

Introducing Music Composition in Your Teaching

Charleston Music Teachers Association

Friday, October 8th, 2021

Dan McCurry, Piano & Music Composition Teacher

dan@charlestonpianolessons.com

THE PEP TALK

- **Congratulations!** You have successfully taken the first step – you showed up! You're a member of these wonderful organizations! There are so many opportunities available to you through your membership and the more you take advantage of them, the more you and your students will grow!
- **QUESTION:** "But I'm not a composer so how can I teach composition?"
- **ANSWER:** "You can do this! You just have to dive in, trust your musical gut and your years of training, and learn as you go! Every musician has a unique perspective on how they hear, think about, and understand music. This is what you have to offer and it is indeed valuable, just as much as with your regular instrumental teaching. You might not have all the answers, you might not know everything there is to know about music, but you certainly know something so start by sharing that. Don't be afraid to grow with your students."

THE BENEFITS

- **Student Engagement:** Sometimes students feel they need your permission to be creative (which isn't true!). Some students might be scared to share their ideas with you (or anyone else). Some students are the sort of naturals that love to just sit down and make things up and perhaps prefer this over learning a piece that you assign. You might be surprised by which students are the most eager to officially compose a piece. Oftentimes students just aren't aware of what's possible until you present them with these opportunities to learn. Composition can be especially encouraging because it's making music that 100% comes from them.
"I didn't know how creative I could be." – Student (8 years old)
- **Concept Reinforcement:** Composition is often a great way to reinforce concepts encountered in music study. Melody, harmony, form, rhythm, meter, patterns, motion, interaction, repetition, etc. are all going to be utilized when composing. This is a great opportunity to point back at all that's been covered, to say – "Notice when you did X, how did that sound? How did that change the feel of that moment in the piece? How did you take this idea and move it around? Where have you seen this happen in a piece you have studied in the past?"
- **Follow Through:** Starting a composition is hard and finishing it is even harder! Generally, writing a composition will feel a bit like doing a large project – it's easy to stall out on these large projects. But pushing through to finish the composition is perhaps the ultimate lesson of all as it teaches students who to think both inside and outside of the box and further develop their musical problem solving skills.

THE CHALLENGES

- **Technology:** Unless you happen to be a notation program wizard, this will likely be the biggest challenge in teaching composition. The programs are not always the most intuitive (though they are great!). You will likely have to navigate multiple platforms (all with different quirks) because students will have all sorts of devices they they use (Apple, PC, Tablets,

Chromebooks, Smartphones, etc.). For the younger kids you might have to notate their pieces for them as you typically can't expect them to learn these complicated programs on top of writing a composition, especially when they still have a fairly limited musical vocabulary. *So long as you are comfortable with one particular platform, you can typically figure out ways to export files from other programs to work with what you know best.*

- **Communication:** Every student has a different “musical language” that they are operating from. This is partly due to their skill and knowledge level but it's also just partly how they think and interact. It's important to try to meet the students where they are. This might involve asking a lot of questions like: “How would you like this piece to make you feel? What other pieces do you think are similar to what you want to write here? What colors? What sounds? What do you hear in your head?” etc. Some students might have lots of ideas while others might be able to say very little. It's important to prompt them to get them thinking about the right sorts of elements and angles to composition. You might have to do a little “translation” of their musical language (often letters on a page with beginners or dissecting videos of their playing) into actual notation.
- **Extra Preparation Time:** Budgeting extra time to review pieces will be helpful so that your comments and suggestions are more valuable. Have students send you updates in advance of their next lesson so you can go in prepared with helpful advice and clear direction.
- **Program Only Composing:** Some students will choose to strictly compose within the notation or recording program and never touch a real instrument. Sometimes this leads to fantastically creative results and other times it's less than ideal. The programs can do just about anything and will not account for instrumental limitations (range, number of simultaneous notes, etc.). They might also have unique sounds that don't easily translate into real world instruments (Beepbox) which can then require more “workarounds.” They might distort your perception by making it hard to really know what's going on (visually and aurally).
- **Improv Only Composing:** Some students might consistently improvise the around the basic idea of their composition and have a hard time committing to anything. You might have to get more involved in helping them pick out the best elements of their improvisations to focus on.
- **Research:** Unless writing for their primary instrument, oftentimes some amount of research will be required when writing a composition. Basic research will include the range of instruments being written for, special techniques, how to notate for those instruments, notable elements of a particular musical style, etc.
- **Analysis:** This is important to do with the student so they really understand the structures within the music they are creating. Sometimes students won't yet have the vocabulary and/or analysis skills yet to break down what it is they have written. They may require your help here.
- **Final Edits & Export:** Expect to have to do the final edits on any piece ahead of submitting it to any competition. Basic final edits will include adjusting formatting and layout, showing measure numbers, being sure all text information is correct (different competitions ask for different information to be included), and exporting files in the proper format. If exporting MIDI files, don't forget to check and make sure the instrument assignments are correct!

TIPS

- **Just One Good Idea:** That's all you really need to get started. Being resourceful and developing an idea is generally the hallmark of composition.
“Every idea is really 3 ideas; forward, backward, & inside-out.” – Bradley Sowash
- **Move It Around:** Melody, chords, rhythms, etc. can all be moved around.

- Patterns & Forms: Using set patterns and/or forms can often be great vehicles for exploring composition. Common forms like 12 Bar Blues, Waltzes, Spanish Dances, and Sonatinas and common patterns like Alberti Bass, LH Blues Patterns, and simple broken chord and/or Ostinato figures can really get the creative wheels turning.
- Chords: There's always harmony present, whether you choose to outline it or not. Encourage students to be aware of more than one note at any given time that can work. This might require spelling out the notes of every diatonic chord, etc.
- Explain Yourself: Encourage the student to be intentional with their compositional choices. Ask them 'why' they chose to do or not do something. Even if they have to figure out the 'why' later, they will learn more through this process. It's hard to learn from 100% guessing.
- Use Video & Audio: Every student these days knows how to use a tablet or smartphone and hit record. This is a very helpful tool for composition.
- Change It Up: Try writing on other instruments! Sometimes exploration is easier on an instrument you are less knowledgeable on.
- Criteria Sheet: It can be helpful to create your own prompt to help students get started. You might have to sit down with them to fill it out. Having just some initial thoughts sketched on paper can be extremely helpful in giving a student some direction, even if that direction ends up being the complete opposite direction than intended.
- Set Limitations: Though it may seem counterintuitive, it's often easier to be more creative when limitations are set (instruments, form, style, length, patterns, prompt, deadline). These limitations can help a student get straight to work composing because they know certain decisions are already made.
- Prepare To Be Ignored: Students might ignore your suggestions. You might ask them to analyze their piece and write out what chords they are using and they might just not do any of that. This might be disappointing. Just remember – this is their composition ultimately.
- Post-Composition Question: What have you learned from writing this specific composition?

FREE NOTATION PROGRAMS

- Finale Notepad 2012: Free but only works on PC platforms. Integrates with paid Finale programs through .mus file extension. It will also export the universal .xml notation file format.
- MuseScore: Free and works on PC and Mac platforms. Fairly powerful and intuitive. Perk is that there is a user community around the software that allows users to upload and download files, etc.
- NoteFlight: Same idea as MuseScore.

OTHER HELPFUL PROGRAMS

- Garageband: Free recording program on Apple platforms that is very intuitive but unfortunately exclusive to Apple platforms. This can be helpful for the student who would rather record their ideas and layer them on top. The MIDI instruments in Garageband sounds much better than anything you will find in any free notation program. Unfortunately, you cannot export the MIDI file from Garageband, you can only do that through the professional version of Garageband which is Logic Pro. If you can produce a MIDI file, you can then import it into a notation program and it will typically produce a decent score that you can then edit.
- Beepbox: Free, online recording program. Fun sounds and intuitive interface – easy to make things sounds good here but unfortunately that doesn't always translate into actual notated compositions (this is due to the heavy use of special effects on virtual instruments). It can be inspiring to some students though.

- General MIDI Player: Inexpensive app that will allow you to check your MIDI instrument assignments from the MIDI score export. Critical if you need to check your submissions in this format since what happens within a notation / recording program might not perfectly translate into the General MIDI sounds as you intend them to.

Composition Competitions

Wednesday, September 15th, 2021

MTNA Composition Competition

https://www.mtna.org/MTNA/engage/competitions/Composition_Guidelines.aspx

Submission Deadline: Wednesday, September 15th, 2021 at 3pm EST

Registration Fee: Varies Based on Division of Student (\$50-100)

**Open to students from 1st through 12th grade.*

***State Winners advance to Regionals and Regional Winners advance to the National round.*

****National Winners invited to have composition debuted at MTNA National Conference.*

Saturday, November 6th, 2021

Charleston Sonata Composition Festival

<https://www.charlestonacademyofmusic.com/sonatina-festival>

Registration Fee: \$20 per student

Registration Deadline: Sunday, October 24th, 2021

**Composition Submission Deadline: Friday, November 5th at 9am*

***Winners invited to have composition debuted at Honors Recital on Friday, November 19th.*

Monday, November 8th, 2021

Piano Guild Composition Contest

<https://pianoguild.com/composition-contest.html>

Registration Fee: Varies Based on Level of Student (\$20-40)

**Piano Solo / Duo pieces only.*

Monday, December 6th, 2021

Pianist Magazine Pianist Composing Competition

<https://www.pianistmagazine.com/competition-uploads/pianist-composing-competition-2022>

Registration Fee: £25

**Open to all ages. Only gainfully-published composers are not allowed.*

***Winner featured in Pianist magazine, has piece recorded by Concert pianist Chenyin Li, and receives a Kawai ES520 digital piano.*

(Late) March 2022

South Carolina MTA Composition Competition

Registration Fee: TBA

Registration Deadline: Late March

**Open to students from 1st through 12th grade.*

***Any piece composed in the 2021-22 school year can be submitted.*