

Chapter 1 – God is in the Details

Dr. Merrill Bradshaw was one of my instructors at Brigham Young University in 1990's. An accomplished composer himself, Dr. Bradshaw once said something to the effect of "I only know of one rule when it comes to musical composition. Every detail of the music should be exactly what you want it to be." At the time, it seemed like one of those obvious platitudes that don't really mean anything. "Of course," I thought. "Anything I wrote would be what I want it to be. I'm the one writing the music." Now that I teach composition myself, however, I finally understand what Dr. Bradshaw was trying to tell me. He was saying that as a composer, I should carefully consider every aspect of my composition and make a conscious choice for each of them.

The actual work of composing music is in the details, and it is in the careful construction of every detail of a composition that a composer earns his keep. Now that I work with young composers, I often see them bringing in works that they consider "close to finished" that really are better described as a "good idea" but only "half-baked." Often the only thing they've thought about are the basic notes and chords and maybe a rhythmic groove. They hardly seem to realize that there is so much more that shapes the musical experience of the listener – subtleties whose effect is perhaps more subconscious than conscious for audiences but cannot be so for the music's creator.

The visual arts provide a nice analogy for what I'm talking about. You can often get across a basic idea of a concept with line drawings and stick figures, but what separates the beauty of the artistic masterpieces from the mundane is primarily attention to detail. When an art critic gushes about the way a master uses light in their work, he's talking about the artist's attention to detail. When most of us look at a landscape, we see flowers, rocks, and trees – maybe a lake. But the master artist sees the details of how the light is reflected and refracted by the various objects in the scenery, and they work to make their paintings reflect these details. That is what separates the artist from the rest of us. It is those many details, painstakingly produced by a practiced hand, that gives the painting its beauty. How many times do the rest of us stop, content that what we've scribbled out looks somewhat recognizably like a lake or a tree?

The creation of art is work – hard, meticulous, time-consuming work. Most people don't think of this, especially when it comes to music. Perhaps they get caught up in the fun of a well-constructed, well-performed piece of music. Perhaps they are deceived by the apparent ease with which the best performers seem to produce their musical expressions – ease that has only been earned through hours of private practice and repetition. Perhaps it is because we have chosen to use the word "play" to describe what we do with our musical instruments. Certainly, some of it is the fault of our own marketing schemes. For instance, musicians and their work are sometimes described as being "inspired" – as if the music just came to them without doing anything themselves – or in some cases popular artists have been portrayed as having a "bad boy" image – living the corrupt life of endless parties and fun as if they don't have anything better to do with their excess of spare time. Such marketing belies the actual work behind the creation of music. Inspiration comes, certainly, and sometimes it seems to come from a divine source - not the composer himself, but I would say that even in those cases, in a sense the inspiration is earned, because of the constant efforts of the composer to improve his craft. It is this work, persistent effort over a long period of time, that prepares the composer to receive such inspiration and to do something with it once it comes.

The word “talent” can be a dangerous word. We live in a society with a fixed mindset, where we assign labels that define people, with no opportunity for growth or change. The way society looks at people, they are either born “talented musicians” or they aren’t. They either can or can’t sing or play an instrument. Musicians are “born with a guitar in their hands.” With this mindset, if you aren’t a child prodigy like Mozart, you might as well give up your aspirations to be a professional musician right now, or you’ll end up living in your parents’ basement for the rest of your life. Certainly, talent is real, but I look at it as a facility to learn something. Some people just have an easier time learning a particular skill than others. But that alone doesn’t define their future. I have seen many students with talent who have never learned to apply themselves – to work to develop that talent. Many times, these talented students fail, while others with less innate talent but more internal drive put in the time and the effort and end up far more successful in their musical endeavors. If only the more talented student had worked harder, the result might have been different. But they also seem to have also bought into the idea that talent is a gift that you either have or don’t have – not something to be earned through hard work.

Another culprit we might look at that has contributed to the perception that the creation of music isn’t work is the mass marketing and distribution of music. A decade ago, it seemed like music was cheap because you could buy any track you wanted for a dollar. Now, many people don’t even pay for music. They listen to whatever they want whenever they want on various ad-supported streaming services for free. Why pay when you can listen legally for free?

Along with this, of course, has come the democratization of music distribution. Like most things, it is a double-edged sword, of course. Increased access to music distribution channels has made it possible for musicians to reach audiences without giving away the rights to their creations along with a large percentage of the profits. On the other hand, the lack of “gate keepers” has also meant that those like my students with their “finished” creations that are really only “half-baked” can release those works to the world, and there is no one to tell them that their works could use some more detailed work. When “half-baked” becomes what young composers are used to hearing in new releases, how are they supposed to recognize the value that can come from a more detailed approach to music creation?

With music being free and the way services like YouTube and crowd-funding sources like Patreon are structured, content creators have learned that the most important thing they can do to build up their careers is to produce content regularly. This too often means putting out quantity, not quality. Technology that speeds up the production process and adds a veneer of polish to a recording is at a premium. Students come into music programs not wanting to learn how music works but wanting instruction on how to use music production software like Ableton Live, assuming somehow that if they know how to use the technology, that will automatically make their music good. In such an environment, the words of composer Quincy Jones ring out, “If you don’t fully understand music, you end up working for the technology instead of the technology working for you.”¹

However, the system is set up to financially reward quantity, not quality. Income from streaming a single track is so low for the music creators, unless you can produce the elusive hit, it seems hard to justify spending the amount of time on a single song necessary to give the attention to detail that quality

¹ <https://www.musicradar.com/news/quincy-jones-if-you-dont-fully-understand-music-you-end-up-working-for-the-technology-instead-of-the-technology-working-for-you> , accessed 5/22/2021.

would require. But if you can produce a song a week, then the same people coming back again and again to hear your newest and latest – even if it's not the greatest – will provide a much steadier income. And on the flip side, audiences rarely truly value that which they get for free.

It is into this world that the intrepid composer steps – a world with no financial guarantees and a world that has so much mass-produced music released each day, it is difficult to be noticed among all the din and clatter. It might seem that I've made a pretty good argument against even starting. What is the point in fighting these forces? What is the point in pursuing quality when everything seems constructed to reward mediocrity, as long as you have a lot of it and know how to sell it?

I think the first question the aspiring composer needs to ask himself is why. Why do you want to compose music? Over the years as a teacher, I've observed that grades are poor motivators. Students motivated above all by the grade often are looking for a way to do just enough. What is the least I can do and still pass the class or get the A (depending on what level of grade you are pursuing)? I've also observed that it is the same with money. Money is a poor motivator, especially when we are talking about the arts. Don't get me wrong. We all need a certain amount of money to cover our basic needs – and every artist hopes that their efforts will be rewarded enough financially that they are able to comfortably meet those needs. But if money is what motivates you, there are many other more reliable and less challenging ways to make money than composing music.

I should clarify, now, that I do not mean to say that composing music is not a legitimate way to make a living. Despite public perception, there are many people who work hard each day and have managed to do exactly that. Quality music is needed (and valued by those who recognize it – despite what I may have inferred earlier), and with skill, persistence and a willingness taking advantage of the opportunities that are there, the persistent individual can build a career as a composer. But when you are working through the details of a particularly challenging transition in your latest opus, it is not the thought of the almighty dollar that will drive you to do your best work rather than settling for the first solution that works well enough.

It isn't easy. And those who successfully pursue that career path do so because of something more than just a pursuit of fame or fortune. I have had students, swamped in the myriad details of voice leading exercises and demanding Roman numeral analyses for a theory class, decide they just don't want to be a professional musician that badly and drop out of the program. There are many who think how wonderful it would be to have a song that they've written out there in the world, but not so many who enjoy the process of writing that song – or who are willing to put in the work when they realize how much work writing a song can be.

My intent is not to talk anyone out of their dreams of composing music. The point I am trying to make is that those who succeed are often driven by something else. They often speak of not being able to not write music. The act of creation is nearly a compulsion for them. And well it should be. Humans are innately creative. We see it in our children – as natural as life itself. But the challenges of adulthood tend to beat that creativity out of most of us. So, I would invite all who care to try their hand at music to consider why it is that they want to pursue this course. What drives them? What do they hope to find as a reward for all this work that they are taking on?

For me, it has been the pursuit of excellence. I love the challenge of doing something well, especially if it's something difficult. And there is also the need to communicate things that can only be

communicated through the pure emotional language of music. I have learned to love the process of creating music – that attention to detail that I've been talking about. I love the work itself. Of course, I enjoy the discovery of new musical ideas, but I also love the hours of careful tweaking of every aspect of a piece of music to make sure it is expressing exactly what I want in the way that I want it. It energizes me in a way that is difficult to describe.

I think that is important. This is a work that requires love. If you create a piece of music and you're only going through the motions, your audience will sense that. It will come out in the music. Most of a composer's time is spent alone, pounding away, shaping, cutting, and tweaking what he has written to find a way to bring that music from inside himself and give it a full and glorious life that others can share. Sometimes the work is done in collaboration with another artist, but the work itself is not glamorous. And the moments of fame that many outside the industry envision, standing on a stage in front of adoring fans, are fleeting – if they come at all. For those who succeed, this is a job – not that much unlike any other. If you do not find the work, itself, rewarding, there may not be enough of any other reward to keep you doing it – at least not over the long term. On the other hand, for those of us who do love the process, what a joy it is to be able to spend a chunk of time each day working in music!

And so that brings me back to the point where I started – the beauty of music that is found in its details. I can imagine a young composer – young in experience that is, not necessarily in age – eager to dive headlong into the rushing waters and begin exploring this new world of music. But they are unsure of themselves. Where do they begin? The river of sound rushes past so quickly, and there is so much to absorb, they might be afraid to even dip in a toe for fear that they could be swept away in the overwhelming rapids. There is so much to learn, so much to consider. Fear of failure is real and can be paralyzing. Perhaps they have even tried to write a ditty or two, but their ideas when brought out into the world seem so insignificant, even childish – their melodies more suited for a nursery rhyme than an expression of the epic feelings that rage inside them, longing to be loosed on the world.

Perhaps to that young composer it might be comforting to know that we've all been there. We've felt that desire as well as that inadequacy to give it proper expression. I remember my earliest attempt at writing music at the age of 12. I was no child prodigy. I also had no understanding of music theory – only my instinctual sense of what didn't sound too bad. My song had lyrics, but even those were inane. The whole project was clearly a first, childish attempt at expression. I am happy to say that that early song and every draft of it has been permanently lost to the past. It was not fit for public consumption. But the important thing is that I wrote it. And then, later on, I wrote something else. The second song was better. And I learned from writing it as well. And the third. Along the way, I studied music theory. I read theoretical books on lyric writing. I studied with experienced instructors and studied the successful works of many other composers. I kept practicing. And I got better. Music composition is a craft that can be learned. It just takes persistence – and time.

Time is the essence of music. Some have said that composing music is like painting and silence is the canvas on which the composer paints his masterpiece. While this is not untrue, I prefer to think of time as my canvas. Or perhaps time is the atom of music – the very building block of musical expression. Without time, you simply cannot have music. Time organizes the vibrations that make up the musical experience and gives them structure. And the composer whose work brings to life this organization also invests his own time in creating this structure. There is no successful way to shortcut this process. It is no surprise, then, that experts on the creative process (musical or otherwise) have consistently pointed

out the necessity of time as an essential ingredient for creativity itself. The more time that is invested, both in active brainstorming and in allowing ideas to percolate and mature, the more likely a completed endeavor is to be successful by all the important measures we use to identify creativity and originality.

Of course, if time were the only thing needed, then an artist could spend their entire lifetime creating one single work – investing the maximum amount of time possible – and end up with the greatest single effort in the history of mankind. But there is another side of the coin – the act of completion. There is also something valuable to be gained from finishing a work, evaluating what was learned from that process, then moving on to apply that learning to the next work. Actor and writer John Cleese has given a number of presentations on creativity, and he has pointed out that the most successfully creative individuals often have a facility for moving back and forth between two modes, which he terms the “open” or creative/brainstorming mode and the “closed” or productive mode.² Individuals stuck in the open mode have all kinds of ideas, but never actually do anything with them, while those who are stuck in the closed mode are always working on mundane tasks instead of coming up with anything original. (I’m simplifying. You should check out his speech referenced in the footnote. It’s excellent.)

Musician and entrepreneur Derek Sivers (founder of CD Baby) talked about a ceramics class in one of his presentations, in which the instructor had half the class receive their grade based on one ideal work they created during the semester and another half of the class received their grade based on the total weight of the projects they created during the semester. He noted that by the end of the semester, the best works were being created by the students in the half of the class that were not being graded on quality but on volume of work done.³ This demonstrates the value of practice – of the iterative process of coming up with a project, working on that project, completing the project, evaluating and learning from the project, then repeating the process over and over. What does this mean for my earlier assertion that students often do not spend enough time on the details of a particular composition? I have two thoughts on the subject.

First, one of the things that you learn with experience is when to call a song “finished.” The fact is that you could probably, in fact, spend an entire lifetime tweaking and improving a single song. There is a saying that compositions are never truly finished, they are merely abandoned. You can always find things to improve – some detail that you can work on. At some point, however, you learn to recognize that you’ve spent enough time on a given project – the details have been worked out sufficiently and any effort from that point will not make a significant difference in the song. When you reach that point, it’s time to take what you’ve learned from this song and move on to other projects. My observation from earlier was that young composers often seem to feel like they’ve arrived at that point earlier than they probably should. That is all.

Second, you get to carry some of the value of the time invested in previous projects into your new projects. In other words, the value of practice is real, and it will make you a better composer. It is important to do more than just talk, read, or think about composing. It’s important to spend time in the actual act of composing. That’s why that first composition at the age of 12 was so important for me. As you practice, you become more aware of the details of music that you want to shape. You become more adept at working with those details. You work more quickly and effectively. Your compositions get

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb5oIIPO62g>, accessed 7/8/2021.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhxcFGuKOys>, accessed 7/8/2021

better, faster – because of the time you have previously invested in learning the craft. Time spent in persistent practice is time invested with compounding interest.

How long will it take? I have heard it said that a serious composer takes about ten years to develop his “mature style.” Likewise, Nashville – the place where many budding songwriters find their start – is known as the “ten-year town” because it is said that it takes about ten years for a songwriter to establish a career there. Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Outliers*, popularized a concept known as the 10,000-hour rule, which posited that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice for a person to become an expert in any field, which coincidentally works about to about ten years of full-time effort.⁴ Whether or not this is an accurate number, it certainly does not mean that a composer pops into a cocoon for exactly ten years and then emerges a fully formed and successful artist. These seem mostly to be popular numbers based on anecdotal evidence, a general unspecific feeling of what it means to be “established,” an “expert,” or “mature,” and perhaps there is also a bit of love for round numbers involved as well.

However, I think this does emphasize the importance of patience and persistence over time when working to develop these skills. You cannot cram for the composition exam. Instead, regular daily practice over a long period of time is key – like any other music-related skill come to think of it. I think it’s important for a composer to recognize this requirement. It’s much easier to make it through the long haul if you realized going in that’s what it was going to take. One thing to also realize, however, is that this is path is not a direct-line, straight course ascending with a constant slope toward a point labeled “proficiency.” Nor will learning end at ten years or twenty – or ever if you’re doing this right. There will be hills and valleys, “aha” moments of epiphany, and grind-it-out long slogs just trying to get something done. Along the way, you’ll discover things about yourself and your relationship with your art. You’ll have moments of connection, where you really feel like you’re starting to get it and so is your audience. You’ll also have moments of solitude, when you wonder if anyone will ever care about your music – or even why would they? It is a journey, just as life, itself, is a journey. There are both rewards and challenges along the way. Hopefully, knowing this beforehand, whether you’re doing this to build a career, as a private hobby to enrich your life or something somewhere in between, you’ll feel that it’s a journey worth taking – whatever your reasons for taking it.

Activities

1. Write a paragraph or two describing your motivations and goals (both short-term and long-term) relating to music composition.

⁴ Gladwell, Malcolm (2008). *Outliers*. Little, Brown and Company.