

So You Want to Compose?
WSMTA Conference – Frances Goei, NCTM
June 27, 2024

How do I Begin?

Introduction:

Writing music can be daunting. In this presentation, we will be moving from the known to the unknown. The easiest way to write a piece is to copy and change an existing piece. We will explore ways to go from changing a piece to creating an entirely new composition. Limited ideas and use of repetition with variation are keys to creative pieces. We will be looking at different styles and forms of music. Frances will be sharing pieces that she or her students have written and the thought process behind creating these pieces. She hopes this presentation will be an inspiration for everyone to even attempt to compose.

Advantages to Creating a Piece from an Existing Piece:

1) The form of the piece is already established.

- Even beginning pieces have an overall structure and even a rhythm pattern. I start teaching theory to students at their first lessons.
- Students see that music has patterns. It is not just random notes.
- Phrases most commonly come in 2 or 4 or 8 measures. Question and Answer phrases. One phrase goes up (Question) and the next phrase goes back home to tonic (Answer).
- The most common form in music is Ternary (A B A). We will be looking at this and other forms in detail later in my presentation.

2) The harmonies are established but of course can be changed.

- Many beginning students do not yet know about but they can start with something as basic as a single note (in key of C, bass C). This creates a pedal point. If already a C in the bass, add 2 notes (C and G) to create an open chord. Or why not use E or G instead (introducing the idea of a chord).
- Students (even beginners) love to change something from Major to minor. For pentascale, the only change is the 3rd is lowered. More advanced students can use relative minor chords (CM changes to am) or parallel minor chords (CM to cm)
- If a chord is blocked (CEG), why not break it (Arpeggio instead)?
- We will talk more about the different ways to add the 2nd voice and the use of harmony later.

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3) It is actually fun to change melodies—students especially enjoy doing this.

- There are so many ways to change a melody. Actually wise to start with a very simple melody.
- Adding neighbor tones (up or down). This may change the rhythm.
- Perhaps starting on a different or ending on a different note. Remember it has to make sense, not just random. Often when you change the melody, the harmonies will also change.
- How about putting rests in? This is fun as it creates syncopation or a different feeling to the piece.
- How about changing the articulation? Going from legato to staccato.

4) If you are unfamiliar with the music software it is a great way to become familiar with it (Noteflight, MuseScore, etc.).

- I have been using Noteflight. For each Noteflight account, students are allowed 9 free compositions. It is easy to learn and then students can move onto other more sophisticated software.
- I spent an hour inputting a beginner piece and learned how to use the software. This summer my goal is to master MuseScore.
- There are so many programs out there. Start simple otherwise you will be wasting all your time on technology. Just start.

5) Inspiration happens.

- Students often say “I don’t know where to start!” but copying an existing piece leads to inspiration as they change and create at the same time.
- Once a student has written one piece, it will be easier to write another piece even from scratch. Students actually have so many amazing ideas. Then you can introduce other forms and styles as they are learning these in their music.
- Again, getting you and the student to write one piece successfully will definitely open the door to more inspiration.

6) Examples written by my students (these are all based on pieces that they were studying).

- Example #1 – Do you know this piece? What changed? What stayed the same? What was added? Is the form of the piece retained?
- Example #2 – This is based on a famous minuet. Which one? Again what changed?
- Example #3 – is this piece familiar? What elements remain the same and what changed?

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Still Need Help Composing - Random Note Composition:

Put note names on a piece of paper and put in a jar. Let students select 3 notes. I have put 3 of each note in the jar. Their composition will be based on these notes.

- 1) What can you do with them? I highly recommend that students do this at the piano and play their own pieces otherwise the computer generated stuff is pretty crazy and sometimes impossible. Yes, I speak from experience!
- 2) Decide with your student if their piece will be a Melodic or Rhythmic piece. I will explain what this means.
 - a) In a melodic piece, melody is dominant. Do you want to write words with your piece or tell a story? Do you hear a tonality—major or minor? Rhythm does enhance a piece so you do want to make it interesting so it is easily recognized. Also music is NOT random. Repeat idea (octave higher), invert, sequence, and question/answer phrase. Too many ideas and rhythmic ideas actually destroy a piece. Have students stick to 1 or 2 main ideas and/or rhythmic patterns. Add an element of surprise—this adds color and character to your piece.
 - b) In a rhythmic piece, rhythm is dominant. Notes are secondary. Melody may not even exist. Even tonality can be non-existent. Often clusters of sound. Younger students love creating “Storm” pieces with 2 or 3 clusters. Again repetition (use your octaves up or down), invert cluster, sequence, and question/answer. Use dynamics to tell the story and what is the element of surprise.
- 3) Element of Surprise
 - a) Use a chord that catches your audience by surprise. The ii (if in CM, this would be a dm chord) is a good substitute for the IV (F) chord. A surprise would be to use the flattened II chord (Db). Augmented and diminished chords are always fun to use. Again it is a great way for students to learn chords and their function.
 - b) Cluster chords – story of my student. Just by using the element of surprise, his piece went from boring to interesting.
 - c) Dynamics – building up and then suddenly soft (subito).
 - d) Deceptive cadences are a great way to enhance a piece and add surprise – go to vi chord (a minor) instead of the tonic (CM) and then repeat with the tonic.
 - e) Surprises need to be added at the right moment and sparingly.

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Specific Composition – you have an idea what you want to write - Styles and Forms of Music

1) Dances:

Minuet – $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, strong 1st beat

Example: Bach's Minuet in G Major

Tarantella – 6/8 meter, driving rhythm, usually 3rd movement of a sonata, usually in rondo form (ABACA), sounds like a pirate piece.

Example: Frank Lynes "Tarantella" – own example – Ex. #4.

Baroque Dances: Sarabande, Gigue, Allemande – you need to know the characteristic of each type of dance. Most of these dances are in Binary Form (A B form). Again it is helpful if students have played these dances so they are aware of each of their characteristics.

2) Ternary Form – ABA form – the most common form in music

Sonata-Allegro Form (Exposition, Development, Recap)

If students are playing a Sonatina or Sonata—analyze it and ask if they could make up something like this—several summers ago, several of us teachers got together and wrote Sonatinas.

Usually the 1st movement of a Sonatina or Sonata.

There is a strict format: if you start in a Major key then you end the Exposition in the dominant key. The Development section is the most chromatic of the piece using many accidentals to finally land on the V chord of the opening key. Recap will start and end in the opening key. If you start in a minor key, you often go to the relative major key at the end of the Exposition, then return to the minor key for the Recap.

Lots of scalar activity in the right hand and a simple left hand.

Inventions (A B A)

Again, have students analyze and notice how sectional these pieces are and how they go to relative major or dominant keys.

In Bach's 2-part Inventions, he often uses the idea of "imitation" or canon where one voice starts and then another voice echoes with the same musical material but an octave higher or lower. They become communication pieces. Like Row, Row, Row Your Boat.

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3) Song Form: Text (own or from other source)

Ballad – Homophonic – melody with accompaniment

Tells a story, paints a picture.

Younger students love this. This year my student, Madeline (then in 2nd grade), wrote about her dog. We talked about what a dog does: walking, running, playing with a stick, eating, sleeping. She tried to convey this in her piece and her piece was awarded 1st place in last year's Young Composer Project. (Ex. #5). Notice the repeated melody and then walking becomes transition material (simply going from tonic to dominant).

Another student, Alaina (in 4th grade at the time), wrote about looking inside the ocean. She used a different theme for 4 different sea creatures and then used a recurring ocean theme to hold the piece together. Alaina also won a few years ago with the piece (Ex. #6). Notice the simple melody and then how it is embellished as the dolphins start playing.

Choral Piece: Hymn like, polyphonic where parts are more equal but where there is a melody. Could be 2, 3, or 4 part for choir.

Church musicians often find themselves improvising on hymns. Why not take a hymn and mix it with a classical piece for Prelude or Postlude music? I did this last year. See if you recognize the pieces (Hint: there are 3 different pieces in this Medley) (Ex. #7).

4) Rondo Form – ABACADA (Predominantly Classical style)

Good example is: Fur Elise (A B A C A)

We talked briefly about this form. Tarantellas are usually in this format. Many 3rd movements are in Rondo form.

5) Jazz Pieces: (syncopation, swing eighth notes, rests, ties)

More rhythmic in nature, also often use different scales or patterns.

Blues – Blues scale

Boogie – usually 4 note ostinato pattern walking up or down.

How to add the 2nd Voice (usually bass)?

For Homophonic Pieces: (accompaniment in either right or left hand)

1) Pedal tone (1 or more notes held) – creates drone effect

2) Um-pah (strong downbeat: usually in $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature C EG EG, but can be in $\frac{4}{4}$ time signature C EG C EG).

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- 3) Ostinato (broken chord, octave jumps, repeated intervals, etc.) (Sonatinas—left hands are often broken chord patterns, arpeggios and scales)
- 4) Scales (Classical style)—scales are great transition material
- 5) Alberti bass (bottom top middle top – i.e. C G E G)
- 6) Chordal/Hymn – chords in root and inversion – mix chords so not all root position chords. Also avoid smaller intervals in the lower range (bass C and lower). Creates a very muddy sound. Smaller intervals are better in the higher range (middle C and above).
- 7) 4 chord pattern (most contemporary songs – i.e. Heart and Soul)
- 8) Jazz chords (added 6th or 7th)

Expansion of Ideas:

There are a number of simple ways to expand a piece.

- 1) Add an introduction. Use a little of the melody or just some broken chords or boogie pattern to get us into the piece. The examples I used today often had an introduction.
- 2) Interlude/Transitional material – sometimes reusing the introduction moves the piece along especially in a song or hymn type piece. Scales and arpeggios are great transitions.
- 3) Coda – do you just end or perhaps restate that opening melody? This is quite common with composition. A section reappears but in a condensed form. Some composers have used a deceptive cadence (VI chord) so it extends the piece and has the listener wondering if the ending is now or later. Then the real ending occurs—final cadence.

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Most Important Question – Why Do We Write Music?

- 1) As an assignment – for a festival – Young Composer Project or Reflection Program, etc.

- 2) Fun or as an expression: during Covid, a number of YCP pieces were about students writing about their struggles during that time. Writing music was a way to express these struggles. One of my best friends had her breast cancer come back during Covid and we thought we were going to lose her. The word “Go” kept coming into my mind so I wrote a piece called “Go Forth”.
Thankfully my friend is still with us and even visited me last week. Ex. #8.

I hope you can “Go Forth” and write something for yourself or work with your students to inspire them as well. Thank you!