

20 | Practical Advice for Emerging Composers

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*This **final chapter** offers advice on the opportunities and challenges of being a composer and is intended to be useful and encouraging for anyone developing their practice. We would like to thank our students for their contributions and feedback, particularly Kit McCarthy, Antoine Veillerette, and Dominic Wright.*

Be curious. Experience the world and expand your horizons. Go to concerts, theatre performances, art galleries, and places of nature. Listen as widely and as deeply as you can. Travel, read books, volunteer. Feed your creative brain.

Analyse the things that you love. Devour films, books, and music for the first time because you love them; but then watch, read, and listen a second time to understand them. How are they working? Which artistic questions are being asked? What approaches and ideas are being used, and why do they resonate with you?

Refine your technique. Technique helps us develop our ideas and allows us to communicate what we hear in our imaginations with others. Score study, listening, analysis, trial and error, workshopping your ideas with performers, and developing your understanding of instruments are all important ways to increase your knowledge and strengthen your technical skills.

Challenge yourself. Work in different environments and mediums, and don't be afraid to explore extremes. Go outside your comfort zone by embracing ideas that feel bold and exciting rather than safe and cosy. Using new tools and approaches will help you to avoid 'idea fatigue' whilst also keeping your mind open to different ways forward.

The Creative Process

Collect ideas. Write down or record melodies, thoughts, and ideas when they come to you (e.g. in a notebook or on a phone) so that you have a bank of material to visit in the future.

Explore your ideas in different mediums. Record yourself improvising and then transcribe it, discuss your ideas with others, and draw graphs, pictures, illustrations.

Learn where your inspiration comes from. When and where do you generate your best material? Maybe it happens when you are reading, or in nature, or meditating, or with the adrenaline that comes from an imminent deadline. See if you can recreate that environment to feel inspired as regularly as possible.

Don't be afraid to use broad brushstrokes. Using big shapes and gestures can be a useful way to map out musical ideas and structures without worrying too much about the finer details. You can then let your analytical brain find what to focus on, develop and finesse.

Compose, then analyse, then compose again. Both steps are vital, but we cannot do them at the same time. It is important to let your creative brain be free to play, and not make artistic or analytical judgements too early in the process; however, the way forward can only be revealed by understanding what is already present. Composing involves carefully balancing creative play and freedom with your inner critic.

Try to get as much as you can out of your ideas. Whilst it can be tempting to throw everything you have into a new piece, exploring one or two ideas in detail can produce a surprising amount of material. Focus on specific parameters – timbre, rhythm, melodic shape, harmony, and so on – and play with abstract elements like rate of change, stability and instability, or degrees of chaos. Try to be deliberate and methodical in your exploration. Think about contrast and balance, how ideas might sound higher or lower, slower or faster, louder or softer, longer or shorter, layered or sparse.

Find strategies for when things go badly. Develop personal approaches for overcoming problems, which might include setting yourself limitations, trying to compose the same passage in several different ways, reordering your material (e.g. to put the beginning at the end, or the end at the beginning), or combining completely unrelated ideas. Different strategies will work for different people and contexts. Find out what works for you.

Working Habits

Write something every day if you can. Composing is a muscle that needs exercising to develop the fluency, consistency, and accuracy needed to translate your ideas and thoughts into music. Don't wait for inspiration, just start!

Know your tools inside out. Whether you write with manuscript paper, an instrument, or a computer, understanding the full potential of the tools you use will speed up your workflow enormously. Understand their limitations as well: a blank project file or score will come with its own default settings, but your creativity does not have to exist on five lines or in regular time signatures and cycles. Use the tools that suit your ideas the best.

Share your work-in-progress. Cultivate a trusted team of people with whom you can share sketches and ideas. Talking through material when things still have a good degree of flexibility can often lead to the best learning experiences and might reveal things about your ideas that you may never have considered. To help this process feel less intimidating, ask focused questions and direct feedback towards specific creative problems. Hold any feedback you get lightly so it does not influence you unduly, but recognise that all feedback communicates something valid, even when you have to read between the lines.

The creative process is messy, and that's ok. It can be difficult to maintain energy and motivation over a long period, and often the excitement of an initial idea diminishes the more a project is worked on. Try to focus both on the long-term goals of a piece and what you want to achieve each time you return to work on it.

Take time off. Move. Walk. Get some fresh air. Go on holiday. Whatever you are able to do.

Work deep, not long. Discover the conditions you need to get into a flow state, where you will happily focus on the task of composing and let the world disappear around you. Find a good and comfortable workspace and turn off all distractions around you.

Community and Network

Be generous. Prioritise community building over career building and find ways to serve the field and empower those around you. Whether this involves suggesting a book to a friend who is working on a particular

topic or something more practical like lending someone a microphone or proofreading parts for them, work-related kindnesses will always be returned to you in some form in the future.

Find friends for your music. Developing relationships with performers, ensemble directors, commissioners, and critics who can champion your work is key to creating opportunities and commissions. Collaborators and supporters might equally be choreographers or mechanical engineers; everyone has a huge amount to offer.

Keep a contact list of musicians who you enjoy working with and trust. Performers who are interested in you and your work can not only perform your work (either now or in the future) but are useful to contact with specific questions relating to their instrument. There is nothing more reassuring than testing an idea or technique directly with a player, whether this is in person or remote, and asking advice is a great way to start building a relationship.

Treat your collaborators with respect. Help to make them feel comfortable and excited to be working with you. Establish clear lines of communication, be approachable and open minded, and be aware of their time and needs. Be proactive in finding and developing shared opportunities that appeal to everyone and support your collaborators' creative visions as much as they support yours. Make sure you always credit collaborators for the work that they do.

Write for your community. Work with amateur and young performers as much as with professionals and engage as actively as you can with all the different ways of making music that are going on around you.

Professional Profile

Understand the industry. Learn basic music business skills like intellectual property (i.e. copyright), contract writing, filling out a tax return, self-promotion, and marketing, and join a rights collection agency such as the PRS (UK) or ASCAP (US). Be aware that the industry you are joining now will not be the same industry at the end of your career, so keep aware of the changes going on around you.

Use a portfolio career to support you financially. Composing is not the most profitable or stable career by any stretch of the imagination, but fortunately can be done alongside other work. There are many jobs that

you might already have the transferable skills for – teaching (composition, instruments, theory, etc.), conducting, performing, music editing and formatting, music administration, grant applications, artistic direction, music supervision, sound recording and production, and so on – but it is just as valuable to work in an unrelated field. Portfolio careers encourage exposure to people and ideas that you would not otherwise encounter, and often improve your practical understanding of how to make things happen.

Apply for existing opportunities. There are lots of schemes and projects designed to support emerging composers, which are listed on websites like www.composerssite.com and www.soundandmusic.org. Apply to the schemes and opportunities that interest you and resonate with your work, and importantly, if you don't succeed the first time, try again and again.

Do it yourself. Be creative and resourceful rather than waiting for opportunities to come to you. Start your own ensemble, concert series or collective, for example, or set up a solo gig at a local venue and play your own music.

Make recordings and document your work. A high-quality recording is invaluable for encouraging a conductor or ensemble to programme your works, and well worth investing in. Learning the basics of video and audio recording and editing is also extremely worthwhile, and there is some excellent open access software available for this (DaVinci Resolve, Audacity, etc.) that is relatively easy to navigate. Learning sound recording techniques will mean that whenever you are able to access spaces and performers, you can jump on the opportunity to have a lasting record of your work.

Share your music and make it accessible to others. Host your work online, and have a bank of resources available (e.g. sound recordings or a press kit) to send out to potential collaborators. This might involve using social media and an online presence to promote the work that you are doing or contacting ensembles or promoters directly to ask for opportunities.

Self-Care

Know your motivations and goals. What does success look like for you? Is it to obtain a specific commission, or collaborate with certain artists, or to be able to pay the bills and be self-sufficient? Creating can be an obsession, and obsessions can swallow you up if you let them. Having clear and achievable goals will help you focus your work and let you celebrate the

wins when they come. Focusing on what is important also allows you to be strategic about which projects you take on and will help to balance your workload.

Make work that excites you. It can be difficult to balance what you want to write with what you feel others are expecting of you. Art is subjective, so you should not feel constrained by the expectations of others, or by pressures from outside institutions and ensembles; you are free to make what you want to make.

Be prepared to fail. Take risks and follow your intuition to explore the intimidating ideas that will stretch and challenge you. Take care and delight over each new idea and listen with excitement.

Times can get tough. For musicians, life can be difficult, both emotionally and practically. Every composer faces rejection, criticism and hardship at points in their careers, but this does not make them any less of an artist. Be honest with yourself about finding ways to meet your needs and support yourself, prioritising your mental and physical well-being over your work. Monitor your inner critic: self-doubt can destroy even the greatest and most original ideas before they have a chance to blossom.

Take your art seriously. Be professional and reliable in the preparation of scores and parts, submit to deadlines, and allocate regular time and effort for admin, whether that be formatting and printing, setting up a website, or contacting potential collaborators.

Don't take your art *too* seriously. It can be easy to feel intimidated as an artist, weighed down by the potential of a blank page and the pressure of the existing canon, but remember that not everything has to be your magnum opus. First ideas are often rubbish, no matter how experienced you are. Re-writing is so much easier than generating new material and being able to be irreverent and destructive with material is often just as valuable as treating it with love and care.

Don't compare yourself to others. This can be a real confidence killer. There is no one path to achieving your goals: it takes time to learn how to compose well, and even longer to grow your reputation and build contacts to the point where you are regularly in work. Patience and humility are key.

Finally, **remember that you are part of a community.** Always ask for help and support when you need it, and do not be afraid to reach out to people for guidance and feedback.