B. J. Music Ed. 2012 29:2, 163–170
doi:10.1017/S0265051712000216
Copyright © Cambridge University Press 2012

Teaching composing with an identity as a teacher-composer

Jennie Francis

jennie600@btinternet.com

Introduction

I enjoy composing and feel able to write songs that I like and which feel significant to me. This has not always been the case and the change had nothing to do with my school education or my degree. Composing at secondary school did not move beyond Bach and Handel pastiche. I did not take any composing courses during my degree. What did influence the change in me was the fact that I made a friend of a songwriter.

We talked about music and musicians and we listened to a lot of music. We talked about people, relationships and things that were going on and I saw how what he talked about was found in his music. We talked about how other writers explored ideas, such as parenthood, in their music. I noticed how his love of piano playing and his interest in jazz and punk and numerous singer-songwriters were part of his music. His music didn't sound like any one of them but his influences could be discerned. He told me how songs he had written had evolved, who he had talked to, where he'd got stuck, and how he'd got unstuck. He made writing songs seem to be something that anyone might do. He played me work in progress and we talked about what he was trying to do with it. None of this had to do with the composing experiences that I was more familiar with such as mark schemes and an imposed need to use musical devices found within a style. It was to do with exploring what it was he was trying to say and feeling good saying it.

My friend didn't suggest that I write songs, but I did, and almost accidentally. I'd started learning some basic jazz piano, which meant that I found myself sitting in front of a keyboard playing with chords and melodies and learning how to create some of the sounds I'd been listening to for years. Thrown into the mix was a bit of personal upset and the requirement to make what felt like a momentous decision and suddenly lots of songs arrived. Heartfelt songs which felt like I was talking myself into understanding and which provided me with a place to think. There was a strange feeling of uncovering something that already existed rather than constructing something new. I felt that I recognised them: I recognised me and I recognised the music. It was exhilarating. Although this is a story about gaining an identity as a composer, what I actually felt was that I had become a musician. I felt that I was being honest with myself. It was this experience that made me begin to question how I had been teaching composition in school and how I could balance the requirements that my students do well in their examinations with attempting to find ways in which they might be able to feel that they were being honest with themselves through their compositions.

Purpose

This article sets out to contrast experiences of composing, which are often heavily influenced by the exam board assessment criteria (development, consideration of melody,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

harmony, rhythm and so on), with experiences in which the motivation for composing comes from within the composer. It starts by considering what appears to be valued by an examination board in compositions and compares this with a more personal value placed on compositions by a composer, Bob Dylan. These two approaches are discussed in relation to Marcel's ideas of 'problem' and 'mystery' in which a problem can be reduced into small parts and be solved without the need for profound engagement, whereas a mystery is something in which we are 'caught up' and cannot be reduced to detail. My experiences of composing, in which ideas and developments arose without my planning them, or even appearing to think very much about them are reminiscent of this mysteriousness. This leads to a description of three students' different compositional experiences in which a common thread appears to be the importance of finding personal meanings and connections with the music that they are composing. These connections appear to arise from the love of particular artists or pieces of music and are often an enjoyment of the medium through which they, and their loved artists, compose. There is a sense in which the students are able to be themselves.

Composition at advanced level – my early approach

The triumvirate of musical 'skills', performing, composing and understanding, which lie at the heart of the English curriculum, are deeply ingrained. My school has one A-level teacher who focuses on performance and another on composing. As a beginner teacher I did not feel confident as a composer but, with the guidance published by the examination board, a syllabus and some exemplar student compositions, I felt that I could do what was necessary to help my students get a good grade.

In these circumstances I was in danger of falling into a vague or nihilistic approach, which has been a concern of many authors, as paraphrased in Berkley (2004, p. 241):

> [. . .] unless teachers have a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve, they may teach composing on a regular basis but have only a vague idea of why they are teaching it, and why they have chosen to teach it in any particular way. [. . .] in this instance there is a danger that classroom practice becomes driven by a set of behavioural objectives derived from the curriculum model provided by government or examination board.

I was not unusual. Many teachers have very little personal experience of composing outside the examination system. It is easy to imagine that the existent scheme of work, the demands of the final assessment and the various books designed to help the busy teacher can become enormously influential in the conception of what composition is in school. Perhaps this is not a problem but this system does not appear to produce many people that choose to compose regularly. Very few of the three cohorts of postgraduate teacher trainees that I have worked with, for example, reported having written much music outside the requirements of academic courses.

So it would seem that, without much experience of composing outside examination courses, it might be easy to place the gaining of good marks according to generic assessment criteria as a primary reason for teaching composing. Perhaps, in these circumstances, it is unsurprising that so many students leave school not wanting to compose, not valuing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

composing for itself. Given their influence, it is worth looking in more detail at the values placed on composing within an examination system.

A brief examination of a specification

The A-level students at my school follow an examination specification in which the 'assessment objectives' for composing/arranging are described as: 'create and develop musical ideas with technical control and expressive understanding making use of musical devices, conventions and resources' (Edexcel, 2011, p. 12). These are clearly assessable and reassuringly teachable. Students can be taught to make use of 'musical devices, conventions and resources'. We can build a repertoire of development techniques. We can be a constant critical friend to help our students increase their 'technical control' of the techniques that they employ and we can keep asking them questions about their expressive intentions and provide them with suggestions and models.

The implied curriculum model can be found in various places. In a section entitled: 'What students need to learn' we are told that:

> Study should include: how to write for instrument(s) and/or voices: efficient, sensitive and idiomatic handling of appropriate timbres and textures [. . .]. How to develop musical ideas within chosen forms and structures: understanding the principles of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic construction and the working of form(s) and structure(s) appropriate to the composition undertaken [. . .]. Students should also study appropriate models drawn from the anthology and elsewhere. (Edexcel, 2011, p. 39)

At A2 further advice is given. For example:

> Area of study Instrumental music: Topic 1: development and contrast.
>
> Students should investigate processes of musical development including motivic development (e.g. by inversion or fragmentation), variation techniques and how such processes can be applied to create varied musical structures (e.g. rondo, sonata form). (Edexcel, 2011 p. 86)

There is nothing sinister here. It is sensible advice. Given that composition forms such a considerable proportion of the marks, even this is expedient: 'Students should be also aware of the assessment criteria that the compositions will be marked against' (Edexcel, 2011, p. 86).

The specification is, of course, concerned with what will be assessed and how students can be adequately prepared so that they gain good grades. In managing the preparation of students to complete the coursework composition, it is easy to imagine schools where it is deemed sensible to have whole cohorts being prepared for the same one or two assessed compositions. An example might be that everyone will compose a theme and variations for flute and piano in the style of Mozart. This way all students can be taught conventions and appropriate development skills efficiently. Everyone can study the same pieces and learn about the same techniques.

To summarise, the examination system enables us to teach composition in many different ways, but through its inevitable interest in what is measurable it can lead to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a one-size-fits-all approach. The composition, whether it is the student's or an existing piece chosen to demonstrate something, is transformed into the product and evidence of knowledge. It is valued because it demonstrates the forms of understanding as outlined in the syllabus. The reduction of music into a product significantly influences our conception of what composing might be. It might lead to rigid schemes of work and rigid approaches to music in which students and teachers find that they learn how to write a good examination piece rather than what it might be to be a more freethinking composer: an artist paying attention.

Bob Dylan and a different approach to composing

On the sleeve note for Dylan's second album, released when he was 21, Hentoff (1963) quoted Dylan:

> The most important thing I know I learned from Woody Guthrie, [. . .] I'm my own person. I've got basic common rights – whether I'm here in this country or any other place. I'll never finish saying everything I feel, but I'll be doing my part to make some sense out of the way we're living, and not living, now. All I'm doing is saying what's on my mind the best way I know how. And whatever else you say about me, everything I do and sing and write comes out of me.

Bob Dylan's comment about 'making sense' of things is refreshing. What is being made sense of is 'the way we're living, and not living, now' and what he has learned from Woody Guthrie is something to do with being a person in the world. He's describing a kind of listening which does not dwell on technical and stylistic minutiae but which responds to the whole, which is caught up in what the songs are about, in why they exist. On another occasion, remembering his feelings when listening to Mike Seeger playing live:

> In order to be as good as that, you'd just about have to be him, and nobody else [. . .]. Nobody could just learn this stuff, and it dawned on me that I might have to start changing my inner thought patterns. That I would have to start believing in possibilities that I wouldn't have allowed before, that I had been closing my creativity down to a very narrow, controllable scale. That things had become too familiar and I might have to disorientate myself. (Dylan, 2005, p. 71)

This realisation, that trying to emulate someone else's style is limiting and probably impossible, that he may have to start thinking differently in order to open up his own creativity, is also important. In both of the above quotes what emerges is his interest in who he is in the world and how he relates to the music of others. It was not enough to play or compose like others. What was important was to *be* like others in that they were playing and composing like themselves, telling stories, making sense of things. Dylan saw that to be a musician meant claiming 'a larger part of' himself and putting that into his music (Dylan, 2005, p. 72). Compositions here are not products, not valued primarily as good examples of style and technique; their value has to do with something altogether more personal and holistic.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Composing as problems, composing as mystery

What has been considered so far is how an examination specification, by definition, makes composing into something measurable, assessable by general criteria, and tidy. And how this tidiness can imply a way of thinking about composing and the teaching of composing based in the development of procedures and techniques and the use of existing pieces as technical models. This has been contrasted with a description of composing as something more personal, something less reducible. To throw further light upon these contrasting approaches, some of the ideas found in 'Être et Avoir' by French existential philosopher Marcel may be helpful:

> It is a proper characteristic of problems … to be reduced to detail. Mystery, on the other hand, is something which cannot be reduced to detail. (Marcel, 1949, p. 101)

Whilst composing stands in the curriculum as a separate skill with generic assessment objectives it may be expedient to build a curriculum 'on the understanding of composing as problem solving' (Berkley, 2004, p. 258) and to see composing:

> As a process where students come to understand that the total composing problem comprises interrelated interim problems with multiple potential answers which require them to combine systematic application of designated knowledge of compositional technique with more rhapsodic and opportunistic creativity. (Berkley, 2004, p. 257)

Although, and perhaps because, this conclusion was reached as a result of extensive research into the teaching of composition at GCSE (the course usually examined at the end of Year 11) and was supported by a prodigious array of pedagogical literature, it seems that certain assumptions, central to the exam board approach, are accepted without question:

> Students must comply with the rules of the musical style in which they are operating in order to be successful. (Berkley, 2004, p. 240)

And that:

> Placing composing competencies which transcend styles and genres at the heart of the composing curriculum provides a framework for developing rationales and methodologies for assessment and pedagogy in composing. (Berkley, 2004, p. 258)

This is not to say that my practice does not involve this kind of teaching. It does. I do, however, try to counteract this by paying attention to the more 'poetic', 'rhapsodic' or 'mysterious'.

> A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is therefore before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety. It is as though in this province the distinction between *in me* and *before me* loses its meaning. (Marcel, 1949, p. 100)

The idea of mystery, as a way of conceptualising composing, is helpful. Its emphasis is not upon the final product but on the process; the coming to know through being deeply involved. The motivation for the writing comes from within and so the arbiter of correctness is the composer. This is not to say that composing becomes impossible to teach and that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

students should not be given technical exercises, general analysis and practical advice. It does, however, suggest a collaborative approach in which the teacher helps the student to find a way of composing in which they can be thoughtful about more than just style and technique. Teachers can encourage students to find composition tasks in which they merge their developing technical skills with the discovery of personal meanings; what Bob Dylan described for him as 'making sense of how we're living'.

Three examples from the classroom

A-level students have to compose individual responses to set briefs. The briefs do not state which style to choose but are specific in other respects. This year's briefs include programmatic storm music and a goodbye song. Here, the challenge to the students to compose something in which they might find personal meaning can be hard to meet because the briefs may not immediately appear to be a suitable vehicle. What follows are three stories that illustrate how searching for personal meanings have helped students in my school (students' names have been changed).

Some stories of engagement – finding and creating meanings

Ruth

Ruth was an A2 (second year of A-level) student studying Music, English Literature and Philosophy and Ethics. She was a flautist and enjoyed singing in the school choir. She was an experienced and talented dancer with an interest in contemporary dance and ballet. She was not a pianist and didn't feel confident with traditional harmony. She chose a brief in which the students were asked to compose a piece of dance music called 'Spanish Isle'. Perhaps the most likely style choices would be a club dance anthem as might be played in Ibiza, a tango or some other traditional Spanish dance. Ruth was not interested in creating instrumental music nor was she interested in creating a tango or club dance pastiche.

In the previous year she had started to listen to choral music from Estonia and loved it. She particularly liked the music of Rautavaara. Ruth decided to compose a choral piece for eight-part choir setting a poem, in Spanish, by Lorca called 'The Song of The Barren Orange Tree'. When approaching this composition she was particularly interested in a piece that had a partially dissonant harmonic language, a modal feel and a dark and urgent quality. We discussed the meaning and the feeling of the poem that she had chosen. Ruth's desire to make the music meaningful was a driving force. Her interpretation of the poem became richer as she worked with it and her music became powerful, vulnerable and sensitive.

Woodcutter.
Cut out my shadow
Free me from the torture
of seeing myself fruitless.

Why was I born among mirrors?
The daylight revolves around me.
And the night herself repeats me
in all her constellations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I want to live not seeing self.
I shall dream the husks and insects
change inside my dreaming
into my birds and foliage.

Woodcutter.
Cut out my shadow.
Free me from the torture
of seeing myself fruitless.

We listened to the piece that had caught her attention and worked out how to play bits of it. We talked about what she liked about it and, in trying to play it, we worked out how it was based on the use of just a few motifs. There were various points at which hurdles were reached and Ruth would have interesting questions about what she wanted to do next. She had a strong sense of what she wanted the music to do, but sometimes needed advice or some other music to listen to (Portuguese Fado for example). She composed mostly with her voice and then auditioned the combined sounds using notation software. She associated certain words with motifs and had some specific chords in mind for particular places (e.g. she had a 'dreaming' chord) but mostly her harmony arose from her melodic lines. When she found that this did not serve her purposes, she looked at Spanish guitar music and considered the types of chord that might be useful. The Estonian pieces represented a musical world that she wanted to inhabit in some way, not through aping them but by being alongside them. Her composition involved problem-solving but, to me, the whole seemed wrapped in a mystery. She was caught up in it. Caught up in a sound world which had its roots in the music of Estonian choral composers, in a poem which had depths to explore and in a process in which she was able to navigate, be guided along and be carried away by. What helped Ruth was her insistence upon making her composing time meaningful and rich.

Happy to say goodbye

The uplifting goodbye song that one of my AS students is currently working on may well come from a similar insistence. He is using multi-track recording to build his ideas and is a multi-instrumentalist. He started one song, which sounded fine, but he soon got stuck; he didn't have anywhere to go with it. It was not so much that he didn't know about structural devices so much that he didn't know where he wanted it to go or what he wanted it to say. I showed him how he could listen to music that he liked and use his guitar skills and his voice to think about what was going on and how it did have somewhere to go. I did this to show him techniques that he might use but mostly to try to encourage him to connect, through his enjoyment of playing and his real interest in the music, to something which he knows in his guitar-playing fingers, in his tapping feet and in his experienced band and choral voice. We worked on one together and with genuine enthusiasm from both of us; as the research into informal learning tells, recordings can be great teachers. He did one by himself. A short time later, he started a new track, one that 'had legs' and soon found its way to the end. This, he tells me, is much more 'him'. He is now in the process of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fine-tuning his piece. It is a goodbye song but it's optimistic and forward-looking, like he is. He turned his composing time into time to explore a kind of music that he loves and time to play with guitars and harmonies.

Helping students who are experiencing problems

Some students don't get going for a long time. They may start experimenting with some ideas and then stagnate. I teach a talented violinist who has found that composing a second section to his 'storm music' has not come easily. Recently I saw him playing (quietly to himself from memory) some unaccompanied Bach. Maybe he was playing it for reassurance or perhaps for fun, or just because that's the kind of thing that he does, but for whatever reason he played it, he was being himself and he looked relaxed. It is full of arpeggios played in various ways; it's rather grand and impressive-sounding. Because it is based on arpeggios, it is quite easy to see that it uses fairly straightforward chords at the start. We talked about feeling great when playing virtuosic violin and about the various ways that we practice scales and arpeggios. We were also able to do a very quick session on basic functional harmony and to have a go at remembering as much of the storm in Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' as we could. We found that this too was all about scales and pedals and a similar straightforward harmonic language.

He went to a practice room promising me that he would not write anything that did not feel great to play. Shortly afterwards, he was already exploring some good ideas, looking much happier, and telling me what the cello would be doing. I am looking forward to finding out what happens next.

Summary and final thoughts

I find the problem and mystery metaphors helpful. It helps me to respond to the concern that teachers should know why they are teaching composition and why they choose the methods that they do. It helps me to think about why I would not privilege an efficient approach whereby all students may, for example, all do the same tasks above a more individual approach. It reminds me that composing offers us the chance to be and to explore ourselves and those compositions can be places in which we can both lose and find ourselves. I want students to become involved in their compositions. The compositions may well present many mini-problems but, rather than being about the mark scheme, I want the problems to be about something inherent in the student's experience of composing music that is meaningful to them and is about their 'being in the world' in which there is human interest and not a little mystery.

References

BERKLEY, R (2004) Teaching composing as creative problem solving: conceptualizing composing pedagogy. *British Journal of Music Education*, **21**, 239–263.

DYLAN, B. (2005) *Chronicles: Volume One*. 2nd Edition. London: Pocket Books.

Edexcel (2011) *Specification GCE Music*. London: Pearson.

HENTOFF, N. (1963) *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* [Record liner notes]. New York: Columbia Records.

MARCEL, G. (1949) *Being and Having*. London and Glasgow: Dacre Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051712000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press