

Instructor's Manual for Alan Belkin's Musical Composition: Craft and Art

by Alan Belkin

This document is meant for composition instructors using my textbook, *Musical Composition: Craft and Art*, published by Yale University Press, 2018.

It presents some pedagogical ideas, derived from many years of teaching experience, and also from the many mistakes I made along the way!

General Teaching Suggestions

This book treats composition as a **craft** to be learned. Obviously talent and motivation matter, but before a composer can find a unique, personal voice there are many basic skills to be learned, so as not to waste time rediscovering the wheel. The chapters in the book with verbs as titles present fundamental principles I have observed and explored over several decades of composing and teaching. Each principle is presented with musical examples and exercises. The instructor should always be ready to add other examples, preferably in multiple styles, and to explain how they apply the principle in question.

A few things are unusual about my approach:

First, the idea of **quantifying** various aspects of the music. This idea only came to me after many years of teaching. Often one has the sense that *something* in the music doesn't quite work, but ... what, and why? In such cases, the best strategy seems to be to first discern what aspect the music contains the problem - harmony, orchestration, tempo, etc. - and then to develop a rough idea of how much adjustment is needed. Even quantifying using just three levels - a little change, moderate change, and a lot of change - makes it much easier to correct problems. Quantifying is also useful while composing, for example when estimating how much contrast is needed in a new section, whether the level of dissonance is appropriate for a given climax, etc.

Second, the idea that **composition teaching is a kind of ear training**.

Students cannot master things they cannot clearly hear. So whether discussing repertoire examples or student work, it is worth taking the music apart, line by line, **singing and playing**, to make sure the student really hears every detail. This approach, typical of Nadia Boulanger's teaching, is a great way to focus realistically on what is actually heard in a given situation, as opposed to what the student may have thought they were doing. Analysis, while certainly useful, does not always engage the student in the same way.

Third, I have found that a very useful pedagogical trick is to **experiment with changes in existing music**. For example, when looking at a Beethoven symphony, try changing the harmony, or the tempo, or the orchestration to a given passage. This is a great way to quickly discover what is really essential to the music's impact and what is secondary.

One last general pedagogical suggestion: always **start with questions** when teaching basic notions. Instead of just summarizing the elements covered in a given chapter, first ask the class an open question, and then have students find examples of the principles for class discussion. For example, in studying chapter 5, one might ask, "Why is punctuation necessary?", or "What would music be like with only one level of punctuation?" This method gets the students **actively thinking**, rather than just **passively listening**, by heightening the urgency of the question before proposing possible answers. If the students have not felt the importance of the question, they will not remember the answer!

Now, some teaching ideas for the individual chapters.

1 Motive

The key point for the student to grasp in this chapter is **why we use motives: to focus and strengthen character**. The fact that these little, well defined patterns are easy to remember makes them very useful to the composer. It is worthwhile for the instructor to bring in some music composed before motives became common practice. For example, in Palestrina, although there

are bits of scale and suspensions all over (what I call "neutral lines"), there are not many strongly memorable themes, in the sense that Mozart's or Beethoven's themes are easy to remember. This is because there is much less internal contrast in the lines, be it of rhythm, timbre, articulation, etc. This is perhaps one reason for the somewhat subdued character of much of this repertoire, compared to the much more dramatic music which starts to appear with Monteverdi and in the Baroque era.

Some 20th century music (mainly some post-serial, atonal repertoire) expressly avoids motives. Of course one may legitimately decide not to use any given technique, but it is still worth knowing why composers used it in the first place, so that, if one chooses not to use it, it is because there is another, equally potent way to achieve the same goal.

The discussion of **degrees of similarity** between motivic variants in this chapter is also very important. Students often learn about transformations like retrograde inversion and assume that they are interchangeable with simpler modifications like transposition. There is a line which the student needs to clearly observe and respect: **some transformations are immediately recognizable when listening and others are not.** Focussing too much on the latter, especially within the same passage, quickly leads to auditory incoherence. Note also that things like retrograde inversion may be easy to see, but not necessarily to hear: the distinction between seeing motivic relationships and hearing them is crucial. The acid test for hearing them is: if you hear transformation "x" 20 bars after the motive's first presentation, would your gut reaction be "oh, yes" or "what's that?"

What I call motivic wandering may require clarification for some students. It does *not* mean simply chaining together a bunch of motivic variants in no particular order. The essential point is that each new variant must be associated in some easily audible way with the ones immediately before and after it. Also, after a certain amount of motivic wandering, a return to the original form becomes necessary so that the music does simply wander off into the wilderness. Without periodic reminders like this the musical material will be less memorable.

Note: for the model examples in Fig. 1.10 on my website I have provided versions with and without the trumpet solo, so as to hear the accompaniment more clearly.

2 Phrase

It is important to underline to students the fact that **human perception needs to subdivide the stream of consciousness, in order to be able to hold things efficiently in memory.** In Chapter 5 (Punctuating) I explore the various kinds and degrees of punctuation, which of course define the limits of any given unit of music. In this chapter we look at the most common unit of subdivision, the phrase.

The distinction between **stable and unstable phrase structures** is also very important. Both in classical instrumental music and in film and video game music there are relatively calm moments, where one idea is the main focus, as well as other more varied and exciting moments. Both are necessary, but at different moments in a piece. So it's essential, when looking at repertoire in this light, not only to notice the differences in relative stability of material, but also to ask, "**why now?**"

As for the exercises in this chapter, the instructor should always ensure that the bass line is clearly directed and makes harmonic sense, since the harmony is the frame within which the motives are deployed. The most common weaknesses in student work are weak or incoherent harmony and motivic vagueness, or else too much motivic variety.

3 Singing

This chapter is about something fundamental that is relevant to every composer: writing for voice.

To help the class understand the details of prosody, it can be useful to do a few bad versions of a phrase or two of text in class. Have the group actually say or

sing the result **out loud**. The results will be funny and easy to remember. Then look for better solutions, trying them out loud as well. This is the best way to develop the necessary sensitivity to the rhythm and melodic contour of the text.

If studying composition in a group, the first exercises in vocal writing can be composed for choir. Make a little ensemble out of the people in the class and try out the exercises. Since choral voices are usually not very skilled, it will be immediately obvious if the music cannot be sung comfortably by the group,. Again, work with the group, trying to find better solutions that are easy to sing. This is a perfect opportunity to link composition study with basic harmony and counterpoint. Remember that for voice, as a rule, conjunct motion should be the norm, and leaps should be more special events.

4 Playing

The exercises in **using a touch of counterpoint to make a secondary line interesting** are important. This skill is essential when compositing for larger ensembles.

This chapter aims to make students aware of the multiplicity of possible textures possible for keyboard instruments. Then we focus on the many possible relationships between the instruments in an ensemble.

Once the preparatory work has been covered, students should start by writing short phrases for their own instrument. Whenever possible, they should perform their own pieces in class, rather than just using computer playback. They should also be very clear about the level of difficulty of what they write. Harder passages take more work and should be musically rewarding for the player, who after all will be spending a lot of time practicing them. Performers do not respect composers who make them work for nothing. Playing one's own music is an excellent way to put oneself in the performer's shoes.

Once a student has written these short solo passages, it is time to try a small chamber ensemble. Again, students should perform the music themselves

whenever possible. Computers don't complain about hard passages, they don't slow down, and they don't phrase by themselves. If students bring in simulations, do not hesitate to point out the weaknesses of the simulation, so that the difference a good, live player would make is really clear. It is a very common mistake to think that because something sounds not bad on the computer, a real performer can do a good job of it. The opposite situation can also occur: something can sound unconvincing in a simulation, but with real live performers it is fine.

This is an occasion to **connect composition study with orchestration**: they are after all not really separate disciplines but rather just two aspects of the same thing.

5 Punctuating

This chapter is a prerequisite to composing any but the shortest of miniatures. **Punctuation should also be one of the first things examined in musical analysis**, since it defines the audible form overall. In all of the subsequent chapters of this book, I take for granted that the instructor and the student will look at what kinds of punctuation the composer is using and how the composer creates hierarchy of punctuation. As mentioned in this chapter, **the student should look at all the aspects of the music, not just the notes**.

Note especially the idea of "**yes, but**". Most punctuation before the end of a piece should let the listener know in some way that the music is not yet complete, thus maintaining suspense and curiosity about what follows.

Many of the exercises in this book do not necessarily have to be done in a tonal style. In a group setting, it can be useful to **examine students' work in various styles in terms of the general principles of punctuation discussed here**. Have the class assign a given punctuation in an example a number, where, say, 5 is a huge stop, and 1 is the mildest breath pause. Then have them justify their choice, specifying exactly which elements in the music create the punctuation and which provide continuity.

6 Presenting

This chapter depends implicitly on the idea of quantifying degrees of similarity between phrases. Even a rough scale, say from 1 to 5, can be very useful. Try to be as specific as possible about **which elements of the music stay (relatively) stable**, and **which elements change, by how much, and in which direction** (e.g. longer/shorter, rising/falling etc.). This will help to settle many problems in actual composition, and we will return to it in Chapter 11 (Contrasting).

7 One-Part Forms

Because of their brevity, one part forms are a good starting point for students' first complete compositions. They may be virtuoso pieces or relatively easy to play. If the latter, they will be easy to program as well. This is a perfect opportunity for young composers to start coming into contact with young performers, to get their music onto concert programs. Obviously the attitude of the young composer is very important in dealing with a performer: the approach should be respectful and show openness to any constructive feedback the performer can provide. If the composer is also a performer, why not program their own music? Composers with performing experience are often among the best composition students.

In terms of composition, the most common problem with one-part forms is introducing too many different motives, or variants that are too remote. Watch for this in student exercises. It can even be useful to do a weak example in front of the students, showing the effect of this kind of too-remote wandering.

8 Ternary Form

It is important to emphasize to students that the model form (on p. 78) is actually not very common at all, since it is so very simple and symmetrical. In

classical symphonies and sonatas, often at least one of the sections in a ternary form will not be as cut and dried as the model.

It may be useful for beginners to suggest a specific number of bars for each section, and to check the completed first section before going on to the second. Alternatively, the instructor could look at the first few bars of each idea before letting the students go ahead with the whole form.

For more advanced students, section called "Elaborations", on p. 82, provides more sophisticated versions of the form as a model.

9 Binary Form

Apart from the fact that the binary form will be the student's first attempt at a more dramatic form, exercise #2 (p. 90) will also be the **first opportunity to bring back familiar material within the same section as a (previous) contrast**. The goal is to strike a balance between the exploratory excursion at the start of the second half and the calming effect of the return to previous material. Note that returning to a previous section has an effect quite different from simply repeating it immediately. If managed correctly, listeners should feel a sense of resolution, or relief. At the same time they will mentally compare the salient features of the original presentation and the new version. In larger forms the return can also ultimately become a turning point for further exploration.

The other thing that students need to aim for is the **sense of intensification at the start of the second half**. Larger forms should not remain at the same level of intensity all the time. The composer needs to develop a fine sensitivity to the evolution of musical tension, allowing the music to "breathe". In a relatively short form like this one, apart from the beginning of the second half, there should be no notable "bumps" in the continuity, where intensity suddenly increases or diminishes.

10 Variation Form

A good way to teach variation form is to present it as a **challenge of invention**: how much variety can you get out of the same material?

The varying degrees of contrast between variations are very important: if all the variations are equally contrasting, the form will stagnate. By the same token, in any but the shortest sets of variations, there should be some attempt to group some of the variations together.

The last variation always needs special attention, since it must be clearly more conclusive than the preceding ones, if the overall form is to end convincingly.

Students' work on their own variations can take several forms. More advanced students can do longer sets of variations and can even invent their own themes. In the latter case, it is important for the instructor to insist that the theme be relatively straightforward in structure; the repetition of a very idiosyncratic form can become annoying, distracting from the real interest of the variation form: the novelty of each variation.

Students who are studying advanced counterpoint may prefer to try writing a passacaglia. Although continuous, the same overall requirements still apply.

11 Contrasting

Contrast is of course essential to any longer musical form. A composer has to balance contrast with continuity all the time; only the relative balance will change. This is why it is so important to **quantify contrasts**: how many elements are changing at a time, and by how much? The class should discuss the whole list of comparisons on p. 113, in detail. At first students often don't even notice many important aspects of contrast, e.g. register, articulation, etc. But their effect is so salient that ignoring them can doom a piece to failure. Only when students are at ease with *all* the aspects of a given contrast will they be able to apply the knowledge to their own work.

Finally, note that this chapter really goes hand in hand with the next one, about transitions, since a gradual transition is effectively a way to mitigate a large contrast.

12 Connecting

Working effectively with transitions requires **strict realism about what is really salient** at any given moment: it can be any aspect of the music, not necessarily just pitch relationships. Most musical training tends to focus on pitch relations, which is understandable but somewhat constricting from the composer's point of view. It is essential to go beyond the notes, and to include aspects of the music like orchestration, timbre, articulation, register, and tempo.

The emphasis in the exercises should be on the **most gradual transitions**, since mastering them is the quickest way to gain control over connecting musical ideas in general.

The idea of use turning points to introduce new material can be quite useful, but obviously it is less common than the gradual transitions discussed above. Note also that even at a turning point, the composer needs to maintain some aspect(s) of the music if the change is not to sound completely arbitrary. Students should be able to specify which elements remain constant.

In a classroom setting, students should compare their various realisations, and try to analyse why some work better than others. This is an excellent way to develop a sensitive ear for musical transitions. The point is not just to say that x is better than y, but to be able to point out why, very specifically. Only when the student can point to whichever element is causing a problem will the solution become clear.

Students aiming at writing music for films, video games, and indeed any other situation involving explicit narrative, need to master techniques of transition within the narrative time frame. It can be useful for these students to do multiple versions of a transition, some more compact than others.

13 Progressing

Progressions and climaxes are an essential part of creating dramatic, dynamic forms. They are simple ways to influence the listener's sense of momentum and forward motion.

The student should really start learning about progressions in elementary counterpoint, when constructing melodic lines which move gradually higher (or lower). Progression also applies to harmony, not in the common sense of a succession of chords, but rather in measuring various degrees of dissonance and various degrees of tonal distance from the tonic. Therefore this an excellent point in the student's development to link up composition training with these preparatory disciplines. Well taught, the student should see them as aspects of the same process and not as abstract, unrelated subjects. One of the most important things a composition teacher can do is to continually make students aware that all these disciplines are parts of the same whole.

When teaching musical form, it can be useful for students to compose and quantify alternative progressions for the same passage and then discuss them in class.

14 Rondo Form

Like simple ternary form, the simplest rondos can easily lack subtlety. However by this time in the course the student should have the tools to make the form more refined, by varying the degrees of contrast between episodes and by using different kinds of transitions when bringing back the refrain. This is why I chose as examples two somewhat more sophisticated forms (Haydn and Ravel).

Students should submit the ideas for each section for approval before composing the whole piece.

Advanced students may want to apply some of the ideas discussed in the last part of the chapter, Elaborations (p. 148).

15 Beginning

Since this chapter mainly applies to larger pieces, it is essential to analyse not only the examples cited, but also to develop the habit of **looking at beginnings in general and asking oneself why they work (or not)**. Which elements in the opening create curiosity? How does the composer leave them at least temporarily unresolved?

By this point we have discussed several fundamental principles of form: punctuating, contrasting, connecting, and progressing. These principles, along with several more, to be discussed in the coming chapters, eventually should combine into a kind of checklist of formally significant features, that students can then apply to all their work. When an experienced composer listens to music, such an internal checklist enables one to evaluate the quality of the music very specifically, and in detail.

Students should attempt to put together their own checklists at this stage of their training and then discuss them in class.

When, in the conclusion of the book (p. 210) I discuss developing a sense of form, this checklist is essentially what I mean.

16 Exploring

When looking at major works in the repertoire it is often striking how much they differ from the simple practice forms discussed in many textbooks. This is not surprising, since ultimately the form of a given piece must grow organically out of its material: the more strongly characterized the material, the less likely it is to fit into a simplistic form. Nowhere is this clearer than in developmental passages.

Much of music's effect comes from the way it explores patterns in sound (motives, progressions, etc.), setting up expectations and then playing with them. **Often the most interesting aspects of musical form lie in the way surprises and anomalies arise, and then eventually find unexpected, new "destinies" of their own.** Of course for these surprises not to sound arbitrary

they have to be integrated on some level into the whole: as pointed out in this chapter, such surprises are subject to some general principles.

First, in a larger work, a composer needs **variety in the transitions between ideas**. If ideas are always connected in the same way, the overall form becomes too predictable. Many transitions will be fairly gradual, but at least a few should be more sudden, more dramatic. Note however that even in the most surprising juxtaposition of ideas, **something needs to remain in common between the two ideas, to create a minimum of connection**.

Usually it will be some aspect of the music not in the foreground. (By definition, in a sudden contrast, the foreground changes dramatically). Examples of such common elements include timbre, register, tempo, meter, and articulation. Of course any of these things can change as well, but at least one or two of them normally provide the glue that subtly holds the disparate ideas together. Students should be able to specify exactly what changes, by how much, and what remains the same in a given transition. Trying more than one version of a transition is also useful.

Another, similar principle has to do with the way successive ideas are presented. If the main contrasting ideas in a piece are too similar in structure (say, two ideas that are both organised as symmetrical double periods), there will be a sense of formal stagnation.

A third principle, already referred to previously, is what Roger Sessions called accumulation: the idea that over a whole piece, the listener must get more intensely involved over time. This does not mean that the whole piece is just a large crescendo (although that does happen occasionally), but rather that the various developments of and juxtapositions between ideas need to somehow create a sense of increasing intensity, overall. Getting this right is not a simple matter, but we can say in general that it always involves adjusting the proportions of novelty and predictability. In particular, when the large-scale organisation is overly predictable in all its details, the effect is usually disappointing for the listener. Students should make a habit of actively listening for when the music becomes too predictable.

Two composers usually thought of as "traditional", Sibelius and Nielsen, are especially innovative in their techniques of musical development. Although their harmonic languages come out of late romantic norms, the way they work out their material is often very striking and original, and repays serious analysis. Their phrase structures are often very unusual, as is their treatment of tonal direction.

17 Returning

Part of this chapter could have been included in the previous one, in the sense that when a substantial amount of musical material returns, the context must be different in some way: the listener needs to have a sense that they are coming home; however, after the adventures explored during the development, they should now see "home" in a new light. The effect of a major recapitulation depends very much on the way it arrives. It is no coincidence that the section right before the recapitulation in most sonata forms ends with some kind of "formal upbeat", e.g. a long dominant pedal. It is essential to make the return a really prominent event in the work, and that means carefully building up expectations in the listener. Once again, it is worth trying out a couple of different ways of preparing an important return.

The first exercises in this chapter provide an opportunity to take an existing piece by the student and to deepen it by enriching the form. This can also be done using some of the earlier exercises. In fact, many of the shorter exercises presented previously can be useful as sketches to be elaborated and enriched, for eventual larger pieces. For example, take the ternary form composed earlier in the course and add a little transition before the return.

18 Ending

Since we are talking mainly about endings to larger pieces in this chapter, it is hard to create exercises without a large piece in which to apply them.

However this is an excellent place for recomposing the endings of existing

repertoire, as mentioned on p. 184. Take some substantial, well-known piece, and have students recompose the ending, making it shorter or longer in different ways. Then compare the results in class, taking care to specify in each case why the result is not as effective as the original. It is not enough just to say that (for example) the buildup to a climax is inadequate; it's much better to point out the exact place where the tension seems too mild, or where something arrives with too much of a bump. Recomposing is useful because it goes a step further than simple analysis, since it requires the student to imagine other choices the composer could have made.

19 Sonata Form

The sonata project is the place to apply most of the principles learned in this book in an integrated way.

Although the sonata project as presented is for piano, more advanced students can realise it for a chamber ensemble, or even, assuming adequate training in orchestration, for a large ensemble.

Since students in this course will have not yet have done much composition in larger forms, it is important to do a fair amount of sketching before starting to put the whole movement together. (Sketching is discussed in detail in Appendix A.) Not only is sketching a good way to accumulate material, but it also allows the composer to really get to know it more deeply and to see its ultimate potential. It may only be after a few days of work with a given idea that its most intriguing possibilities come to light. Note also that once the individual ideas are worked out a bit, it can also be very useful to experiment with various ways they can be juxtaposed and combined. But the essential thing is just to experiment, to try things out. Usually that means multiple sketches, often starting from the same material. If the composer has not tried out several possible continuations for a given passage, more sketching is in order!

20 Refinements

The three refinements discussed in this chapter are far from being the only ones possible. They should be considered mainly as models for the way a mature composer tries to constantly improve their own work. Young composers should be constantly looking at what makes their favorite pieces work and trying to generalize from their observations.

Another important point: often the difference between a given passage as it comes to the composer and its final version may just be a difference of degree. Accenting and announcing in particular are very dependent on the exact amounts applied; the difference between accenting a given moment clumsily and appropriately is often just a matter of slightly augmenting or attenuating the accent.

Thanks to Matthew Lane and Andrew Schartmann for their thoughtful suggestions. For comments and suggestions about the book and/or this PDF, I can be reached through my website, at alanbelkinmusic.com.