

This is the Art of Composing music podcast, episode number 4: *The Pathway to Mastery, Part 1*. Welcome back. Today's episode is going to be about mastery, what it is, how we can attain it, and why. I don't consider myself a master of music composition. I'm working towards it. I'm approaching the subject of teaching composition from the standpoint of having to teach myself. Everybody is responsible for learning a subject on their own even if they have a teacher. A teacher can show you the way but the teacher doesn't actually make you know and understand a subject. That only comes through hard work.

FEATURED CONTENT

Mastery is a subject not often touched on or talked about in modern society. Most things in life are really designed to prevent you from mastering a subject. The biggest culprit for this is school. School is designed to be a place of conformity and regurgitation from the beginning. Through the creative and curious parts of life you're forced to listen to teachers talk about subjects you don't really care about. After the day is done, you have to go home, study those same subjects and do homework. This all leads to a lack of motivation on the part of children to care much about school. For me, this led to a habit of procrastinating. Procrastination really has nothing to do with being lazy. I still am a hard worker. I just never wanted to work on what I had to (homework, reports, papers). This has nothing to do with the teachers themselves. I had some great teachers growing up and I have friends that are teachers and care deeply about the kids they teach. But they're in a system that's designed to create factory workers, not mastery. Why am I talking about this? I want to make it clear that mastery is attainable. Anyone can be a master of their field. In reality, if someone has mastered it, so can you.

The first step toward mastery is identifying your life's task. No one told me to transcribe music. No one made me read through sheet music. No one made me write *Bugs*, *Packman* or *Der*, which were the first three songs that I wrote. It was a desire that came from deep down inside. That need to follow my life's task overshadowed everything else, like school work or practice. What if you're past your prime? Remember the 10,000-hour rule? If you were to spend two hours a day working on your life's task it would take 13 years to master it. Thirteen years sounds like a lot. But that's only two hours a day. At three hours a day that drops to nine years. Four hours a day drops to 6.8 years. Now there are limits on how much deliberate focus you can do in a day. If you're in your 50s imagine where you can be 10 years from now. If you're a teenager, the sky's the limit. The important thing is identifying your life's task. In his book *Mastery*, Robert Greene talks about five strategies for finding your life's task:

- 1) Return to your origin
- 2) Occupy the perfect niche
- 3) Avoid the false path
- 4) Let go of the past
- 5) Find your way back

I have gone through all of these strategies to get back on the path.

Returning to your origins is basically connecting with what interested you most as a child. Take some time and reflect. What did you spend your time doing? Did you love to go outside and observe nature? Did you spend time solving puzzles or doing math games? Or like me, did you transcribe music because you wanted to know how it worked. As Robert Greene says, 'In order to master a field, you must love the subject and feel a profound connection to it.' What used to cause you wonder in life? Take time and think about this.

Occupying the perfect niche is about working your way towards a life that will support and nurture your life's task. For me, part of this was starting artofcomposing.com. Part of the benefit of this is the reflection time, thinking about the process of composition, how best to teach and learn as well as how I compose. It also fits with my other interests of technology, design, art and entrepreneurship. Take time to think about what your ideal niche is and how to get into that. Do you want to write choral music? Look for a job with a church. Do you want to compose for big bands? Find out where the local big bands are. The key is aligning what you do with what you want to do. This takes time and patience, but you must work towards it and be flexible.

Avoiding the false path is about not being steered in the wrong direction. The greatest part about this is a story in the book about Mozart. Early on Mozart realized that he did not want to be a performer. He wanted to compose and compose opera especially. In a letter to his father he wrote 'I am a composer. I neither can, nor ought to bury the talent for composition with which God, in His goodness, has so richly endowed me.' Mozart was being pulled around Europe to perform for royalty. His incredible skill as a young boy enthralled everyone. But he knew that it was really a distraction from what he was meant to do, which was compose. In the same way, I saw other obligations, like school work and practicing trumpet, as false paths. I was not meant to be a trumpet player. I was meant to be a composer. But as life happened, I was slowly driven away from it. By the time I went into the army I was fully on a false path. It took me six years to get back on the path. Six years at two hours a day, that's 4,380 hours. That's almost half the way to 10,000 hours, which is a lot of lost ground. So stay off the false path.

If you're already on the false path, *Letting go of the past*, and *Finding your way back* are the next strategies. You must be willing to make a cut of whatever progress you've made in the things that are not your life's task. For me this meant leaving the army and moving to California. For you, it can mean leaving your job, your school, or even your country. Now this takes courage and commitment. That little voice in your head that says you shouldn't do it, that's resistance. You may be well paid and have a high position, but who is it that really respects you? Do you respect you? I'm not saying just leave your job and throw caution to the wind. Leaving the army for me was a year-long process. I made plans. I had support from my family. Don't let money be an excuse. Do you want to get to the end of your life and say that you've earned a lot of money and were miserable? Or do you want to use your time to fulfill your true destiny. Fulfilling that destiny starts today. As soon as you get a chance write your childhood story. Put yourself back in time. What did you spend time on? Where was it leading? Are you still going in that direction? Hopefully you'll get some clarity.

In the next episode we'll take a step back and talk about what mastery is, the three stages that all people must go through to achieve it— 1) apprenticeship; 2) creative; 3) active, and finally mastery itself. We'll then look in-depth at apprenticeship, how you can take advantage of this stage. For now, turn your attention inward and find your life's true calling.

Takeaways

Mastery is really about a state you can achieve in which you have a power over reality that most people do not. This power comes from fully absorbing all aspects of your life's task. Your life's task is the thing that you feel deep down that you are really called to do. To identify your life's task, you have five strategies. *Returning to your origins* is connecting with your true passion. *Occupying the perfect niche* is about working your way towards a life that will support and nurture your life's task. *Avoiding the false path* is about not being steered in the wrong direction. *Letting go of the past* is about looking at the direction your life has been taking and having the courage to say whether you've been on a false path, even if you've worked hard in a particular field. And finally, *Finding your way back* is about being willing to cut with the progress that you've made in order to get back to your true path towards mastery.

You can find the show notes for this podcast at artofcomposing.com/episode4. If you want to start on the path to becoming a composer and don't know exactly what to do, head over to artofcomposing.com/101 and check out my introduction to composing page. Be sure to sign up for the free beginner's composing course. Until next time, compose like your life depends on it. Because maybe someday it may.