student composers wrote works for ensembles of student performers—usually student compositions were rarely performed at that time (in the 1980s) so it was quite special to hear your imagined sounds realised. Today there is much more computer technology that allows students to hear their work with instrumental samples of variable quality, but it's not quite the same as working with humans who can suggest changes and improvements to your music. This experience has influenced my philosophy of teaching composition, and interacting with performers is at the heart of all my composition teaching.

How should composition be taught?

So how should we teach composition? What is the most effective pedagogy to employ? In a symposium at Stanford University in 2012,[6] there were divergent views expressed on how to teach composition at the doctoral level. The Universities of Chicago and Columbia had a traditional approach to teaching composition through imitating past styles which

6 Applebaum and Ulman, eds., 'Pedagogical praxis and curricular infrastructure in graduate music composition' *Contemporary Music Review* 21 (4), Aug. 2012.

contrasted greatly with a much more *laissez-faire* approach at Princeton. Dan Trueman, professor at Princeton, suggests that "good teaching is more about establishing rich contexts (or cultures) for learning than it is about the direct transmission of knowledge, skills, or ideas."[7] This is a view I would agree with—there is no one right way of composing, as we live in a pluralist age that includes both the dissonant complexities of Brian Ferneyhough and the consonant simplicities of Philip Glass. Wilkins makes the point that "stylistic composition should not be regarded as a substitute for, or an alternative to, the guided experience of free composition."[8] Alexander Goehr, in a BBC 3 radio programme in November 2015,[9] made the point that what a composer really needs to learn is how to revise and correct—how to work on their ideas effectively to make them better works. The truth of this statement can be observed in the radical transformations that take place from Beethoven's often banal sketches to the final transformed works.

My approach to teaching composition has evolved, reflecting the changing needs of students and the development of my pedagogic thinking. Initially in the 1980s and 1990s, I focused on teaching composition through analysis of relevant models, supported with tutorials and practical workshops of students' work. This reflects the approaches outlined in the books by Smith Brindle and Wilkins. The pedagogy involves taking apart model works to demonstrate how they have been constructed; students then compose their own music based on these models. Later in the course, students are given greater freedom and can compose whatever kind of music they wish, while developing their own creative voice.

Over the years my approach[10] has changed to one in which the complexity and length of the assigned compositions increases over the first two years of study;[11] this helps to build up students' confidence and technique gradually. The earlier assignments have a clearly defined musical purpose with a tight focus. Assessment of the work has two stages: firstly, an informal stage focused on helping students improve through peer and lecturer feedback in workshop situations; and secondly the formal assessment by the

7 Trueman (2012, 327).

8 Wilkins (2006, 12).

9 Service (2015).

10 My composition students take a BMus degree in which composition is their specialism and they spend 25% of their time on this area; the rest consists of complementary music curriculum. Other music students specialise in music performance or music technology. Non-music majors would not normally take such a specialised subject like composition in the UK, however, not all music students taking composition will have much experience of the subject.

11 In the UK most degree courses are three years in length, usually with greater freedom of choice of modules in the third year.

lecturer. The trouble with today's students' obsession with their marks is that it tends to encourage students to avoid risks, and this is a destructive force in the arts. I am often asked by students: "how can I change this piece so that it gets a very high mark?" This is an impossible question to answer; we can suggest ways to improve their work, but not to guarantee a particular grade. What is more important is to help students to develop a critical approach so they can perceive the strengths and weaknesses in their work—hence the importance of workshops. My experience of co-marking with one or more colleagues is that assessing creative work is challenging, and experienced composers do not always agree on the relative merits of a student work, as there is an inevitable degree of subjectivity in the process.

Composition teaching and assessment in School

Students' experiences of composition teaching at secondary school in the United Kingdom (ages 11-18) can be variable, as few music teachers will be composition specialists and often don't have the experience to support their students. Composition is assessed at both GCSE[12] (examinations taken at age 16) and Advanced level[13] (taken at age 18) and there is a focus on composing quite extended works (up to 9 minutes for some boards at Advanced level). The focus of these examinations[14] is on summative assessment, rather than the process of learning how to compose, which would be achieved by a more varied folio submission. I have been involved in consultation with an examination board (WJEC)[15] in 2014, and my feedback was that the length of assessed compositions was too long for most candidates at that stage of their development—they did subsequently act on my suggestions by shortening the required lengths of the works, but I still feel the approach is driven by assessment and not by the learning needs of the pupils. A larger

12 General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations are distinct qualifications in a wide range of subjects (up to 11). In the music GCSE there is an emphasis on the practical aspects of music such as performing and composing, which continues into Advanced level music. See the Incorporated Society of Music for an overview of the new GCSE in music from a range of boards, accessed April 2, 2018, https://www.ism.org/images/files/GCSE-music-comparison-chart-2016.pdf.

13 Advanced level courses are a precursor to University study and pupils normally take three subjects. Most music students in higher education focusing on composition will have taken Advanced level music, but it is also possible to gain entry with other qualifications such as the BTec. national diploma in music.

14 In composition examinations in the UK students usually work on their compositions away from the classroom but with some time allocated to work in school with teacher supervision. These are not formal examinations as such and students can make use of notation software such as Sibelius.

15 Welsh Joint Educational Committee

folio of shorter works would encourage the development of a range of compositional techniques which is not possible with fewer but longer works. The WJEC also uses the phrase 'Western Classical style' in the A level specification[16] in relation to the required style of a composition—this is meaningless as a concept as there are many quite different Classical styles depending upon how one defines the term. This is a throwback to 'style composition', taught in higher education in the past, in which students compose music in the style of a specific composer (usually pre-twentieth century)—the difference is that at least in the latter case there is clarity of the specific style to be imitated.

An approach to composition pedagogy

Because of the above situation, students who have been through the GCSE and Advanced-level music courses in the UK often have deficiencies and gaps in their compositional knowledge, technique and skill level. In my department, this is addressed in the first-year composition course through focused topics leading to compositional projects. The pedagogic approach to teaching the course is rooted in practice; therefore, the model is: exploration of a concept through the discussion of a topic; listening to examples; analysis of these examples; creative practice responding to these works—thus active learning is at the heart of the teaching. The weekly classes are two hours, so in the first 20 minutes there would be class discussion of the topic; the next 40 minutes would focus on listening to and analysing relevant examples; the second hour would be focused on practical work. This creative practice consists of students working in groups on the creation of a short collaborative work exploring the topic that has been discussed—these can be fully-composed or more usually part-improvised. These resulting 'microcompositions' are performed to the rest of the group for peer/lecturer feedback and reflection. The benefits of this approach are that students immediately try out a concept in practice, and listen to the results. Students also learn from listening to their peers' approaches and can provide constructive peer feedback.

In the teaching schedule, there are also workshops when finished or nearly-completed assessed works are played to the rest of the group, either live or using midi realisations, so that students can get immediate feedback before the formal assessment process. In addition, students submit their compositions for workshops with a professional ensemble (recently a string quartet) and a good local amateur orchestra, which provides valuable learning experiences mirroring the professional composers' world.

16 WJEC GCE AS/A Music Specification (from 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/music/r-music-gce-asa-from-2016/.

In the first year of the BMus composition course, the objective is to deal with the fundamental elements of music separately, to enable students to understand these concepts more clearly. The projects consist of a series of compositions of around 30 bars in length (or equivalent), and deal with the following topics in this order: graphic scores, rhythm, melody, serialism and non-tonal music, vocal composition, and extended compositional structures. These are not the only topics one could explore in the first year of a composition course, and the above could be substituted with other equally valid topics such as harmony or polyphony. However, I do feel that the first three are essential elements in any composition course. Although there is not a specific style of music emphasised in the course, there is an overarching encouragement for students to be quite experimental and open-minded in their approach to composing, which they could bring to whatever style of music they want to compose. The projects have a clear brief which gives students a set of boundaries to compose within. In all cases the music composed will be performed in a workshop for peer- and self-reflection.

The rationale for starting with a graphic score composition is to encourage students to think away from traditional notation, and to think about texture and timbre more than about specific pitches and harmonies. It also has the benefit that students who have little confidence in traditional notation do not feel disadvantaged.[17] The topic of graphic scoring allows students to explore the nature of music notation, what it is useful for, and what are its limitations. The assignment students undertook was to compose "a work for at least four parts (voices and/or instruments) which must show a variety and evolution of textures. It must use a form of graphic notation and not traditional stave notation. It must include a detailed key of the notation used." What is most valuable in terms of students' learning is performing the work in the workshop, experiencing what is effective and what needs further development.

The second topic is based on composing music which is based only on rhythm and uses non-pitched percussion instruments. This allows the isolation of a single musical parameter and how to use this to create a structured and engaging piece of music. Students listen to and analyse works which are purely rhythmic, such as Steve Reich's minimalist *Music for Pieces of Wood* (1973) and Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1929-31), to develop an understanding of how they are constructed. Students with a lack of experience in notation are gently introduced to traditional notation through rhythm without having

17 Increasingly, students come into Higher Education in the UK with fewer traditional musical notational skills; this is often because they have a background in popular music and may have been largely self-taught.

to consider pitch or staves.[18]

The next topic is focused on pitch and the creation of a monody, allowing students to concentrate on line rather than harmony. Much popular music is dominated by tonal harmonic progressions from which melodies emerge, and I think it is valuable to explore melody without having to think about the harmonic implications. As part of this topic, the subject of modes is addressed to enable students to be aware of the range of possible raw materials of melodic invention.[19]

The fourth topic is a little controversial as it is concerned with an introduction to serialism and atonality. It seems to me that any composer should be aware of the music in which tonality became challenged, because of its influence on Western art music of the twentieth century. It is not that one would expect all students to become serial composers, but it is important that they understand how and why serial music emerged, and that there are valid methods beyond tonality with which to construct music. The construction of a serial matrix helps students' development of music theory skills through transposition of the row. This assignment also focuses on how to make use of drama and expression in composition and how significant this element is for any successful work.[20]

The fifth topic is based around the voice, which was chosen because it involves the additional challenge of working with a text. For this assessment, students could compose either a pop song or else a more experimental work. The focus is on examining the nature and possibilities of the voice, exploring extended techniques and how to set the text effectively.[21]

The culmination of the course has a longer project which gives students the freedom to compose a work of around five minutes in a style of their choosing. This project explores the issues around composing larger works in terms of the structural design and the development of material. The final assignment was to compose "a work in any

18 The assignment was to compose "a work which consists of at least four parts for non-pitched percussion. The work must explore rhythmical processes/development, polyrhythms and polymetres."

19 The assignment was to compose "a monody for an instrument within your group which uses a mode (you could create your own). Attention should be made to the formal shape and the development of ideas."

20 The assignment was to compose "a work which uses a serial pitch matrix to generate its compositional material. It should be for piano and solo instrument or instrumental quartet. Attention should be focused on the expression and drama of the work, such as elements other than pitch. You must provide the serial matrix used with the composition and indicate the rows used in the score."

21 The assignment was to compose "a work using the voice or voices which could also include instruments. Be clear about how you use the stresses of the text, and take into consideration the practicalities of writing for voice, such as range and complexity."

style of about five minutes in length. It should show a clear and coherent structure, and should also show development of the ideas. A recording should be submitted with the score (which should be appropriate for the genre)." For this assignment, I suggest that the students should try to compose music which they themselves would want to go and hear at a concert—to think about their compositional voice. However, I also feel that as a teacher it is my role to ensure students hear and analyse music that they have never heard before. Students in the United Kingdom often come to university with a very narrow range of music they listen to and like—students often show a reluctance to listen to more challenging work. The quality of work produced by my students is often very imaginative if imperfectly notated; what is most important for me is to encourage development and risk-taking in their work. We ask for feedback from our students each year, and a typical example from 2013-14 was that "the string quartet workshop and recording was especially appreciated. Students also liked the range of materials and the tutorial support given."

To address the issue of repertoire knowledge in the second year, the composition course focuses on a range of contemporary or twentieth century approaches to composition. Therefore, topics such as *Farbenmusik*,[22] minimalism, systems and the use of chance in decision-making are explored. Students are also commissioned to write a longer composition for one of their peers who is specialising in performance on the BMus course. In this work, the evolution of the composition is collaborative, so the performer has significant input into how the work evolves, and aspects of its style and approach. This has benefits both for the composer, who learns how to write effectively for the instrument, and the performer, who develops an understanding of a composer's practice. A crucial part of the process is a workshop in which the resulting composition is performed, to generate feedback and discussion. The work is also performed later in the year, in a recital at which the performer is formally assessed.

The rationale for choosing the above topics in year two is that they are representative of a range of current techniques, but could be replaced by other equally valid ones such as postmodernist/post minimalist approaches, new complexity, or the fusion of popular music with contemporary musical techniques. Other supporting elements are covered such as extended instrumental techniques (which ties in with the commissioned work in stretching the performer's technique), advanced harmony, analysis of models, and instrumentation. There is also space in the schedule to allow students to suggest topics to be included; one group wanted more discussion and analysis of traditional tonal orchestral music, as that was the kind of music they were most interested in. I feel it is important to listen to the needs of our students and take a flexible approach to the curriculum content—

22 'Colour music' is music in which the main compositional elements are timbre and texture.

after all, no two classes are alike in their needs. There has been a noticeable change in the backgrounds of students taking the BMus course in my institution, and discussion with colleagues at other institutions suggests this is widespread in the UK: more are coming from a popular music or a conversely conservative classical music background. However, it is possible to integrate these elements using the above teaching model in a flexible manner.

Conclusions

My conclusion is that it is essential that the teaching of composition is practical, active, and that peer- and self-feedback is a significant part of the learning process. The response from students experiencing this approach is that this is an enjoyable and stimulating way of learning. The active approach to learning, combined with reflective workshops of their own work, is a powerful way to develop their skills and confidence in composition. I'd like to end with some thoughts by Corder on the topic of originality:

> as to actual distinction and originality of style, this is always far more a result of conscious reason than a mere intuition, or instinct. For, to be original does not mean that you are to do eccentric things: it only means that by the exercise of superior thought and knowledge you replace stale conventions by newer ones.[23]

This chimes well the idea I suggested at the beginning of this article, that there is much in common between cooking and composing—that composers must develop a technique based on existing ideas, but then change them in some way, to create a new work of art. The quotation from the title of this article comes from Smith Brindle's book: "I think we are born composers and not made"[24]—but ironically, he later goes on to suggest possible approaches to teaching composition through analysis. I don't agree with Smith Brindle's suggestion: I think composers are in fact made and not born, however, to be successful as a composer you must go beyond your teaching to find something new to say, as Corder suggests; otherwise you will just be regurgitating the music of past.

23 Corder (1909, 85).

24 Smith Brindle, *Musical Composition*, 1.

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