

Teaching music

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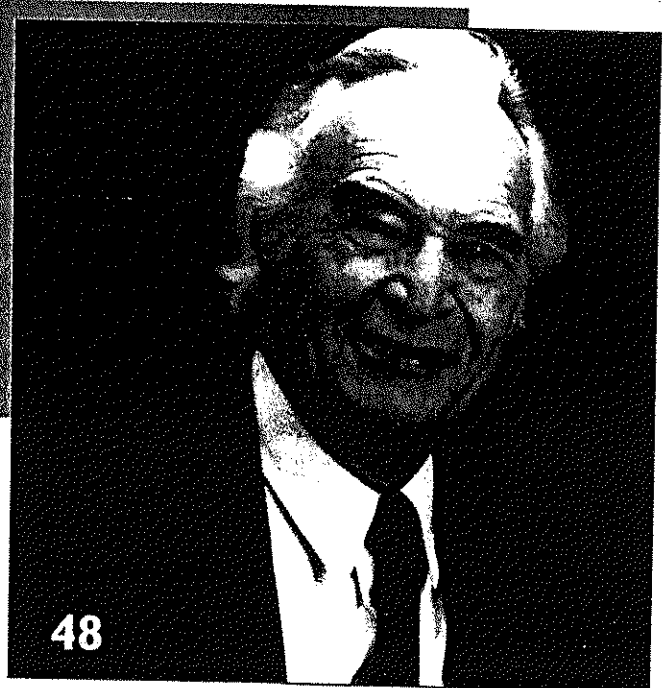
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Cover illustration by Cary Henrie



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erding the Composer Within

“How do you teach composition?” is a question I am sometimes asked. My answer is generally, “You can’t.” Composition cannot be taught, in the strict sense of the word. Technique can be taught via such forms as counterpoint, harmony, instrumentation, and computer programming. Aesthetics can also be taught (to a degree) through extended analysis of and familiarity with the broad range of compositional approaches and styles found in music history. And, although I can teach almost any competent student of music to write a three-voice fugue in a Baroque style or to construct a piece based on minimalist patterns of overlapping material, this is teaching composition in a literal sense only. The creative aspect of composing cannot be taught. I can nurture, I can guide, I can suggest, I can cajole, but I cannot teach a student how to become creative.

To be creative requires a leap of faith, tenacity of will, and a spirit of adventure. All students must discover the spark of creativity within themselves in their own time and at their own pace. My job as a teacher is to see the spark of creativity within my students and then encourage their journey to its realization.

Along this journey, it is also my job to help the student find his or her own creative voice. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, this means exposing young composers to as much music from different cultures and from different periods in history as possible. It is impossible to know from which source any individual composer will find inspiration; a wealth of diversity will present many possibilities. I must feel free and have enough self-confidence—but not arrogance—to open many doors and windows with as little prejudice as possible (but with opinions, to be sure).

Young composers must remain active in the performing world in large ensembles and in smaller groups. Whether this means a university wind ensemble, a church choir, a

piano trio, or a rock band, the experience of being an *active* musician as a necessary corollary to composing cannot be overemphasized. Students will not only learn more about composing by being involved members of the performance side, but will also maintain instrumental skills that may help to pay their bills upon graduation.

AS I SEE IT, MY JOB AS A COMPOSITION teacher falls into four broad categories:

1. *To impart technical knowledge.*

This is fairly straightforward, and it is what most teachers of composition cover in their classes. Examples of technical knowledge that must be learned would include the range of musical instruments and ways to notate artificial harmonics.

2. *To give historical perspective.*

Most teachers of composition probably include this in their lessons. If a student is working on a string quartet, for example, I would direct that student to listen to and examine the

Goals of a Composition Teacher

- Impart technical knowledge
- Give historical perspective
- Reveal real-world facts about the profession
- Share personal strategies for growth

scores of various works in that genre with which they may not be familiar. These might include Béla Bartók's String Quartet no. 4 or Ruth Crawford's String Quartet.

3. *To provide real-world facts about the profession.* As I have often stated in pedagogy master classes, it is important to share with students the existence of composers' organizations, many of which help to support performances or recordings of members' works. Taking a student through the steps of copyrighting his or her music, setting up a publishing company, and applying for grants and fellowships is also important. Dealing with necessary noncompositional activities is a real-world task that students should learn while in school.

4. *To share personal strategies for growth.* This is the most elusive category of all, because to accomplish this task I must be a role model on a variety of levels. First, I must maintain my own creative activity in the field, compose new music, wrestle with my own compositional dilemmas, seek performance opportunities, and study new music, whether new to me or to the world. I must show confidence and joy in my work, but I must also share disappointments and frustration. Being a composer is a very complicated business, and some composer-teachers grow cynical. They lose the mystery and the joy of composing, and this cynicism becomes the lesson that many of their students learn. These teachers can inflict damage on their students. On the other hand, there are "composer-dreamers" who pay little attention to the "real-politik" of composition and

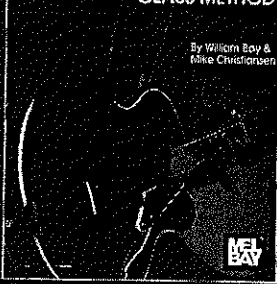
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haven't a clue about how to prepare their students for a life beyond the university's garden. The middle ground between these two types is ambiguous, but it must be found.

Young composers should find pure joy in the act of composing. They should be able to learn that from me when I express my own joy, perhaps when I am working on a piece and I say, "I have been struggling with these two measures for a week now, and I discovered what I needed to do yesterday. Would you like to hear it?"

AS CLOSE AS A STUDENT AND A TEACHER may come to feel about one another, there also needs to be a certain separation between them. It is only natural that students would wish to please a composition teacher. But it is important for the teacher to remain attentive in this area. Students who begin to compose "like the teacher" are not doing themselves or the teacher any favors. Teachers who encourage students to mimic them or, worse, discourage students who approach composition from a different aesthetic or technical viewpoint from their own, can do great damage in their teaching. I must encourage young composers to explore their own territory. If this exploration briefly leads a student through my territory, that's fine. And it may be that a student will honestly share part of the territory, but I must also be able to perceive the difference.

Setting up and following this separation between young composers and their teachers is important for a variety of reasons. First, it fosters sincere self-confidence in students. A sensitive teacher will always find ways to encourage while remaining objective. Aesthetic separation is not abandonment. It is communicating to a young composer that his or her impulse to please the teacher by copying the teacher's approach is not helpful to anyone. Over time, the student will learn that what pleases both teacher and student is taking risks, exploring

one's potential, going beyond earlier victories, and finding new ground. Second, young composers will learn to teach through example. If they teach when they are older, they will bring many of their own experiences to the table. But there are few courses in academia that address the pedagogy of music composition. Therefore, the teacher can play a pivotal role in the student's development as a composition teacher and as a composer. Both

teacher and student will affect future generations of creative young people, and so this part of the responsibility cannot be taken lightly.

By Jeremy Beck, associate professor of music in composition and theory at California State University in Fullerton. This article is based on a presentation given by the author at the Mid-American Composers Festival at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, October 1-3, 1999.

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