AN APPROACH TO THE PEDAGOGY OF BEGINNING MUSIC COMPOSITION:  
TEACHING UNDERSTANDING AND REALIZATION OF  
THE FIRST STEPS IN COMPOSING MUSIC

DOCUMENT

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By

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ABSTRACT

Conducting a first course in music composition in a classroom setting is one of the most difficult tasks a composer/teacher faces. Such a course is much more effective when the basic elements of compositional technique are shown, as much as possible, to be universally applicable, regardless of style. When students begin to see these topics in a broader perspective and understand the roots, dynamic behaviors, and the general nature of the different elements and functions in music, they begin to treat them as open models for individual interpretation, and become much more free in dealing with them expressively.

This document is not designed as a textbook, but rather as a resource for the teacher of a beginning college undergraduate course in composition. The Introduction offers some perspectives on teaching composition in the contemporary musical setting influenced by fast access to information, popular culture, and globalization.

In terms of breadth, the text reflects the author’s general methodology in leading students from basic exercises in which they learn to think compositionally, to the writing of a first composition for solo instrument. The concept of universal applicability of techniques is carried through discussions on the nature of sound as an expressive resource, how to deal with first ideas, exploration and formation of motives, building phrases, and the notion of form in music. The approach and procedures in the text are
based on the author’s own experiences teaching composition at The Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, and Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Examples and assignments serve to illustrate points in the text, and to assist the teacher in the classroom.
Dedicated to my parents,

Dragan and Rajka Stanojevic
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I would like to thank all of my teachers and professors who helped me from an early age to understand the beauty and complexity of the world of music. I especially thank my primary composition teachers, Professor Mirjana Shistek-Djordjevic and the late Professor Alexander Pirumov. I would also like to thank my adviser, Professor Donald Harris, for his encouragement and support.

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When a composer finds her/himself faced with the challenge of teaching the very first steps in music composition, a whole array of questions arises. The level of apprehension becomes even higher when the subject is taught in a classroom setting. The imaginative and creative processes involved in composition are only as explainable as the human mind and as much inexplicable as the purpose of those processes. These issues are much more easily dealt with in individual instruction, where the dynamics of thought exchange involve only two individual minds, and where the teacher’s instincts and intuition are brought to bear on a single student.

There are many good textbooks dedicated to teaching beginning composition, including some that were written by composers whose names are already recognized by history (Schoenberg, Hindemith). All of them are very helpful in giving us a range of exercises to develop students’ writing skills as well as to organize and select the materials needed to be covered in a course. More and more, however, we find ourselves as composers and teachers questioning the applicability of the old systems and values to new roles, expressions and perceptions of music. On the one hand, pedagogy is only effective if it is systematized, but on the other, that is exactly what can make it limiting. Is it possible to “invent” an open system, to allow for diversity of styles and the ebb and
flow of tastes and aesthetics? I believe that the solution lies not so much in inventing new
methods of teaching as it does with the way topics in music are presented.

While in other areas of music, such as Form and Analysis or Harmony, one learns
to discover the structural system and *modus operandi* of a particular piece, in
composition that formal system must be given new life, new expression, and must be
approached from an individual angle. This is why I think it is important to put each topic
into a broader perspective and understand the roots and the general nature of the different
elements and functions in music. Let us consider, for example, the fugues of Bach. To
most of the new generation of students, the language of the fugue is unfamiliar and
remote, but when it is presented through the prism of universal principles it becomes
relevant and attractive to them. It is possible to see fugal form as a reflection of the
constant motion and change in the universe; polyphony as a presentation of the parallel
existence of things, and harmony as the result of their interactions in time.

It is my experience that when issues are approached from a broader and often
metaphorical perspective, students feel much more free to creatively deal with subjects.
This also leaves just enough undefined space to be filled in with their own imagination.

This text is not designed as a textbook, but rather as a resource for the teacher of a
beginning college undergraduate course in composition. The intent is to go beyond basic
descriptions of the topics of music and present them as open models for individual
interpretation. In the Introduction, I attempt to understand the place of music in today’s
world by observing how the sources of inspiration, as well as the purposes and forms of
expression have changed throughout history and apply this to communicating with
today’s students. The following chapters reflect my general methodology in leading
students from basic exercises in which they learn to think compositionally, to the writing of a first composition for solo instrument. Examples and assignments serve to illustrate points in the text, and to assist the teacher in the classroom.
INTRODUCTION

MAKING SENSE OF TODAY THROUGH THE PRISM OF HISTORY

Teaching beginning composition has always presented a challenge on many levels. A successful teacher has to know how to balance skill development with a need for self-expression in students. Most often, no other music teacher faces students with so many varieties in musical backgrounds and levels of knowledge, as in the case of beginning composition.

A new age of information technology and globalization has brought with it a new realm of possibilities and challenges. Suddenly, long accepted recipes for music making in Western European music tradition are beginning to be seen not simply as “old fashioned” but rather as “limited.” This doesn’t have to do so much with the 20th century well known clash between the “tonal traditionalists” and “dissonant modernists,” as with the popularization and commercialization of new musical genres and styles (such as rock, pop, rap, hip-hop, etc.), as well as with the ease of information exchange due to the development of the internet.

It is somewhat self-centered, however, to view our time as extraordinary. The time one lives in always seems new compared to previous ones. That new time feels more advanced (read: better) and more challenging than the time before. This is especially true
for the Western-European way of thinking, rooted in a long tradition of observing the world as constant upward linear change and revolution toward the better.

Without getting too deep into the analysis of connections between the evolution of music and socio-political-economic changes in the western world from the Renaissance era onward, it is important to say that, in my view, up to the beginning of 21st century “classical” or “academic” music developed toward individualization in the sense of uniqueness, rather then globalization.

The fall of the Bastille and the fall of the Berlin wall are two important arches in the history of music-making and perception. The first historical event brought the development of democracy to Europe along with an emphasized role of the individual. This is very much reflected in the music of the 19th century. The god of the Renaissance and Baroque eras that was still, although less than in the Middle Ages, a world unifying, globalizing force, was obscured by the light focused on the individual. The end of 18th- and the beginning of 19th century brought us the first “celebrities” in music composition, and the principle of unique self-expression culminated in the romantic period.

But there was another current developing in the 19th century: nationalism. It represented as much the urge of writers to come out of their own self-important shell and connect with a larger group of people, as the result of political dynamics of that time. This understanding of the importance of connecting with others, along with the acceptance of one’s role in a larger society and a view of originality as a variation on collectively well known trends, is becoming a re-born principle of today’s world.

The pendulum of history is always in motion. Nationalism and collectivism in dialectic unity with subjective ego-expressiveness lost its appeal as a result of two world
wars in the 20th century. Composers moved to, what it might seem, the opposite direction, reaching to rational sources like mathematics and science for their inspiration.

Even though the rationality of numbers took music out of the subjective realm, many works created in this period failed to communicate, and therefore to be of use to the broader audience. The new musical codes, coming from the experimental laboratories of their creators, formed a language understood often only by their makers. In that sense, the individualization of music from the 19th century continues into the new one, but this time not in the form of the irrational or subjective, but of the rational and explainable.

Although uniqueness is an important principle of nature itself, the overwhelming worship of novelty and individualism that is still present in today’s musical judgments should probably be relegated to one of history’s drawers. This principle of evaluation is also reflected in the way we teach and test the musical knowledge of our students. The 20th century admiration for unique musical ideas and techniques has become almost an obsession, especially in the academic world.

It is interesting how unrecognizable for many music historians is the birth of a new, after-modern and post post-modern era in music. The sensibilities of the present era are perhaps best perceived through viewing the perceptions of music by the newest generation of students—most of them born, and/or growing up after the fall of the Berlin wall, an event which heralded the advance of globalization. There are similar, yet contrasting parallels between this generation at the beginning of the 21st century and the one at the beginning of the 20th. Both generations projected their interests toward the broader world, but in case of the latest generation, the world came to them. They don’t observe it as “foreign” or “exotic,” but rather as intrinsically their own. Theirs is not the
world where spices are imported to be added to their own recipes, but rather the world where Chinese or Indian foods are part of the everyday diet. Their view of music history is similar: approaches and techniques of composers from the past are treated as readily available and accepted as belonging to today.

In my experience, most of the students of this new generation showed as much interest in learning techniques of pre-20th-century music as those of the recent past. It is interesting to observe these students showing equal excitement in a discussion of music, whether the topic were Cage or Schubert. They did not see Cage and Schubert or Shostakovich and gamelan music as conflicting, but rather coexisting peacefully on the plate of history, available for immediate consumption.

In this new, post-Berlin-wall world, music is judged less by its style/technique and uniqueness/individualism than by its ability to communicate. On one level, that explains the success of popular genres that use easily recognizable musical codes, most often in a form of a basic tonal harmony, along with texts reflecting the life of today. These codes are constantly recycled for easy communication in advertisements, movies, cell-phone rings, etc.

If an art medium is seen more as a tool for communicating meaning, rather than mainly communicating the form of its own self—characteristic of so many works of contemporary art centering around experimentation and uniqueness as a self-fulfilling prophesy—then it has a chance to go far beyond its own self, to reach the cross-point of all artistic genres where the essence is not the result of expression, but the subject of it. As T. S. Eliot (Kermode 1975) puts it: “…poetry so transparent that we should not see
the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry.... To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to *get beyond* music....”

A lack of transparency of meaning in music resulted in people abandoning concert halls when contemporary music was performed. Ease of communication, however, should not be confused with the quality of it. The same desire for transparency in communication can easily become a negative force. Look at the example of how the music of Bach and other great composers of liturgical music is being replaced in churches today by sweet, sentimental and simplistically tonal “Contemporary-Christian” music.

What are the lessons the teacher-composer might learn from observing past and present tendencies? It is my opinion that we are entering a time where past and present meet, and the pendulum of history is not moving to extremes. This is possibly a time to achieve a balance between the individual and the global, the subjective and the collective, the tradition of the past and the experiment of today. How can we be in tune with that as teachers and nurturers of new generations of composers?

1. Listen to your students. Learn about their interests, tastes and goals.

2. Take advantage of the past becoming present. Present historical musical skills and let students interpret them from their perspective.

3. Don’t be afraid to be “conservative” by bringing the music of old masters to classes. To most of students this music is refreshingly new. Remember, Mozart or Beethoven might be confused with Nokia or Ericsson ring-tone!

4. Imitation is a tool of learning; novelty is a side effect of that process. Do not emphasize originality as an important value in students’ works, especially in this beginning stage of learning.
5. Do not require purity of style in compositional exercises.

6. Challenge students to avoid the traps of clichés. Allow them to discover their unique internal voice and teach them how to listen to it. It helps to have them experiment with new approaches/techniques and study music that is new and unfamiliar to them.

7. Students are thirsty for diverse information. Make students listen and search for music from different times and geographic origins.

8. Decide on a set of parameters for evaluation of music. The majority of those should be universally applicable.

The last point, *evaluation*, is probably the most sensitive and controversial. The danger and beauty of teaching composition lie in its unpredictability, which is nowhere more evident than in situations where one is called on to make judgments. Those situations, however, embody the essence of composition pedagogy. The dynamics of lessons are a result of the personality of the teacher and the diversity of the students. While the strength of the teacher’s personality often depends on her/his strength as a composer, the latter does not equal the quality of her/him as a teacher. Good composers don’t always make good teachers, but the good composer does have more of a chance to become one. This is why I emphasize the importance of getting out of our own shells, finding ourselves on the stage of history, seeing the collective whole and the present time of which we are a part. Our students just may be the best mirror of who we are, where we came from, and where we find ourselves at as creators and teachers.
CHAPTER 1

SOUND: THE BASIC BUILDING BLOCK OF COMPOSITION

Most of our students come to their first composition class with “symptoms” of overexposure to the most simplistic tonal music. They have been bombarded with this type of music from all kinds of sources: TV advertisements, MTV music videos, movies, music in shopping malls, etc. Although, in my opinion, no one musical language is superior to any other, one of the first principles in teaching is to recognize barriers in the student’s mind that could possibly limit the breadth of their creative imagination. This is the reason I like to start by asking students to discuss the basic nature of music, to formulate their thoughts with an open mind, almost as visitors from another civilization, but at the same time not to be discouraged from making intuitive observations.

When asking what is music, I don’t expect a dictionary definition. We all know that music is an art form. But what is this “artificial” creation built of? Sounds. Music is a dynamic art form comprised of meaningful connections of sounds passing through time. By meaningful I have in mind that this medium (music composition) is communicating meaning, and is not just a concoction of sounds naturally (or unnaturally) appearing around us. This building block of music composition, sound, can be any sound, from a million-dollar Guarnarius to hitting a kitchen pot—and again, the pot-banging, or
whatever, becomes music when meaning is communicated through the treatment of those sounds through time. Of course, the perception of meaning can exist both on the emotional and/or rational levels. This is a subject for an expanded discussion that we cannot fully avoid talking about in music composition, and an in-depth treatment of this topic would be better reserved for classes in music appreciation, aesthetics, music cognition and semiotics. For the purposes of this argument, we need to focus on the main element of music: sound itself.

When we think of sound, the first characteristics that come to mind are probably the pitch and time it occupies, i.e. its length or value. Another property of sound, loudness, carries with it a large expressive potential, and is important to emphasize. Even if the pitch of a tone is held constant, its loudness can be articulated for expressive effect, as can be heard in Example 1, which presents a single tone that varies periodically in loudness to produce a kind of “expressive tremolando.”

Click here to play Audio Example 1.

Audio Example 1. Single tone that varies periodically in loudness.

Another very important characteristic of sound is its timbre, or tone color. Timbre is a complex attribute, dependent on pitch, loudness, and duration. Without delving too deeply into musical acoustics, let us say that the beginning composer should have an appreciation for a few facts about timbre: 1) sounds are comprised of simple, single-frequency (sine-wave) components that sound together like a chord to constitute a timbre;
2) the number of components, their arrangement in frequency, their strength in amplitude relative to each other, and their behavior through time all contribute to the timbral quality of a sound. Students should be familiar with how the analysis of sound is represented graphically to reinforce these basic concepts, for example, the three-dimensional, or waterfall, spectral-analysis display of Figure 1 that shows loudness on the Y axis, frequency on the X axis, and time on the Z axis (the dimension of depth going into the page). Both graphs show three notes, all G4, played by three instruments: flute, oboe, and clarinet. In the waterfall display these three notes appear from top to bottom as horizontal and parallel mountain ranges. Each “mountain” is a single-frequency component of the sound moving through time, and the differences in the topography or “recipes” of the instruments are readily visible.
Since the beginning of the 20th century, composers have increasingly employed timbre as a resource for compositional expression. The development of electroacoustic music certainly opened a rich storehouse of timbral possibilities, and the so-called spectral-music school of composers has used the basic information about timbre and the analysis of sounds we touched on above to create a striking new palette for orchestral composition.

We should add to the above discussion the spatial quality of sounds: the direction a sound comes from, and the kind of acoustic environment it emanates from. For sound to be perceived as music, a change of at least one of the above characteristics—pitch, duration, loudness, timbre, spatial quality—needs to happen. The ear is drawn to change in sound: the snapping twig in the forest, the sforzato/piano figures in middle and late Beethoven. See how the following examples dealing with minimal changes in sonic parameters bring us closer to what we might start calling music. Figures 2 and 3 show changes in duration and pitch, respectively, while Figure 4 shows the usual case of rhythm and pitch changing together.

Figure 2. Single pitch, rhythmically articulated.
Although one might think that pitch, especially the definite pitch characteristic of a sound, is paramount in music composition, pitch’s primacy is often overstated. Think about tribal ritual drumming, where rhythm (time-value changes) is the basis of music creation. Or, see how after listening to Varèse’s *Ionisation*, the main memory is of timbral and rhythmic, rather than pitch differentiation. The following examples show how small changes in parameters other than pitch and rhythm can make a sound expressive, and thereby move it to the level of music. In Figure 5, a single tone is articulated by changes of loudness.
Notice how in the above example, even though the same syllable is kept throughout, changes in loudness induce concomitant changes in timbre.

Audio Example 2 shows how two instrumental sounds, trumpet and clarinet, can be gradually faded from one to the other to achieve a timbral shift on a single pitch.

Audio Example 2. Timbral fade in an orchestral composition.

The next audio example shows how a musical event (a flute sounding a steady C5) can be produced by change in the spatialization of sound:

Audio Example 3. Two-channel spatialization of flute sound.

Writing a piece of music based only on changes of loudness, timbre, and spatialization would be extremely challenging and is definitely not a goal at this stage of teaching. However, I believe that a more in-depth approach to the basic material of music, which sound represents, develops new musical sensibilities in students and gives them the possibility of expressing their first musical thoughts more freely and
unconventionally, with results they might not have thought possible. In some ways this approach is reminiscent of the interests of Cage, Brown, and other composers in the 1950’s who avoided the “props” of melody and motivic development, much as the visual artists of the New York Abstract Expressionist School avoided representation of objects. The application of topics discussed in this chapter will be found in student assignments in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 2

FIRST IDEAS

The process of composing involves two main stages: having an idea and capturing it. I like to think of it as a process of consciously searching for, or spontaneously discovering a unique, wild animal (musical idea) and hunting it down, seducing it to enter the golden cage of form. The substance of that musical idea lies far beyond the visible (audible) surface that one perceives as tune, set of pitches, melody or something else. The deepest roots of the idea belong to the world of the intuitive and the subjective. In its first stage, the musical idea is, however unusual as it might sound, inaudible and amorphous. To inspire students is to bring them to the very source of musical concepts—helping them realize their ideas and communicate them to the outside world is teaching them technique, or composing skills.

In its amorphous stage the musical idea exists in a time-compressed state. I like to compare that with everyday situations such as having a feeling that takes a second but requires minutes to communicate to someone else, or with, as Hindemith put it in A Composers World (Hindemith 1952): “We all know the impression of a very heavy flash of lightning in the night. Within a second’s time we see a broad landscape, not only in the general outlines but with every detail. Although we could never describe each single
component of the picture, we feel that not even the smallest leaf of grass escapes our attention….” Another analogy comes to mind: seeing someone’s face for a short moment and then trying to draw it. The memory (idea) of that face has to go through the time of unfolding itself on a piece of paper, becoming a new form determined by lines and colors before it can be communicated to others, in the minds of whom (hopefully) the idea returns to its original form.

The technique of composing involves organizing, manipulating and connecting dots (sounds) through time. In the second stage of its realization, the musical idea assumes musical form. It begins to have an audibly perceivable shape. Like all forms in nature or art, musical form is a macro-organization of microstructures. For example, binary form consists schematically of A and B, each of which parts consist of smaller ones, for example, periods that themselves are built of two or more phrase-structures. Each phrase-structure can be further divided into motives. The elements of motives are sounds that themselves could contain an inner expressive form, as shown in examples of loudness, spatial, or timbral sound transformations in Chapter 1.

The question arises, from which side, macro or micro, does the student approach composing a piece? Hindemith’s flash-of-lightning-illuminated idea, seeing the whole piece of music in one short moment, is probably more the luxury of the skilled composer. How many times, even as experienced composers, do we first have to scribble down something at the beginning before the “enlightenment” strikes us? A composition can develop either way: inductively or deductively.

It is important to talk about this process with students, most of whom are very puzzled by it, and are very eager to learn about it. In my experience, many students sign
up for beginning composition because they have already had some musical notions, either written down or floating around in their minds. The students most often kept these ideas to themselves, not so much out of shyness, but because they felt the ideas lacked form or further development. Without those first ideas or some kind of experience of having them, however, the majority of students would probably not have considered signing up for a composition class. They simply would not have had the call to do it. Maybe this lack of ability to develop their beginning ideas made them understand, as Hindemith put it, “Everyone can have scientific ideas, but it takes a scientist to know what to do with them” (Hindemith 1952). I do not, however, like to start by requiring students to make an overall plan of their piece for their first projects, since I believe that over-conceptualizing can get in the way of the students’ musical imagination. I like to open up a broad field of possibilities for creating the first idea and then teach students how to search out its developmental possibilities. Also, I prefer to unleash students’ imaginations by offering a non-conventional approach to what those possibilities might be. As I mentioned before, however inventive and fresh young minds might be, they are hardly unspoiled. Our current fast-information and quick-and-effective-mind-fix environment offer the young musician non-nutritional, fast-food-like solutions for their musical experiences. “Instant” music is a music of clichés, and simply exists on a different level of human experience, but it does play a part in our overall existence.

The very first task I like to give students is “molding” the sound through a short segment of time. All the issues mentioned in Chapter 1 now come into play: students are assigned to make short phrases using only one or two expressive tools such as timbral
and loudness manipulation, spatial effects, pitch, and rhythm. This “minimal” approach, I believe, sensitizes students’ ears and brings to their attention the deeper layers of sound and music.

After the tools for the above exercise are chosen, the question of form must be brought up for discussion. This is the time to introduce the concept of phrase as one of the basic formal structures of music composition. We might at this point discuss connections between music and speech, or language, but at the same time limit the discussion to parallels between the linguistic expression of a thought in the form of a sentence and that of musical elements in the form of a phrase. In music, the phrase represents, to varying degrees, a complete musical thought. It is the first structural musical formation that has an audible-architectural shape, or contour, which is most often determined by the placement of the climax point.

The possibilities of phrase shapes are numerous, some of which are shown in the figures below.

![Figure 6. First Loss from Schumann’s Kinderszenen. Climax at the beginning with release of intensity toward the end.](image)
Figure 7. Beginning of the *Promenade* from Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition.*

Climax in the middle of the phrase.

Figure 8. Tchaikovsky Symphony #5, Second Movement. Phrase with climax at the end.

Figure 9. Stravinsky, *Allegro,* from *The Five Fingers.* Relatively calm phrase. Flow without climax.
One of the easiest ways to achieve and perceive a climax in the phrase is through high and low points in pitch, which in most cases is coordinated with an appropriate rhythmic design. For example, we could have a grace note as the highest pitch, but it could never present a point of culmination in a phrase. Look at the phrase from Mussorgsky in Figure 7 above: the high F is just a part of the culmination, and is secondary in intensity to the C-D. The phrase could retain the same general shape and even be recognizable without the F, as shown in Figure 10.

Mussorgsky achieves a culmination not just through rising pitches but also by interrupting the even flow of quarter notes through the introduction of a new rhythmic figure, two eighths-quarter. Both the emphasis of the culmination and the balance of the phrasal architecture are achieved by repetition of this rhythmic pattern. It would be correct to conclude that rhythm actually plays a larger role in shaping the phrase than pitch. Although there are number of examples illustrating how a culmination can be built using just whole notes, as in the cantus firmus, it is important to say that we can write a good phrase without changing pitch using rhythm as a phrase-articulating force, as shown in Figure 11.
Rhythm is an important, if not independent, integral part of the phrase structure, be it in collaboration with pitches, loudness, spatialization, or timbre. It is the change that presents the movement of sound through time, without which music does not come into existence. On the other hand, a sound with, say, a constant periodic change in loudness, as shown in Figure 12, will fade into the perceptual woodwork over the long duration and music will cease to exist.

Figure 11. Phrase composed using only rhythmic differentiation.

Figure 12. Musical event with constant periodic change of loudness.

Compare the previous figure with Figure 5 in Chapter 1. It is the timing (rhythm) of loudness changes that keeps our interest and helps build the shape of the phrase.
The same can be observed in moving a sound spatially, as shown in Audio Example 4 where a constant periodic movement without variation in the time-rate renders the pattern uninteresting to our sensory apparatus, which, after a while ignores it.

Audio Example 4. Sound panned with a constant rate between two channels.

On the other hand, a phrase based on the concept of spatialization can come to life by shaping a pattern of dynamic rhythmic movement of the sound through space.

Audio Example 5. Sound panned with a varying rate between two channels.

Composing a good phrase is essentially the craft of playing with intensities. By intensity I mean a perceived dynamic quality that may be conveyed by any number of musical means. It is most usual to associate a buildup in intensity with increased
loudness, faster moving objects (sounds) or a rise in pitch. Sometimes, however, the lowest pitch could be the highest point of intensity, especially if it is rhythmically or durationally underlined.

Figure 13. Bach c-minor Passacaglia theme showing a low pitch-point climax with durational emphasis.

In addition, some other event, such as an unexpected silence could play a role as a climactic event in the phrase.

Although the details and possibilities for building phrase structure are virtually limitless, how the manipulations of these basic musical parameters are used to communicate intensity must contribute to the clear perception of phrase shape by the listener.

Two main characteristics of the phrase were mentioned above: a sense of *completeness* and the perception of shape. Before attempting to write their first exercises, students often ask about the appropriate length of a phrase. Because I am not introducing a classical, but rather a broader esthetic approach to the concept of phrase, I avoid
describing its length in measures. However, we do need to give students some tangible framework for their assignments. For this reason, I have chosen to describe the length of a phrase in terms of the time it takes to slowly exhale a deep breath—somewhere between five to ten seconds. By understanding its length as that of a breath rather than a certain number of measures or seconds, I believe students can come closer to realizing the phrase’s potential as a beautiful, flexible, organic entity. Below are some examples of assignments I give students in connection with this chapter.

**Assignments:**

1. Write a phrase that builds to a climax point toward its end. Use only rhythm to achieve this. Compose this phrase for a percussion instrument of indefinite pitch.

2. Write a phrase in which the climax point is at the very beginning. The intensity should then weaken toward the end. For this you will have four singers spaced in the four corners of an auditorium or classroom. The phrase will consist of a single pitch, sung on the same vowel and moving continuously from performer to performer.

3. Write a phrase that culminates in the middle. Use a solo voice singing a single pitch using different vowels (changing timbres) and changing dynamics. Make use of the fact that phrases can contain rests. The actual breathing of the singer, however, should not interfere with the sense of unity, contour or overall breadth of a phrase.
4. Draw a line that has what you consider an interesting contour. Represent the shape of this drawing by composing a phrase based on three pitches of your choice. These pitches can be employed in any order throughout the phrase and can be treated freely, including the repetition of a single pitch. Use rhythm and dynamics to help you present the contour. Compose the phrase for an instrument of your choice.
CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST IDEA

The elaboration of the first idea into a meaningful, larger form presents perhaps the biggest challenge for students. At this stage the teacher plays a crucial and somewhat controversial role. This is the time of the first major “intervention” of the outside observer, which the teacher represents, into the very personal conception of a first musical idea conveyed in a form of a phrase. It is impossible to avoid the subjectivity of the process, whatever the approach.

I believe that at this stage students have to be acquainted with as many compositional tools as possible and that most of the traditionally known techniques may be transformed and applied to new forms of musical expression. After the students have completed a first phrase I suggest to them that they make an overview of this short, but formative musical entity. Every student’s first phrase will have its own particular characteristics to be taken into consideration and discussed. Is it a particular rhythmic pattern, pitch combination, or a dynamic shape that makes their phrase stand out and have life? Students will also benefit from seeing these characteristics at work in phrases from music literature.
By discovering patterns that fuel the first idea and form it into a phrase, students actually learn about motives. If a motive can be seen as an atom, then the phrase is a molecule shaped by the unique combination of those atoms. The motive becomes the main building block for further development of the piece. In the laboratory of the composer this important component is manipulated both internally, to produce variants, as well as externally by arranging it in a variety of ways to build a larger form.

One of the main traits of Western European music is its in-depth process of motivic exploration. The compositions of Beethoven and Schoenberg reveal one of the best paradigms of this procedure. It is important to realize, however, that the principle of motivic variation as a propulsive force of music is more universal. There are countless examples from ethnic musics throughout the world that demonstrate this.

Audio Example 6. Motivic variation in folk music: Kolo of Welcome, Serbia (Valjevska-Kolubara region), Krstivoje Subotic playing the leaf.

The works of Bartok and Stravinsky present an interesting bridge between classical and ethnic-music approaches to motivic unfolding. The folk-music principle of minimal change occurring with each repetition of a motive is often applied in the music of these composers, and serves as an exemplary and very useful tool for the beginning composer.
While composing a phrase is a rather emotional and subjective journey, working with motives involves a more rational, scientific approach. Some students feel more comfortable at this stage, while others might consider this a boring shift away from the artistic process. It is important for them to understand from the very beginning that compositional creativity represents a fine balance of the subjective and the objective, the subliminal and the conscious. The rational approach represents a foundation for the discovery of the beginning idea’s potentials and can create a world of new possibilities directly derived from the idea’s substance. This is very much a process of deconstruction for the purpose of renewed construction. I ask students to subject their motives to this kind of experimentation and to write down as many results as they can devise. They
usually find that the results of this exercise turn out to be a key element in the development of their piece, and a powerful source of inspiration. One of the most important principles in working with musical ideas is not to confuse the process of deconstruction with that of destruction. Deconstruction of musical material should be understood as a process of preserving, rather than destroying, essential structural parts and characteristics, keeping the “DNA” intact. This will give the composition a sense of consistency and organic unity.

What embodies the musical idea’s “DNA”? In short, it is that most remarkable feature of the theme (phrase) that imprints itself in our memory. These memorable characteristics are most often attained through a distinctive rhythmic pattern or pitch profile (sometimes containing only two or three pitches). An outstanding feature of a first phrase could, for example, very well be a striking timbre—a tongue-ram on the flute, or snap pizzicato on a string instrument. Harmony is also an important factor, to be sure, but since we are at this point working on monophonic writing, harmony is only implied.

The examples below demonstrate processes of motivic variation involving pitch and rhythm.

1. Skeletonization. Frederic the Great’s theme for Bach’s Musical Offering served as a skeleton from which the whole work was derived. Compare Figure 16 that shows the beginning of the basic theme from the Musical Offering with a “fleshed-out” version shown in Figure 17. Sketching the framework of a main idea, even when the skeleton does not appear literally, leads the composer to better understand and develop her/his material.
Figure 16. Bach, *Musical Offering*, beginning of Royal Theme.

2. Expanding internally (adding notes to fill skips or adding notes around the principal tones without greatly influencing the length of a phrase).

Figure 17. Bach, *Musical Offering*, Canon a 2 per Tonos.

Figure 18. Martinu, *Columbine Sings*. 
3. Expanding externally (adding notes to expand the length of a motive).

Figure 19. Stanojevic, *In Memoriam*.

4. Augmentation or diminution of the intervals in the phrase. Figure 20 shows the original, while Figure 21 shows interval alteration of the theme.

Figure 20. Stanojevic, *Dance: to the End of the Circle*, opening.

Figure 21. Stanojevic, *Dance: to the End of the Circle*.
5. Transposition.

Figure 22. Gershwin, *Prelude: Sleepless Night*.


Figure 23. Bach, *Musical Offering*, retrograde of beginning of Royal Theme.

Figure 24. Bach, *Musical Offering*, inversion of beginning of Royal Theme.
7. Augmentation or diminution of the rhythmic motive.

8. Time displacement of the rhythmic figure by moving it to different parts of the measure (Figure 27) or by changing the meter (Figure 28). Note that the original theme of *Dance to the End of the Circle*, shown in Figure 20 is in 4/4.

Figure 25. Bach, *Musical Offering*, retrograde inversion of beginning of Royal Theme.

Figure 26. Diminution of the rhythmic motive.

Figure 27. Bartok, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*.
9. Transforming the rhythmic pattern of the motive.

Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is one of the greatest examples of the power of motivic exploration. The opening motive, consisting of only two pitches, set to a short but striking rhythmic figure, puts in motion one of the most compelling and recognizable pieces in music literature. What might students learn from observing a few short segments from this work?
What characterizes the first four-measure phrase? Is it a succession of pitches in descending thirds (G-Eb, F-D) or a catchy rhythmic pattern? Beethoven gives us his answer as he continues.

It is obvious that the rhythmic figure propels the opening of the movement. The rhythmic motive does not change, which only adds to its resilience, while the melody expands. It is interesting to observe how this short repetitive rhythmic figure does not
prevent the expansion of the melodic contour, from two to three to twice four and then eight measures \((2+3+4+4+8)\), giving the whole twenty-one-measure section a unifying shape.

There are numerous examples of melodic and rhythmic transformations of the opening motive throughout the symphony. However, one of most significant of these occurs in measure 19 of the third movement. The rhythmic motive is augmented and placed on the strong beat, while the melody is reduced to only one pitch. This enforces even more the feel of determination and invincible fate.

![Figure 32. Beethoven, Symphony #5, Third Movement, excerpt.](image)

One might argue the importance for the contemporary composer of studying motives and their transformations—whether this feature of music is relevant to only a few centuries of musical development in Europe. There are two reasons why I consider these exercises involving motives important for young composers. First, the large majority of students rely on pitches as an important part of their compositions. Second, I believe that exploration of motives can be taught, understood, and applied in a much
broader sense. The role of the motive in a piece of music should be seen in a more universal way, as that of “genetic material.” something memorable and capable of growing into a larger organic whole.

If pitch is not the basis of a piece of music then *time* always is. Time is the essence of music. As I mentioned previously, for music to start moving through time requires change, and when and how we make changes makes a pattern in itself. The way the composer treats the timing of changes, then, can also be seen as a motivic development, even if that motive is but a single sound, varied in timbre. The time pattern of changes of sounds, or sound qualities, *is* the rhythm. As we know, any pattern can be seen as a “motive” and therefore treated as such.

Rhythm in music is a combination of artificially modeled segments of time. This gives a piece of music an original time-frame-pattern both on a micro (as a rhythmic figure) and macro level (as an overall form). The piece as a whole occupies a segment of time populated by sounds—a segment that consists internally of smaller parts differentiated by more or less contrasting internal energies (densities, tensions, timbres, loudnesses, etc.).

Techniques of the recent and no-so-recent past can be used and transformed to reflect the reality of the world and time we live in. Actually, we might find that our reality at its core is not much removed from that of the past—it might just sound different! That is why I believe that teaching traditional compositional tools gives students the “shoulders to stand on” and hopefully see farther.
Assignments:

To further expand the range of melodic possibilities and enrich students’ musical language, I encourage my students to make use of different non-tonal scales, several of which come from folk music from around the world. I suggest that for now the students use only scales with a few pitches (four to six), or use the most characteristic parts of longer ones. Figure 33 in the Appendix shows a selection of non-tonal scales that can be used for this purpose.

1. Add rhythm to a given melodic outline. Use a maximum of two short interesting rhythmic motives to achieve this and at the same time be sure to preserve the contour implied by the outline.

Figure 34. Pitch source for assignment #1.

2. By adding notes, internally expand the melody you composed in Assignment 1. The added notes should be derived from the following scale:

Figure 35. Scale resource for assignment #2.
3. Continue the given motive in Figure 36 to make a longer phrase that grows in intensity toward 3/4 of its length and relaxes toward the end. Although you may use only the three given pitches, you are allowed to set them in different registers to achieve your desired expressive effect. Vary the rhythmic figure and change the metric accents to make an interesting result. You might want to refer to the Messiaen example in Figure 29 as a model.

Figure 36. Motive for assignment #3.

4. Write a calm short phrase based on any scale from Appendix A, Figure 33. Write the inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion forms of this phrase.

5. Continue the given motive in Figure 37 to make a longer phrase. Use augmentation of intervals and application of diminution to the motive’s rhythmic figure to achieve this. You may employ any of the notes of the chromatic scale.

Figure 37. Motive for assignment #5.
CHAPTER 4

THE EXPRESSION OF FORM IN MUSIC

Before assigning students their first composition project, a monophonic piece for solo instrument, it is necessary to address some important issues of form. By this time, the subject of musical form and its main attributes should not be entirely foreign to students. The principle of an overall shape with its climax and arrival points, built by the rises and falls of tensions, as well as that of a homogeneity, realized by the use of musical material derived directly from the main idea, have already been discussed in connection with concepts of phrases and motives, and should be reapplied here for an understanding of form as a whole.

While there are countless possibilities for musical form, there are still, in my opinion, some more universal principles that are reflected in its structure. It is said that beauty is in the mind of the beholder, but however different the perceptions of beauty might be, the human mind remains deeply connected with the laws of nature. Music, like all art forms, reflects those laws. I should add here that controversy about art usually arises when those laws are broken, for example: disorder in place of order (such as the emphasis on chance employed in many pieces of John Cage, or the intentional
misplacement of an object, such as Duchamp’s urinal); de-formation of objects and shapes (such as in Cubism, or atonal music starting with the so-called emancipation of the dissonance with its disjunction of the melodic line); or intentional lack of form (for example, improvisatory, loosely controlled works of composers such as Earle Brown and Stockhausen).

However, attempting to create something contrary to nature actually serves to underline nature’s inherent system, and, in fact, expands her realm. For students to break these rules, they first have to move in the direction of understanding and mastering them. It is important to understand that manifestations of natural principles occur most often interdependently, and are not separate categories per se. Let us discuss some of these principles that are reflected in the organization of music.

**The characteristics of microstructures are mirrored in macro forms.** As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, characteristics similar to those applied to phrases should be utilized in writing larger formal sections. The piece as a whole should have its own overall contour, with its ups and downs, points of climax and sense of completeness.

**Larger form is a hierarchy of smaller, individual, but codependent units.** The shape of each formal entity is a function of interactions of its respective subunits (e.g., the contrasting parts in binary form; phrases and motives in sonata form that shape the exposition and energize the formation of the development). The overall form and its contour are achieved and determined by the arrangement of smaller parts. This reminds me of a technique applied in a portrait of Nikola Tesla by the Serbian artist and composer Vladan Radovanovic: looking at the drawing from a distance we clearly see the face of
Tesla, but when we approach it more closely we see that the shape and depth of the face are formed by a handwritten biography of the scientist. The letters in the drawing function as tones in music, the shorter words as motives, and the sentences as phrases—they are independent entities, but together they form an image of Tesla’s face. This same concept can be visualized in music by looking at the amplitude-versus-time graph shown in Figure 38 below of an audio file of a twelve-minute composition, showing its three distinct sections. The independent parts of the piece contain their individual shapes and points of climax, but when the composition is observed as a whole, the overall shape is the dominant image left in the mind of the listener.

Figure 38. Amplitude/time display of Stanojevic’s *In Memoriam*.

**Structures have stability and uniformity.** As we have discussed, every independent entity of a larger form has to play a part in a general context. The techniques for achieving this are also derived from nature:
1. *Evolution* and *Variety* of forms derived from the same elements. In music, this is achieved by exploration and transformation of the essential elements of the principal idea, techniques of which we discussed in the previous chapter.

2. *Repetition as a factor of balance, symmetry and periodicity*. Repetition is an important principle for establishing the pattern of the fabric of a musical structure by regulating the balance between the new and the familiar—a state that is essential for the perception of formal wholeness and completeness. Repetition is the essence of structure of many forms both in nature and in music. Some of these include symmetrical forms, which in music are exemplified by ternary (ABA), binary (abba), and sonata (exposition, development, recapitulation) forms as well as periodic arch forms such as the rondo (ABACA, etc.).

The esthetics of Classical music, like all classical movements, is based on a respect for natural forms and principles. Music of this period is characterized by a desire for symmetry and balance. This is manifested in the types of forms mentioned above, as well as in components of form, such as periods that most often consist of two equal-size phrases. The dynamic interactions of phrases, periods and larger formal parts are realized in this style through harmonic relationships. The principle of balance is always preeminent: the build up of tension is always counteracted by resolution. Time in classical music is most often periodically divided, which is another manifestation of natural order.

Classical style, with its embodiment of the abovementioned principles, is most often employed in teaching beginning composition. The principles of this style are relatively easy for students to grasp, probably because they align themselves well with basic human
perceptions of time and order. In applying Classical formulations to exercises for beginning composition students, the teacher should always remember that these “rules” constitute only the framework for expression, and not the expression itself, and that formulations like 4+4 or ABA do not evoke creative imagination but only serve as the outline of it.

To prepare students for writing a first larger composition, I choose to teach them to write smaller period-like forms built using different combinations of phrases. Some examples of assignments using this approach are shown below.

**Assignments:**

1. Use the two-phrase example from Walton’s Violin Concerto, shown in Figure 39, as a model for writing a form consisting of two non-contrasting phrases (a a’) where the first phrase has less of a sense of completeness at the arrival point (cadence) than the second.

![Figure 39. Walton, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 1-18.](image)
2. Write a two-contrasting-phrase form (a b) using the Chopin example in Figure 40 as a model.

![Chopin Mazurka Op. 7 #2](image1)

Figure 40. Chopin, *Mazurka*, Op. 7 #2.

3. Write a musical form consisting of two short phrases followed by one longer one (a a' a" or a a' b). The third phrase should bring a sense of finality and be roughly the combined length of the two previous ones. The Prokofiev example in Figure 41 and the Webern example in Figure 42 are two very stylistically-different examples of this procedure.

![Prokofiev March Op. 65 #10](image2)

Figure 41. Prokofiev, *March*, Op. 65 #10.
Figure 42. Webern, *Das dunkle Herz*, Op. 23 #1.
CHAPTER 5

WRITING A SINGLE-LINE COMPOSITION FOR A SOLO INSTRUMENT

When preparing to write the first composition project students have to make two main decisions: what instrument to write for and how to realize the form. Concerning the choice of instrument, I allow students to write for any member of the string, woodwind, or brass families. In classes prior to the beginning of the project students are assigned to give presentations on different instruments, preferably, but not necessarily, the one they play. These presentations should address questions of how the composer should approach writing for a particular instrument, and should cover topics such as ranges, means for timbral control using mutes or other performance techniques, timbral variation through the registers, basic and extended techniques as well as issues of notation (i.e. clefs, notations of specific techniques, and transposition, if applicable).

The study of the literature of an instrument or instrumental combination in preparation for writing a work is a time-honored task of the composer, and is an important part of these presentations, as well. I encourage students to look into diverse styles of music to find the best, most interesting examples that involve the instrument for which they are writing, and stress that the examples need not be limited to solo pieces. The young composer should from the outset be taught to understand the significance of
collaborating with the performer: not only can the composer get immediate feedback on a work or work-in-progress (as well as the occasional compositional suggestion), but also a personal, in-depth lesson on the instrument’s capabilities and intricacies.

Even though the issues and nature of musical form were discussed in classes prior to the composition assignment, the process of applying them to structuring the piece remains a daunting task for students. The two best sources for understanding and solving this problem are the composer’s own experiences and what the composer learns from the experiences of others. Of course, the first choice is not a fruitful option for the beginning composer and her/his main resource for learning has to come from music literature. Music literature and the lessons drawn from it should serve as a backbone of composition lessons and classes. Students should learn how to approach literature as composers, not theorists. While both approaches are similarly analytical, the composer looks at the structure of a piece more as a form of expression of meaning and searches for ways in which that expression is realized. Through studying the music of others, the composer learns a range of solutions, including but not limited to: sources of material (musical language, sounds, instrumental techniques, etc.), exploration of the material (tools for transformation and variation), treatment of time (how long it takes for changes to take place) and paths of formal development (from overall form to its smallest subparts and their interactions).

Looking to find a musical example that might best reflect and in some way summarize most of the material covered in the course up to this stage and that would at the same time serve as a kind of a blueprint for the students’ first project, I chose Varèse’s *Density 21.5*. 
I believe that students should approach analysis deductively, getting the overall impression of the piece first and then moving to the examination of the smaller parts. Although Varèse’s *Density 21.5* projects the quality of a free flow of somewhat extreme and intense expression, students are able, often after just one listening, to perceive the tripartite (ABA’) formal structure of the piece. However easily identifiable the parts are, they are actually strongly unified by the transformational use of the opening motive. The first three pitches of the opening theme (F, E, F#) are, literally, the basic structural support for the whole piece: each pitch in succession presents the starting point for each of the three sections (F in m.1, E in m. 24 and F# in m. 41). What effects contrast between the A and B parts is not the introduction of a new idea, but rather a change of character of the material brought about by a strong contrast in timbre (the use key-slaps, or key-clicks, notated as a “+” above the notes) and by a more agitated and articulated quality. The lines of the overall contour of the work are in general jagged and at the points of culmination become dramatically steep. There are actually two areas of culmination, both occurring in the second half of the piece. The first culmination begins in measure 32 and is subordinate to the second culmination in measure 46, which presents an extended, higher-transposed version of the first.

Like many pieces of the 20th century, *Density 21.5* does not rely on periodic organization, but still exhibits a strong phrasal structure. The expressiveness of the phrases results from an artful manipulation of their lengths, highly contrasting dynamic changes and intervallic expansion of the motive.

*Density 21.5* is a model of mastery of motivic transformation. In this work, melodic material is continuously varied through interval modification, expanding from
the minor second to the minor ninth. The rhythmic motive of the opening theme (two sixteenths, eighth) is also transformed throughout the piece.

Varèse’s rich exploration of the instrumental techniques, registers, and timbres of the flute is an inspiring example for the young composer writing a work for solo instrument. In addition to the above exemplary characteristics, the duration of *Density 21.5*, is, I believe, perfectly suited for the work’s use as a model for a first student piece.

**Assignment: Composition for Solo Instrument**

**Duration:** 3 to 4 minutes

**Instrumentation:** Any instrument from the string, woodwind, or brass families.

Make sure that the performer is available for close collaboration as well as the performance of the composition. Your piece should take advantage of the different timbral, registral, and other expressive qualities of the instrument, while being idiomatically written and, above all, playable.

**Form:** ABA’

Considering that the piece is (very) loosely modeled after Varèse’s *Density 21.5*, the form should be in three sections, with a contrasting middle part and a varied recapitulation of the first part (ABA’). It is important to keep the piece unified by transformations of the main idea. The contrasting middle part could also be based on transformed material of the first idea.

Advice: Do not use compositional techniques as a goal in themselves. They should only serve as tools for expression! Think about the overall character of the piece and map its general shape. Write the opening phrase. Study it and begin to sketch out transformations
of it using techniques we have discussed. Decide where your culmination is going to be and how you plan to approach it. Think about how the instrument of your choice can best present that culmination. Decide on the moods of each section and how they will work together as a whole. As you start writing each section, outline its general contour (and, if necessary, those of the individual phrases), always keeping in mind the overall outline of the piece.
APPENDIX

SOURCE SCALES FOR ASSIGNMENT #4, CHAPTER 3
Figure 33. Source scales for assignment #4, Chapter 3
BIBLIOGRAPHY


