

THINKING ABOUT COMPOSITION....

Listen and question – learning and ‘catching’ how to compose doesn’t always mean working on composition directly. Learn by listening to the work of others; question how they have achieved certain effects and investigate the techniques they have used. Become curious as to how these techniques ‘work’.

Less is more – ‘less is more’ has become my compositional mantra over the past few years. ‘Less is more’ means to keep things simple. As Einsteinⁱ said (or is at least paraphrased): “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Write economically – to write economically is to observe ‘less is more’. Well composed music is often economical – it does not contain things that do not need to be there or contribute to the piece as a whole. Why drive big truck when a Mini will do the same job?

Grow organically – music should grow from one or more seminal ideas. These ideas should grow with the narrative in mind and can be rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, textural... This idea should be developed as so it becomes foundational and identifiable to the work. Don’t rush the idea – let it evolve.

Weave a narrative – a composition often tells a story. It should have a narrative that you can follow. I often find this is lacking in many compositions as ideas are developed too fast, or not at all... The music should have an element of story to it – make sure it takes the listener on a journey. Like the narrative of a story, musical narrative may be interleaved with other themes, augmented, juxtaposed...

Don’t forget space – again piggybacking on the notion of ‘less is more’, rests or ‘space’ (durationally and vertically/structurally) in the music can provide tension and suspense just as effectively as sound can. Often the most intense parts of horror films are the moments of silence (of course, this tension is greatly conjured up by the preceding music).

Don’t treat some of the music elements as an afterthought – expressive devices such as dynamics, accents and articulation can drastically influence a melody and should be considered at the same time as more foundational musical elements. Expressive devices exist for musical reasons; they are not aftermarket parts to ‘dress up’ an idea.

Don’t ‘bricklay’ – composition is a non-linear process – get your ideas down, reflect, ‘play’ with them, reflect again... You almost never get it right the first time. Don’t cement ideas in – be flexible, willing to adapt and change ideas, throw things away...

ⁱ Various sources suggest that this quotation is a simplified version of: “It can scarcely be denied that the supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience.” This sentence may be the origin of the much-quoted sentence that “everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler,” and its variants. Interestingly, in 1950, *The New York Times* published an article by the composer Roger Sessions entitled “How a ‘Difficult’ Composer Gets That Way”, and it included a version of the saying attributed to Einstein: “I also remember a remark of Albert Einstein, which certainly applies to music. He said, in effect, that everything should be as simple as it can be but not simpler!”