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ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

THOMAS BENJAMIN

I have been thinking about what it is like to teach composition, and especially about the limitations of what we can accomplish. There is little written on this subject that has much practical value of the "what do I do Monday?" variety. Like the weather, everyone discusses it, but mostly in general terms. We can understand why this should be since the composing process is intensely personal and subjective, and the teacher/student relationship is complex and privileged. In the avoidance of specifics we encounter in the limited literature, we sense some implicit assumptions: it can't be taught; it is too intuitive; genius teaches itself; there are no general principles or strategies. While we may share some of these attitudes ourselves, we still can discuss what works for us as teachers.

First, a few caveats. There is a clear danger in using a lot of words to describe non-verbal process. None will in any way substitute for the hands-on experiences of composing or nurturing students. Thus, the free-advice list I present at the end of this paper may look intimidating. It must be understood to represent many years' worth of advice to any given student or group of students. Obviously any particular piece of advice must arise spontaneously out of the exigencies of the moment, or the particular student and problem. Another caveat: it is self-evident that composition teaching varies with the needs of the particular student as well as the attitudes of the teacher. One's approach to a beginning undergraduate is likely to be utterly different from dealing with an experienced graduate student. And the needs of composition majors are quite different from those of non-majors. This paper's notions probably apply best to the undergraduate composer, major or not. It also avoids any reference to specific musical techniques; this approach is in no way technique- or style-dependent. Finally, these ideas may not apply very well to the student intending only to bang rocks together randomly. That sort of thing may well be of interest, but such a composer is unlikely to be in an academic context. And I may as well admit to a certain bias in favor of intentionally organized sounds meaningfully arranged.

Why study composition? A student intent on entering the field needs to be leveled with. We all, I suspect, spend a lot of time in

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

professional and perhaps personal counseling of students, and we need to beware of encouraging professional ambitions except in the case of the most abundantly talented students (all too rare). "Have the courage," Hindemith urges us, "to discourage his (sic) ambitions as a composer."¹ The opportunities for teaching positions and professional success in the field are, of course, severely limited. Rather than majoring in the field, perhaps most music students should study composition for their own pleasure, and to improve their musicianship. Many composers have the feeling, cautiously expressed, that only composers understand music. Performing, careful listening, analyzing, studying—all are necessary but finally external activities compared to the attempt to create. All of us should try to understand, hear, and experience music as the composer does—as something vital, organic, necessary, and integral to our lives. As Schoenberg says, "The study of composition will not make [your students] experts . . . its only purpose is to help them understand music better."² Composition study should "train the mind of the student, [and] give him possession of the sense of form and balance and an understanding of musical logic."³ Whether the student is headed for a career in the field or not, study should "liberate his talents and his creative personality." There is, after all, great pleasure in self-expression. In all human beings there is a fund of sensitivity and imagination that can be released and given shape and purpose by any creative undertaking. This sounds a little like "composition as therapy," and why not? If we can't make money doing it, at least we can use it to explore our own creativity. So I always encourage my best theory students to take some composition, but not to major in it.

Can composition be taught at all? The bulk of the evidence says clearly "no." Telemann writes, ". . . nature alone was my teacher, without the slightest instruction,"⁴ and Toch tells us "I studied with Mozart."⁵ Mozart, as we know, refused to teach Beethoven, although he was very impressed with Beethoven's talents. Bartok taught only piano. "He who is destined to be a composer will be one in spite of what he is taught The only teacher is life You cannot learn to be creative."⁶ And Chavez writes, "The great masters have developed their natural faculties in the practice of music itself," and not in academic studies.⁷ "In earlier times," we are reminded by Hindemith, "composition was hardly taught at all. [The young composer] was given as an apprentice into the hands of a practical musician."⁸ The genius, writes Schoenberg, "really learns only from himself, the man of talent mainly from others The genius learns from nature—his own nature—the man of talent from art."⁹ We are not mainly concerned right now with geniuses, I think, but with the person of talent—at best.

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

So what can we hope to teach? For one thing, not creativity. We can't give the young composer ideas. Blake has it right: "Science is soon got; the other (genius) can never be acquired, but must be born." I always think in this context of the answer, variously attributed to Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong, to the matron who asked what jazz was: "Lady, if you has to ask, you'll never know." That answer goes, of course, to the composition student begging for ideas. "Secret science," Schoenberg tells us, "is not what an alchemist would have refused to teach you; it is a science which cannot be taught at all. It is inborn or it is not there."¹⁰ C.P.E. Bach, writing on the composition lessons his father gave, tells us, "As for the invention of ideas, he required this from the very beginning, and anyone who had none he advised to stay away from composition altogether."¹¹ It is amusing and rather touching to read in Mozart's letters to his father of his frustrating composition lessons with the daughter of the Duc de Guines. He struggles with her utter lack of ideas, trying in all sorts of clever ways to get her to compose, at least in part, a minuet. Familiar? All fails. "Well, we shall see," he writes. "If she gets no ideas or thoughts then it is all to no avail, for goodness knows I can't give her any It will all have to be done by art—she has no ideas at all."¹²

While we can't give the student ideas, at least we can help with the craft. "A teacher cannot help a student to invent many and beautiful themes," says Schoenberg, "nor can he produce expressiveness or profundity. Instead, he can teach structural correctness and the requirements of continuity He furthermore can influence the taste."¹³ A teacher can, in short, "help the neophyte to find the adequate and exact expression of what he has in him to say."¹⁴ Sessions puts it very well: "The single goal of instruction is the pupil's resourcefulness and independence in the actual handling of materials," and not the transmission of style, technique, "rules," or theories. Our task is "purely and simply that of teaching him to write: that is, to use the materials at hand with precision and assurance."¹⁵

But beyond the teaching of craft, about which more later, we may have other obligations to the student. Composition teaching is by definition a very personal art; even in composition classes it is at best a one-to-one transaction. Our task is to assist students in discovering and developing their own musical personality, and not to impose our tastes or technical biases. If the teacher's personality is strong, there is always the danger of mimicry, or worse. Recent music history abounds in negative examples, to name no names.

Another habit we could be teaching, simply by exhibiting it ourselves, is constructive self-criticism. In lessons and classes, we can be developing a critical model which young composers will instinctively

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

internalize and use for their own improvement. Criticism can be done with kindness and tact. This modeling process is probably even more important than any specifics we may hope to communicate. As a teacher of composition or theory, the composer's instruction "is bound to have a certain creative warmth," suggests Hindemith, "because he is passing on directly what he has experienced."¹⁶ "A true teacher must be a model for his pupils; he must possess the ability to achieve several times what he demands of a student once . . . He must work [a problem] out in the presence of the student, improvising several solutions . . ."¹⁷

Finally, it seems to me, we are providing a model of honesty, of authenticity. Sessions states it a little differently: "Composers cannot, certainly, be taught to keep faith with themselves; the impulse must be there, the courage, the intelligence. But they can be helped by teaching to understand their materials and come to real terms with them."¹⁸ Schoenberg's teaching was described by Webern as "a training toward complete honesty with oneself,"¹⁹ and Schoenberg himself writes that " . . . a teacher of art could help even the (merely) talented to reach the point where they can give voice to the kind of utterance that fittingly expresses a personality. Belief in technique as the only salvation would have to be suppressed, and the urge for truthfulness encouraged."²⁰ That would seem to be an excellent description of good teaching in any field.

Why do I teach composition? Well, of course, to eat, but also by choice. Some composers honestly do not like teaching; we can hope they will then refuse to do it. Stravinsky felt it would be harmful to his own work, but it seems to have done very little damage to Bach or Haydn, or Sessions or Schoenberg for that matter. I personally find it exciting. There is a free-wheeling, improvisatory quality in the doing of it that appeals to the performer in many of us. You can't really prepare a composition lesson. What is exciting are the surprises, the unstructured give-and-take of the lesson. I am much more likely to learn something in a composition lesson or seminar than in a theory class, even though these too are always open to dialogue and to the unexpected. Teaching composition improves theory instruction, almost certainly. In teaching theory, we are inevitably focused on facts, events, relationships, specifics. From composition teaching we develop a feeling for first principles, for general processes. Our teaching of theory becomes more musical, contextual, organic. Beyond all that, composition teaching has to have the effect of improving our general awareness of music, the acuity of our hearing, and our own perceptiveness as performers, listeners, and composers.

It might be useful, as a transition into the more specific part of this paper, to consider briefly the ideal background and training of

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

young composers. What understandings and attitudes should they bring into the lessons? First, and in some ways most important, one needs a broad cultural awareness and sense of intellectual involvement with the world, especially that of the arts. A knowledge of and experience with the time-oriented arts— theater, dance, film—will be particularly useful. The thought that we are turning out technicians or theorists posing as composers terrifies some of us. A good reading knowledge of the liberal arts, including philosophy, and of the sciences, is highly desirable, and a solid background in electronics and math would be helpful. The point is, of course, that music exists in a wide variety of contexts— aesthetic, political, historical, economic—and the composer had better be aware of them all, not only for the sake of the art but for survival. If these things are important to us, we will somehow find the time to become conversant with them.

A practical knowledge of music history and literature also seems important. "One cannot understand the style of one's time if one has not found out how it is distinguished from the style of one's predecessors."²¹ This implies a profound awareness of the literature, through repeated listening, real analysis (beyond mere surface description)²² and, above all, performance. It is important for a composer to perform, for through performance one gains a feeling for real time in music, for the crucial role of gesture, for the psychological drama of a musical work. Conducting and keyboard performances are obviously desirable. Orchestral playing will prove of great benefit, as will playing chamber music or doing choral singing. In all cases, hands-on experience of the thing itself is preferable to academic "course" familiarity. Don't just analyze it, we might tell our students, do it!

I find that many of my students, both at the University of Houston's School of Music and at Interlochen, are unfamiliar with, and naive about, the music of our century. To counter this, I hand out a listening list to all composition students. They are responsible for becoming familiar with the works on it at some point in their course of study, the sooner the better. They are also urged to keep a listening journal, with their own reactions and thoughts about the works they hear. This may lead to some rather superficial familiarity with these works, but at least they will have been heard, if not fully assimilated into the students' experience of music.

Additionally, the beginning composer must possess, self-evidently, a discriminating ear, "the habit of complete accuracy of both inner and outer hearing."²³ Composers must hear their own music accurately, not only pitches, but also rhythms, textures, densities, dynamics, and so on. A good ear in the largest possible sense is inherent; it can hardly be produced by training, only made more acute.

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

This brings us to the question of theoretical training for the composer. The question of the relationship between technical training and inspiration, between the conceptual and the instinctual, is complex—the balance is delicate. Especially problematic today is an issue on which Hindemith writes: "The most conspicuous misconception today in our education method is that composers can be fabricated by training We produce composers the democratic way, as we produce congressmen."²⁴ Talent, he points out, is essentially aristocratic, individualistic. Stravinsky makes a similar point: "I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge."²⁵ For some composers, theoretical knowledge is the opposite, the enemy, of the creative. Today especially, with the ascendancy of speculative theory and theorists, we need to take care that the young composer is not seduced into writing works that are merely demonstrations of this or that theoretic construct. The composition of a work on a pre-existing *Urfinie*, for instance, strikes me as dry and absurd, like the deification of the species in contrapuntal training. Sessions writes significantly on the current trend toward musical analysis as a self-contained discipline, the "intoxification with detection,"²⁶ which Edward Cone so neatly skewers as "the lust for inventing structures."²⁷ Our music academies, by their nature, may overstress the rational at the expense of the intuitive, the conceptual over the experiential. No analysis is worth doing if it does not reflect and inform experience.

None of this is to say that craft is not vital. Verdi makes a helpful distinction between *erudition*, for which he has no use, and *knowledge*, by which he means practical technique. "In my youth," he writes, "I studied long and hard. That is why my hand is strong enough to shape the sounds as I want them."²⁸ This manual-labor image is healthy and practical. The point, of course, is the immediate application of a mastered craft to a specific result, as Haydn points out: "Any man who knows good craftsmanship will admit that it helps the creative process . . . for it nourishes the imagination and sets the impulses free."²⁹ But first the technique must be utterly mastered. "Facility in art is almost indispensable," writes Bizet, "yet only when the man and the artist are mature does it cease to be a threat."³⁰ Or as Schoenberg has it, "You don't have technique when you can neatly imitate something; technique has you. Other people's technique."³¹

Is the study of theory prerequisite to the study of composition? I should say probably not, assuming that the student has good musical instincts, a good ear, and a grasp of notation. Piston suggests that "it is a mistake to regard the writing of original music as the final stage of

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

graduated technical studies," and urges that such studies run concurrently with work in composition.³² There are good practical reasons for beginning technical training as early as possible, though. We so often find our undergraduate students deficient in basic craft, the question of imagination aside. "No beginner is capable of envisaging a composition in its entirety; hence he must proceed gradually, from the simpler to the more complex."³³ Craft can be built up systematically through either style-oriented or materials-oriented theory programs. I firmly believe that the whole point is good teaching, and that the particular approach is ultimately unimportant. The study of historical techniques ought not to be thought of as style-imitative, but as "a convenient way of introducing a young musician to a set of problems with which he will be confronted . . . throughout his career as a composer." Such studies ought not to be confused with composing; they are simply a means of gaining fluency with materials.³⁴ After all, it is in the great tradition first to copy literally the works one most admires, and then to compose in frank imitation of them. While it may on the surface be true that "creativity is the opposite of imitation,"³⁵ it is truer still that, as Stravinsky said, imitation is the beginning of art.

For the composer, again, the whole aim of technical studies is to develop an answerable, practical craft, beyond mere "theoretical" knowledge. J.S. Bach "started his pupils at once with what was practical, and omitted all the *dry species* of counterpoint that we are given in Fux."³⁶ Writes Sessions, "An art is . . . a craft; and a craft is mastered through prolonged practice—not through theory or 'learning' in the usual sense."³⁷ Instruction should be based on psychological and acoustical fact, not on theories about music. That is to say, theory in the best sense *is* practice. Which suggests again an integrated, broad curriculum, with maximum attention given to the *reality* of music: hearing, performing, experiencing. Hindemith urges a "practical music" training for composers, rather than an overly-specialized one, leading to the broadest competency in the field. "Don't teach composition . . . teach musicians."

Technical studies, properly approached, do not revolve around the learning of rules, but rather the mastering of a craft through prolonged practice.³⁸ A traditional historical and stylistic approach to theory studies is thus perfectly compatible with a contemporary composer's needs, as long as the focus is on the practice, "not how music *should* be written, but how it *has* been written."³⁹ Only through study of the past can we liberate ourselves from it. "Well," said Picasso, "you see, everyone has to have a father." The main difficulty is that technical studies are started too late, so that we find composers of eighteen or twenty just beginning the work in technique that they

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

should have mastered years before. This can create understandable resentments, unless we explain clearly and persistently the *purpose* of such studies, and communicate how important they have been for our own development, and then attempt to make these studies as exciting and engaging as possible. We need at all times to stay focused in our teaching on the larger issues, on principles and not just facts as was suggested earlier. We ought to be teaching not sonata form, but the application in a particular sonata of the practical and real principles of contrast, repetition, development, return, shape, gesture, closure, and so on. The current trend in some theory instruction in this direction is very healthy, as long as we remember to feed our understanding back into the experiences of performing and listening.

A couple of biases: I feel with Schoenberg that " . . . a student should never write mere dry notes. At all times he should try to 'express something.' Marking tempo and character . . . he may find that his imagination has been stimulated to make him produce pieces of a definite character."⁴⁰ I never allow my theory students to turn in an unedited assignment, and I find it possible to insist on some degree of musicality and personality in even the most elementary studies. It is, again, critical that all such studies connect with the student in an experiential way—that they be *musical* and not merely theoretical. "Technique never exists devoid of invention; what does exist is invention which has still to create its technique."⁴¹ The study of harmony, counterpoint, and form must be re-integrated, becoming simply the study of music. There are practical and pedagogically useful distinctions to be made between these aspects at the very earliest stages, but an integration should be attempted as soon as possible. To treat music as if it were synonymous with chords is obviously nonsensical. We need to be teaching harmony in the largest possible, medieval, sense of the word, as line, form, structural voice-leading, texture, shape, drama, all in a context provided by the immediate *experience* of music.

What do we actually do when we teach composition? We don't give students ideas; at least we shouldn't. And technique *per se* is hardly the point; we are more concerned with *results* than with methods. Technique must ultimately be transcended. Stated simply, we can be nurturing "the ability to sustain and develop an organic musical train of thought."⁴² Or, differently put, nurturing what in Beethoven has been described as " . . . this process of self-criticism, brought to the pitch of genius."⁴³ We can be communicating the fact that "appropriate patterns of organization spring from the materials themselves."⁴⁴ Whatever we teach about technique, we can make it consistently clear that the process is essentially intuitive first, and

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

only later conscious and analytic. In fact, when the process is working well, "no one can tell where the composer's spontaneous invention left off and the hard work began," in Copland's phrase.⁴⁵ I have a prejudice that says if a work does not arise out of a spontaneous, deeply felt musical urge, then it is unlikely to be effective or perhaps even valid music; it is *inauthentic*. The student ought to look on rigid schemes and plans with considerable suspicion. In spite of some of the metatheorists, it is still an art and not a science.

On the other hand, it is dangerous to encourage the student to wait for inspiration. One is not likely to recognize it anyway, and you will hardly get anything done while you are waiting. It is well documented that inspiration is a secondary manifestation, not a precondition for composing. "The primary fact is the ability to compose. Inspiration is often only a by-product."⁴⁶ There are, of course, different types of composers—the spontaneous, "inspired" type (composers mainly of small works, of whom Schubert is an archetype) and the working-out, constructivist types (the Beethovens). The former, as Copland points out, conceives works in a flash, outlines intact. Hindemith refers to the *Einfall*, the lightning flash, as does Sessions. For the other type, and this includes most of us most of the time, the process is one of discovering the implications of the musical material. But to behave as if you were inspired is useful: ". . . A composer must not compose two or eight or sixteen measures today and again tomorrow . . . but should conceive a composition as a totality, in a single act of inspiration. Intoxicated by his idea, he should write down as much as he could, not caring for little details. They would be added later."⁴⁷ Excellent advice! This is what we mean when we urge students to sustain the grand line, to ignore detail problems, and press ahead. Can we help in this process? Probably not much. "The greatest difficulty for the students is to find how they could compose without being inspired. The answer is; it is impossible . . . The only way to help is if one shows that there are many possibilities of solving problems, not only one."⁴⁸

As composition teachers, finally, we can have tremendous influence over the formation of the student's character. We affect, by precept and example, not only the student's technique, but the style, taste, judgement, and aesthetic stance. "The art teacher . . . should pass on only artistic methods and aesthetics . . . Normally he mixes the two in a proportion that depends on his degree of insight; when he can get no further with one, the other had better come to the rescue."⁴⁹ We need not hesitate to pass along our own musical prejudices, judgements, aesthetics. Not to do so would be, in a way, dishonest. Of course we need to be careful to identify them as such, so as to avoid imposing them on our often uncritical and malleable students.

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

Before closing, I would like to say a few *specific* things about how I teach composition. I suspect, from talking with colleagues about their own teaching, that I am not greatly different from most others. First, I teach composition privately or in seminars of two or three students. The small groups seem productive; it is very good for young composers to see their peers working out problems and exploring process. They are asked to critique each other's work, in a positive way, and this seems to lead to an increased self-awareness, an ability to critique their own work with some degree of objectivity. It does not seem to foster competition (highly inappropriate between composers) but to encourage support and mutual helpfulness. Some seminar time is spent in score study (as required by the students' immediate needs) or in discussions of aesthetic issues. I give the students a reading list in musical aesthetics and suggest readings as they seem appropriate to the issues raised by their work. I tend to refer often to the music of the masters, present and past, as models for the compositional process and for solutions to particular problems in the students' work. Schoenberg's use of the Beethoven piano sonatas is particularly apt, and I find myself using them as models quite regularly. When a particular contemporary work will serve as a model for a specific technique a student is using, it may be looked at. But I tend to think that use of models too close to the student's style is dangerous.

Regarding required work in composition, I am fairly non-directive, beyond insisting on a large output. You can't learn to compose without composing. If a student clearly needs to be exposed to a certain medium or idiom, I may make a specific assignment for that purpose. More usually, I let this happen by itself through exposure (the listening list is helpful) and through the course in 20th-century techniques we require of all music majors at the University of Houston. We are very restrictive about whom we allow to continue in the composition program. Promotion from one level to the next is juried by the faculty and is by no means automatic. Those who are permitted to remain in the program must demonstrate before graduation a solid grasp of a variety of media, forms, materials, and techniques. Some directive projects in composition can serve the function of showing the young composer the great value of imposed limitations. The self-discipline gained through working within restrictions is tremendously helpful in strengthening the craft. Many composers' favorite quotation must be this passage from the *Poetics of Music*: "My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself . . . My freedom will be so much the greater . . . the more narrowly I limit my freedom of action, and the more I surround myself with obstacles."⁵⁰

All this brings up the style problem, which all composers and

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

teachers of composition must resolve in their own way. What is your own proper style? What distinction do you draw between the derivative and the eclectic? Do you limit your students' choices of style or material? Is it acceptable to borrow from Boulez but not from Bartok? from Crumb but not from Hindemith? Where do you draw the line—or do you draw it at all? Obviously some borrowing will occur at the earlier stages. In fact, as I have suggested, it may be desirable, if done consciously and purposefully. The student who is truly a composer will gradually develop an individual musical personality. Style is, after all, only "the way in which ideas take shape,"⁵¹ and the student can be encouraged, even forced, to explore all available styles as they embody the spectrum of available techniques and materials. I personally put no rigid limitation on style, beyond insisting that in the course of study the student must exhibit a wide range of competencies, to prove that style is a matter of choice, and is not *faute de mieux*. The problem, Schoenberg writes to Karl Wiener in 1910, is "how to develop one's own talent in the way most suited to it. I do not force anyone to compose in the modern manner if he does not feel in the modern way."⁵² Schoenberg's teaching, as reported on by Webern and others, bears this out, as does the variety of styles of his various pupils. "I was not able to teach my students a style . . . even if I would have overcome my dislike of so doing," he writes later.⁵³ His own stylistic flexibility perhaps is the clue to this attitude: "I myself often feel an upsurge of desire for tonality After all, composing means: obeying an inner urge."⁵⁴ I see a problem these days in the pressure at some schools to write in whatever is the prevailing academic style. This doctrinaire attitude, equally prevalent among graduate students as among faculty, can be resisted. The point is not, after all, academic respectability but the composition of music that is honestly felt and crafted. We can, and I am sure do, insist with our own students on the demonstration of conviction, of authenticity.

Let me mention a few things I find myself doing consistently over the years in teaching. They are probably not very different from the strategies of other composition teachers. I do ask most students to prepare a plan of action, a ground plan for a piece. This may be done before, during, or after the process of composing, to help the student to consider the large-scale direction, drama, contour of the work, and direct attention away from the constant preoccupation with detail. The ability to sustain this duality of focus is the essence of the ability to compose successfully. The plan should not be inflexibly followed, but used as a frame of reference only. It may be written as a graph, a timeline, or a verbal outline, and needs to be focused on the large-scale structure as experienced by the listener. Another device is to ask

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

students to keep a sketchbook of all their musical ideas for future use. This should include not only notes, but tempi, dynamics, and articulations, to capture clearly the flavor of the original idea. A variant on this is to ask the student, especially when stuck on a piece, to prepare a few pages of sketches showing every imaginable treatment or manipulation of the material. This brainstorming approach will often suggest continuations that would otherwise not have been discovered, and will enhance the grasp of unification and developmental processes.

A few key words seem to recur in my composition and theory teaching, as no doubt others do in yours: gesture, shape, flow, process, logic, drama. It is often necessary to direct the students' attention constantly to the effect of the music, beyond mere technique. The classic notion of "Le grande ligne" is very useful in all composition teaching. A student can be directed to sketch through an entire movement as one line, leaving out all the detailing, in an attempt to capture the continuity and character of the original musical *Einfall*. This counters the tendency to think in isolated fragments, on the detail level, a habit of mind picked up at least in part from the fragmenting nature of so much music instruction. In all instruction it seems useful to speak in terms of first principles: repetition, departure, return, contrast, closure, and so on. And the pairing of concepts seems helpful to both theory and composition students: tension/relaxation, unity/variety, stable/unstable, exposing/developing, leaving/returning, active/static, directed/undirected, continuous/articulated, predictable/unpredictable, and so on. These are LaRue-esque terms, and I am fond of the LaRue view of what music is. His notion of "options for continuation," for instance, is extremely provocative for a composer, as is the concept of the "growth module." And his replacement, by the word "growth," of the misleading term "form" is helpful. From Schoenberg I borrow the idea of the *Grundgestalt*, though defining it more loosely and less serially, more like what d'Indy calls the "cellule."

Other tactics include improvising on a student's material to suggest the full range of treatments and continuations possible. I think if one goes through a variety of continuations, there is little danger of leading students on our paths and not theirs.

There are many useful questions to be asked of the student:

Where is this piece going?

Where are we *now* in the piece?

Where is the climax, if any? How is it approached, left, sustained, and by what means? Is it placed effectively? Is it long enough?

What is the *focus* of this passage, thematically?

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

Where does this piece, or passage, fall on the various scales of unity/variety, continuous/articulated, stable/unstable, and the rest?

Would you pay \$6.50 to hear this in Jones Hall?

Yes, but how do you *feel* about it?

What does this passage *do* for the piece?

What is next?

Where does this music really fit?

Do you really *need* this introduction(transition, coda, etc.)?

How might you end?

Didn't you actually start at the end, or the middle?

What is in this material that is trying to get out?

What is the music telling you it wants to *become*?

Additional suggestions and questions are on the "Free Advice to a Young Composer" pages.

There are some problems that seem to crop up continually in teaching composition. Some few students are too facile, not sufficiently thoughtful or careful. There is in them a tendency to accept the first thought, the obvious answer, whatever has worked before, rather than to think through a problem to its best possible solution. We all face the danger of standardized responses, of artificially limited options. We tend to use the same shapes, developmental processes, gestures, colors, harmonies, we have used before, because they work. This is especially problematical for pop-oriented students, who tend merely to manipulate standardized formulas rather than actually compose. Rameau hits on it exactly: "We all have our habitual 'modulations' into which we lapse when we lack the knowledge which might divert us from them to good purpose."⁵⁵ A common problem, at least with my students, is being stuck. I have a multitude of gimmicks to protect against this, though my success rate is not impressive. The trick is to be in touch with the wellsprings of one's creativity, through improvisation or other expedients, as detailed on the free-advice pages. A related dysfunction is compositional tightness, an overconcern with conscious control, unity, organization, which can result from too much intellection, or the wrong kind of analytic work. Composers with this problem need to be induced to believe in their own instincts, to take a leap of faith, to improvise, to stop worrying about being right or in control all the time, to be in touch with their powers (if any) of musical fantasy.

Finally, it seems as though some students come to us only for praise, not helpful reactions. They have the "every-note-is-sacred" syndrome, in which the ego is too heavily involved with the product. They lack that objectivity, that ability to distance themselves from the work and function as its audience, which is so necessary for the

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

process to operate properly. I have had very few of these students, and they need, as do all students, tact and kindness. Composing is terribly personal. Our identity is on the line every time, and we have an obligation to be aware of this and to temper our reaction with objectivity, humor, and understanding. We find ourselves, as teachers, suggesting, questioning, giving options. I like to feel that my relationship to a student is that of an older to a younger colleague. Because of this feeling, I will try to avoid *ex cathedra* pronouncements of all kinds, except perhaps humorously. For all of us, I am sure, it is not an issue of teaching or indoctrination so much as of gentle guidance and tactful help. After all, we are all in this together.

FREE ADVICE TO A YOUNG COMPOSER

Note: these are only suggestions, not imperatives. They will not all apply to you. Use your own sense of process as a composer to decide what works for you.

I. Attitudes and General Suggestions

Beware of free advice from other composers.

Don't believe everything you hear.

Each composer has a different working process. Composing was hard work for many of the great masters. Beethoven is a better model for most of us than Mozart in that sense.

Write, write, write, write . . .

No one can teach you to compose except you; no one can give you musical ideas. Teachers only help with craft.

You will tend to write out of your own musical experience. Therefore, immerse yourself in music. Listen, analyze, perform.

Originality may not be possible or desirable at first. One often learns best by imitation. The point is not so much the idea as its treatment.

You can't know too much or have too much technique. If your personality and gift are strong, technique will free, not inhibit, you.

Don't be too self-critical at the beginning. Don't hesitate to guess, to leap.

You don't have to be right all the time; you can always come back later and fix something or fill in details. Press on.

You don't always have to know what you are doing.

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

Keep a sketchbook of ideas: tunes, rhythms, harmonies, textures, sonorities. Don't throw away ideas even if they don't seem promising now.

Beware of program music; a work must stand on its own.

Don't always write for your own instrument; don't always play your own music.

You owe your performers a clear, correct, and unambiguous notation, and complete editing of score and parts.

Oversee rehearsals if you can. Your responsibility to your music does not end when the last note is written; it ends when the piece has been properly performed.

II. The Compositional Process: Starting and Continuing

Don't be afraid at first to borrow an idea (a motive, a texture, a rhythm, a color) to get started. Try improvising to get the process started. Don't be afraid of fantasy or free-association.

Try preparing a ground plan, a plan of action, graphic or verbal. But don't follow it rigidly if the music tells you differently.

Be constantly aware of the dramatic shape. A composer is a dramatist and a psychologist. Is the music building? relaxing? level? Where are the climaxes? How are they achieved, sustained, and distributed in the work?

What are the notes telling you they want to do? Try not to impose preconceptions rigidly on the music. Stand back from it and try to be objective. Pretend to be the audience. What would you like to hear next?

Be constantly aware of the big line: continuity, flow, logic, shape.

Be aware of the force of *gesture* in your music.

Conduct the piece to yourself as it is in progress. Really listen to it. Time it. Is this part long enough? Does this music come in the right place? Is this the appropriate gesture here?

Watch the form trap. A general structural scheme may be useful, if not mechanically followed. Prefer words like shape, growth, process.

Be aware of the placement points of focus or goals. Are you always moving toward them? Or always away? Use both processes.

Watch articulations (pauses, divisions) in the flow. Do you always articulate with the same element (texture, cadences, color)? Do you articulate too often or too strongly? or not enough?

Consider all possible options for continuation: repetition, varied repetition, contrast, development, response, return, closure, etc.

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

Keep in mind these pairs of principles: tension/relaxation, unity/variety, continuity/articulation, exposing/developing, leaving/returning, static/dynamic, regular/irregular, predictable/unpredictable, directed/undirected, and so on.

Beware of falling into easy habits of form, harmony, and texture. Don't always accept the first idea, even if it seems right. What would be even better? Beware of formulas of all kinds.

Be constantly aware of the non-pitch aspects: color, dynamics, density, pulse, rhythm, tempo, texture, attack density, articulation, and so on.

Learn all the devices for development as soon as you can.

Limit your materials rigorously at first. You can always free up later. Stay with the material: "How can I get more mileage out of this; what's in this material that's trying to get out?"

On the other hand, watch for over-tightness of process or result. Music needs free fantasy, spontaneity, air, light, windows, doors, contrast, variety.

Don't allow yourself to get bogged down in detail. Try for the big line, the overall shape or effect first, and fill in the details later.

If stuck: try improvising; use a tape recorder; try working on two different pieces alternatively; use a simplified, graphic notation; go away from the piece for a few days; work on a different section; analyze the material and make sketch-pages of every possible treatment of it; start again.

Write on one side of the paper only. Try taping the pages together and laying out the whole piece on a table or floor to see the entire work as an entity.

Perform each instrumental or vocal part, at least in your head. Is it interesting, idiomatic, grateful, well-notated? Don't waste any instrument; make them all necessary to the music.

Don't just stop. End.

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

NOTES

¹Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World* (Gloucester, MA, 1969), p. 214. (The author would like to apologize for the many gender-specific references in the quotations given here. It seemed awkward to alter each item.)

²Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York, 1975), p. 382.

³Arnold Schoenberg, *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint* (New York, 1964), p. 23.

⁴Quoted in Piero Weiss, ed., *Letters of Composers through Six Centuries* (New York, c1967), pp. 69-70.

⁵Ernst Toch, "I Stopped Teaching Composition!" *Music Journal* (March 1954): 39.

⁶Idem

⁷Sam Morgenstern, ed., *Composers on Music* (New York, c1956), p. 524.

⁸Hindemith, p. 206.

⁹Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 365.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹¹Weiss, p. 108.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹³Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 389.

¹⁴Richard Hall, "Some Reflexions on the Teaching of Music Composition," *Score* (December 1956): 31.

¹⁵Edward Cone, ed., *Roger Sessions on Music: Collected Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 206.

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

¹⁶Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition* (New York, 1941-42), vol. I, p. 4.

¹⁷Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 398.

¹⁸Sessions, p. 192.

¹⁹Morgenstern, p. 456.

²⁰Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 368.

²¹Ibid., p. 377.

²²See Thomas Benjamin, "Musical Analysis: Some Notes Toward an Understanding," *Forum* (Summer-Fall 1976): 4-9.

²³Sessions, p. 207.

²⁴Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 211.

²⁵Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Episodes* (New York, 1967), p. 7.

²⁶Sessions, p. 221.

²⁷Edward Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York, 1967), p. 98. See also my article "Against Analysis" in the *Journal of the Liszt Society* (June 1984): 167.

²⁸Morgenstern, p. 194.

²⁹Weiss, p. 174.

³⁰Morgenstern, p. 238.

³¹Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 366.

³²Walter Piston, "What a Young Composer Should Know," *Music Journal* (November-December 1949): 6.

ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

³³Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (New York, 1967), p. 2.

³⁴Sessions, p. 214.

³⁵A. B. Hunkins, "A Teacher Views Problems of the Student Composer," *American Music Teacher* (March 1968): 24.

³⁶Weiss, p. 107.

³⁷Sessions, p. 205.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 210.

³⁹Piston, p. 6.

⁴⁰Arnold Schoenberg, *Models for Beginners in Composition* (New York, c1942), p. 4.

⁴¹Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 366.

⁴²Sessions, p. 191.

⁴³Paul Mies, *Beethoven's Sketches* (New York, 1974), p. 1.

⁴⁴Hunkins, p. 24.

⁴⁵Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York, 1939), p. 31.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁷Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 385.

⁴⁸Schoenberg, *Fundamentals*, p. 215.

⁴⁹Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 365

⁵⁰Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music* (New York, 1947), p. 68.

⁵¹Hunkins, p. 24.

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

⁵²Erwin Stein, ed., *Arnold Schoenberg Letters* (New York, 1956) p. 27.

⁵³Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 386.

⁵⁴Stein, p. 255.

⁵⁵Morgenstern, p. 43.