GOING INTO BATTLE

5 Tips for Winning the Mental Game of Composing

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Introduction

I've created this guide, because there is a overlooked side of musical composition that is vitally important to every composer.

Composition can be a very difficult task, both technically, but also on the level of mental resilience required.

Much of the innocent resilience we have as children seems to go away as we get older. Think of a baby learning to walk or crawl. What happens? They take the first step, and then boom... they fall. But do they quit? No. They just keep trying. They may get a little frustrated, but in the end, they don't despair over the idea that they will never walk. It's not even a thought in their brain. They just look around at everyone else walking, and say to themselves, "I want to do that."

Well this guide is an attempt to bring some perspective on the game of composing, so you too can have a childlike pursuit of a truly noble, and dare I say, socially important skill. This skill is musical composition, and the world needs it more than ever.

And the world needs you to do it more than ever. So read on...

Problem #1:
You Are
Frustrated
With Your
Results

Solution: Set Realistic Expectations A certain scenario has played out across newly minted composition studios across the world. It goes like this. A brand new composer, let's call him, Jon, hears a piece of music that stirs his soul. It's beautiful. It's written by his favorite composer... Gustav Mahler.

The melodies... simple yet profound. The form... clear and logical, with a touch of madness. The harmony... sensuous.

So Jon gets an idea. "I am going to compose something like that."
Hastily, Jon runs to his studio - the leftover room in the house where he can fit a keyboard and not bother everyone else. He grabs a piece of sheet music and begins to write. As he makes his way past the first few bars, Jon is... well... not impressed. "Why doesn't it sound like what I was just listening to. I can hear it clearly in my head."

We all have our composing heroes. Music we listened to growing up, dreaming about composing something similar, or maybe someday surpassing. The problem is, we are not taking into account a few things about our heroes.

Problem #1: You Are Frustrated With Your Results

- 1. The music we listen to, is usually not that first thing a composer wrote.

 More than likely it's one of the last.
- 2. Our favorite composers spent a lifetime working on the craft that lead to that music.

You see, when you sit down to write like your heroes, you are setting an expectation that is just unrealistic. Let me clarify here, I am distinguishing between goals, and expectations. It is a great thing to set goals that are lofty. But then you also have to look at the steps towards those goals, and what an acceptable outcome should be.

If you are expecting your first piece in the style of Gustav Mahler (or any great composer for that matter) to actually sound like Gustav Mahler, then you are going to be disappointed.

How do you set realistic expectations? You must take into account these factors:

I. Your technical skills

How well do you actually know the tools of music composition? More importantly, are you able to fluently put them into action without too much mental energy expended?

If it takes you 30 minutes to write an accompaniment to a theme, because you don't understand the rules of voice leading very well, then you will have trouble composing an entire sonata quickly and efficiently.

2. Your Deep Experience With a Lot of Music

Have you taken the time to read the scores from the great composers? If you look at composition as a set of problems in which you have to work through,

Problem #1: You Are Frustrated With Your Results

then you will realize, there is an answer book waiting for you right now. Many of the things that you want to do, and you think are original, have actually been done many times over by great composers from the past. Take the time, to look up these answers, copy them out, and assimilate them into your style.

When you've seen how other composers are able to solve the problems of composition, you will understand what you need to do, and more importantly, you will be able to do it. This means you can raise the bar on your expectations. But this takes time. So deeply reflect on what you can accomplish right now as a composer, and then set the bar just high enough to improve.

There is no thing as an unrealistic goal as long as you have a realistic expectation on what it takes to reach that goal.

Problem #2:
Being
Derailed By
Failure

Solution:
Accept that
You Will
Occasionally
Fail

I'm sure you've seen it before. The typical artist in films, that is not satisfied for some reason or another with their painting. Maybe they can't get the color right. Or maybe their lover says something they don't like about it. What does this artist do? They completely destroy their painting, usually violently slashing it with their brushes, or even worse - a knife.

Now you may not have had quite this reaction before, but you will face the feeling of failure at some point. Maybe you are trying to compose a simple theme, and it just doesn't sound right. Or maybe you are trying to compose a Symphony, but you are not making any progress.

Whatever your goal, if you don't reach it, the feeling is crummy. You start to say to yourself, "Who am I kidding, I can't compose."

The fact is, everyone fails at some point. The best thing to do in this situation, is just remember, you are definitely not alone. Not even just composers, but everyone who has ever achieved anything of value has struggled and failed along the way.

Problem #2: Being Derailed by Failure

So you need to look at failure differently.

Failure is a way of teaching you what you don't want to do.

This can be just as important as knowing what to do.

In fact, just recently, I had the opportunity to record with a fantastic trumpet player. He would be playing Piccolo Trumpet, which I had never written for. I am myself, a trumpet player, and so I thought I would be able to write a great part for him.

It turns out, I didn't. I wrote a horrible part. He said to me, "If this we're on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the hardest, this would be an 11."

The worst part is, the recording didn't go that well, and we both felt bad about it. I felt bad, because I should have known better being a trumpet player and taking pride in my craft. He felt bad, because he is a professional, and wanted to give me the best performance possible. None the less, I learned some very valuable lessons that day.

The next chance I got to record with him, you better believe I meticulously scrutinized the part. I wanted to give him something to remember. And he knocked it out of the park. If it hadn't been for the mess up, I probably would have chugged away, not really knowing how to write for piccolo trumpet. Probably worse, I would have not learned the valuable lesson of really taking the time to check the playability of my parts.

It was the failure that truly taught me.

Problem #3:
You Feel
Completely
Burned Out

Solution: It's Okay to Take a Break Burn out is a dangerous thing, because if you handle it incorrectly, you may end up tossing aside your passion for the rest of your life. Think about all the adults in this world that do something they don't like for a living. Chances are one of two things happened.

They either started off doing something they really loved as a child, and then through repetition by the government, the school system, and society in general, they moved onto a more "realistic" career. They may still harbor dreams of pursuing their passion. This was me back in 2011. I was fed up with my job, and I wanted to do something I loved. So I steadily worked towards it.

But there is another thing that may have happened. They may have been truly pursuing the thing they loved, but through overworking themselves, and not understanding their own capacity for pushing themselves, they burned out.

But when they burnout came, they did not realize it. They continued doing doing what they normally do, working towards their goal without a rest. Sadly, bitterness started to creep in.

Problem #3: You Feel Completely Burned Out

Each day, working towards their goals became a chore. They didn't get up in the morning eager to do their passion. They wanted to take a break, but it felt like the wrong thing to do.

If only they had this guide...

You see, burnout is a real thing. And there is only one way to deal with it. You need to take a break. Your brain needs time to rest, and recuperate. A little R&R. Just as soldiers in battle need time to decompress, you are going into battle every time you compose. And you need to take it seriously. There is a reason we take vacations from work.

So here are my tips for dealing with burnout:

- 1. Challenges yourself in a different way
- 2. Exercise
- 3. Visit a new location
- 4. Turn off the ankle-biters
- 5. Refill your creative reservoir

CHALLENGE YOURSELF IN A DIFFERENT WAY

There are certain faculties of the mind that get used over and over again when composing. Problem solving, pattern recognition, transference of what you hear in your mind down to paper (or screen if you compose on computer). Needless to say, this can get mentally tiring to do this everyday, day in, day out. A way to give these mental muscles a break, is to do something completely different. Find something to break down. I am not talking destruction here. I am saying find something that intrigues you, and deconstruct it. Get into the inner workings of it. If it is music, find the score, and read it. Read the biography of a great composer, and try to figure out how they went about the process of learning to compose.

Problem #3: You Feel Completely Burned Out

This is just one idea, but there are many ways in which you can do new kinds of mental tasks that challenge you in a different way. It doesn't have to be completely opposite, just different.

EXERCISE

Exercise has an incredible ability to remove stress, reduce fatigue, and generally improve creativity. If you are not someone that exercises on a regular basis, then you need to start... now. It doesn't have to be crazy. You don't have to run a marathon. You just need to do something that gets your blood pumping. I personally love to run. Running is great because you are forced to focus on what you are doing. You'll probably find that if you are dealing with some difficult problems, the answers magically come while exercising.

VISIT A NEW LOCATION

Visiting a new place can have a drastic effect on reducing fatigue. It doesn't have to be very far either. Just find a new town near you, and go there. Try out a new restaurant, or maybe just sit in a park and relax. Changing your location, even for a day, can bring new perspective on your problems and your fatigue.

Turn off the ankle-biters

You may not be familiar with the term ankle-biters, but it is everything that takes your time away from your primary goals. Things like email, mini-tasks like laundry or the dishes, home repairs... if it's small and you don't want to do it, it's an ankle-biter. The thing about ankle-biters is, they can almost always wait. Do you really need to respond to that email right now? No, you don't. Is it really important to check your facebook feed right now? No, it's not.

Problem #3: You Feel Completely Burned Out

There is huge benefit is turning off the ankle-biters and getting some mental freedom. This goes hand in hand with exercise, and visiting a new location. Here is something, try leaving your computer and your phone off for the day. You will probably have some anxiety, but guess what... you'll be fine.

*Please note: I am not condoning behavior that will get you fired from your work. If you can't get away for a day from your boss, you probably need to work on a little more freedom from that first. Don't get yourself fired.

REFILL YOUR CREATIVE RESERVOIR

Refilling your creative reservoir is really about consuming. Give yourself an excuse to watch a new TV show, or go to a new movie. Find a new book. Listen to new music. Go to an art museum. You need to find new forms of inspiration and drive. Don't try to force it either. Just do and enjoy.

The goal with this, and the other tips is to relax your mind in one way, while stimulating it in another new way. They all work hand in hand. The most important thing is to identify if you are getting close to, or already in the stage of burnout. If you are, take action now.

Problem #4:
You Are Not
Making
Progress

Solution:
Split Your
Learning into
Small Skill
Sets, and
Perfect Them

Progress is sometimes difficult to measure. This is because we often don't take the time to define it. But if you have taken the time, at least even a little, you realize, the only way to define it, is to have measurable goals. Goals, as I stated earlier are a good thing. Having lofty goals is a good thing. There is nothing wrong with striving to be a great composer.

But achieving large goals is really about achieving many small goals. So let's look at what is required to set those small goals.

The best way that I know to identify the small goals is to start with a large goal. You may have several or many large goals, but in this case, we are going to pick just one. Let's say the goal is to write a symphony.

Well, this is quite fuzzy. A lot of things go into a symphony that we can split up, and work on separately. For instance, we know that a symphony usually has, although not always, several movements that have different large forms. The typical classical symphonic movements are Sonata Form, Minuet/Trio, Sonata Without Development, and Rondo.

Problem #4: You Are Not Making Progress

So one level down, we could say, our goal is to master large form. But this in itself is a fuzzy goal, so let's continue.

All of these forms are made up of both intrathematic, and interthematic functions. If you are not familiar with these terms, never fear, the next email you'll get has a guide just like this one, but for one of my favorite topics, musical form. In a nutshell, interthematic functions are the things that work together to create large musical form. So this includes sections of a movement, like the introduction, the exposition, the development, the recapitulation, and the coda. So we could say that we want to get a solid grasp over what it takes to compose these areas.

But even then, we can go smaller. Each interthematic section, is made up of multiple intrathematic elements. These are things like phrases, cadences, and transitions. Now we are getting somewhere, it is starting to look more manageable. We could take an intrathematic function, presentation phrase, and say, "What is it that makes this work?" Once we do this, we have even smaller goals to work on.

A presentation phrase is made up of several elements, things like creating a short, two measure melodic idea, called a basic idea, and then repeating it. Voila! Now we have a manageable goal. We can practice creating two measure melodic ideas. But even more, we know that it prolongs the tonic harmony. Voila! Another small goal. We can practice prolonging tonic harmony in new and interesting ways. But we get even deeper, tonic prolongation requires a familiarity with functional harmony, as well as aspects of simple chromatic harmony, like modal borrowing, and applied dominants. So now, we have a specific goal.

Goal 1:

Master creating two measure basic ideas that prolong tonic utilizing diatonic functional harmony, with the occasional modal borrowing and applied dominants.

Problem #4: You Are Not Making Progress

This is a very specific goal, and is also manageable. We can now do two things from this:

- 1. We can identify the skill sets required.
- 2. We can compare with great composers.

The skill sets have been talked about a little so here they are, with a few additions:

- 1. Understanding functional harmony
- 2. Using applied dominants
- 3. Using modal borrowing
- 4. Creating unique, characteristic motives
- 5. Combining motives within a two measure unit
- 6. Creating a feeling of beginning by using melodic opening up within the idea

There are quite a few specific skill sets to work on there, and you may not know where I am getting them from. This ties in with the last problem, and solution I am going to talk about. But one more thing.

You can now actually compare your music with great composers. It is very difficult to take an entire piece of yours, and put it up against a master composer's work to compare it. There are just so many factors at play. But you can very easily take a two measure idea you've written, and compare it with a two measure idea from your favorite composer, and see how they have approached the process differently. This is when you will start to really learn. See what they did, reflect on it, and try and assimilate it if you like it, or throw it away if you don't. But know why you don't.

You can see, this is a lot of work, but the mastery of anything is a lot of work.

Problem #5:
You Don't Know
Where To Go
Next

Solution: Get a Map Finally, we get to the last tip. This happens to everyone at some point. You're making progress, you're feeling good. You're keeping an eye on burnout and taking needed breaks. You identifying your skill sets and attacking them head on.

But you get to a point, where you just don't know what to do. You're lost. You need a map.

This is where a little mentorship comes in. Find a composer that is on a similar journey, but further along. Most people, myself included, have a hard time letting go of the notion that I need to blaze my own path. I need to work out things on my own. But the fact is, we all need mentors. I have them in my life. You have them in yours.

And just like every other aspect of life, your composing life needs them. I have had the pleasure of working with some of the best composers and orchestrators in Hollywood, and have learned a ton. But I have also been steered in the right direction, to pursue things on my own.

Problem #5: You Don't Know Where To Go Next

A mentor won't do the work for you, but they will make sure you are doing the right work.

I have talked extensively about this process in my podcast, which I highly recommend listening to. Finding the right mentor is important, but more important is your attitude towards the process. *You must be open to learning*.

Mentors also don't have to be in person. They can be, but they can also be online, like through my website www.artofcomposing.com, or the Academy at academy.artofcomposing.com. They can be through books, or video training. They can be through email. They will require investment. This investment could be time, energy, money, or all of them.

Here is a question. How much time and money do you spend on things that ultimately don't contribute to your education? How much TV do you watch? How much time do you spend on facebook? When was the last time you bought a book on learning composition? Or theory? Or a biography of a great composer?

You live in a time when we have more access to information and knowledge than throughout the entire history of humanity. And as a society, we are squandering it.

So now is the time. Take your creative destiny into your own hands. Use the gifts that you've been given to create a future with your great works of art for the world to enjoy and benefit from.

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