

CREATIVITY AND THE COMPOSER

Advice to young composers.

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Presented to the Philosophical Club of Cleveland on January 26, 2010

One of my earliest composition teachers told me that: “Unless you compose with total serialization you are not composing. You might as well give up.” Pierre Boulez had completed the First and Second Books of his “Structures for Two Pianos” in which he serialized not only pitch but also timbre, articulation, and rhythm. This was a welcome development, a new method of composing that was introduced by a prominent composer. This was, however, one among many techniques a student composer should be introduced to and, eventually, master. I therefore had some reservations about this composition teacher’s advice.

My personal opinion was that creative people should be given the opportunity to discover and decide for themselves what approach would be suitable for their own compositional development. In autocratic societies the individual generally is expected to follow established trends while in a free society decision making becomes more of a challenge which contributes to popularity of fads. To learn from existing masterful compositions should be a lifelong endeavor. All sounds, methods and approaches should be available to the beginner composition student. Writing in the style of a specific composer can serve as a very helpful exercise. There is much that young composers can learn from past and present masters. However, they should at the same time strive to discover and establish their own voice. For example a student who is set to become an orchestral conductor should study many master conductors and learn different characteristics from different maestros instead of trying to be a carbon copy of one individual. Similarly a young man striving to enhance his personality could benefit by internalizing good traits of different individuals that he admires: emulating the posture of one, the vocal projection of another, the kindness of the third and so on.

Young composers are not always given the opportunity for this kind of self-discovery and instead are forced to adhere to the use of a specific, established method, usually in the style of the one in current practice. As a result many burgeoning composers begin to sound alike. In a way this is similar to the concept of drawing with the ‘dot to dot’ method. Ideally the composition teacher should present many ‘dots’ and expect the student to make choices.

In 1946 the Darmstadt Summer School was established and eventually it became a haven for the musical avant-garde where many composers participated in developing experimental and innovative approaches to the compositional process. According to Alex Ross in his book *The Rest is Noise* the Darmstadt school was supported by OMGUS, the Office of Military Government United States. “The collected might of the Anglo-American industry, which had been used to obliterate one German city after another, now became the engine of reconstruction. Germany would be reinvented as a democratic, American style society, a bulwark against the

Soviets. Part of that grand plan was a cultural policy of denazification and reduction, which would have a desired effect on postwar music.”

Soon after, several of the Darmstadt composers established very self-indulgent positions and attacked each other implying that their individual method of composing was the only valid one. With the process of eliminating the autocratic and despotic mandates of Hitler’s Nazi era an equally autocratic and confining set of guidelines were being introduced. Accessible music was frowned upon. There was to be a complete break from the past. Any reference to scales, chords, and established formal designs was not acceptable. In a word they were dictating to the young composer how he or she should compose. Here is a case with demands that could easily become a negatively intrusive process of mind control. Stravinsky referred to this type of self-indulging opinionated composer as snobs.

My reaction to this confining set of directives was to reject them outright. I appreciated these composer’s innovative ideas and learned from them. But when they indulged in dictating to others how composing should be done, they lost all credibility. Unfortunately, composition teachers of the time were intimidated, and adhered to these confining expectations. They forced their students to follow these restrictive trends. As a result during my student days when I was given an assignment to compose serially with 12 tones I used only 11 notes. This was my silent, personal way of expressing dissatisfaction. None of my teachers became aware of it. Apparently they never counted the full order of pitches. I was repudiating the status quo and refusing to be manipulated.

It was at that time that I decided, ‘if I ever happened to have the opportunity to teach composition it will not be in this confining and autocratic manner. My students would be encouraged to make decisions and create their own rules however insignificant these rules might seem to be.’ No wonder that composer Igor Stravinsky often remarked that it would be difficult to expect true creativity in academia. Academics too often are expected to follow established rules, and they use these rules in their teaching methods, whereas a truly creative person will create his or her own rules. R. S. Nickerson in his article *Enhancing Creativity* sums up the creative persons’ numerous characteristics: “purpose and intention, basic skills, domain-specific-knowledge, curiosity and inquisitiveness, innovation, self confidence and willingness to take risks, mastery orientation and self competition, beliefs, choice and the opportunity to discover, self management skills, and specific creativity aiding techniques.” The academic will often interfere and not approve of at least some of these approaches. Strangely enough the creative individual at the highest level of advanced study often encounters more resistance to experimental and speculative thought.

According to Robert J. Sternberg’s *Investment theory of Creativity* “Creative people are the ones who are willing and able to buy low and sell high in the realm of ideas. Buying low means pursuing ideas that are unknown or out of favor but have growth potential. Often, when these ideas are presented, they encounter resistance. The creative individual persists in the face of this resistance and eventually sells high, moving on to the next new or unpopular idea.”

Prospective young composers should strive to enrich their art and not worry about recognition or accolades.. There are many examples of outstanding compositions that were not acknowledged or considered significant when they were first

performed. Johann Sebastian Bach's masterful St. Matthew Passion did not find acceptance until 79 years after the composer's death when Felix Mendelssohn performed an abbreviated version of the work in 1829. According to Bach's contemporary and critic Johan Adolf Sheibe, "Bach's music is confused and turgid, 'like the words of a horrid poetaster' and 'as labored as it is useless, because it fights against common sense.'" There is no record that Bach's Brandenburg concertos, considered the finest musical compositions of the Baroque Era, were ever performed during the composer's lifetime. The Mass in B Minor, widely accepted as one of the supreme achievements of classical music, was not published until the year 1900, 150 years after the composer's death. Two of the most beloved symphonies of Franz Schubert, the Unfinished No. 8, and Symphony No. 9, characterized as the Great, were never performed during the composer's lifetime. Beethoven's violin concerto, considered by many as the king of the violin concertos, was premiered by violinist Franz Clement in 1806. According to the *Wiener Theaterzeitung* critics, "The construction of the concerto was weak and the unending repetition of certain places might easily cause fatigue." The composition was not well received and was neglected until 1844 when the twelve year old violinist Joseph Joachim performed the concerto under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn.

Invariably it takes an artist scholar such as Mendelssohn to elucidate the importance of a masterful work and explain its importance to the general public. This phenomenon does not apply only to the musical world. Van Gogh who was little appreciated during his lifetime, yet today, he is regarded as one of history's greatest painters. His paintings are valued in the millions. It takes a long time for the general public to begin to appreciate masterful works.

Knowledge and especially wide ranging information is necessary for creativity to flourish to its fullest. Academia's contribution for a creative person would be to enrich the knowledge in the specific domain involved. Academia can serve as a very valuable source of information that is indispensable for the growth of the thriving creative mind. A developing young composer will need to achieve the expertise as a performer and acquire familiarity with the existing musical literature and be knowledgeable about many related enriching subjects. Above all he should learn to recognize and appreciate great music. It is difficult for a composer to produce aesthetically rewarding compositions if he cannot recognize the qualifications of what distinguishes a masterpiece.

Most experts on aesthetics would agree that a work of art above all needs to have sound structure. There are those who would argue that structure is the only attribute with which one could judge a masterful work. A work of art always seems to be walking a tightrope between unity and contrast. Shapes, colors and melodic patterns, if repeated, become monotonous and boring, while continuous introduction of new materials will lead to disorder. It is that unique balance between unity and contrast that gives a work of art its individual identity.

Felix Mendelssohn in a letter to Marc-Andre Souchay wrote: "There is so much talk about music, and yet so little is said. For my part, I believe that words do not suffice for such a purpose, and if I found they did suffice I would finally have nothing to do with music. People often complain that music is too ambiguous, that what they should be thinking as they hear it is unclear, whereas everyone understands words. With me it is exactly the reverse, and not only in regards to an entire speech but also with individual words. These, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so easily

misunderstood in comparison to genuine music which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words." A young composer should learn to realize that there is a difference between meanings in words and meanings in music and to learn to appreciate music for its own sake.

Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in their *Creativity in Later Life* state, "A person cannot be creative in the abstract, but only within the rules of some practice or idea system. It is impossible for a child living in an isolated tribe or urban ghetto to become a creative mathematician, or for an athletic young man to become a creative basketball player if that game is unknown in his culture. Domains change with time; creativity in physics, for instance, might be easier in certain periods of growth and more difficult when the organization of the domain has become so complete that no discovery seems possible." The authors state further that, "Specialized knowledge is not enough; one needs to reflect on a great amount of experience before being able to say something new. Therefore, one would expect important new contributions in these domains to be made late in life."

Examples of creativity in late life include: Goethe completing *Faust* at 80, Toscanini conducting at 85, Titian painting masterpieces at 98, Granma Moses bursting on the Art scene at 81, Verdi producing his opera *Falstaff* at 80. As these creative artists can be considered late bloomers there are many child prodigies who made their impact at a very early age. Among them we encounter Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Bizet. Most child prodigies never seem to do anything creative as adults. We can only wonder how they would have fared at an older age since they all died relatively young. One could also wonder how Mozart would have fared and what his achievements would have been had he not been born to a family with such a rich cultural and musical background.

There are studies about creative individuals who happen to have common backgrounds and experiences. There are many who have had an early trauma such as the death of the father when they were very young. Some of the most famous inventors and creative people experienced the loss of their father at a very young age. The child in these cases had to take the responsibility of finding solutions to problems that usually would have been taken care of by the father figure. As a result they endeavored to excel even further than if they had had an intact family situation.

There are creators who commonly exhibit characteristics often associated with mental illness. The frequency and intensity of these symptoms seem to vary according to the magnitude and domain of the creative achievement. Composers who exhibited mental disorders include Handel, Schumann, Rachmaninoff and Ravel. In the book *Greatness in Music* by Alfred Einstein we read, "When Goethe refused Schubert's songs set to his poems, it was presumably not only for the reason that the amplitude of the music appeared to interfere with the poetic word, but because he felt the 'demon' in them, for he himself had much too much of this demonical, this abysmal, element to have it stir him in music. It is to be supposed that for him there was also too much of this in Beethoven—but then he knew Beethoven's music only very inadequately. Of the once fashionable theory concerning the relationship of genius and insanity this much is true; that they wander near the Chasm's edge, so that even their gaiety has a dark background; that for this unsteadiness of feeling and thinking they must often enough pay dearly in everyday life."

According to Harvard University psychologist David Perkins, "The idea that creativity spontaneously bubbles up from a magical well or gains a direct line to the Muses is just another myth among many about highly creative people and their work," Inspiration comes as a result of hard work. Ideas may seem to come in a single burst, however most often these ideas must have been developing for a long time. Lukas Foss discussed this subject in an open letter, responding to a composition student who had complained that he had spent three hours on a single measure and produced no results. Foss's statement meant to imply: "What makes you think that you should be different from other creative people who spend endless hours to achieve tangible results? Who do you think you are that you should not spend three hours on a single measure?" The implication was that it does take very hard work and long hours to achieve the desired outcome.

Those who do not persist and who give up easily deprive themselves of great dividends that can only be achieved after lengthy and persistent hard work. We often hear comparisons between Beethoven and Schubert. As admirable as Schubert's ideas are, they always seem to have arrived in flashes and in succession. When compared to Beethoven's his compositions do not have the desirable formal balance and order. More often Schubert repeats his ideas while Beethoven's motives are perpetually developed. As we study Beethoven's sketches we discover that he must have spent long periods of time improving his compositions. A truly creative person will never stop asking the question: "Can it be better?" or "Is there room for improvement?" One is reminded of the oft quoted story about Linus Pauling when he was asked at a public lecture how one creates scientific theories, he replied that one must endeavor to come up with many ideas – then discard the useless ones.

Creative expression generally contributes positively to the quality of life of individuals who engage in it and often enriches the lives of others as well. Composer Reginald Smith Brindle was right when he said, "To compose is one of the most wonderful experiences God has given us, and the journey into our imagination is something other mortals may never experience." Current scholarly research has concluded that creative individuals are most successful when they can follow through with their personal ideas without outside interruption. It has been stated for example that the reason the Wright Brothers were successful with their flight experiments was because they were free of outside interference and that they were able to proceed with their experiments with continuity of thought. As a result they achieved "the first sustained and controlled heavier-than-air powered flight." Others, during that time, who were striving to achieve the same goals, were not successful and failed miserably because they did not have the freedom from external interference.

Boulez's composition *Structures* for two pianos introduced total serialization and influenced a generation of composers. Nowadays Boulez dismisses and rejects his earlier opus as a trifle experiment. Young composers should be given the opportunity to exercise their own experiments trifle or otherwise and discover paths that would lead them to important achievements. Creative individuals are most successful when they follow their own personal dreams.

Notes

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