

## Chapter 1

# Thinking Like a Composer

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Finding freedom in restraint
  - ▶ Joining the ranks of those who create something from nothing
  - ▶ Getting to know a few rules of composition
  - ▶ Some things to remember before you get started
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**M**usic is the one art form that is entirely defined by time. Once a piece of music is finished being performed, technically, when the last of its echoes fades, it's gone. Each piece of music is literally sandwiched in silence, or external noise, and if your listeners aren't paying attention, they're going to miss it.

Your job, of course, is to make them pay attention.

## *Limitations as Freedom*

Going further, music can be considered to be *the sculpting of time*. You can think of your three minutes — or half hour, or 36 hours — as a block waiting to be chiseled into a specific shape that's meant to tell a story or convey an emotion. You just have to figure out which carving technique(s) will work best to get your particular idea across to your audience.

This is where *form* comes in. Forms are the specific ways of composing pop music, classical music, blues music, jazz, country, and even atonal and serial music. If you know what form you want to compose your song in, part of the groundwork for your composition is already done for you.



And don't fret about this "constraining" or "limiting" you. Does the net limit you in tennis? No, it gives both players something in common to go by. In music, a form does the same thing: Your listener knows more or less what to expect, and you know more or less what to give them. The rest — the uniqueness of your contribution — is up to you. Plus there's nothing wrong with combining forms to make new ones. You've heard of jazz/rock fusion, porch punk, country blues, and so on? In fact, you may even find yourself combining forms without thinking about it.

After choosing a main form, you may want to pick the key you want to write your piece in. Knowing how the different keys and modes lend themselves to specific moods is a great help in trying to get a specific emotion across in your music. And how do you know about keys and moods? By listening to music written by other people, of course. You have already internalized a lot of musical mood information, probably without even realizing it.

You may have a melody already bumping around in your head that needs harmonic accompaniment. You can either plug that melodic line into your chosen form or start adding some chordal accompaniment and see where it goes on its own.

There's no real pre-ordained order in which you should begin composing music. The end result is all that matters, and if you end up with a piece of music that you're even partially satisfied with, then you are on the right track.



You don't have to re-invent the wheel. Much of the work in composing music has already been done for you by others. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, make your wheel different, more interesting, more unique and truer to what's inside you than any other wheels.

## *Composing as an Extension of Listening*

As a music teacher, Johann Sebastian Bach, like other great composers of his day, trained his students to be not just impressive little robotic pianists, but to be improvisers and composers. This is something that's not often taught by music professors today. Back then, learning how to read scores and perform other people's music was not a separate or independent skill from learning about the creation of music itself. The music of the masters was presented to students as something to improvise on — and possibly even to improve on.

This practical musicality was a comprehensive craft that involved thinking creatively and realizing it in sound. Music meant more than merely following instructions. The rote repetition of other people's music, including Bach's own, was used as example *and was not the end itself*. Students were encouraged to alter scores by adding notes, reducing the time value of notes, dropping notes, and changing or adding ornamentation, dynamics, and so on. One couldn't even get into Bach's teaching studio without first showing some rudimentary composing ability.

If you're a classically trained music student who has just not had a lot of opportunities to spread your wings and write your own pieces of music, this book is especially designed to help you find your own voice, both by drawing from what you've learned in all those years of rote memorization and mining your own feelings about how music should sound.

## Rules as Inspiration

If you didn't know better, you might think that music was something that could start on any note, go wherever it wanted to, and just stop whenever the performer felt like getting up to get a glass of iced tea. Although it's true that many of us have been to musical performances that actually do follow that, ahem, style of "composition" — for the most part, those performances are confusing, annoyingly self-indulgent, and feel a little pointless. The only people that can pull off a spontaneous jam well are those who know music enough to stack chords and notes next to one another *so that they make sense* to listeners. And because music is inherently a form of communication, connecting with your listeners is an important thing to try to do.



You really need to know the rules before you can break them.

Knowing about song forms, how to meld harmonic lines into a real melody, and how to end a song on a perfect cadence can be incredibly inspiring. There's just no describing the power of the light bulb that goes off in your head when you suddenly *know* how to put a 12-bar blues progression together and build a really good song out of it. The first time you make music with your friends and find you have the confidence to present your own ideas is thrilling.

It's our intention that the reader of this book will end up putting his or her copy down on a regular basis because the urge to try out a new musical technique is just too hard to resist!

## *You as Your Own Teacher*

As with any creative activity, composing music requires that you trust yourself. An understanding of music theory and a lot of playing skill can be a good starting point, but what an idea means to you — how it makes you feel and what you ultimately say with it — can be the only real criterion of its validity.



As you read the following chapters, keep the ideas in this section in mind.

### *Know what your options are*

Once you have an idea, learn how to work it, with methods for (re)harmonization, melodic and rhythmic development, counterparts, variations, and other compositional techniques. A good composer never stops learning and can never have too many “tools” in his or her musical toolbox. Learn as many compositional styles and techniques as possible and try to get an intuitive grasp on how and when to apply them.

With practice, this information will become second nature — as easy to summon and use in your compositions as it is for an electrician to pull a screwdriver or wrench out of his toolbox. A firm, intuitive grasp on music theory and basic composition and arranging techniques will take you farther than you can imagine.

### *Know the rules*

Every form has a set of rules, and as a composer, you should be familiar with all of them. Rock, folk, classical, and even experimental genres have specific rules that define them, and knowing those rules is sometimes half the work. Are rules made to be broken? Sure, sometimes. But they are also made to be hard-earned guidelines that many, many people before you had to figure out by trial and error. Use their wisdom for all it's worth — don't unthinkingly discard it.

### *Pick up more instruments*

Each instrument has its own beautiful, specific sound. Sometimes, becoming halfway fluent on a new instrument can completely change the way you want

to put music together. It can also expand your appreciation for those other musicians who will be (we hope) putting your music into action.

## ***Understand when to put something aside***

The compositions that cause you persistent, frustrating problems are probably the ones you need to put away for a later date. Often (but not always), the best ideas for compositions are the ones that come together naturally, easily, and quickly. If you're struggling with a piece of music, sometimes the best thing you can do is put it away for the day, or even longer, and come back to it later with a fresh perspective.

## ***Get something from nothing***

A great idea is a gift and cannot be produced at will. However, lots of great composers can do just fine without divine intervention. If you look at many of J. S. Bach's compositions, for example, you can see that many sections are directly technique-inspired, built around very basic melodic lines and musical ideas.

If you can't come up with a brilliant start from thin air, then just try to start with a random one by taking a pen and writing down a series of random notes. Fill a whole music sheet with random dots and see if there's anything interesting. Yes, we're serious. Or pick up a guitar and play random chords until something sounds interesting. Or fiddle around on a keyboard until something makes your ears perk up. Countless classic pieces of music have begun with little more than these simple techniques.

Once you have a bit of something you want to explore, you can use rules to help you. It may sound corny, but it's true: The biggest oak began as a tiny acorn. The chapters in this book can show you how to fill out the melodic line you've just created as well as build a harmonic accompaniment.

## ***Trust your own taste***

If you like it, someone else will too. Composing music is about self-expression, and if you've written a piece of music that sounds wonderful to you, then by all means, go with your gut. As beautiful and unique as all members of the human race are, there are more similarities between us than differences.

On the other hand, even if what you've written doesn't follow any set of rules, and even if most people who hear it hate it, *if you love it, it's worth keeping*. Eventually you'll bump into other people who will truly *get* it, and you'll be happy you saved that one odd bit of music that everyone else thought was unlistenable.

We mentioned a composer's toolkit. In the next chapter, you start building yours.