

When they say opinions are like that certain part of the anatomy, in that everyone has one and they're all different, they could be talking about the process a composer uses to create music. When you read a lot of biographical books about composers, as I've done, you get some insight into the methods they employ when composing. That can range anywhere from sitting at the piano and writing down the ideas they come up with, to a detailed look at their complete work flow from concept to finished score.

Initially, I was interested in all of that by way of comparing others' methods to my own. I wasn't necessarily looking to emulate anyone in particular. I was just interested in seeing what fundamental steps they took to create a piece and why they took them. When you understand the reasoning behind why they did things the way they did, you can apply that same logic to your own approach, to see if it makes sense for you. Obviously, methods change over the years as better resources become available.

Bach's methods for composing were limited to what he had at his disposal, namely his instrument, pen and paper. An important point here is that the method doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the quality of the result. Bach was a musical genius and that's what comes through in his music. If he used pen and paper or scribbled his music with a stick in the sand, it would still be Bach's music. Method is secondary to creativity. It's the road you travel on to get where you're going, not the destination.

Having said that, a method can help facilitate creative flow or hinder it. In that regard, it can affect the result. The harder you have to work at something, the more other human factors enter the picture. You can get just plain fatigued. That still happens sometimes, regardless of method. Your inspiration can get diluted as you struggle with an inefficient method that takes too much of your energy to deal with. Basically, the more of a distraction a method is, the more it diverts you from the creative

flow. Your methods should be as transparent to creativity as possible. Easier said than done sometimes.

What I was looking for was common ground; steps composers took that transcended a point in time or the tools available to them; something that was essential to the process, whatever it might be. Basic to any process is to first translate the concept or idea into musical form. This is usually rough-cut, so to speak, in that it's just raw ideas, as yet undeveloped. Once an idea is given a sound, you can start to develop it further by reshaping it and putting it in motion.

All music has an aural and temporal aspect to it. These happen concurrently, but not necessarily contiguously. It's often a mix of silence and sound to varying degrees. Ideas can be congruent or sporadic with spaces of various duration in between. There are no rules except those you impose upon yourself. Typically when you learn a method of tonal organization (triadic harmony, serialism, etc.), you learn the rules for using it that have been established. You're not bound by these rules. They apply if you want them to apply.

Why is this important? Because it will affect the methods you use to compose and, by extension, the result. This is not to say one approach is easier than another. It says that the differences can affect how you work and the time it takes to finish a piece. Whatever method you develop, repeated usage improves proficiency. The more you do it, the better you get at it, the faster you can work unimpeded. You minimize the distraction aspect and optimize the creative aspect. That's a good thing.

After a composer begins giving shape and form to an idea, it needs to be developed. Most composers formulate some sort of plan at this point. You can put your ideas into a traditional form, like a sonata or symphony. Or you can develop your own form, or just ignore any preconceived form and just let the music happen as the ideas flow. There's been magnificent music

created doing each of these things, so one method will not necessarily produce a better result than the other. Again, it gets back to the composer's creativity and talent.

Even if you opt for a free flow of ideas, that's still a plan. The point is, you have to decide how you're going to proceed, otherwise you'll come to a dead stop, get frustrated and probably go have some lunch. That'll satisfy your hunger but won't get your composition written. Once you have a basic plan, you can begin to musically develop your ideas and fit them into whatever form you've chosen. To what extent you do this, and in what detail, depends on how you're capturing your ideas.

If you're at a keyboard, you may play the idea you have, maybe tweak it a little, and get it to a point where you're happy with it. Then you write it down to document it. If you're doing it all in your head, without the aid of an instrument to hear your ideas, you can begin to write your ideas down as they come to you. Some composers have a gift for hearing their music in their heads, as though it were being played by one or more instruments. Others have problems trying to realize it like that. They need to play it to realize it, before they can start to develop it.

As you develop the ideas from that starting point, you can continue using a combination of playing and writing it down, or focus more on just writing it down. That depends on a lot of things and what works best for you. But you will need to document it as you're developing it. From time to time, you'll probably rewind and go back from the beginning, or some logical point, to hear (aurally or mentally) everything you've done to that point. This allows you to determine if you've stayed on plan, and if the development is to your satisfaction. Is it unfolding the way you want it to? Does it sound right to you?

One of the criticisms of the European serialists, especially Boulez, was that they were more interested in how a piece was made

than how it sounded. It's crucial to remember that, regardless of the method or discipline you use, the piece has got to sound right. What's right? That's up to the composer. If you're targeting a specific kind of audience, you have to assess how well your piece will be received by that audience. If you're doing it to satisfy yourself, you still need to determine if you've achieved your goal. But it's important to make sure it sounds the way you want it to sound. It's like buying a used car without a test drive. You may be disappointed with the outcome and have regrets.

Once you've developed all your ideas, given them shape and form, put them in motion and documented everything, you're ready to put it in a finished form. In all likelihood, you've hand written everything to that point. You'll look at what you've done and determine if it's legible or if it looks like you've chased a fear-crazed chicken through some ink and onto your manuscript. Don't laugh. I've seen manuscripts like that. When I did some copyist work, I had to struggle with sloppy writing all the time. It's hard, even for the composer himself, to read this stuff.

If you haven't already, you will have to orchestrate your work. You'll need to take it from the composite form you just finished and arrange it for the intended instrumentation. This requires a knowledge of the instruments you're going to use, and how to voice the music for them. That's a whole other discipline we won't get into.

Depending on what comes next, you'll decide if a more legible copy of the score needs to be generated. You can hand write the score or use a notation software app to do it. If you're having a copyist do it, they'll probably be using software. But you'll have to provide a master copy. I'm proceeding under the assumption that we're talking about some form of concert or symphonic music. Much of the process I've described also applies to song writing. The only difference is deciding in what form you want the finished product, like a lead sheet.

At this point, you're done with the composing process. If the piece will be performed, you'll need a printed copy of the score and each of the parts, in sufficient quantity for all the players involved. But that's something that happens after the piece is composed, so it's not really part of the composing process. There's another point to consider in all this, and that's deciding at what point all of the the work is actually done.

Some composers just develop their ideas and put them into the intended form, so that what they have is a composite score, no orchestration or finalization. They may hand that off to an orchestrator who will assign instruments and generate a final score, based on the composite he's given. He may then hand it off to a copyist to get it in printed form, ready for performance. Some composers orchestrate their scores themselves. Often the tone color or timbre of the specific instruments is an important part of the whole, and they want to control that aspect of the finalization. They may hand it off to a copyist to put it in printable form.

While other composers, like me, do the whole thing themselves. I generate and develop the ideas, put them in the chosen form, orchestrate them as I go and print out the score when I'm done. I take it a step further and generate a virtual realization that I'll edit, process and record. I find that as I compose, I'm conscious of all these subsequent processes as I go and often blend them into what I do. I just don't think about the concept itself; my plan is conceived as a full blown plan, complete with orchestration and all constituent parts.

I think many independent composers do the same thing. It's usually the big film composers who have the kind of resources it takes to delegate much of the work they need to do. There's enough money involved to afford to do that, as well as the need to adhere to schedules and deadlines. For the rest of us, we have to work at it. Whoever said that composing music is 5% inspiration and 95% perspiration knew what the hell they were

talking about. I even go so far as to use Midi to determine volume levels and expressions, so that the virtual realization has all the performance nuances a live one would.

Unfortunately, much of today's film and television dramas have scores developed in this virtual way, much to the dismay of the working musicians who have traditionally played these scores live, in the studios, in real time. My best friend was a bassist in that Hollywood film scene for many years, and lamented the transition from live to virtual because it put a lot of musicians out of work. He was right, of course. He even took a dim view of me composing with virtual tools, using software and hardware.

I pointed out that I didn't have the resources or connections to get my work performed by live players. Even if I did, most have other agendas they adhere to and don't have the time or inclination to bother with my work. For me, and others like me, it's a matter of convenience and availability. For the film producers and studios, it's a matter of economics. Today's films may not have the budgets the older films had. There's increased pressure to launch a film sooner, to get it into the right season or timeframe.

Things like that happens as old traditions give way to new, and old technologies yield to newer, more sophisticated ones. This is true in all areas of human endeavors, not just music. You've got to adapt your process and work flow to accommodate these new ways, if you want to remain competitive and get a fair shot at what little work there is out there. Since that aspect doesn't concern me as an independent composer, I'm more interested in how new technology will improve my process and what results from my efforts.