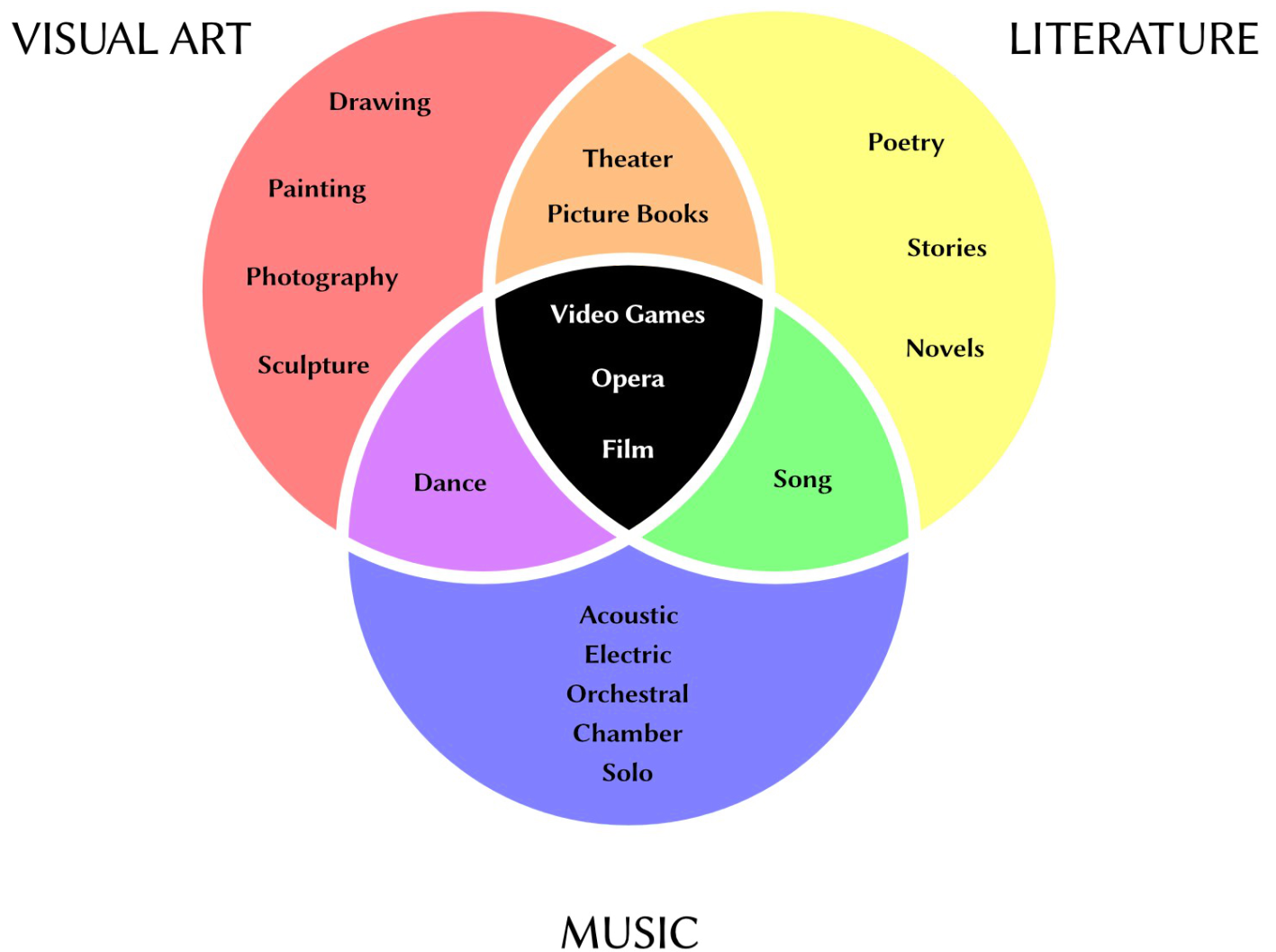


# A Guide to Music Composition for Teachers & Students

by Nathan Shirley



## Introduction

The three primary creative art forms are visual arts, literary arts, and music. Like the three primary colors they can be mixed, producing ballet, song, theater, film, and so on. Creativity is fundamental to all art, but technique is required to actualize a creative idea. The stronger the technique, the more likely an idea will reach its full potential.

The piano method series [Piano Revealed](#) introduces composition and improvisation from the start. This guide is a supplement, intended for students and teachers to dive deeper into music composition, to develop solid technique necessary for writing good music.

Basic piano skills are very important, but you don't need to be a virtuoso. Even young children just learning piano can be introduced to music composition. Piano skills should be developed alongside composition.

At its core, composition is a type of improvisation—a very thoughtful, very purposeful type of improvisation. So in order to learn to compose, one must first learn to improvise—just as a child learns to speak before learning to write, or learns to hold a pencil and scribble before learning to draw images from their mind's eye.



## Why Piano?

The piano encompasses the full pitch range of the symphony orchestra, from contrabassoon to piccolo. It's the most versatile instrument when it comes to playing multiple musical lines at once, large chords, and melody with accompaniment—all dynamically and expressively. Learning to play piano and improvise will

help train the ear to hear and understand harmony *intuitively*. It is an invaluable tool for inventing and developing musical patterns, accompaniment textures, melodic ideas, harmonic outlines, and so on. There's a reason it has been the composer's instrument of choice since its invention 300 years ago. Composers should learn to play other instruments too, but the importance of solid piano skills cannot be overstated.

The greatest composers were impressive improvisers as well. Most developed the ability to compose in their heads, but really that is simply improvising in the mind, playing around with and developing musical ideas as one might do at the piano. It takes considerable skill to think through even simple music in the mind—an excellent sense of relative pitch, of harmony, and musical memory. No matter how skilled a composer might be in these things, the piano is still a powerful tool to speed the process and streamline work.

Many of the greatest artists sketched before painting. Sketching enhances the artist's ability to "see" as they play around with their visions, just as the piano enhances the composer's ability to "hear" as they play around with their auditory "visions." So it's no surprise that most of the famous composers preferred to compose at the piano. Beethoven, in order to continue composing as he went deaf, went to the extreme of sawing the legs off his piano to better hear his music vibrating through the floorboards. Did he need the piano to compose? No, he composed some of his best works when he was deaf, but it's clear that he desperately wanted to use his piano for composition. Even Mozart, legendary for his ability to compose huge works in his head, is recorded to have strongly preferred composing at the piano.





## Performance-Improvisation vs Composition-Improvisation

In the days of Mozart and Beethoven, most musicians learned to improvise and compose. Today, when it comes to composition, even seasoned musicians must often start at the beginning, as improvisation and intuitive composition skills are now rarely taught (particularly true for classical musicians). Creativity is key, but all too often it's suppressed by a narrow focus on rigorous instrumental training and studying the "rules" of music theory.

Improvisation is the heart of the composition process, but it's a very different type of improvisation than what most people think of. Today the word 'improv' is often associated with jazz (of course it's possible to improvise in any style). A general goal of many jazz musicians is to make up music on the spot during a performance, and so there's often a motivation to create consistent polished performances. The way performance-improvisation is often taught is actually too structured for the purpose of composition. Though freedom is highly encouraged, many musicians, especially students, tend to play certain patterns that sound good over and over in slightly different ways. This can create cohesiveness and even a sense of individual style, but it's different from the composition process as there's simply no time to fully explore ideas while performing. There isn't time to stop and slowly rework and perfect these ideas. Heavy experimentation and repeated failure is *critical* to the composition process.



# Learning to Improvise

Improvisation requires setting all inhibitions aside. It isn't difficult to learn, but the fear of making "mistakes" or playing something stupid or bland can be a serious barrier, especially for adults and older children. Teaching 5-year-olds to improvise is quite easy. If you're new to improvisation, transport your mind back to when you were 5, and think of this process as finger painting at the piano... minus the paint.

Work on improvising several times each day:

- Choose a scale/tonality to work with, the 5 black key pentatonic scale (F# major pentatonic) is a good place for beginners to start.
- Begin with a single note or octave in the left hand as a drone on the tonal center (1st scale degree/tonic). So F# in this case. Repeat it slowly, over and over as it fades out.
- In the right hand, improvise a little melody above this held tonic. Even a simple 3 note pattern will be a nice place to start.
- Shift the melody around, experiment with steps and leaps, slow rhythms and fast.
- As you become more comfortable pick a 2nd, then a 3rd note in the bass to slowly alternate between. Notice how these bass tones change the atmosphere and character of the melody.
- *Very slowly*, alternate between the tonic and every other scale degree in the bass. Spend a *lot* of time with each bass note against your simple melody, so you can really hear the different effect each has against the melody.
- Eventually you can move more freely with a slow bassline made from the notes of your scale. Notice how the tonal center acts a bit like a magnet, always tugging the bassline toward it. Resist its pull, then periodically give in, returning to the tonal center.

As you gain experience, try reversing the hands, with melody in bass. Then try creating a basso ostinato (or ground bass: repeated pattern in the bass), with melody in the right hand. Play a simple repeated rhythm on a single bass note to get started. Again, eventually try switching hands. As confidence grows, push yourself to improvise outside of your comfort zone. This is one of the quickest ways to develop new skills. Once you are relatively comfortable with the simplest improvisation, you should be ready to dive into composition.





## More Improvisation Techniques

The following is a list of improvisation techniques to help gradually increase abilities. It's ordered roughly from easiest to most challenging, but feel free to skip around. If you are familiar with jazz piano

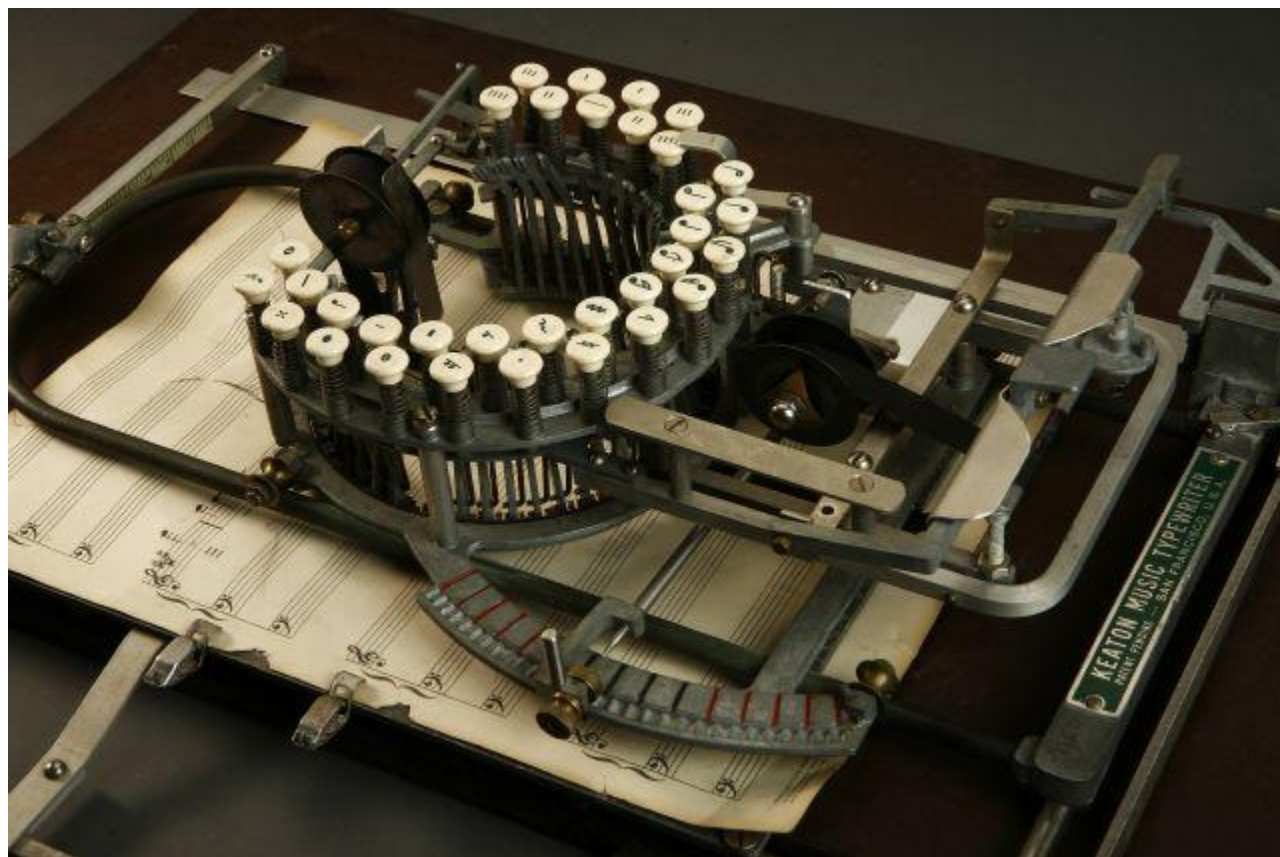
improvisation some of this may be very familiar, but I highly recommend spending time with any exercises that seem foreign. This list is much less focused on chords, specifically avoiding them early on.

1. Black key major pentatonic scale with F# tonal center (as before).
  - Single (or octave) droned F# in bass.
  - Improvise very simple melodic patterns in right hand using only black keys.
  - Very slowly alternate between tonal center and the other 4 scales degrees (spend a long time on each).
  - Move slowly but freely in the left hand, trying to compliment the right hand's melody
2. Pick a new common tonality (7 note major or minor scale for example).
  - Repeat exercise one (above) with this new tonality (make sure to identify the tonal center).
3. Using exercise one again, work with other scales/tonalities:
  - Various minor scales (natural, harmonic, melodic).
  - Modes (dorian, phrygian, lydian, mixolydian, locrian).
  - Non-diatonic scales (Hungarian, Spanish, Persian, etc.).
  - Other pentatonic scales (various Japanese, Indonesian, pentatonic modes, etc.).
  - Others (tetratonic, blues, whole-tone, octatonic, modes of the harmonic and melodic minor scales, etc.).
  - An extensive list of scales is available to [download/print here](#).
4. Pick a favorite scale/tonality, create a simple repeated rhythm for the left hand (right hand still improvising melody above it). Again, work through exercise one using this repeated rhythm in the left hand.
5. Use various tempos and time signatures.
6. Create a basso ostinato in the left hand, improvise a melody in the right hand above it (start simple).
7. Reverse hands, melody in left, repeated harmonic notes or ostinato in right (exercise one can be repeated with the hands' roles reversed).
8. Improvise in free counterpoint: a simple melody in the right hand, a simple melody in the left hand. As one becomes more active, the other can become simpler, trading off. Sometimes they might imitate each other, sometimes they might act as in conversation. Occasionally they might both be equally active.
9. Improvise with added chromaticism, adding chromatic tones between notes of the scale being used (both in melody and in accompaniment).
10. Add complexity to the accompaniment/bassline: arpeggios and chords (based on bassline), small bits of counterpoint, leaps, more complex patterns and combinations of the above, etc.
11. Add complexity to the melody: periodic harmony tones/small chords below a melody note to highlight certain moments, simple secondary melodies below melody, combination of the two.
12. Develop a simple 4-8 note bassline, then build chords on each note. Repeat this chord progression and add a melody above in the right hand. Eventually break these chords into various textures and simple repeated patterns.
13. Improvise in various dance styles: waltz, mazurka, tango, polka, jig, etc.
14. Experiment with polytonality, bassline in one key, melody in another.

While working on these things, always listen very carefully to what you are playing, paying special attention to how the two parts interact. Adjust your harmony (bassline) depending on where the melody goes, or vice versa. You should experiment extensively, developing your own improvisation exercises as well. Don't stop here.



Learning improvisation is an extremely slow process, with no end. But it's highly rewarding. Start slow and simple—build up. Don't be afraid of strange sounds, but embrace them and try to understand them. Some of the most beautiful music comes from the most unlikely musical combinations. Setting music theory aside and exploring through intuition will be the best way to find wonderful new sounds. If you play something that seems odd, repeat it, see if you can find something that compliments it. It just might take you somewhere amazing.



## Computer Notation

In the age of notation software it's common for people wishing to compose to simply sit down at the computer, load up a blank score, and dive into writing. However, for all but experienced composers this is a mistake. The importance of composing at the piano can't be stressed enough, particularly for those who have not attained Beethoven's level of audiation. Composition needs to grow the same way a painter plays with lines and shades on paper, or colors and textures on canvas. The piano is the composer's easel, their fingers the brush. The computer or manuscript paper are simply there to record the work.

Unlike painting, music isn't tangible. Sheet music is *not* the equivalent of a finished painting. Viewing a finished painting is the equivalent of actually *listening* to music. Sheet music serves only as a means to realize the finished work of art, like a set of architectural blueprints for a performer to bring it to life.

A beginner sitting down at a computer away from an instrument to compose is like a 7-year-old loose in a chemistry lab. Well-intended parents might think this could lead their child to become a great scientist. Instead, they'll play with beakers, hazardous chemicals, and burners (staves, notes, and midi playback). They won't learn much about science, and they may get burned.

Computer notation is a godsend for composers. It not only allows for easy reproduction of legible sheet music, but it automates the process of making orchestral parts, and in general speeds up the notation process dramatically. However, for beginners it should only be used *after* the composition is complete. [MuseScore](#) is a free/open-source program useful for that purpose.

Beginners attempting to compose at the computer bypass the improvisation process, the heart of the creative process itself. At the computer, beginners tend to throw out notes, press play to hear what they sound like, drag them around a bit to hear how they sound higher or lower, add some more, change the rhythm as an afterthought, and so on. While entering one note at a time, they are often ignoring the music that came before, or the music that might come next. They lose perspective of the full musical line as new material is added.

Until you can fully hear and understand complex music in your head, you absolutely need the piano to give instant feedback as you experiment with various musical elements. In this way you imagine the music and you play it *simultaneously*, there is no delay, no separation. On the computer, altering one note, then listening to the last few bars, then altering the note again, is not just inefficient, but leads to bad habits. The student might as well compose by rolling dice, as improvisation and full musical creativity aren't being employed. (Ha, [rolling dice](#)... get it?)

The solution is simple: paper-and-pencil at the piano.

(Download and print [large](#) or [small](#) staff manuscript paper.)



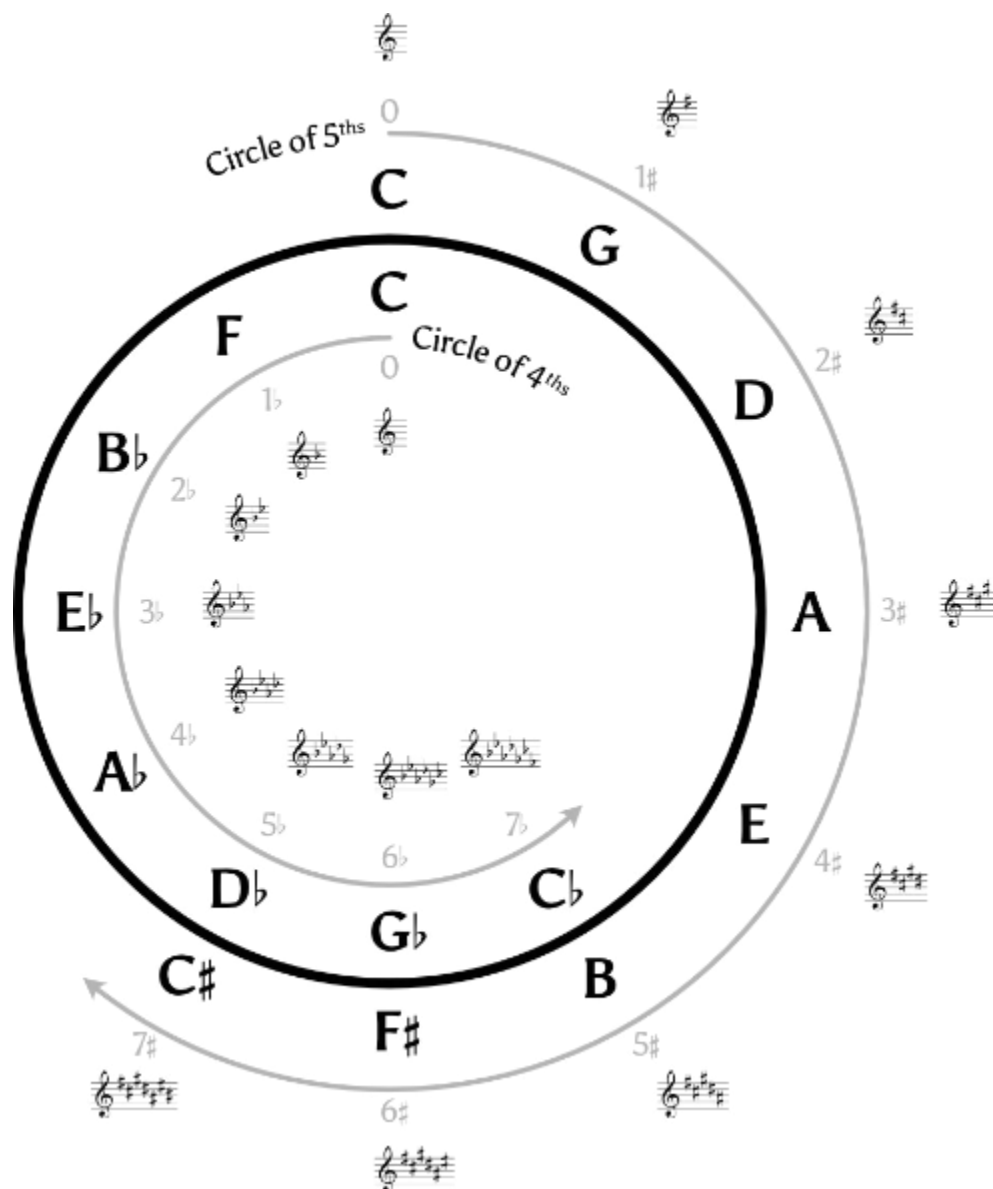
## Learning Notation

Many students, particularly younger students, can be averse to writing down their compositions. Notation can be quite laborious at first, particularly if there's a lot of music to be written down. For this reason it is strongly advised that notation be learned as soon as composition is started. This is also important because good ideas can be forgotten quickly, and though it's easy to make an audio recording, it's far easier to map out a piece visually and keep track of subtle details as they're laid out in front of you.

For most beginners, notating rhythm is far more difficult than notating pitch, and so it is recommended to use less precise rhythmic notations at first. For example, when a melody is discovered, try to recognize which notes are longer, which are shorter, and which are somewhere in between. Notate the pitch only with very small solid noteheads (no stems). Try to leave more horizontal space after longer notes, less after shorter notes. Drawing little horizontal lines after fast notes, and longer horizontal lines after longer notes might help younger students. Uncertainty about notating a precise rhythm shouldn't slow down the composition process. Exact rhythms can be determined later. Also, time signatures and bar lines should be avoided until enough music is written to confidently determine meter.



Once a short piece is finished, or once a section of a composition is complete, try adding exact rhythmic values. Write the rhythm above the staff, over the pitches the rhythm corresponds to. Next try to figure out a suitable time signature for the music and begin adding bar lines. As a general rule, simpler music is more likely to use a lot of quarter notes, perhaps some eighth notes, and a good number of half and whole notes. If you find you're writing a lot of whole notes and tied whole notes, but not many (or any) eighth notes, then cutting all rhythmic values in half will likely work better. In other words, convert all whole notes to half notes, all halves to quarters, all quarters to eighths, etc. Occasionally you might run into the opposite problem.



## Music theory

Basic music theory is very helpful as you go deeper into music composition, particularly understanding keys/scales/tonality, rhythm/meter, and basic harmony. On occasion it's certainly good to learn theory when

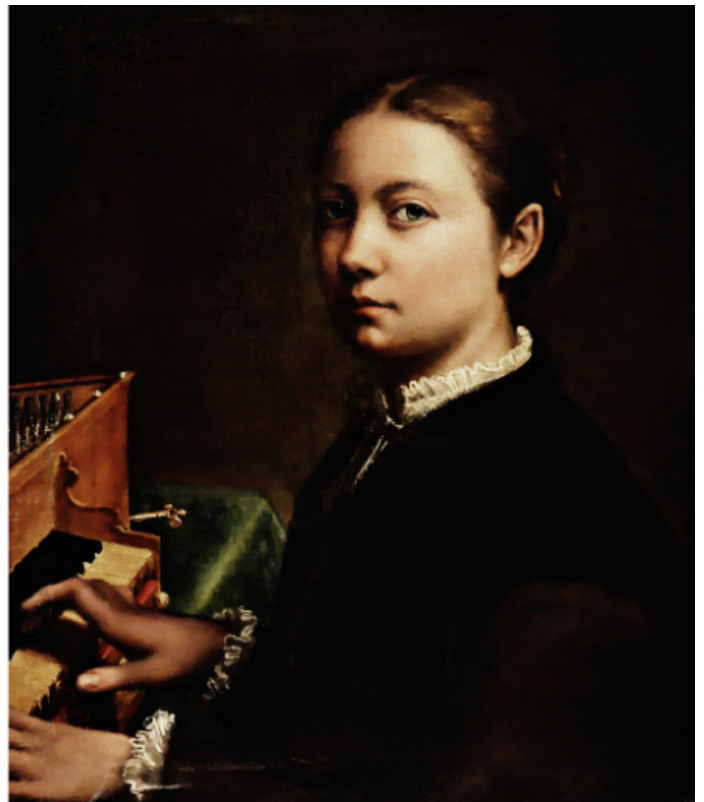


relevant to a specific composition. For example, if a student writes sharps and flats arbitrarily, without understanding keys and scale degrees, this is a good time to learn about how scales are constructed. However, music theory in general should be learned *separately* from composition.

A common yet serious danger arises from teaching music theory as though it's the foundation of music composition. It is not! Creative improvisation is. Basic theory is very important and very useful, but far too often theory is introduced as a guide book to composition. Remember, much great music was composed before music theory as we know it today was even developed.

Music theory is based on music analysis. It can teach us interesting things about what a piece is made up of, but it doesn't tell us anything about how the piece was conceived. You might be able to analyze ice cream to learn that it's made of milk, cream, and sugar, but mix those up in a bowl and you won't get ice cream. As stated before, improvisation is an inherently creative process, fundamental to composition, and of course music composition is a creative art. Music theory taught as a fundamental rule book for composition strips that creativity away.

Again, basic music theory shouldn't be avoided, but in general should be taught independently of composition.



## **The Artist Trains the Mind's Eye, the Composer Trains the Mind's Ear**

When composing, it's important to keep your mind open to anything interesting that might turn up. Experiment and listen deeply. Stop as soon as you discover an idea of interest. Take the idea and

manipulate it, try to "hear" where it wants to go, what might come before it, what sounds good underneath it, etc.

This process is similar to an artist sketching as a face gradually takes shape, visualizing how it would look with deeper set eyes, or with wild hair. The composer must learn to 'visualize' their music, hearing it in their imagination (audiation) as they play and manipulate it at the piano. They must learn to find the notes they hear. Ear training will help immensely, and in fact the composition-improvisation process itself trains the ear.



## Ear Training

You can train your ear alone at the piano (or even purely in your head, though that takes more effort). You might start by inventing a little 3 note melody. Next sing it, matching pitch as carefully as possible. Expand the melody by a note or two on the piano, and sing again. Once you're comfortable with a handful of specific notes, play one and sing it, then sing another without first playing it, and then check your pitch on the piano.

Another exercise: play a C and sing it. Now sing an ascending C major scale without the help of the piano. While singing the top C, play that C on the piano to check your pitch. Periodically reinforce the entire scale by singing each note and then immediately playing each on the piano. Repeat. Eventually try this with each mode, checking every pitch you feel insecure on. Go slowly. Your singing tone doesn't need to be great, but your pitch should be as accurate as possible.

Try singing a one octave chromatic scale, again holding the top note and checking your pitch with the piano. If you get off, break it into small bits, playing them on the piano to reinforce what you need to sing. C, C#, D... D, D#, E... C, C#, D, D#, E. And so on.

Sing while improvising. Try to match the melody, then switch to singing the bassline. Sing a drone while you improvise around it. And most important: make up your own exercises as you find things that are difficult. If they're too difficult, simplify them, building up gradually. Take breaks often. It's a very slow process, but it's a crucial skill for music composition.

There's a huge amount of ear training software these days. Much of it focuses on listening to and identifying intervals, scales, chords, and rhythms, as well as having you notate randomly generated melodies. There's a free '[interval ear trainer](#)' at [musictheory.net](http://musictheory.net) and a good Android app is [Perfect Ear 2](#). These are useful resources, but singing at the piano with your own exercises and while improvising is even better.

It's easier to hear something in your head than it is to sing it, or to play it on an instrument. So as you get comfortable singing music with minimal reference tones (played on the piano) it will become much easier to play and notate musical ideas you dream up. You may find yourself with a musical idea in your mind that you struggle to sing, or to find the right notes on the piano. The mind has a way of skimming over imperfections so you don't notice them. What you think sounds perfect in your head, might only be an approximation. This becomes obvious when you try to sing it. Working through this process will help train your "inner ear."

As audiation and improvisational skills increase, you will gradually develop the ability to improvise in your mind. Hearing harmonies and multiple voices in your head is more difficult, but it too will come with persistence (well, hopefully not hearing actual voices...).





## Musical Form

Musical form, or structure, is the architecture of composition. It determines how musical elements in a composition are organized. Good form serves to maintain interest, cohesiveness, and purpose. That involves where and in what order melodies/phrases are introduced, when they are repeated, where ideas are varied, developed, etc. Musical form can be one of the most challenging aspects of composition to master. For this reason starting with very short compositions is highly recommended. Write many of them before gradually working your way up.

Maintaining high [aesthetic](#) standards becomes more difficult as a work grows in size. Generally, the longer the piece, the more complex its form. But even long pieces with simple forms can become very challenging to keep material fresh and coherent. As in all art, proportion is a core element of form. Much can be learned about balance and proportion by studying the work of Mozart (his D minor Piano Concerto is one of many fine examples).

Ultimately the goal of form in music is to maximize the aesthetic potential of a composition's core material (melodies, harmonies, textures, etc). An example of effective form might be carefully building up to a specific melody, delivering it at just the right moment, grabbing the listener's attention and enhancing its effect. If handled well, the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. If handled poorly, form can seriously detract from even the best material. Beethoven's 5th Symphony is a remarkable example of the former. Carefully thinking through the psychology of how a piece will unfold to a first-time listener can help influence a work's structure during the composition process.





## Getting Started with Composition

While improvising you might occasionally stumble upon a little melody, bassline, pattern, or other musical idea which you especially like. Stop. Write it down. It's easy to rapidly forget these ideas, so get them down fast. Keep a notebook of them. This way when you start a new composition you'll have plenty of material to choose from.

Compose many short pieces, about one page each, built with only melody and bassline. Write the melody and bassline simultaneously. Simple two-part baroque dances for keyboard are great models (such as the famous [Minuet in G](#) from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook). Write the first section (A) to be roughly 8 measures long. Next write a second section (B) of similar length to compliment it. The B section might share the same character as A, or it might contrast A. For example, if 'A' is major, 'B' could be minor, or in a different key, or rhythmically more active, etc. Either section can include a repeat, or both can repeat. Eventually sections roughly 16 measures long can be attempted. Younger children can start with shorter sections, roughly 4 measures long.

Once you have a few pieces like this under your belt, also try composing a bassline alone first. Think of it as a simple low melody. Once complete, add a melody above. Then try the opposite, melody first, bassline second. You should try each approach at least 3 times. Later you might try these methods in longer forms.

Study the work of the masters, starting with their shortest/simplest compositions. Many composers wrote little piano pieces. Play them, learn their form, where sections repeat, where there are variations, where there

are sequences, transitions, codas, introductions, etc. Study a wide variety of these little pieces and use them as models for your own compositions.

Carefully studying scores can be very beneficial. However, by playing them at the piano, with an eye (and ear) towards structure, you will absorb much more than through analysis alone.

There are many good collections of short and simple pieces by great composers. Denes Agay compiled several, for example *Easy Classics to Moderns* and *More Easy Classics to Moderns*.



## More on Baroque Dances, Simple Forms, & Repetition

In addition to composing simple AB forms (and repeating sections: AAB, ABB, and AABB), also try other simple forms such as: ABA, ABBA, ABAB, and even just A. These various forms can be written using simple repeats, or 'D.C. al Fine' (in the case of ABA and ABBA). As mentioned before, baroque dances are great models: minuets, gavottes, sarabandes, musettes, etc., with a single melodic line, bassline, and simple structure.

You can also think of each section as being made up of smaller elements. For example, an 'A' section might consist of a 4 measure melody followed by the same melody slightly altered. However you can find plenty of pieces where there's less repetition within a section, for example a continuous 8-measure-melody. Anything goes. So don't feel you must stick to 4 + 4 bars for each section. And if your 'A' section ends up with a total of 7 or 9 measures it might be just right. Always follow your ear!

Repetition is fundamental to music. It helps listeners remember important ideas, helps new sections sound familiar, helps retain attention, and basically serves as the glue which binds everything together. Musical form is primarily concerned with repetition, where it occurs, how ideas are repeated, and when something isn't repeated (when new material is presented). Musical ideas can be repeated verbatim, or shifted up or down in pitch, or repeated slowly, or more quickly, or with different rhythm, or with the same rhythm but different pitch, or in a different tonality, or with variations, or just a fragment of an idea can be repeated, or an idea can be stretched out with new material at the beginning, end, or mixed throughout, growing into something new, or a melody can be repeated as a bassline, or condensed down to a series of chords, and on, and on.



## Composition Exercise using Baroque Dance

Try writing a bassline to go along with an existing baroque dance melody, and also a melody to go along with an existing bassline. Write out the melody from the treble clef, don't look at the bassline. Play through this melody several times at the piano to internalize it, then work on composing a simple bassline to go along with it. Do this without thinking about theory/voice leading, simply use your ear to improvise a very slow moving bassline to fit the right hand. Start with just whole notes and occasional half notes. Make the left hand part move as slowly as you can, only changing to a different note when it sounds like it *really* wants to change. As you find these notes, write them down.

Next dress the bassline up a little. Add some passing notes here and there, add some rhythmic interest, make it more compelling so that it could stand on its own without the right hand. But don't let it get more complicated than necessary, overwhelming the melody. Once you're satisfied with it, compare your version to the original. You might find passages where you prefer your version. You are very likely to find at least a few passages where you prefer the original (try listening objectively!). Compare them carefully by playing them on the piano bit by bit.

Then try composing a melody to an existing bassline. Again start simple. These exercises can help build an intuitive sense for harmony and voice leading.



## More Advanced Composition

After you've composed a good number of simple pieces, pick one, and try adding more detail to it. Think of the melody and bassline as a skeleton. Your task now is to flesh it out with organs, meat, and...flesh...or if you prefer, think of your simple melody/bassline composition as a simple sketch that an artist would draw before turning it into a detailed and colorful painting.

One way to add detail might be to make your bassline more intricate. Let it move around more, add passing tones, give it some interesting rhythmic variety, and add occasional chords. Also, try dressing the melody up a bit. Add rhythmic variety, perhaps a single note or small chord underneath the melody (but still in the right hand) to highlight an important melodic note.

As you gain experience with this you can take it further. Use the suggestions for improvisational techniques ([More Improvisation Techniques](#)) as the basis for different compositions. For example, try composing in a variety of keys and tonalities\*, with an ostinato in the bass, perhaps a melody could be passed to the left hand in another piece, more chords could be added, arpeggios, and extra voices. Also try to write dances of different types and try your hand at different musical styles.

Writing counterpoint is also great practice. A good way to get started is to take one of your simple two-part works and add more and more passing tones in the bassline until it's a melody in its own right, giving you two voices in free counterpoint.

And of course come up with your own ideas, search for unique sounds, rhythms, harmonies, and textures. As before, keep these pieces short and with simple forms.

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Note:

\*When composing using modes or other less familiar scales, it is critical that you fully internalize the tonality you are working with. The best way to become fluent with unfamiliar tonalities is to improvise with them. You should be able to really feel the tonal center and anticipate how the various scale degrees change harmonic colors. Many people get lost with modes because they haven't internalized them, so they wander off thinking they are in phrygian when really they've shifted to natural minor.



## Other Forms

Eventually you can work up to writing rondos, short 'theme and variations,' and preludes. You might try your hand at a sonatina and eventually a basic sonata.

Rondo form can range from quite short to very long: ABA, or ABACA, or ABACABA. They can be symmetrical (ABACADACABA) or asymmetrical (ABACADAEA). Composing short rondos is a good next step after more simple AB compositions. Handling a 'C' section can be tricky (no, not that kind of C-section), particularly incorporating it in a meaningful way while preventing repeated sections from becoming dull.

Theme and variations are often just an 'A' section followed by a series of variations on the 'A' theme. Composing variations is excellent practice for manipulating a melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, etc., giving a fresh perspective while ensuring cohesiveness. If done creatively and ordered thoughtfully, it's a great way to hold the listener's attention. Variations can occur in any musical form (not just theme and variations) and can be labeled A<sup>1</sup>, A<sup>2</sup>, etc.

Preludes come in many flavors, but are frequently built with nothing more than a little idea or pattern which has been sequenced through all sorts of different harmonies, often modulating heavily. Bach's C major prelude from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is a famous example. The pattern he uses lasts only half a measure (repeated).

Compose your own prelude by finding a simple pattern, then repeat it over and over while shifting through a harmonic progression. Think of it as going on a journey, perhaps eventually returning to where you began. Try to avoid returning to the tonal center too often, otherwise harmonic momentum can be lost. And a

warning: preludes are far more difficult to write effectively than they might seem. The beginning often comes quickly and easily, but each measure after that can be more and more difficult (if you are focused on good aesthetics, which you should be!). Keep it relatively short and stick with it. Improvising complete preludes is also excellent practice.

Sonata form can be quite complex, and generally quite lengthy, so it is not recommended until a large number of smaller pieces have been completed. In its most basic form, a sonata is made up of an 'exposition' (AB, often repeated, and 'B' often in a different key), followed by the 'development' (taking elements of A, B, or both, and playing around with them, often in the key of the B section), followed by the 'recapitulation' (return to AB, often B now in A's key). The combined development and recapitulation are sometimes repeated as well. Often a coda (separate ending) is included, frequently as a return to A. So Sonata form in a nutshell is: ABAB-development-AB-development-AB-coda. But sonatas come in all shapes and sizes, so these are all very much generalizations. Rules are made to be broken! Sonatinas are usually much shorter and simpler in form, without much or any development.

Sonatas also often incorporate transitional material, basically passages that join two sections. Rather than just ending A and diving directly into B, a transition gently guiding the listener to a new section, or signaling that things are changing can work nicely. Transitions can be quite brief, or fairly lengthy. They can be totally unrelated to anything, or they can directly pull from something in the piece. They can compliment the surrounding sections, or contrast them. Like variations, introductions, and codas, transitions can be used in any number of different musical forms.

Don't stop there. Invent your own forms. And even as you begin composing more complex works, return often to simple form pieces. You'll never master longer forms without first mastering the shortest.



## Counterpoint



Fugues, cannons, and other contrapuntal types of music should only be attempted once you can play them. Having the ability to improvise in free counterpoint is also very important. It's crucial that you thoroughly internalize contrapuntal elements so that your ear is always your guide.

Bach was a master at composing using these techniques, but not because he read books on counterpoint (not much was written on the subject back then). He mastered them by learning to play them and to improvise with them. He could fluently improvise 3 part fugues and canons! Just as you breathe air, he breathed counterpoint.

Start by playing a few famous rounds (*Three Blind Mice*), then try composing a simple one yourself. Having written a good number of successful preludes will also serve you well when composing in counterpoint as the overlapping melodies shift harmonically and modulate through various keys.



## Aesthetics

There are general principles of beauty: proportion, grace, interest, etc. They can be subjective to a greater or lesser extent, based on personal taste and culture, but they can also be grounded more objectively in physics, nature, and our species' evolution.



While composing, keep aesthetics at the forefront of your mind. Ask yourself:

“Why did I place this melody here? Would it be more interesting elsewhere? Is part of this passage awkward? Is the harmony inconsistent? Is any section too thin, too thick? Does any section lose momentum, or would any benefit from a rhythmic break? Is anything of a lower quality than the surrounding music? If so, why, and how might it be improved? Should it be cut completely? Does anything stand out as being especially good? If so, why, and could it serve as a model to improve other parts of the music?”

Also try to think objectively, from the perspective of someone listening to the music for the first time, and how they might perceive it and better absorb and enjoy it. Maintaining this frame of mind takes practice, but over time it will dramatically increase the quality of your music.



## Writing for Other Instruments



Writing for multiple instruments becomes more complicated, so first gain significant experience composing for piano alone. Interestingly, those simple two-part pieces as described earlier can be played on a variety of instruments, often working very nicely. They could even be sung. Those simple pieces aren't so much written for piano as they are written as *pure music*. As you advance and your music becomes more complex, it will likely also become more "pianistic." Once you've reached that point and have plenty of finished compositions under your belt, you may be ready to try composing for other instruments. When you do, it's very important to keep in mind that what's easy on piano is not necessarily easy on another instrument.

You will need to learn the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the instruments you compose for. You will need to study instrumentation and eventually orchestration (both massive topics). It's also extremely valuable to learn to play other instruments, at least to basic proficiency. I would highly recommend learning the basics of violin, flute, trumpet, and snare drum (stick method). From there you can expand out, focusing on any instruments you are especially interested in. Used instruments can often be fairly inexpensive. They need not be of fine quality.

At first try arranging a piano composition for piano and a second instrument (let's say violin). As an example, keep the left hand as written, but give most of the right hand to the violin. Then in the right hand (piano) add some chords, arpeggios, rhythmic textures, etc. The piano might periodically imitate the violin, or converse with it. Keep things simple at first.



## The Elusive Creative Flow

It's crucial for musicians to understand the thought process behind effective practice, so they can rapidly identify problematic passages and work effectively to master them. It's also crucial for composers to understand the thought process behind creative productivity, so they can fully harness inspiration when it strikes, and make strikes richer and more reliable. This involves identifying both what slows you down in the composition process and what invigorates you. Unfortunately, though interestingly, the path can be quite elusive, varying significantly from person to person.

Listed below are key elements to help maximize creative productivity. These are not all universal, so experiment to find what works for you. For some people the polar opposite might be best.

- Time of day that inspiration is most likely to strike:
  - For many people, the closer to sleep the better. Either right after waking up in the morning, or in the evening.
  - Composing immediately after a nap can also be quite productive.

- You may not feel motivated to compose at these times, but push yourself to begin and you may quickly find yourself "in the zone."
- By midday creativity often wanes, ideas may flow much slower, and they may be less likely to excite.
- Less creative times of day can be good for playing through scores, working on ear training, piano technique, or taking a nap.
- Creative flow:
  - While writing the outline of a composition, when melodic and harmonic ideas are flowing, it's easy to get distracted by details. Details are often easy to flesh out later, and inspiration won't wait, so quickly write as much skeleton/general outline as possible, maximizing inspiration as it's there.
- Build up stamina for composition:
  - While composing, try to push yourself to continue as long as you are making good progress. At some point, be it in 2 hours, 4 hours, or 20 minutes, you will notice your mind tiring, ideas flowing less easily. This is a logical time to take a break, but before you do, push yourself to continue just a little bit longer. Concentrate all your mental power to regain some of that creative flow and push on for another 10 minutes or so. This is a great mental exercise not only for building up stamina to compose, but also for training your mind to identify the state of creative flow to more easily find it in the future.
  - Mental and physical health are intertwined and both play an immense role in productivity. Eat healthy foods, drink water, get plenty of sleep, and exercise daily. Seek out and spend time with people you can talk openly with, people who respect and care for you, people who you enjoy being around.
- Find what works for you:
  - Be extremely attentive to your mental/emotional state when inspiration strikes. What led up to it? Were you tired, alert, angry, sad, excited, calm, stressed? Did your mentality or emotional state change as you went into this heightened creative state? The variables won't always be the same, but search for patterns. Creative flow can be elusive, so keep an open mind and be persistent.
  - As you discover what plays a role in preparing you to enter a state of creative flow, you should, in time, be able to more easily return to that state. This can be similar to achieving a meditative state, or lucid dreaming.
  - When composing, or anytime you use creative energy to make something new, your inspiration reserves are drained. Recharge them. Go to an art gallery, read poetry, listen to music, take a walk, watch a movie, have a good in-depth conversation with a friend--whatever is likely to inspire and get you thinking from a new perspective. You need roughly equal parts *input* (things that inspire) and *output* (creative work).

Combine inspiration, creativity, technique, and discipline, and you will achieve great things.

**END**