

The Top **5**
Composing Tips
for **New**
Composers

by Jon Brantingham

Art of Composing

Tip #1

Start calling yourself a composer

There is a difference in this world between people who want to be, and people who are. Most people want to be. Few actually are.

But where does the transition happen? When do you cease being "someone who composes," and instead become "a composer"? The answer is purely up to you. It happens when you make the mental transition and actually start calling yourself a composer.

Imagine this. You meet someone new. This person plays piano professionally, and you would like to get one of your pieces played. Maybe you are even willing to *pay* this piano player. You walk up to the piano player and say, "Hey, I am someone that... you know... likes to compose... in my spare time. Would you play my piece for me?... I'll pay you."

Now put yourself in the shoes of this piano player. Someone they don't know, who doesn't really seem to be sure whether they are a composer or not wants him to play in public something they wrote. Would you say yes? Or would you say, "Umm... actually, I am fully booked up right now."

Probably the latter.

But now replay the interaction.

"Hello, my name is Johann Wolfgang Haydn, and I have just finished my latest work. I am a composer in the area and I am looking for a serious piano player to premiere my work for a gala event on the 20th."

I would go with the second guy.

In order to be taken seriously as a composer, you must take yourself seriously as a composer.

Tip #2

The best way to become a better composer, is to actually compose

Sometimes it can be very tempting to drown yourself in theory, analysis and listening. You say you need inspiration, or you need to understand something a little better. But at the expense of what. The best way to improve your composing is to actually compose. Your personal experience will always be more meaningful to you than someone else's personal experience.

But how should you compose? Mindset and approach are important. You must always approach composing as an apprentice, and you must have a "beginner's mind".

Beginner's Mind is a zen term that basically means you do not, or at least you try not to come at a problem with preconceived notions. And composing is no more than answering a set of problems. Not necessarily math problems, but musical problems.

How do I end this phrase?
How do I develop this idea?
What instrumentation should I use?

They are all problems that must be solved.

Beginner's mind teaches you that your value as a person is not on the line with every piece you write. You are not your compositions.

If you know you are a student, then your mistakes will not sting as much. If you write something, and then a week later you hate it, you won't take it personally. This is because everything is a step towards mastery.

This is not to say that theory, listening, transcription, analysis, and critique are bad things. I think they are very good things. They can inform your compositions in ways you would otherwise not see. Learning theory and analyzing other composers doesn't mean you won't have a beginner's mind. It just means that you can use the theory to understand how previous composers approached their composing problems, and in turn,

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how you can potentially approach your own composing problems. There is a healthy balance of studying and composing that must be maintained and composing should be the heavier side of the equation.

But the linchpin is actually composing.

Not thinking about composing.

Not dreaming about composing.

Not starting a composition and then surfing the internet.

It's actually composing.

So go compose.

Tip #3

Cultivate Your Skills and Then Let Go

I always look at composition as a multi-faceted set of skills. There is the skill of transcription, so you can hear something (either you play or imagine in your head) and then write it down.

There are the skills of harmony, melody, counterpoint, and orchestration, that give a depth to your composition beyond simple tunes.

There is the very important skill of actually forcing yourself to write down what you are playing... and not just noodling at the piano or guitar for an hour.

This one gets me a lot. I will be on track with a great idea, and it's developing nicely.

"Yes! Yes! That's it! That is where it needs to go!" But as I grab my pencil and begin to write, I realize I haven't written anything in the last five minutes that I've been playing the piano. And poof... it's gone.

Approaching composition as a set of skills makes the intimidating task of mastery a little less intimidating, and it gives you the chance to deliberately practice smaller chunks in a focused way.

Here is a short list of skills you can practice:

- Transcription
- Voice Leading
- Counterpoint
- Instrumentation
- Orchestration
- Writing against the clock (give yourself a short period of time, like 30 minutes to finish a piece.)
- Transformation of ideas (variations on something you've already written - like expansions, extensions, retrogrades, inversions, etc.)
- Composing without an instrument.
- Active Listening
- Improvisation

But once you master a skill, and you actually sit down to compose, let go. Let the skill manifest naturally in your composition. Don't force it. Trust me, if you have put in the practice, it's there.

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Tip #4 Practice in Public

Practicing in public basically means that you book yourself for public performances of your pieces. *If you wait until your music is ready for the public, you'll never do it.* But if you look at this as a public practice of your music, you can once again let yourself off of the mental hook. You are there to improve and learn. Hopefully everyone else enjoys the music, but that is secondary. I guarantee you will hear things you missed when you composed it, just because the pressure is on.

The next time you do it, you will be better.

Now this requires some steps.

First, you have to find a performer. This could be you, or another musician... or even a computer, if that is what your music is written for. But find someone or something that can handle your music. If you can't... then you may be caught in one of the composing traps of *writing for make believe virtuosos*. If the only person who can play your latest sonata is Lang Lang or Sibelius software... you need to lighten up on the quadruple octave runs and arpeggios.

Second, you need to find a venue. I think you'll be surprised at what a local wine bar or coffee shop owner will allow. Let them tell you when the best time to perform is. Also bring along a demo CD or be prepared to play the music from your website or soundcloud. Put them at ease. You don't want this to be your debut of your latest opera "Screech! and Other Annoying Sounds."

Third, be prepared with marketing material. Make some business cards. Set up a website. Have some CDs or something. At least have a facebook page that others can like. You never know when opportunity will knock. Will you be ready to answer.

The main point is that you are willing to put your music out in public. This is a big day for a composer. There are not many experiences in the world like having others enjoy your music.

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Tip #5 Connect with Other Composers

Finally, I think nothing will help you grow more than connecting with other composers. Sometimes composing can seem like solitary confinement. But if you look at all great composers through all of time, they were clumped together. This guy knew that guy. Haydn was friends with Mozart and taught Beethoven. *Les Six* in Paris. Mahler and Strauss. They all were good buddies and helped each other grow.

If you can find a more experienced composer to bounce things off of, that is great as well. Having a mentor who has been there, and done that will also allow you to grow in ways you cannot see from your own vantage point and help put some identity into your soul.

Strive to get both peers and mentors. You can never have enough.

We are all on this journey together, and I invite you to find some other composer's to connect with through the [Art of Composing Facebook Group](#).

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