

Composing and Interpreting Music

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*(Draft 3.7 - January 15, 2010
Musical examples not included)*

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Preface

The simplest way to describe this book is to say that I have tried to put into it the main things I wish someone had told me when I was starting to compose music. The book has been written primarily to help would-be composers and improvisers develop in their art. I have given the book the title “*Composing and Interpreting Music*” because there is more to the process of producing music than putting notes on paper or the electronic equivalent thereof. For the process of creating a musical composition to be complete the written notes have to be *performed*. Performance, even if it is purely mechanical, involves *interpretation*. The composer thus needs to understand interpretation. This is particularly important if the performance is to be on a computer because the person giving the instructions to the computer is doing the interpretation. When there are live performers realizing music there is always a partnership between them and the composer, even when the composer has been dead for centuries. For a partnership to work, both parties have, ideally, to understand or anticipate each other’s intentions. Performance issues are thus relevant to the composer, and understanding the principles of composing music is highly relevant to performers too. I believe furthermore that understanding the principles involved and being able to communicate them to students will greatly help those involved in teaching both music theory and performance.

This book is not meant to teach a composer or performer basic music theory, counterpoint, figured bass, harmony, musical form, and orchestration, all of which should be part of the education of a composer. Instead, I attempt to give here in what I consider to be the important general foundational musical principles behind these subjects; principles which are not taught generally in standard text books. My goal is to make readily available, in as consistent and obvious a way as possible, an explanation of what I believe are the underlying principles of music that a composer should know.

Because I am attempting to cover many areas, the discussion of each topic is necessarily brief in many cases. I have not gone in detail into theoretical controversies, nor do I expect a great knowledge of music theory. Much of what I say should be accessible to a reader with no musical training at all, but in most places I do assume that he or she has at least a modest familiarity with some of the basics of music. Should a reader encounter unfamiliar musical terms, my hope is that he or she will be inspired to learn more about music. The serious would-be composer certainly needs to thoroughly study basic music theory, counterpoint, figured bass, harmony, musical form, and orchestration, and I give some comments on studying these subjects.

My discussion of the reasons, or possible reasons, behind the various musical principles often leads into realms of philosophy, physics, psychology, and physiology, I have included such discussion because I think that a musician, and particularly a student, is more likely to understand the importance of the principles enunciated and to put them into practice if he or she sees the underlying reasons for them.

This is not meant to be a book about what is nowadays popularly called “classical music” (*i.e.*, music in the western art music tradition). I believe that all music has the same underlying principles. What I have written should be of equal interest to the rock musician, the folk musician, the jazz musician, and musicians in any culture. The vast majority of the musical examples, however, are from the so-called “common practice” period of western art music (*i.e.*, what is currently popularly called “classical music”). This is in a large part due to my own musical background and interests, but also, to some extent, because of copyright issues. However, I make no apology for the choice of examples since, as popular musicians have discovered on many occasions, the great works of the western musical art have a lot to offer the popular musician. The harmonic language of most popular music, for example, is firmly rooted in that of the common practice period.

January 15, 2010

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