

Episode 3: My Composing Process

Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

Episode proper

Hello and welcome to the show today. I'd like to talk about developing my composing process. I feel that overall, there's not an abundance of information out there about this topic and that composers keep this info close to the vest. Maybe sharing my process will help others who are in the same boat. I didn't learn much about this in college, similar to how I didn't learn a lot about how to practice until after I'd graduated. While my teachers certainly helped me with critiquing and revising what I'd composed, we really didn't talk about what to do when you sat down to write. What *do* you do when you sit down and face a blank page of manuscript paper or a blank screen? We just didn't talk about it all that much, and I didn't think to ask, either.

I managed to compose enough music for my senior recital, and that was about it. The requirements for the senior recital were 20 minutes of music, and in a way that was almost a struggle for me. And while I had some music that I wrote for assignments, it wasn't all that substantial. They were just little tidbits, nothing overly exciting. And so I left college with a very small body of work, and then I wrote next to nothing. After graduation, I wrote a piece for a friend's wedding, and I dabbled around here and there, but it really wasn't much overall. Part of the reason is because I did go on to grad school for library science, and I was really busy with that. And along with that, I didn't have the tools to just sit down and write for a few minutes. I always felt like I needed a huge block of time to be able to get into the zone and actually start writing.

How do composers write?

And so with all this, I've had to reexamine what I thought was how composers write. We often hear about the special cases-- Mozart, the prodigy; how Shostakovich composed "Festive Overture" in only three days; and et cetera. But that doesn't help the rest of us. It doesn't help the non-special cases, which most of us fall into. And it's really easy to feel like a failure when we inevitably can't hold a candle to these guys. And it does put a lot of pressure on us because we feel like we need to, and it's easy to let the self doubt creep in that. Well, if I can't write as well as Mozart, then I shouldn't even try.

But on the flip side, it's good to remember that other composers took a long time to write their masterworks. In his own words. Brahms took 21 years to write his first symphony, and I also think about people like my late grandmother who didn't start oil painting until she was older than I am now. I have some of her paintings up in my house, and I think she did a pretty darn good job for starting late.

I've found some help by reading about how authors write, and there are definitely parallels between the composition process and the writing process. And so I'll talk about a couple of books later on.

Inspiration

I've also had to reexamine my beliefs about inspiration. Yes, inspiration can sometimes strike like lightning, but most of the time it doesn't. Inspiration requires work. I've come to learn that it's a relationship, and if I don't actively try to come up with ideas, I can't be surprised when ideas don't just come to me. Two books that I've really enjoyed are *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert and *The War of Art* by Stephen Pressfield. They're excellent reads for creative types. I highly recommend them, and I will add some links in the show notes.

I liked Gilbert's ideas of inspiration and ideas and that relationship of your inspiration to you. It's an interesting way of looking at it. I think she might be onto something. And with Pressfield and his talk of resistance, that's one of the biggest takeaways of that book is just getting over the resistance and the procrastination to actually sit down and do the work.

Rewriting is normal

So it's okay to rewrite. I had to write this on a sticky note and put it in my composing notebook because it's something that I continually have to remind myself. And it's also one of the more important lessons I've learned.

There is a caveat to that in that don't rewrite so much that you never finish anything. You can take that too far and feel that you are never, ever done with the work when you're probably just fine and can release it at some point.

We tend to have a notion that someone just starts writing at measure one and they keep going until they're done. And that's not how it works. That's what I used to think. And now I've come to realize that that's not the way to go about it. There might be a few special cases where, yes, you manage to write something great all in one sitting from beginning to end. But I also think that that's not the vast majority of how writing gets done, and it's certainly not how it's working out for me. And once I understood that, that has helped me to actually sit down and write something.

Bad first drafts

So there's almost always a bad first draft. I mean, that's just what happens, and that's okay. And that's normal. You can make a bad draft better, but you have to have something to start with. You can't just start writing and expect perfection as soon as your pen hits the paper. For one thing, that's a lot of pressure to put on yourself, and that's something that I've battled with. Where oh, well, if I'm not going to write a masterpiece right when I sit down and writing, why should I bother writing? Well, that's not a great way to think about things, and it definitely held me up over the years because I think I was too scared to write something bad that I could then turn into something good later. Sometimes you really just have to sit down and start writing anything, something, whatever. Just know that you can revise it later or you can decide that, no, that idea is just not that good and discard it completely. But at least write something down

because that gives you a start, and it's something that I've gotten a lot better with, and I'm looking forward to expanding on this and trying out different things.

I'm still learning

My composing process is still a work in progress, and I'm figuring out the best way for me to sit down and actually work has gotten better, and I know I still have room to grow with that. I have had some changes that should allow me to explore this even further, and that's something I will talk about in I think, the next episode. But I'm still figuring it out for myself, and that's okay because that's how I'm learning and I'm becoming a better composer.

Arranging music helped me get started. I do enjoy taking a piece and adapting it for other instruments. There will be times I hear something and think, oh, that would sound great for clarinet, quartet or oh, flute, clarinet duet would work really well for this. And so I do enjoy doing that. And I've always enjoyed it. And there's also much less blank page syndrome when say, Beethoven is giving you a blueprint. And not only that, it also is a good way to hone your skills in terms of orchestration and figuring out what instruments can do, what are their strengths and weaknesses. And it's a great way to learn that too, which then you can apply to your own original works.

I've also been taking a composition class and we're nearing the end of it, but it's one of the things that I'm doing to help myself on this journey. We've talked about this very topic in your composing process, and it's been really interesting and informative to hear from both the teacher and my fellow students to find out what they're doing and see if I can adapt some of their practices to help me out. But it's been great to have a group of people to share this with. Composing can be kind of a lonely process sometimes. And so knowing that I have some of these other fellow composers who are in similar situations, to me, it's been great to be able to bounce ideas off of them.

The class is also improving my composition skills in general, and that in turn helps my writing process because by learning and getting more skillful in what I'm doing, it should speed up the process of me sitting down to write. While I still get stuck with blank page syndrome, I now have some more tools to help myself. So I'll do things like think of a broad musical idea for a piece like, do I want to write a beginner duet for flute and clarinet? Or do I want to write a clarinet choir piece or what do I want? Do I want it fast, slow, major, minor, and stuff like that. It's been nice to have this basic idea of what I want to do with something, and that can help start the ideas flowing. And so I'll let that rattle around and maybe start singing melodies to myself or play around on the piano. And I start getting little bits of ideas of, oh, this could be something I want to develop in this piece or oh, I like this idea, but maybe that's for something, another piece along the way. I also start thinking of the form and structure of the piece. Is it a traditional ABA form? Rondo? What kind of form do I want? Or do I want to do something a little different and go in a different direction?

And then along with all this, I'll make sketches either in my manuscript notebook or using a notation program on my tablet. I personally love StaffPad, and I would recommend that. The handwriting input is really cool and I'll link to that in the show notes as well, and I'll also do a

future topic on some of the tools I use. Along with doing that, I'll often write short notes about the sketch as well, and whether that theme is good for the beginning or the end, or if that's going to be the main theme I want to build everything on, or maybe the rhythm is good, but I don't like the pitches yet, so I will start making notes.

I find it's also helpful to take breaks. Taking a walk or working on a puzzle or doing some quick chores can help. Let my mind just think about what I've been doing and come up with new ideas, or better ideas, and sometimes even just switching and working on a different piece can help.

Conclusion

So these are some of the things I've learned as I've gotten back into composing, and I hope that me shining a light on some of this can help others facing the same things. I would love to hear from other composers, or even authors, about your own process, and maybe we can help each other figure out what to do. So feel free to email me at podcast@tonaldiversions.com. Like I said, I'd love to hear from you and find out what you do to help yourself sit down and write. And then I would love to be able to share those on a future episode. So yes, please get in touch with me.

Thank you for tuning in. I hope this has been interesting to hear how at least one composer works on music and who knows, there may be a follow up episode in the future as I further figure out my own process and what works for me, and then I can also incorporate people's feedback from this episode. So take care and I'll see you next time.

Outro

Thank you for listening to Tonal Diversions subscribe wherever podcasts are found and share with a friend until next time. Bye!