Reimagining the Role of Composition in Music Teacher Education

Abstract: The disconnect between the need for music composition instruction at the precollege levels and the content of music education curricula across North America has been a concern for over two decades. To be able to effectively teach their students how to compose, music educators need to have both experience and comfort in the creative process of composing. This experience and comfort can be achieved within the music education curriculum through a strong partnership between music education and composition faculty and in the field through experimentation, working with other teachers, and participating in joint composition projects with their students.

Keywords: composition, creativity, experimentation, partnership, Standards

Every few years, at least since music educator and philosopher Bennett Reimer’s brilliant “An Agenda for Music Teacher Education” was published in the Journal of Music Teacher Education in 1991, the issue of what to do about composition within the broader framework of music education has been initiated, discussed, and forgotten—only to be resurrected phoenix-like over and over again. As a composition professor with an undergraduate degree in music education and years of experience working with music teachers and precollege students, I take part in this latest volley of articles encouraging the addition of composition in music teacher education by exploring the systemic reasons why this concept has failed to take hold within music education curricula and what might be done to improve the situation.

Needs

There is, of course, a strong need for the inclusion of composition in the music education curriculum, a need that has been growing steadily since the early 1990s. Bennett Reimer’s prescient observations in 1991 could have easily have been written yesterday:

Already it is common to encounter school kids who own rather sophisticated electronic equipment and have gained a great deal of musical know-how and satisfaction by com-

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posing with it.... So we are witnessing a significant movement in a new direction—to add composing as a viable option for creative musical activity.5

Reimer’s comments have absolutely come to pass. Beyond the ancient analog instruments of the past (e.g., pencil and paper), students today have access to a dazzling array of tools with which they can create and manipulate musical or sonic ideas in manners barely conceivable thirty years ago. Digital notation (such as that produced by software such as Finale, Sibelius, MuseScore, and Noteflight), sequencing (such as can be done with GarageBand, Logic, or Digital Performer), and looping software applications (such as found in Ableton Live) are just a few of the myriad options available to students. In addition to having access to tools to help them create, students have the ability to disseminate their works as well as study the works of others through the Internet. Social networks like Facebook and Twitter, audio sharing sites like Soundcloud and Bandcamp, and music players like Spotify and Pandora have expanded the world in which composers can listen to music, interact with others, and distribute their own projects so fast that we are still racing to catch up with that world and its ramifications. To this end, when I mention the term composition in this article, it is meant to include all forms of composing, not just the traditional pencil-to-paper method.

What is important is not the means by which young composers create but the fact that these changes in technology have provided opportunities for many students to dive into the world of composing regardless of their musical experience. In years past, there was only one way for composers to discover their love of writing music—through the logistical bottleneck that is inherent in organizing live performances of one’s work. Today, however, the aforementioned digital breakthroughs provide opportunities for students to become bitten by the “composing bug” in their mid to late teens, often well beyond the fourth- to sixth-grade window through which most children begin their instrumental studies in school. It is imperative that music teachers be able to encourage and educate these new and nontraditional students, but the training they receive rarely prepares them to do so.3

In 1994, composition was placed as one of the nine Music Standards, and its impact in these standards was diffuse at best. With so many Standards to cover, teachers found it difficult to prioritize those standards that were less related to their preexisting conducting-based or general music curricula, leaving composition, among others, on the periphery, as outlined in educator Susan Byro’s 1999 study:

Music specialists need increased ability to effectively teach all of the standards, emphasizing the standards with which they are least comfortable: composing, improvising, understanding music in relation to other subjects, understanding music in relation to history/culture, and playing instruments.4

When the Music Standards were revised in 2014, those nine Standards were replaced with four more general standards—creating, performing, responding, and connecting—that were mapped onto five context-based “strands,” including K–8, Ensemble, Guitar–Harmonizing Instruments, Technology, and Composition–Theory.

The fact that creating was being put front and center in these new Standards and Composition–Theory was to be included as a primary strand was heartening, and I was honored to take part on the writing team that crafted the Composition–Theory Standards. Those Standards were written so that all teachers would be able to construct learning objectives and basic project plans that would give their students the opportunity to truly experience the entire compositional process, no matter what the experience level of their students. The overall structure of the Standards is sound, and they have even helped me to clarify my own concepts of what teaching the creative process should be at the collegiate level.

I am afraid, however, based on my own experiences and discussions with educators across the United States, that the Standards may not do much good given that most of today’s music teachers have had little to no preparation in composition pedagogy during their collegiate studies and—more important—that they have had little to no experience composing their own music.

This is not a unique or new concept. Educator Peter Webster decried the situation in 1990:

Teacher training programs at the college level, both undergraduate and graduate, rarely devote time to encouraging teacher education students to think about developing creative teaching strategies or creative thinking in children. Composition and improvisation are almost totally ignored as legitimate teacher’s skills and as activities to encourage with children.5

And composer and educator Dana Wilson echoed Webster’s remarks in 2001:

A teacher’s responsibility in the composing process is primarily twofold: to try to determine what a student composer’s intentions are, and then to suggest ways that he or she might better achieve them. Unfortunately, many teachers have been reluctant to become involved, having never had the opportunity to develop compositional skills themselves.6

Followed by educators Michele Kaschub and Janice Smith in 2013:

Teachers, most of whom have had no previous experience with creating music as composers or training in how to teach composition, have been steadily exposed to a rapidly growing dialogue about composition and its potential value as a tool for teaching music.7

How can composing music consistently be seen as an essential and important component of music education and yet, with few exceptions, barely make any headway at all for inclusion within the music teacher preparation curriculum after twenty-five years?
Challenges

I believe that there are several systemic issues deeply ingrained within the curricular structures of music education degree programs that have caused and will continue to cause composition to remain an afterthought. Four of those are the lack of exposure to composition in theory and music teacher coursework at all levels, the mental roadblocks educators place in front of themselves due to inexperience in doing composition, the overly limiting performance-based mind-set of educators and the programs that prepare them, and the lack of collaboration between music education and composition faculty at the university level.

Theory courses at the college level provide strong preparation in fundamental concepts and skills through cognition and analysis. However, if composition projects are included, they are almost invariably of the modeling nature, asking students to compose "in the style of" in order to provide a good assessment on how well the student can demonstrate whatever material he or she happens to be studying at the time. While these skills are eminently important to the growth and understanding of a music student, they do not effectively prepare students to explore the entire creative process.

In the three-and-a-half to four years of coursework that music education students take before their student-teaching semester at the State University of New York at Fredonia, for example, their curriculum is one of the most fully packed and tightly regimented of any discipline. Between general education requirements, core music requirements, education requirements, and music education requirements, there is usually very little room for any additional or elective courses in students' schedules. This almost always means that composition as a subject matter can only be added to a music education curriculum if something else that already exists is scaled back or removed entirely. Even at the graduate level, music education curricula rarely if ever include strong preparation in composition or composition pedagogy. The ramifications of this situation are twofold; not only are graduates in the field often teaching with little to no composition experience, but so are their faculty instructors at the university level. This creates a curricular vacuum that, unless changes are made, will continue to facilitate this situation indefinitely.

Even if these curricular concerns were addressed and educators were given appropriate opportunities in their theory and education courses, music teachers of all ages and backgrounds will often balk at composing because of the fear of being "wrong." As far back as 1973, music educator and composer Henry Lasker pointed out the challenge of encouraging young composers:

Teaching young people to compose is not as difficult as is commonly believed. Everyone is instinctively creative. In most of us, innate talents lie dormant, often becoming lost through fear, apathy, or lack of guidance. Many young people grow up with the belief that exercising creativity through music is a formidable task to be left to the talented student and the professional living in an ivory tower. Consequently, they develop a defeatist attitude, positive that their creative attempts will fail. They must be convinced that composing is a natural phenomenon, that they are potential composers because they are human beings, and that their creative efforts can give them great satisfaction. Once their self-confidence is assured, they may reach unforeseeable levels of achievement.

Lasker's words were directed toward music teachers so they could encourage their students to compose, but I would just as easily use those words to encourage the music education student or, even more so, the music teacher in the field to compose their own music. The "defeatist attitude" Lasker mentions is one of the hardest and most pervasive challenges in composition pedagogy for several reasons:

- First, those previously mentioned theory courses have a habit of instilling a sense of "rules that must be followed" into the compositional tools. The preparation in the theory classroom that is necessary to solidify the various aspects of compositional craft can have the effect of calcifying a "rules" mentality that can stand in direct opposition to the creative process.
- Second, we have been surrounded by brilliant works by master composers for hundreds of years, and in order to convince oneself to delve into the art of composing, one has to come to terms that any work created could be compared unfavorably to the massive repertoire that enticed us all into becoming musicians in the first place.
- Third, whereas a musical performance has a constant in its equation—the score—to which the performance is compared, a composition has no constant, no performance practice, no way for the creator or their instructor to know what are the right or wrong decisions during the creative process.

Finally, composition is a very personal act. If a performer plays a wrong pitch or sings out of tune, these are physical acts that reflect on the performer's preparation and can embarrass a performer in the same way athletes feel when they don't perform well on the field. The fear of this, while sizable, is still external—sometimes our physical body does not or cannot do what we want it to, and therefore, we can excuse those mistakes to physical ability and poor practice regimen. The act of composing, on the other hand, is not physical in nature. It is a blend of emotion and intellect that can be perceived as a reflection not of what we can do but of who we are. For an inexperienced composer, the fear of laying bare one's own emotional and intellectual windows for others to look into and pronounce judgment can be an enormous disincentive.

Another major obstacle to the incorporation of composition into the music rehearsal room is how different it is from the traditionally performance-based curriculum. Music classes are
almost always constructed so that the teacher is working with a large body of students who are playing instruments or singing together in preparation for one kind of public presentation or another. This format is difficult to pull off even in the best of conditions, but the potential addition of written projects into the mix could give all but the most experienced composer-educators pause. That is not to say that it is impossible—there are strong examples nationwide that prove that it is indeed feasible—but the time and experience that such a program requires is foreboding for those who do not have the requisite preparation.

The final major challenge that stands in the way of effective incorporation of composition into the music teacher education curriculum neatly dovetails into the first of several solutions for the impasse that has been created: the lack of strong relationships between music education faculty and composition faculty in higher education. On first blush, there aren’t many compelling reasons why composition and music education faculty would want to work together, often their priorities are trained in the opposite directions. Composition faculty, for the most part, tend to focus their own creative output toward the exploration of complex compositional techniques and concepts for high-profile advanced ensembles and soloists while music education curricula primarily focus on the basic musical and educational needs for beginning and young performers; there are legions of stories of professional composers who delve into the world of writing for public school ensembles and write something that they feel is very simple in their eyes while it is actually much too difficult for the group, thus leaving a bad taste in the mouth of both composer and music teacher. Both sets of pedagogues exist within two different worlds, even though their offices may only be down the hall from each other.

Solutions

Bringing these two disparate areas together is not easy, but to truly create opportunities for music education students to learn the creative process of composition, both disciplines need to break down any barriers and find ways to incorporate composition faculty into the music teacher preparation curriculum. Composition faculty could augment the teachings of the music education faculty and the traditional core theory courses by providing insights into a multitude of creative aspects (including abstract and narrative concepts, linear motion, textures, development, and pacing), allowing the students to focus on the compositional process rather than the product. In addition, composition faculty are expected to be aware of the contemporary concert literature and would be able to introduce many new stylistic and technical concepts to music education students.

Does this mean that a new class needs to be required of all music education students, taught by composition faculty, which spends an entire semester introducing the basics of composition? Not necessarily, though composition programs often offer such a course for composition majors, and if allowed for non-composition majors, it can be extremely helpful for those students who have a special interest in composing. My own beginning composition course is available for non-composition majors, and many music education students have taken it to good effect. An important limiting factor on such a course, however, is the time required for an adequate reading session. Because of this, I try to limit my courses to twelve students.

Integrating composition into the entire course-work structure helps to ensure that all music education students have a baseline of solid experience. Introductory courses, methods courses, conducting courses, instrumental or vocal techniques courses—all of these have the potential for composition to be utilized effectively into existing syllabi. For instance, I was recently invited into a colleague’s choral methods course, introduced several basic concepts, gave an assignment to create numerous variations on a handful of motives the students composed in class, demonstrated how a short composition could be constructed using those motives, had every student build such a piece in class, and played through each piece—all in two class periods. Conducting classes could have each student conduct a simple composition written by a classmate, while instrumental technique courses could allow for simple composing assignments for each instrument at a beginning level as well as help to consider basic instrumentation and orchestration concepts for the various instrumental families.

Using the concept that any time music exists within a music education course at least a portion of that music could be composed by the students, it would not be difficult to construct a strong system of compositional sections and opportunities spread evenly throughout an entire four-year degree program so that by the time a student graduated, he or she had been composing for several years in a variety of contexts. This concept of multiple compositional experiences over a period of time cannot be stressed enough. Whether we’re talking about elementary school students in a general music class, high school students performing in a jazz ensemble, or graduate music education students, they will learn how to compose more effectively if they can do it often—even in small doses. It is also important to vary the instruments and people for whom one is composing. In the same way that student composers should be writing for their friends as well as for themselves, music teachers should be writing for their individual students, their own ensembles, and ensembles from other schools or districts.

Although the act of initially composing and developing musical ideas within a notational medium—"pushing notes around," as I have been known to call it—is often solitary, especially for the adult music teacher, it is important for there to be sources of constructive feedback and assessment during the creative process. Teachers already in the field can avoid the fear of "going it alone" by forming support groups or "composing clubs" with other music teachers, with the ease of sharing PDF
scores and MP3 files easily online, these support groups do not have to be limited by distance or geography. It should be noted, however, that composing and developing musical ideas does not need to be solely within a notational medium. The previously mentioned looping and sequencing software applications that allow students to explore their creativity on their own personal devices can be used by the music teacher for their own personal creative projects, whether they be stand-alone works or pieces that integrate digital audio alongside live performers.

By working with others, whether it be with experienced faculty in college or with colleagues with similar experience after college, the process of receiving and translating feedback into one’s work helps the composing teacher to discover a satisfactory balance between too much and too little instructor interaction from the students’ point of view. Teachers at all levels tend to err on the side of too little active feedback to beginning composers; as the teacher gains experience in composing, he or she will become more comfortable with making suggestions to their own students. By receiving feedback from colleagues and mentors, teacher-composers will soon discover the importance in ensuring that the material is always coming from the student, as it is all too easy to fall into the trap of composing a work for a student. This is easily avoided by starting with objective criticisms (notation, instrumentation, etc.) and gradually moving into more subjective suggestions.

A final proposed solution is to compose with one’s students in addition to composing for them. At least once or twice a semester, I will compose “without a net” in front of my beginning composition class, beginning with no preconceived ideas or limitations. With this method, any music teacher could choose to take part in a composition assignment along with their students... even to the extent as to take part in group critiques and sharing sessions. In my beginning composition courses, for instance, I instituted a day of “speed dating” for each project where students are paired up and critique each other’s works for ten to twelve minutes before switching to a new partner. The same technique could be particularly useful within methods or other classroom-based courses that are large enough to preclude extensive one-on-one mentoring by the instructor but could also be useful by giving students (either individually or as a group) opportunities to critique the instructor’s work. By explaining critiquing parameters ahead of time and enforcing boundaries when necessary, this allows the instructor to model a “safe-zone” approach where criticism is constructive and to demonstrate a balance between instruction and personal taste when dealing with artistic decisions.

Questions for the Future

Many of the ideas proposed here may be seen with more than a little skepticism within academia. What I suggest would take a great amount of work to revamp curricula and relationships between music educators and composers. The challenges before us can be found in questions posed almost twenty-five years ago by Reimer:

But a host of questions are raised by this obligation. Who will be the teacher educators to provide the needed models of composition curricula when such models do not yet exist? How do we begin to formulate, try, and evaluate composition programs to ensure that the models we propose will be musically and educationally valid and effective? Who will teach music education composition majors their lessons? We have built an entire college-level system to provide all music majors with lessons in performance: will we have to build a parallel system to provide all or some with composing lessons? Will we find ourselves recruiting composition teachers for college faculty positions as we now recruit specialists in all the instruments and voice? And, if so, what kinds of backgrounds will they need to have—straight composition (comparable to undergraduate and graduate performance majors) or a mixture of composition with music education (as is the case with many performance teachers)? Where will music education composition majors gain clinical experiences and student teach when there is still a paucity of composition programs in the schools?

I sincerely hope that this article might help to begin answering Reimer’s questions or, at the very least, begin the conversation that has been so very long in coming.

Notes

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
11. Lasker, “Why Can’t They Compose?”