Composing–
Isn't It Just Like Ironing Your Shirt?

article by Michael Smolens ©2011

Persistent Composing Myths

When I mention to people that I help musicians develop their songs and instrumental pieces beyond what they thought was possible, they are usually enthusiastic. Yet, very often I'll hear them follow up with a comment like one of these:

MYTH #1 *– Composing can't really be taught, it's something mysterious that just happens to those who have "talent." (Translation—only a small group of people are capable of composing).*

MYTH #2 *– Great composers started writing when they were very young. (Translation—composers don't develop, they either "have it" or they don't.)*

MYTH #3 *– If you don't have a strikingly original sound, there's no point to composing at all. (Translation—who wants to sound like any other composer?)*

MYTH #4 *– True composers need to have really suffered in their lives to be able to write anything that rings true. (Translation—isn't that where the blues comes from?)*

MYTH #5 *– You have to have grown up in the culture that you're drawing from musically. (Translation—non-natives are merely "musical impostors".)*

MYTH #6 *– Real composers study The Masters for a long time before even trying anything on their own. (Translation—they're called Masters for a very good reason and I'll never be one of them.)*

MYTH #7 *– Studying composition is pointless because it will only get in the way of your creativity. (Translation—who wants to sound self-conscious, formulaic, or unfeeling?)*

MYTH #8 *– Composers write music because they can't play an instrument. (Translation—composers don't have the discipline to really learn an instrument.)*

MYTH #9 *– Why should I compose when I don't have anything to say? (Translation—I have no value.)*

I've heard these comments and their variations for as long as I can remember. They're remarkably persistent, **and they're all myths**, fostered by a culture that sends a parade of confusing messages about the creative process.

Frankly, the longer I teach composition, and compose, the less those beliefs have any validity.

I've seen many of my students, regardless of their interest(s), reveal how one or more of these myths have held back their composing in some way. Some are very aware of a particular myth from the first lesson, and for others a myth emerges after months of studying. When I explain that learning to compose is very much like learning how to iron a shirt, their faces always light up in surprise. In order to get that clean just-off-the-rack look, you've got to iron the shirt in many directions. And it's the very same approach that I use for helping students expand their composing and creativity.

My Combined Approach For Training (to getting that shirt really ironed...)

1) **Analyze composers whose works inspire you, regardless of the style**
2) **Analyze your own works as in-depth as you would works by any other composer**
3) **Create compositional games or projects that focus on your weak area(s)**
4) **Compose pieces without any restrictions**
5) **Develop any basic skill (instrumental/vocal/theoretical/rhythmic/etc.) that might be holding you back**
6) **Listen to new composers, styles, and music from other cultures that challenge your comfort levels and aesthetic assumptions, as well as familiar composers and styles for greater depth**

These half-dozen approaches have always felt very natural to me and have been successful with students who do medium- and long-term work. When I do short-term work with a student for a session or two, I'm usually looking at a specific project or issue that will likely draw upon just one or two approaches. From that, I'll frequently assign them projects using one or more modalities to address a particular weakness in their writing.

Yet, over many decades of teaching, I've noticed that none of my students have ever been exposed to this range of approaches; one or two, occasionally three, but never more. I began to wonder about why this is the case, and thought it would be fruitful to examine where and how musicians typically get training in composing.

Where To Learn To Compose *(other than privately...)*

Here are the most typical scenarios where musicians become trained in composition *other than private lessons:*

Conservatory (or University)

Here you'd enter a composition program and spend most of your time studying and composing in various classical techniques (counterpoint, serialism, orchestration) along with detailed analyses of various classical composers from different eras. Free composing generally happens toward the end of the program. Exposure to student and faculty works, access to various performance ensembles and highly specialized equipment, and of course certification, are key benefits to studying in this setting. Still, others find the personal and musical relationships that come out of this experience to be invaluable. You'll hear *MYTH #6* often circulating here.

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Apprentice
Though you will likely be in frequent proximity to them, the majority of time with a mentor will be spent performing logistical and administrative tasks. You will be observing them in a variety of contexts, and eventually you will likely be entrusted with tasks of a more artistic nature. The decision of an artist to take on an apprentice is very individual, i.e. some do it based upon timing, some do it based upon the personality of the applicant, and some never take on an apprentice at all. As a result, you'd be wise not to take their decision to reject (or accept) you personally. The opportunity to work closely with an artist whom you revere can be highly rewarding. *MYTH #3* has been known to appear here.

Workshop
The focus here is creating a new piece, usually in a specific pre-existing form, e.g. a 12-bar blues, a call-and-response chant, a verse-chorus song, etc. Following the form and being exposed to significant exemplars of the style or form at hand are the primary features. (A smaller number of workshops do not restrict the style and allow your piece to be completely open-ended). The comments on your piece may come solely from the instructor or from the participants, or both. The format of a single day (or time slot) devoted to just one piece can be very attractive, as are the opportunities to network and meet like-minded musicians. You might hear *MYTH #5* in this environment.

Band
In either joining or forming a band, the primary goal is to foster and feature original works. The promise of performing and/or recording original songs is so powerful that many writers are involved with more than one band. Songs are created either as a group, from a pair within the band, or solo, and instruction usually comes more from the mixing of the band members' strengths rather than teaching per se. Real coaching can happen depending on members' backgrounds and communication skills. Bands that focus on original compositions tend to be very catalytic because of the immediate feedback opportunity from constant rehearsing. *MYTHS #4 & #7* frequently appear here.

Art-As-Expression
Typically you'd enter a liberal arts type of program that centers on Art-As-Expression. High priority is given to authentic self-expression rather than analysis of prominent musical icons. Significant focus is put on examining the motivation of your decision-making process, and establishing a clear criteria for making your pieces feel genuine. These programs tend to be interdisciplinary, and encourage you to include other art forms (movement, writing, film, etc.) to complete the piece's concept and enhance the process. Programs like this can be very personally healing and are excellent preparation for work in any art-related therapy career. You might hear *MYTH #7* circulating here.

Self-Education
Self-Education is ideal for someone who is very motivated and has a history of designing and carrying out projects on their own. The resources may include textbooks, workbooks, and online tutorials. Self-pacing and the ability to design a highly individual program are the main attractions.

Students often use this path in conjunction with modalities that have contact with other people such as periodic sessions with an instructor, attending live concerts and/or open rehearsals, and even composing collaboratively with others either in-person or over the internet.

It has been my observation that students, regardless of their interests or learning styles, still require a healthy dose of both support and accountability to develop their musicality. Joining or forming a peer-oriented group can generate tangible results without an instructor if the participants are highly motivated. Group support and publicly-declared, time-specific promises to its members are central to that kind of program. Also, in-group and public performances, along with guest presenters, can greatly strengthen the impact of the experience. Examples of this format would be a Meetup, Mastermind, or Artist Anonymous group. **In fact, all of the above venues, include support and accountability as an integral part of their structure.**

At this point I should state that depending upon the needs and timing of the student, any one of the above learning models might be an excellent vehicle for their growth. They can also be used in combination to produce dramatic results, as I have personally experienced.

Let's recap the six different modalities that I've recommended, with abbreviated labels:

1) **Analysis**
2) **Self-Analysis**
3) **Games**
4) **Free Writing**
5) **Skill Building**
6) **Listening**

And take a look at what each one has to offer a composer...

Analysis *(oh no, not THEORY...)*

People often hear "theory" used interchangeably with "analysis," so I'm going to address how most musicians encounter theory, which is usually in the context of a music class or sometimes through private instruction. Invariably, the vocabulary of written music is introduced (note values, rests, meter, key signatures, etc.) followed by long courses about how our harmony system works (i.e. the world of chord progressions). Now, there's nothing wrong with this, yet these are only two of a dozen or so major areas of study. Only much later are other areas generally addressed. And because theory is most often taught without a concurrent connection to composition or improvisation, many students are dismayed by such an abstract and disembodied method. *What this traditional approach fails to do is equip students to listen to any style of music, no matter how seemingly simple or absolutely unfamiliar, and observe the patterns that the piece creates*. If you've been groomed to listen primarily to harmony, you're going to miss out on a lot of music that doesn't gravitate around traditional harmonic practice.

Like a great painting, a piece of music can be studied in detail to reveal its many qualities—some quite subtle, some surprisingly obvious. Good places to start your investigation of pieces that inspire you are: style, overall form, lyrics (if present), phrasing, melody, rhythm, harmony, arrangement, tone color, and rate of change. Less traditional, and still fascinating elements are: global placement, elemental qualities, lightness spectrum, social/political context, style tendencies, and placement within the composer's overall output.

So, if analysis is an after-the-fact phenomenon and is not actually composing, why bother? The first and most obvious benefit will become apparent when you feel stuck on some part of a piece and need a way to get "un-stuck." After all, even the most experienced composers get stuck sometimes. The tools that come from analysis are akin to having your very own emergency roadside service. Anytime you feel the need for a "jump", or a good flashlight to help you see why you're at an impasse, you'll thank yourself for having those skills.

Another benefit you'll feel from analysis lies in your ability to pre-plan. Granted, I pay careful attention to my unexpected ideas (and gifts) that show up and incorporate them when they strengthen a piece. But I also appreciate the ability to compose based upon certain elements that I know in advance, like style, key, melodic range, piece length, type of event that the piece will be played for, etc.

The final benefit is more unconscious in nature, but no less important. *Learning how to take apart music will help you trust your first instincts—a critical skill for any composer*. Over the last several decades of composing, I have noticed that I feel much more trusting of my ideas as they occur, even when they don't at first seem to make sense. Time after time I've observed that my first impulse was correct when I looked at my decision-making process using the tools of analysis (though not during the purely creative phase). I love that feeling of knowing that I can "find my way home", no matter how far afield I travel.

Self-Analysis

All of the benefits outlined in the previous section certainly hold true when you examine your own work. And there is a skill to keeping that analytic part of your mind at bay when you are in the exploratory phase of a new song, so don't be alarmed if you notice a bit of that internal chatter at first. It's a natural tendency to become conscious of your creative process when learning the various aspects of composing.

When students who have done a fair amount of composing take a step back, they can quickly see what styles, forms, and approaches they've taken a liking to. Chances are good that many of their compositional choices are the result of unconscious habit, and this is where detailed observations and gentle suggestions from an experienced coach can make a big difference. For more advanced or professional composers, the role of the coach is to instill a system of observation that enables more risk-taking and more ambitious projects.

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I've been observing for quite some time what styles of music I listen to and improvise in, yet in which I have not yet created finished compositions. For that very reason, I recently composed both a three-movement suite in a classical Turkish style, and I am currently completing my first odd-time funk piece in 5/4. Consequently, I find myself able to not only visit these styles, like exotic destinations, but to inhabit them as well.

Games

Here is where Self-Analysis gets applied. Let's say you've noticed that you have a strong tendency to compose songs that start with an 8-bar rhythmic introduction (generally referred to as a *vamp*) with your guitar. Also, your lyrics are usually written after you've created your vamp. This is likely the reason that your songs don't have the variety that you're searching for. A quick way to address this tendency would be to compose three different sets of text, four lines each, on completely different subjects, and create a melody for each without any accompaniment. This game is designed to force you to deal with the inherent differences in text without the distraction of your guitar playing.

Working on (and even creating) compositional games that focus on a weak area has many advantages. One is that each project can be short, quite short, in fact, so it will feel less intimidating. The next is that no real inspiration is needed for this; you treat it more or less just like a crossword puzzle, something you might do nonchalantly. Another is that it is easier to maintain a sense of detachment when reviewing your efforts because it's fundamentally an exercise, though you may find yourself surprised to notice how invested you've become! Lastly, your game needn't be developed into a completed piece or even performed, so this is a great way of taking the pressure off of the process. I recall one of my composition teachers saying to me, "Michael, your problem is that you think everything you compose has to be made public." Point taken...

Free Writing

Composing without any restrictions is, in a sense, like breathing. It's essential to maintaining a healthy sense of self-expression and artistic autonomy. If you have the time and focus to be able to fit in your other writing projects (and instrumental and/or vocal assignments), I generally recommend that you always keep it in your schedule to some extent. Depending upon your temperament, you'll prioritize free writing to suit you, and this will almost certainly fluctuate over time.

Occasionally, I'll recommend that a student only listen to and write in one particular style, or in the style of an infuential composer, or some specific parameter (a tempo, form, etc.) to address some imbalance in their writing. Let's say that a writer tends to always write fast pieces with many chord changes. I might suggest that they compose a minute-long, unaccompanied melody where occasional quarter notes are the fastest events in the piece. I might also suggest that they listen to very slow pieces from various folk, classical, and world music traditions to help support this newfound sensibility. A comparable situation would be assigning a student to only make slow "hu" sounds to relieve chronic vocal tension. It's amazing what a short immersion experience can yield!

Skill Building

No one learns all of the facets of music at the same rate, (after all, learning music involves nearly 20 different parts of the brain), so it's only logical that there are going to be areas that will take longer to develop. And chances are very good that the skills that are slowest to arrive will be the ones that could eventually make the biggest difference in your music. This is especially true for anyone desiring to integrate their performing with their composing. Ask any composer who performs their own music (and probably also leads their own ensemble) and they will tell you what a handful this can be! It might be a particular technique on your instrument or voice, your ability to imply more than one rhythm at a time, learning to play in unfamiliar scales, developing certain kinds of rhyme schemes, etc. Any or all of these items might be holding you back from manifesting what you hear as a composer.

There was a five-year period when I was spending nearly all of my time composing and very little on my skills on keyboard, voice, percussion, or alto flute. I remember at one point I was creating *six different pieces at the same time (and they were in different stages, too*). It was a very exciting and productive phase, yet I reached a point where I really felt the need to bolster my skills (especially on piano) so that I could actually keep up with my band at the time and make my ideas more rhythmically convincing. I also wanted to create pieces that were more technically challenging. So I consciously made the decision to shift my priorities, and I was very glad I did. Mind you, with current technology at our fingertips, any composer can simply input their ideas via their computer and hear it played with remarkable accuracy. Composers no longer need virtuosic technique or super human ear-training abilities to write exciting music like they did up until just the last generation. From the very beginning of my own composing, however, I knew that having an inspiring band was critical for creating new works, and the more accomplished the members, the better. What I saw was that the more I expanded my technical abilities with my different instruments (including voice), the more opportunities I had to write more interesting pieces, and in many different ensembles (currently five). This also gave me a stronger sense of purpose for building my technique. Coincidentally, this enabled me to obtain more work as a performer.

Listening

The importance of listening cannot be over-emphasized, for both new composers/styles/formats as well as depth listening. For exposure to more challenging artists, I've found publicly-supported radio, friends' recommendations, and progressive concert series to all be excellent sources. And if you stay in contact with each of these, you can return the gift to your friends by recommending new artists to them as well.

Being exposed to exemplary artists in a particular style is always beneficial for a composer, even if it's in a style that you're already familiar with. Earlier, I mentioned that I am currently completing my first odd-time funk piece, and I found it to be perfectly natural to listen very carefully to a master of that genre, Jeff Beal. Although I had already come up with the opening vamp on my own, I was compelled to study one of his pieces in detail, *The Watcher*, because of its brilliant phrasing and sinister mood. From that, I gained a profound clarity about what was weak about my vamp, and had an excellent model of what would create a more convincing bass figure.

I also noticed how economical his work was by utilizing the same melodic idea for both the bass vamp and melody.

Looking At The Big Picture...Your Future

In order for you to make a truly informed decision about what modality or modalities are going to be the most appropriate for you right now, let's take a look at a chart that puts everything in a side-by-side comparison. Obviously, there will be quite a variety within each category, so the following is meant to only be a general guide:

The *Where* and *What* of Learning to Compose

	Analysis	Self-Analysis	Games	Free Writing	Skill Building	Listening
Conservatory	*			*	*	*
Apprentice	*				*	*
Workshop	*		*			*
Band				*	*	*
Art-As-Expression		*		*		*
Self-Education	*	*		*		*
Combined Approach	*	*	*	*	*	*

Here are just some of the advantages of the Combined Approach:

1) Develop many musical skills at once
2) Be able to shift your attention if one or more areas feel dry at any given moment
3) Learn to quickly assess what you need more or less of as time progresses
4) Gain a greater sense of composing as simultaneously personal and not personal
5) Learn invaluable time-management skills to balance all of these areas.