

## TEACHING COMPOSITION: SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS

Teaching someone to compose is impossible! We all know that Bartok said it and refused to teach composition. My mentor Feldman taught composition but always claimed you couldn't do it, for which he was often criticized by students. His now somewhat famous response to a student who asked him how he could possibly be so hypocritical as to teach composition classes and yet at the same time say that it couldn't be done was to say that it was a sign of "maturity".

I believe that Bartok, Feldman, and many others however never meant that you cannot teach someone to compose but rather that you cannot teach imagination, creativity, and natural musicianship, or in other words the basic talent (tools) needed to be a composer. I believe that they might have agreed that you can improve someone's musicianship and try to increase or open up a student's creativity (within limits).

In addition to these important tools for a composer, perhaps the one thing that is as important is musical awareness. While the tools are harder to teach and greatly improve, musical awareness is not hard to teach. What do I mean by musical awareness? A thorough knowledge of all musics regardless of style. While the emphasis I make is on Art music I also try to make sure that my students are aware at some level of ethnic music from around the world as well as popular and/or more vernacular music (a part of their education that I don't usually have to do much about). And when I say Art music I mean all aesthetics (Glass to Boulez to Beethoven to Zorn, etc.). I do not take this approach expecting them to appropriate these musics but rather to make them aware that influences in one's work may come from very unexpected sources.

In my opinion one of the biggest impediments to being a competent composer is being naive. This is something that I try to make sure that all of my students overcome and I do it in a variety of ways which I will discuss below. In addition, I firmly believe that good works transcend style. As a result I do not require or teach any given musical style. Instead I make sure that students are aware of as many of them as possible. What do I mean by good works transcend style? I explain this in detail in my article *Why References?* but will briefly state that a great work has value not because of the style that it is in but rather for the impact that it makes. For me this impact is much more related to the material and how it is presented than the style. In my view, the references the work may have are generally secondary and do not give the work importance. For me when you compare great works throughout history, style is not what determines the value of the work.

Given that I have been at a relatively young university Florida International University (FIU), for over 15 years, I have had the good fortune to be able to design, install, and modify the program of studies for composition students. This work began with the creation of an undergraduate curriculum and later a graduate program. My first step was to create the FIU Electronic Music Studio and a set of related courses. At the same time I organized a student New Music Ensemble for the performance of student works and works from the recent 20th Century repertoire. The implementation of a set of strong musicianship and analysis courses was also undertaken.

The electronic music and technology courses are imperative for composers in the 21st century. While possible to avoid in the not too distant past, without them today you are a deficient and

naive composer even if your excuse is that your first love is writing for the orchestra. The New Music ensemble is not only important for the students performing in it but for the students that are exposed to the music of the 20th and 21st century as performed by their peers. The requirement that all composition students perform in this ensemble for at least 4 semesters keeps them in the world of music making and reinforces and expands their exposure to new works.

Performance at the undergraduate level is important in my view and from the start our composition students have been required to present a 30 minute recital on their instruments of works from the repertoire before graduation. This is in addition to the 45 minute composition recital of their works. I also require composition students to conduct at least one of their works before graduating. These performance requirements help to keep students in the real music world and not divorced from music making. In my view the creation of music and the presentation/realization of music are very closely related.

Having strong analytical and musicianship skills are also important for the developing composer (as if we ever stop developing). Having a notion of what it is that one is creating during the compositional process is an important tool. Even as intuitive as my compositional approach is, I find myself utilizing my analytical background as a new piece unfolds. A strong and comprehensive background in theory can be very important in this regard. Sight singing and aural skills are obviously of great importance to the student composer however this is just a starting point. A good composer must somehow be able to notate what it is that they hear (no matter what it is). Feldman would often say you are only as good as your notation. By that he meant you are only as good as your ability to accurately take whatever you have in your head and have others (performers) produce the same exact sonic image (or sound). Obviously he wasn't talking about rendering just rhythms and pitches. Timbre, densities, textures, etc., these are all integral and important parts of the sonic image.

An important way to develop the ability to render and notate what students' hear is by having as many of the students' works read and/or performed as possible. Given that FIU has a strong performance program this is generally not a problem. At the same time students are required to organize the performances of their works, finding the performers and coaching them. This is done to encourage students to develop skills that will be needed later in the real world. The university does provide reading sessions each semester by the orchestra, choir, wind ensemble, and assists with helping to organize readings and/or performances by student chamber ensembles (string quartet, brass choirs, etc.) but performances at student composition recitals are organized by the students.

Earlier I mentioned naiveté. In my program this is most often resolved by having students analyze and take listening identification tests that include a good deal of the most significant music from the 20th/21st century (ca 120-150 works). These tests are taken as part of the composition seminar offered during the sophomore year and coincide with short writing projects in which the compositional techniques utilized in the works on the listening test are employed. An upper level course focusing on just 20th/21st century music history is also part of the curriculum further emphasizing and reinforcing what was assimilated in the sophomore year. Guest composers and performers present lectures as part of a composers forum that meets weekly. The latest music and techniques are often presented and discussed at these forums. In

addition student compositions are presented for critiques by the composition faculty once each semester giving the student feedback from several faculty not just his or her primary teacher. Not to be diminished, the more traditional repertoire is covered in many of the basic (and upper level) theory courses and the history survey courses focus on the music from antiquity to first part of the 20th century. In many of the theory classes strict writing using common practice is emphasized. Given this pluralistic approach students explore a variety of aesthetics early on and usually gravitate towards one or more approaches. As Feldman once commented Stockhausen has 6 centuries of music to choose from for just one measure while other composers are just stuck with 12 notes in a series or row. While I have nothing against 12 tone writing, I don't want my students "stuck" in anything.

My aim is for my students to have the 6 centuries plus at their disposal and another way that I do this is by being involved in the presentation of International New Music festivals and other related events at FIU. These festivals which I have organized over the last 10 plus years have brought excellent performers and composers to our campus for the enrichment of our students and the community. Most of them have (and will continue to have) master class components for our composition students (both graduate and undergraduate). These events are another example of one of my main pedagogical concerns, that student composers must be musically aware.

Teaching composition at the graduate level is a little more specialized in that students come in with different and more evolved backgrounds. Here teaching more basic skills is not the case rather the challenge is to help the student continue to find his or her own unique voice. As with the undergraduate program students with talent but lacking musical awareness eliminate this deficiency with additional writing, listening, and analysis projects. Most come in with solid backgrounds and continue to grow given the emphasis on the music being written today throughout the world.

As with the undergraduates, Electronic Music courses are required and technology is emphasized at the graduate level. A course on Experimental Arts in which students are able to work with students from the dance, theater, and visual arts is another important part of the program (which advanced undergraduates can also take). As we enter the 21st Century these collaborations will increase and students should have the ability to experience the collaborative process and integrate with other arts. Advanced analysis and orchestration courses are also integral to the program as the skills acquired at the undergraduate level must continue to develop and evolve when students continue graduate training. Although performance skills are always welcome they are not emphasized at the graduate level. It is assumed that at this level the student has already completed a certain level of proficiency as a performer. Nevertheless I continually advise my graduate composition students to continue to perform and/or conduct.

Lastly, and as important I try to teach young composers (especially graduate students) to be self critical of their music. This is best done by trying to distance ones self from your work and treat it as if it was a work by another composer. Not easily done, when accomplished properly however, it helps students take a step back from a work often allowing them to subsequently return to the work with a fresh point of view. Too often student composers get very involved with the day to day writing of their music and miss the bigger picture. Why are you writing the work? What is the work about? Why have you chosen the aesthetic you are in? What would

your reaction be if you heard this work on a concert and it was by composer X? Would you find it of interest? I am convinced that this method of auto criticism if used properly can help the advanced student find his or her unique voice as a composer.

Can composition be taught? If what we mean is musical talent then obviously not. But if what we mean is can we help students evolve in such a way as to develop the talent that they already possess to the maximum, then I believe that the answer is yes. And I am pleased to be able to say that I have been very fortunate to have seen this phenomena occur in many of my students.