

(Handout)

Including Composition in Your Studio
Teaching Composition with Lillian Reichert, 11/02/13

Why teach composition to your students?

So they will gain a deeper understanding of these concepts:

- Form of a piece
- Themes and their development
- Chord progressions
- Articulation, texture, dynamics, rhythm, & voicing
- Characteristics of different styles
- Rhythm and Note-reading

Ideas for compositions

You can tap into your students' imagination and inspiration to characterize an idea.

- A Character piece: briefly portrays the "character" of a person, idea, situation, or emotion. It is usually sectional (AB). Possible topics include:
 1. Animals or people
 2. Events (circus, sports, trips, popcorn popping)
 3. Nature (rain, mountains, clouds, sunset)
 4. A story (running a race, exploring a forest, returning triumphantly)
 5. A feeling or emotion (happy, sad, excited, contemplative)

Choose from a variety of forms:

- Binary, such as a Minuet (AB)
- Sonata form, such as a Sonatina (Exposition, Development, Recapitulation)
- Theme & Variations (change key, time signature, rhythm, clef)
- Rondo Form (ABACA)
- Impressionist (structured around masses of sound, musical imagery)
- 12-bar blues (I-I-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-IV-I-I)
- Free form, such as a Fantasy (full of abrupt changes and unexpected events)

Developing a melodic idea (Example: *Fox on a Trot*)

Here are some options for developing a melodic idea:

- 1) Make a sequence of three, up or down
- 2) Invert it (turn it upside down)
- 3) Make it shorter (diminution)
- 4) Make it longer (augmentation)
- 5) Turn it backwards (retrograde)
- 6) Change keys (could be major/minor)
- 7) Turn it into theme and variations (change key, time signature, rhythm, clef)
- 8) Add common accompaniment figures in LH, such as Alberti bass, blocked, or broken chords
- 9) Create a second theme
- 10) Place the two themes on top of each other (could be polytonal)
- 11) Use imitation
- 12) Use the same melody, but change the harmony

- 13) Add pedal point (same bass note under changing harmonies), or use an ostinato bass
- 14) Change the character through different articulation, time signature, texture, dynamics, or pedaling
- 15) Change harmonic rhythm (rate at which harmonies change)
- 16) Explore harmonies other than the common primary chords, such as extended harmonies (7ths, 9ths, 11th, & 13ths), quartal (fourths) or quintal (fifths) harmonies, chromatic mediants (lowered III or VI triad), Neopolitan 6ths, tertian pivot, suspensions (9-8, 7-6, or 4-3); bitonal or atonal; modal, pentatonic, or whole tone scales
- 17) Put melody an octave higher or lower, or put melody in LH
- 18) Change the texture, thicker or thinner (more or fewer notes at a time)
- 19) Use special pedal effects
- 20) Vary or develop the rhythms (2-against-3, accelerando, syncopation)
- 21) Use a scale for a long line—it could even be a chromatic scale.

Ways to include composition in your studio

- Use composition as a topic in one of your group classes as a springboard.
- Do a Unit Study: spend 10 minutes a lesson on composition for 6-12 weeks. (Follow the guidelines given in Carol Klose's book.)
- Offer a summer camp: 5 mornings of composing with your students. Include group and individual activities. (Combine with another teacher.)
- Showcase your students' compositions at a recital. One option is to feature period styles (Minuet, Sonatina) in conjunction with Music History.
- Enter your students' compositions in competitions!

MTNA Composition Competition

- Timeline: Early September Entry, online, cost ranges \$50 to \$100.
- Guidelines: <http://mtna.org/programs/competitions/composition-guidelines/>
- Components judged: rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, notation, & form.

Other Composition Competitions

- Carol Klose Hal Leonard: March 1 Entry, online, free. <http://haleonard.com/klosecompetition/>
- National Guild of Piano Teachers: November 8 Entry, via mail, cost ranges \$18 to \$36. http://pianoguild.com/page/nztq/Composition_Contest.html

Recommended Supplies

- Staff paper with ten staves per page
- Transparent 6-inch & 12-inch rulers
- *Piano Teacher's Guide to Creative Composition*, by Carol Klose, \$9.99, a step-by-step process of how to teach composition in your studio in short, ten-minute segments.
- *Essential Dictionary of Music Notation*, by Alfred Publications, about \$6.00

COMPOSITION CONTEST CHECK LIST

STAFF PAPER

1. Are the staff lines large enough for writing clean, clear notes?
2. Is there enough space between the staves for dynamic marks, leger line notes, or words?
3. Is there space between the Grand Staff's for the pedal marks, etc.?

TITLE

1. Does the title fit the music?
2. Is it clearly understandable? (Ex.: If in a foreign language, please translate. For a title like "Arabian", add another word. Is it an Arabian Horse or an Arabian Dance? It would make a difference.)

FORM

1. Is the form of the piece clearly marked (ABA, etc.)?
2. Does it make sense? (Ex.: Are phrases in even groups of measures, particularly at the elementary level?)
3. Is there any variety or contrast in the different sections?

NUMBERING MEASURES

1. Are the measures numbered?
2. Are they numbered only above the first measure of each staff?
3. Are the numbers in a small square or circle?
4. Are they placed over the upper staff to the left of the bar line?
5. Are any measures with pick up notes numbered? (They should not be.)

NOTATION

1. Are the clef signs accurately and neatly drawn?
2. Is the time signature in the first measure only? (Unless it changes during the piece.)
3. Is the key signature BEFORE the time signature in the first measure and also at the beginning of each line?
4. Are notes clear, legible and neatly spaced?
5. Are notes of a consistent size, drawn clearly on the correct line or space?
6. Is the stem placement correct (up or down)?
7. Are the bar lines and note stems straight? (Use a ruler.)
8. Are the notes aligned properly? (Notes to be played together.)
9. Is the rhythm correct? Correct number of counts in each measure?
10. Are the rests used when needed? Are half and whole rests written on the correct line of the staff without an added written line?
11. Are the repeats, D.C.'s, and D.S.'s clear and properly indicated?
12. Is the final bar line a double bar (heavy line)?
13. Is there a copyright symbol, year, and student's name, bottom of 1st page?

EXPRESSION

1. Are there dynamic and expression signs?
2. Are the softs (p) and louds (f) written in cursive and not printed? (F, P)
3. Are there slurs and phrase marks?
4. Are there pedal indications, if needed?