
Building a Career

Throughout history, the products of musical creativity and labour (scores, sounds, ideas, etc.) have been exchanged for money, services, or goods. One of the earliest recorded demonstrations of this type of exchange, suggests Stephen Blum, is the indigenous Blackfoot Confederacy myth of the Beaver Medicine Bundle, where ‘the first human owner of the bundle receives a series of songs from beaver in return for prepared animal skins’.¹ For many in the music industry today, the monetisation of a compositional commodity is an awkward by-product of artistic endeavours. The linking of creators and products through models of copyright, and the replacement of the patronage system with a capitalist model both offer an uncomfortable challenge to creative autonomy; a challenge that, for many, presents an uncomfortable compromise needed to counteract the low pay and insecurity of a precarious profession.² Forging a meaningful career as a composer necessarily means negotiating one’s ‘sense-of-self-as-artist in the context of market economics . . . [alongside aspirations] to retain a degree of emancipation (both moral and financial) from the messy business of late-stage capitalism and the transitioning of business models within the recorded, published and live performance cultural industries.’³ In other words, activities that once attracted charges of ‘selling out’ (i.e. the act of abandoning previously held aesthetic commitments for commercial gain) are now considered savvy or even ordinary strategies for artists to be heard and make a living.⁴

This pull between autonomy and service provision sits centrally to the various ways that a composer might monetise their work. The commissioning model in concert music – i.e. writing music on demand for a particular venue, artist, or patron – remains a central vehicle for composers to (usually) have free reign over what they write: but the freedom to avoid market commodification also comes at the cost that these opportunities are few and far between. Creative autonomy does not mean an absence of limitations though, and having work commissioned requires a keen attention to the needs of the commissioner (such as deadlines, length,

instrumentation, and other special requirements). Film, television, and games music also has a commonly established commissioning practice known as ‘bespoke’ composition, but in this field, it is far more common for the commissioner to be very specific – and often also very demanding – in their needs, often presenting composers with a defined brief for the work. The other option for a media composer is writing production music (sometimes known as library music), which is ‘generic’ music that can be licensed to customers – such as film producers and directors – directly by a production company without specific negotiation from the composer.

Whilst composing for the media and popular music industries is generally better paid than concert music, there is an expectation that composers at the earlier stage of their career will spend a lot of time writing in a pastiche style to simulate temporary guide tracks, and creative autonomy is something that is hard earned. The ideologies of competition, individualism and entrepreneurship are palpable in much of this world:⁵ for instance, there is a widely accepted culture of working for free in anticipation of paid employment and composers will frequently put advance time and labour into demos to present at competitive pitching processes required to obtain this work.⁶ How plausible this is for composers will depend on their personal financial situations (e.g. privileging those with access to support from family and friends) but also directly correlates to the funding system in their individual country, with countries like Austria or Scandinavia, for example, supporting artists through yearly salaries and tax deductions. Financial models likely correlate with creative practices: we see in continental Europe, where arts funding stems from state-funded opportunities, artistic innovation is rewarded, whereas in the US where there is little public subsidy, aesthetic adventure and risk is less commonly expected.⁷

Beyond commissioning, there are several opportunities to further monetise an existing composition. The most common of these is payment for live performances of a work (royalties) or record plays (mechanical royalties). Royalty collection agencies will ensure that the composer will be reimbursed every time a piece is performed live – through the ‘small rights’ of a concert, or the ‘grand rights’ of a dramatic work (opera, dance, musical theatre, etc.) – or a recorded track is played on the radio, at a venue or streamed by a digital service provider (e.g. iTunes, Spotify, YouTube, or SoundCloud).⁸ At the time of writing, streaming income is much less than through traditional royalties, with a five-minute track receiving around £150 from radio airplay on a major station, but £0.0066 on Apple Music and only £0.0028 on Spotify.⁹ The second route to finance is sheet music

publishing, either for sale or hire, although, since publishers often keep copyright themselves, the small percentage that reaches the composer makes this ancillary income for many. It is increasingly rare for publishers to put a lot of resources behind marketing a composer, so more developed artists with existing followings are going to be more appealing to publishers, meaning that this option is not necessarily available to those earlier in their careers. The final opportunity lies in the exploitation of intellectual property through synchronisation (the licensing of existing music as soundtracks for visual media), which offers an increasingly eclectic and accessible pathway for monetisation regardless of genre or existing audience base.

It is extremely rare for composers to be able to earn their entire incomes from composition alone. The conflation of cultural and financial value within the production and consumption of new music often forces composers to either adopt a position of 'flexible speculation' – the ability to create a variety of products for sale in a number of markets, often with wide-ranging payment structures in response to rapidly shifting market forces.¹⁰ Composers today are largely freelance, and alongside compositional activities might earn money from performing (e.g. as composer-conductor), giving interviews or pre-concert talks, making YouTube videos, creative residences, arts administration, delivering community projects and workshops, or something completely different. One major patron of new music is academia, which offers steady income and financial stability to many composers who frame their work in terms of research and teaching. For some, this financial security offers greater creative freedom, as the intellectual arena offers a platform to pursue interests outside the regimes of domination imposed by cognitive capitalism,¹¹ whilst for others the ivory tower 'sanctuary' provided by universities siloes composers away from the reality of commercial music-making, allowing them to become out of touch with prevailing societal trends and needs.¹² Forging a career as an academic composer is now an established path for a composer, and an increasing number of institutions offer practice-based doctorate opportunities – many of them funded – as specific training in this field.¹³

Many composers struggle dealing with the precarity of the career, often encountering low income, constantly changing work patterns, decreased stability, and continuous travelling. A recent survey from the Ivors Academy in the UK found that over half of composers earn under £10 k from composition – most of which is from self-produced projects rather than professional commissions, and nearly a third have considered abandoning

their creative careers after the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁴ For a career where there is often little division between work and life, with frequent exposure to public criticism, and whose core activities are traditionally solitary, emotional management can be a challenge for the composer building their professional profile. This challenge is exacerbated for composers of colour and women composers, who ‘continue to experience a masculine bias that ... [affects] income, work and learning, relationships and networks’.¹⁵ Composers from marginalised groups often find themselves pressured to adopt an ‘artificial ‘persona that eschews their cultural connections as an explicit part of their practice ... to avoid being two-dimensionalized as an artist’,¹⁶ and report having to manage their public identity by ‘tailoring their behaviours in order to “fit in”¹⁷ through concealment tactics and identity management.

One particular challenge in the industry today is the downscaling of labour, meaning that composers are required to become increasingly active within commodity chains (i.e. the different stages of cultural production), and less likely to be valued for their creative labour and expertise alone. In concert music, this might mean composers creating and formatting their own scores and parts (rather than this being taken on by publishers) and being responsible for an increased administrative workload, such as fundraising with (or even on behalf of) commissioning bodies. In the commercial side of the industry, composers are often expected to be able to record and produce work themselves – often including the procuring and managing of musicians – to provide high-standard music on a limited budget. Increasingly, compositional skill lies as much in immaterial production (conceptual insight, determining and costing the viability of projects), entrepreneurial skills (self-promotion, funding applications) and relational labour¹⁸ (building relationships with gatekeepers, understanding the strategic and structural dynamics of cultural institutions, and forming meaningful connections with audiences through social media) as it does in the construction of musical works.

Notes

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4. Bethany Klein, *Selling Out: Culture, Commerce and Popular Music* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
5. See Mariana Ritchely, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
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7. John Berry, 'The Arts Council Is Harming the Cultural Organisations It Should Help', *Prospect* (2022), www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/the-arts-council-is-harming-the-cultural-organisations-it-should-help (accessed 1 February 2023).
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13. See Christopher Leedham and Martin Scheuregger, 'The Purpose of the Written Element in Composition PhDs', in Christopher Wiley and Ian Pace (eds.), *Researching and Writing on Contemporary Art and Artists: Challenge, Practices, and Complexities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 65–90.
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15. Dawn Bennett et al., 'Creating a Career as a Woman Composer: Implications for Music in Higher Education', *British Journal of Music Education*, 35/3 (2018), 237–53.
16. Adriel Miles, 'Decolonizing Higher Music Education: Person versus Persona', in Bryan Powell and Gareth Dylan Smith (eds.), *Places and Purposes of Popular Music Education: Perspectives from the Field* (London: Intellect, 2022), 329–34.
17. Dawn Bennett et al., 'Hiding Gender: How Female Composers Manage Gender Identity', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 113 (2019), 20.
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