Creative Processes

What do composers do when they compose? How and why are specific decisions made? And what are the conditions and procedures that lead to the generation of musical ideas? Whilst it is perhaps impossible to capture and document a singular set of processes capable of summing up the vast diversity of possible approaches to composing music, the chapters in this section explore some of the key elements of creation: the generation, development, and arrangement of musical material; the collaborative 'working through' of ideas with performers and collaborators; the embodied and cognitive nature of writing music; and the potential working parameters, resources, and material objects involved. Creation always begins with an ideation phase, where appropriate materials are gathered and rules, situations, and constructs put into place.[1] There must be an initial impulse to create, which might equally be an image, or a sound, or an idea, or something completely different. It might be generated seemingly like a cartoonish lightbulb moment – appearing as if from nothing from inside the mind, as an electrical charge jumps from synapse to synapse – but this is far from the only way we get our ideas. This initial moment of inspiration might just as equally be found through improvisation or experimentation with new technologies in search of 'happy accidents', although this process of exploration can be equally as frustrating as it can rewarding. 'It's astonishing how humiliating beginning a piece is', says John Adams. 'I always feel like a pre-schooler when I start a piece'.[2]

Sometimes sonic ideas feel too ephemeral to reproduce without destroying their sheen, and this is hugely challenging for the composer 'bent upon capturing and reining in the insights of a fugitive imagination . . . before they can get away'.[3] Having said this, maintaining ambiguity and flexibility can be hugely important in creative work, and risk-taking is a vital mode of thinking for the composer. Some creative models suggest that a period of incubation or 'letting go' is essential to engage the subconscious thought process before our brains start to connect up disparate ideas and illuminate certain processes or approaches.[4] As musical materials begins to form – what John Cage

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refers to as 'collecting . . . the sounds and silences of a composition'[5] – it is up to the composer to understand the potential for invention: both how music unfolds in time 'horizontally' and how it might afford interactions between different layers or components 'vertically'. The metaphors of a sculptor or furniture maker are common to a lot of composers as they 'mould', 'shape', and 'polish' the gestures, colours, and densities of a work's material. Tasos Zembylas and Martin Niederauer suggest that this stage is characterised by open and dynamic processes: 'imagining, listening, feeling, conceiving, trying out, contemplating, notating, [and] correcting'[6] which are beautifully illustrated in Augusta Read Thomas' evocative visual depiction of this stage of the creative process (see Figure 0.1).

Sometimes the creative process can feel like the music flows out in one continuous stream, but other times it can sometimes take a great deal of energy to complete even the shortest of pieces. Even for the most polished and unified of final products, the creative process will usually feel at least sometimes like a chaotic and exhausting bricolage as disparate fragments, influences, materials, and thoughts are tamed into some sort of order. Either way, a key aspect of most compositional practices is that the activity of composing 'bears no temporal relationship to the experience of hearing the outcome of that process',[7] giving the composer time to consider the large-scale architecture and balance. It also affords the luxury of reflection and revision: as Johannes Brahms observed, 'the pen is not only for writing, but also for deleting. But be very cautious. Once something has been written down it is hard to get rid of. . . . How often one attempts to save such a passage and thus ruins the entire thing, not to mention becoming a slave to the idea instead of being the master.'[8] Brahms alludes here to the importance of self-critique, analysis, and reflection in order to counterbalance the more fluid aspects of writing. Questions about the shapes and concerns that are surfacing in a work can help suggest ways to move forward. A near-unifying factor of many of the sketches of major composers throughout history is how actively 'hands on' and destructive they are with their work,[9] revealing the 'deliberations, uncertainties and laborious trial and error that may have dogged the creative process'[10] in contrast to the myths of divine and free-flowing inspiration found in historical writings.

An important theme to emerge in recent studies of the creative process is the study of the 'distributed' creativity that occurs in collaborative ways, for example taking into consideration how a composer's interaction with performers or commissioners might influence the final composition.[11]
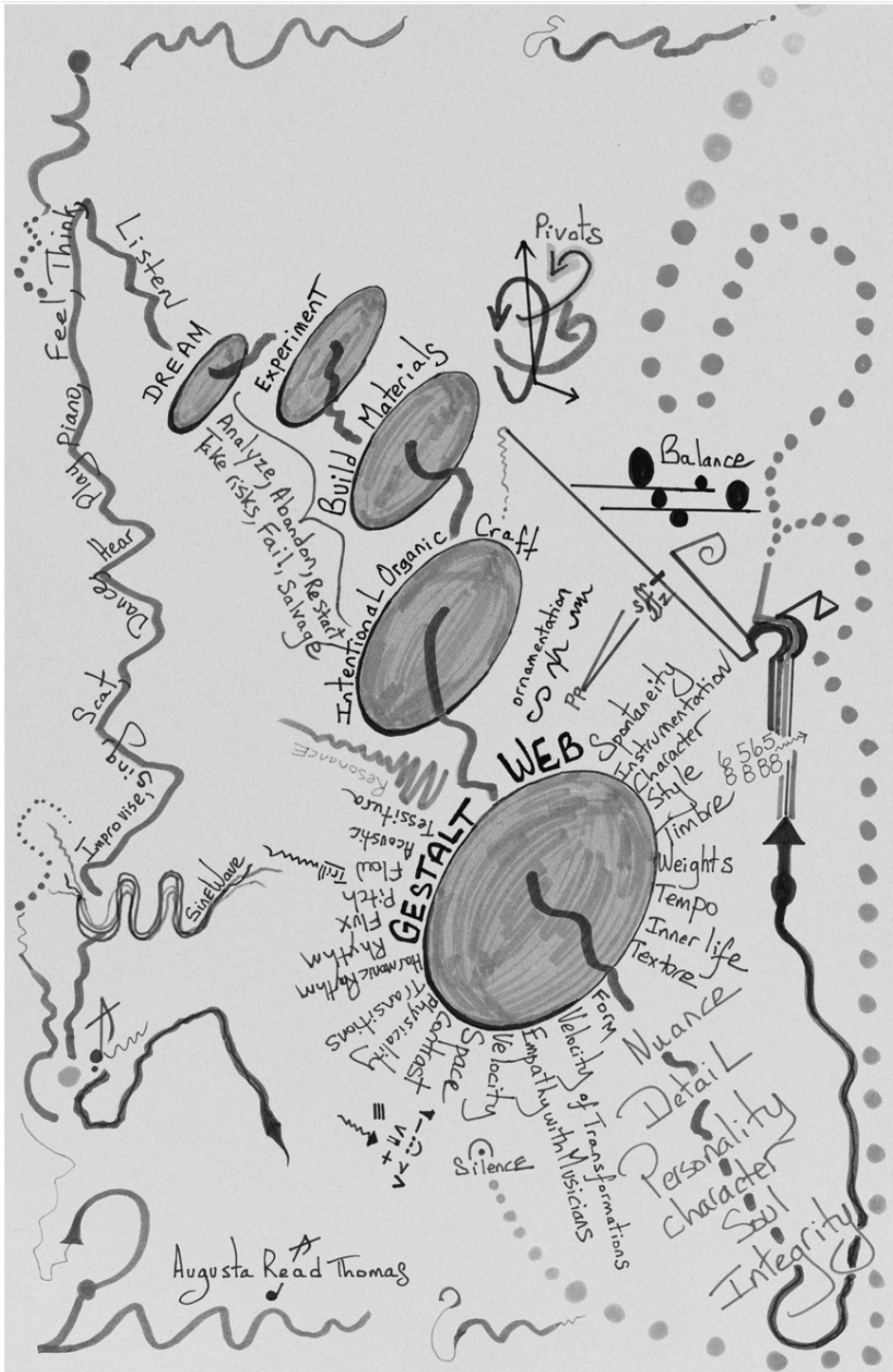
Figure 0.1 Augusta Read Thomas, *Gestalt Web* (2020), ink on paper, 432 × 278 mm. Reproduced with permission of Augusta Read Thomas.

This approach to composition is particularly crucial for composers writing music for film or video games, where the number of people involved in the production process necessitates a constant and careful interaction with other members of the creative team. Another important thread of distributed creativity is the contribution of non-human agents and material conditions to the workflow: for example, the environment where a composer writes (in a studio, in a café, etc.), what their routines and rituals are, and what tools they have to hand (instrument, computer, pencil and paper, voice, etc.). Whatever tools a composer may choose, the activity of rendering the initial impulse into sound is mediated by the physical and cognitive process of transformation. As the musical material is extracted from the fictive sonic space of the mind and projected onto paper or computer, it is both brought into the world and yet paradoxically abstracted away from its original form (i.e. what we first 'hear' in our auditory imagination). For many composers the early stages of music composition involve sketching on paper, whether this produces informal drawings and diagrams or notated partial drafts of the final piece. 'Every notation is, in itself, a transcription of an abstract idea,' observed Ferrucio Busoni. 'The instant the pen seizes it, the idea loses its original form.'[12]

Choosing to use five-lined staff notation, for instance, focuses material into dialogue with dominant common-practice 'note-based' topographies, where pitch correlates with the height of a notehead. Some composers opt to write with instruments, responding to the physical gestures and materialities they encounter. Whether writing with an antique grand piano or an electric guitar going through effects pedals, each brings its own characteristics to form an interactive network with the composer, as the gestural, mechanical, and resonant properties of instruments offer certain affordances. 'If you are an oboist, for example,' writes Nicholas Cook,

you are led most easily to think of sound as a single, highly nuanced stream that is produced and shaped through continuous physical engagement, whereas for pianists eighty-eight separate notes lie permanently at hand, each ready for instant deployment. For the oboist, each note replaces or takes the place of its predecessor, transforming the stream of sound, whereas the pianist's ability to play multiple notes, coupled to their readiness at hand, prompts a more permutational approach to thinking in sound. In addition, the physical patterning of black and white on the keyboard maps onto the replication of sound patterns in successive octaves and to some degree fifths: this means that there is a more regular correlation of sound and gesture than in the modern oboe, with its proliferation of highly contingent keywork.[13]

The same principles apply to writing with computer technology. Whether using notation software (Sibelius, Dorico, Finale, etc.) or a Digital Audio Workstation (Logic, Ableton Live, Cubase, etc.), the program structure and graphic user interface radically affect how music is represented and compositional workflow. For example, the orchestral-score style vertical layout of most DAWs (e.g. Logic's 'Arrange Window' and Pro Tools's 'Edit Window') displays only a few bars horizontally, encouraging 'vertical' composition like loop-based writing and textural layering instead of the linearity and melodic development afforded by a single line of manuscript paper. As Lambros Malafouris demonstrates in his anthropological studies of cultural production, tools have an ability to 'extend' our minds as creators.[14] In the context of computer-assisted composition we see this most obviously with the playback function, becoming an extension of the composer's ears and imagination as the immediate 'feedback' of newly written material affects creative decisions in very immediate ways. The composer must constantly adapt and evolve to respond to the nature and limitation of any non-human mediation with its own kinds of expectations, gestures, and agencies, and understand how this translates into performance.

Notes

1. See Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021 [2007]).
2. John Adams, 'I Still Dance: A Friendship Formed in Music' (10 June 2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBcv2r4pG94 (accessed 1 February 2023).
3. Tim Ingold, 'Introduction', in Monica Janowski and Tim Ingold (eds.), *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 12.
4. See Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004).
5. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1961), 18.
6. Tasos Zembylas and Martin Niederauer, *Composing Processes and Artistic Agency: Tacit Knowledge in Composing* (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 48.
7. Claudia Molitor, 'Composition as Hyperobject', *Apria* (2021), www.apria.artez.nl/composition-as-hyperobject (accessed 1 February 2023).
8. Quoted in Walter Frisch, *Brahms and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 201.
9. See Patricia Hall and Friedemann Sallis (eds.), *A Handbook to Twentieth-Century Musical Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

10. Richard Steinitz, 'The Study of Composers' Sketches, and an Overview of Those by Ligeti', *Contemporary Music Review*, 31/2–3 (2012), 117.

11. See Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (eds.), *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

12. Ferruccio Busoni, *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*, trans. Theodore Baker (Glasgow: Good Press, 2021 [1962]), 84.

13. Nicholas Cook, 'Getting Out of the Garret: Social and Material Dimensions of Music as Creative Practice', in Nicolas Donin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Creative Process in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

14. See Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013).