

This is the Art of Composing music podcast, episode number 3: *So You Want to be A Composer?* Welcome back. Today we're going to talk about how to start composing music. So you want to be a composer? It involves a lifetime of study and hard work. The goal of this episode is to get you up and running so that you can start composing immediately.

In this episode, we're going to cover several different areas that relate to composing. First we'll talk about mindset—the mindset you should have towards learning to compose and actually composing. Next, we'll talk about your studio—what kind of things are necessary? After that, the topic of musical grammar. Then we'll go into composing and how it differs from learning to compose, should you separate the two? Next, we'll go over why you should learn diatonic harmony and simple forms or musical logic. Finally, I'll go over how you can learn this musical logic in my free beginner's course.

FEATURED CONTENT

Mindset. Becoming a composer happens first in the mind. You have to choose to be a composer before you can actually compose. You can either go about it timidly or you can accept it and be deliberate about it. I recommend calling yourself a composer. What is your identity in life? Your identity is wrapped up in you. If you want to be a composer, then call yourself a composer.

You need to have a beginner's mind. A beginner's mind goes into a situation without any preconceived notions. In composing, there really is no right or wrong. If you've been composing then you probably have some ideals about the subject. Be open to new ones. As a beginner you will get frustrated and that is normal. Your level of frustration is a matter of expectation. If you expect yourself to suck, and don't, you'll feel pretty good when you finish a piece. But if you expect to be the next Mozart, I think you'll be disappointed. A beginner's mind will allow you to grow.

Finally, with mindset, you need to prepare yourself for deliberate practice. Deliberate practice is a specific kind that focuses on small, measurable skills that are repeatable. This will allow you to make incremental gains in your ability and really catapult your composing skills. You've probably heard about the 10,000 hours that are necessary to become an expert in something. There's another thing to think about. It's the first 20 hours. To become great at something, that's going to take years of focus and deliberate practice. But to become better than 90% of the population at something, that only takes about 20 hours. Those 20 hours need to be focused, just like with the 10,000 hours. The 20 hours can be split up into smaller chunks. So, if you spend 20 hours learning composition (studying some form), harmony, melody and putting that into practice, then you will be better than most people at composing music. It's really about being dedicated and having deliberate practice hours.

Let's talk about your composing studio. I recommend you call the place where you write your music, your studio. It should be set up to offer zero-friction composing (the least resistance in composing). Every studio needs just a few things—staff paper, pencil and eraser. This is what

the Great's used. They just had their brains and writing utensils. It also helps to have a computer and keyboard (piano)—you'll need something to check your pitch. I do recommend learning to play an instrument. I've composed many pieces using my trumpet or guitar. Every instrument will steer you in a different direction compositionally.

After setting up your studio, you need to make sure that you learn musical grammar. This means that you need to be able to read music notation, know your key signatures, know your musical symbols and terms, and know the names and different types of chords (what they sound like). I know there are people out there that have learned to compose without learning to read music. Not being able to read music would just get in the way of things. Learn your musical grammar.

In my mind there are two types of composing. There's *Composing* with a capital 'c,' where you're attempting to create a work of art, realizing your passions and letting your imagination run free. And then there's composing practice. It may seem to be the same thing on the surface, but it's actually different. When you practice, you're attempting to improve specific skill sets. You're still creating new music but there should be far more discipline to sticking towards your plan. That plan should be clear from the outset. You should have learning goals. It could be something as small as writing an eight-bar theme using only the chords I and V. Or something as big as writing a piano sonata in traditional forms. The mindset is different. You're trying to improve, not impress. *Composing* (with a capital 'c') is really a time to forget the rules, theory and purpose and to just write. When you're just starting off, I recommend *Composing* with a capital 'c.' Don't worry at the beginning about getting things right. Just *Compose*. As you become more comfortable with the act of creating music, you will start to naturally want to practice specific things.

How do you actually begin to write? If you listen to my second episode, you can hear me compose a piece, how I hunt around for ideals on the piano. If you know your musical grammar, then the best advice is to start to write down your ideals. When you're noodling around, especially when you understand musical grammar, you're going to naturally go to some basic elements. I'd like to cover just a few of those general ideals.

There are two types of melody that you can write. There are *scale-line* melodies (also known as step-wise or conjunct melodies) and there are *chord-line* melodies (also known as disjunct melodies). Scale-line melodies move in steps and half steps and generally follow the underlying scale, although, you can add in chromatic notes. Chord-line melodies move in leaps. Try mixing the two. Use sections that are scalar, and sections that are chordal. Beyond that, at least at the beginning, stick to simple chords. Don't be afraid to just use C, F and G. Everybody does. Even Beethoven and Mozart have written entire little pieces just using I and V.

Once you've got your basic ideal you need to develop it. I recommend learning some simple musical forms. These are things like sentences, periods, small ternary and binary forms. The essence of these forms is that you can chop them up into small chunks. This makes the process of composing far less intimidating because you don't have to worry about how you're going to

write three or four minutes of music. Worry about the first two bars, then the next two bars, where they repeat, how to change their harmony, where to put the cadence, until you find you've written an entire piece. It's kind of like the saying goes 'a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'

The form of a piece is what gives it structure and signals the beginning, middle and end. When I'm *Composing* I won't actively try to fit it in a form because that's a time to write and forget the rules. If you're practicing, pick a form and try to make your music conform to that. Beyond form I highly recommend learning simple diatonic harmony. Understanding some simple concepts about harmony will take you far. I'm a fan of a chart originally created by Dmitri Tamashco in his book, *The Geometry of Music*. The concept is, traditional diatonic harmony moves in harmonic cycles. It goes from the tonic chord (I chord), through a subdominant chord (IV chord), to the dominant chord (V chord). If you want to use diatonic harmony in a logical way, you've got to follow harmonic cycles. You start at I, move to V, and back to I. The concept is solid.

I recommend signing up for my free beginner's composing course. The course is a video series with worksheets and musical examples. It takes you from the first note of a new piece all the way to completing it in small ternary form. I cover all of the topics discussed including, writing a melody, theme types, harmony, and completing your piece. To sign up go to artofcomposing.com/free.

Takeaways

Becoming a composer starts with calling yourself one. 'Fake it 'til you make it.' You need to approach composing with a beginner's mind. This will give you the freedom to accept what you are learning and to grow. Be prepared to put in at least 20 hours of deliberate practice to get comfortable with composing and another 9,980 hours to become a master. Set up your studio so that it's comfortable. Have staff paper, a pencil, an eraser, and some kind of instrument to help you orient pitch. Learn the grammar of music and learn it well. It will make your life a lot easier. If you're worried about how to start with the first note then just start with C. Try to think of the shape of your melody in mixing up scale lines and chord lines. You can also take one of your favorite pieces and then write a variation on it. You're practicing. Do whatever you want so long as it helps you progress in your goal of becoming a composer. Finally, learn basic musical form, basic diatonic harmony. Go through the free beginner's course.

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