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Chapter **1**

Thinking Like a Composer

Music is the one art form that's entirely defined by time. After a piece of music is performed — technically, when the last of its echoes fade — 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.

In this chapter, we introduce you to the concept of musical form, how being a good listener will make you a good composer, and how the rules of composition are there to serve you, not constrain you, in your journey as a composer.

Structuring Freedom

Music can be considered 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 tells a story or conveys an emotion. You just have to figure out which carving technique(s) work best to get your particular idea across to your audience.

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



REMEMBER

And don't fret about form constraining or limiting you. Does the net limit you in tennis? No, it gives both players a structure around which to play the game. 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. Also, there's nothing wrong with combining forms to make new ones. You may have heard of jazz/rock fusion, pop punk, country blues, and so on. In fact, you may even find yourself combining forms without thinking about it.

After you choose 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've already internalized a lot of musical mood information, probably without even realizing it. (See Chapter 4 for more information.)

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. Sometimes, the choice of chords can act as the choice of moods.

There's no real preordained 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, you're on the right track.



REMEMBER

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

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. Music professors today don't often teach

composition or improvisation. Back in Bach's day (the 18th century), 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. A person couldn't even get into Bach's teaching studio without first showing some rudimentary improvisation and composition ability.

If you're a classically trained music student who hasn't had a lot of opportunities to spread your wings and write your own pieces of music, this book can help you find your own voice, both by drawing from what you already know after all those years of rote memorization and mining your own feelings about how music should sound.

Using 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 and annoyingly self-indulgent, and feel a little pointless. The only people who 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, as a composer and performer, you want to connect with your listeners.



REMEMBER

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 inspire you to see what you can come up with on your own — especially when you know the rules and structures behind your favorite songs. There's 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 that you have the confidence to present your own ideas is thrilling.

We want the reader of this book to end up putting their copy down on a regular basis because they just can't resist the urge to try out a new musical technique!

Following Your Music Instincts

Like 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.



REMEMBER

As you're reading this book, keep the ideas in the following sections in mind.

Identifying your options

After you have an idea for a song or a piece of instrumental music, figure out how you can best work it, using 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 their musical toolbox. Get comfortable with 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 can 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 their toolbox. A firm, intuitive grasp on music theory and basic composition and arranging techniques can take you further than you can imagine.

Knowing the rules

Every musical form has a set of rules, and as a composer, get 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're 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.

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI (1567–1643)

If we had to name one person who was the missing link between the music of the Renaissance (14th–16th century) and the Baroque (17th–18th century) periods, we'd name Claudio Monteverdi. (Well, which we just did.) Monteverdi brought an unparalleled level of sophistication and respect to vocal music, turning it from something only peasants and priests could enjoy into full-blown opera performances designed to entertain the ruling and intellectual elite.

Even as a child, Monteverdi was musically precocious. His first publication of sheet music was issued by a prominent Venetian publishing house when he was only 15. By the time he was 20, a variety of his works had gone to print. His first book of five-voice madrigals succeeded in establishing his reputation outside of his provincial hometown and helped him find work in the court of the Duke Gonzaga of Mantua.

Monteverdi became known as a leading advocate of the then-radical approach to harmony and text expression. In 1613, Monteverdi was appointed *maestro di cappella* (music director) at St. Mark's Basilica, Venice. There, Monteverdi was active in reorganizing and improving vocal music, specifically *a cappella* (singing without instrument accompaniment), as well as writing music for voices. He was also in huge demand outside of the Roman Catholic Church for his operas and made a decent living from opera commissions.

Monteverdi can be justly considered one of the most influential figures in the evolution of modern music. His opera *Orfeo* was the first to reveal the potential of the genre, while his follow-up, *Arianna*, may be responsible for the survival of opera into the 18th century and beyond. Monteverdi's final opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, is his greatest masterpiece and arguably the finest opera of the 17th century. Monteverdi was also one of the first composers to utilize the techniques of *tremolo* (a wavering effect in musical tone) and *pizzicato* (plucking the strings) on stringed instruments.

Picking 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 (we hope) put your music into action.

Putting a piece of music aside

The compositions that cause you persistent, frustrating problems are probably the ones that 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.

Getting something from nothing

A great idea is a gift and can't be produced at will. However, a lot of great composers can do just fine without divine intervention. If you look at many of Johann Sebastian 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, 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 whether you came up with 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.

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

Trusting your own taste

If you like it, someone else will, too. Composing music is about self-expression, and if you write 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 find other people who will truly get it, and you'll be happy that you saved that one odd bit of music that everyone else thought was unlistenable.