

## **How the Great Composers Taught Themselves: 11 Steps to Follow**

**A**t Alexander Publishing we have a unique basis for how we view music education at the compositional level. This basis is an ongoing study I've been doing since I was a junior at the Berklee College of Music working towards my Bachelor of Science Degree in Music Composition. The study is based on a question that came to me while studying one day in the Brookline Public Library.

*How did the great composers teach themselves?*

I've been studying and answering this question for 30 years. Out of this question, which I originally asked to better myself as a working composer, has come not a book, but entire music curriculum for harmony, counterpoint, advanced composition, and orchestration.

### **How I Determined How the Great Composers Taught Themselves**

To answer my question of how the great composers taught themselves, I read dozens of composer's biographies and took notes. Later, when I moved to work in Los Angeles, I continued my research by interviewing composers and orchestrators in the film scoring community to discover how they learned. I still continue interviewing composers to stay up to date.

What I discovered is that over a period of 281 years, the answers to this question have remained remarkably consistent.

Here's the big picture. The path to what in academia is commonly called commercial success, is the same as in any field of endeavor.

And the path is this: find people who are successful in what they do, learn from them, and where possible, imitate them. In other words, walk in their footsteps. When we look at successful composers over a 200+ year period, I discovered 11 steps to follow. From this, we built the Alexander Publishing curriculum.

### **#1) Successful Composers Seek Mentors.**

The Encarta World Dictionary says that a mentor is someone who's usually older and more experienced, who provides advice and support to, and watches over and fosters the progress of, a younger, less experienced person.

I've found two kinds of mentors in music. One mentor is the composer who can also teach who goes beyond the class or the private lesson and invests something of himself in a talented student. The second mentor is the composer/teacher who takes his experiences and mentors through a printed document. Both have one thing in common: their ability to be a coach and whether in person or in print, to encourage the reader/student to push themselves and keep at it.

Those composer/teachers who mentor through the written word have in common the ability to foster instructional progress in print by teaching through practical,

methodical procedural steps that build the learner at multiple levels to a clearly defined end result: creative competency.

This is a critical point. A successful training document in or out of music connects the dots, so to speak, so that the reader/student understands how to use and apply the concepts. It's not exercises (homework!) for the sake of the exercise/homework, but an exercise that leads to a practical, usable application. Johann Joseph Fux was a master at this. In our new translation and musical engraving of the complete *Gradus ad Parnassus* from the 1745 Mizler edition, look at the first page of examples in Species 1 counterpoint and turn to the back of the book with the final compositional examples and here you'll see a journey. Once glance at the progression of musical examples in the back of the book and the student knows, to use today's vernacular, that the book is going to take him someplace.

For example, consider the two-voice progression from one on one to florid. Each is a musical technique in its own right. But by the time the student reaches the florid stage, and depending on how he's taught, the student has the requisite skill to compose or improvise on the spot in any mode. When that's expanded to the more standard song forms of today (verse chorus and AABA), students are on their way to becoming effective improvisers (regardless of music style) and developers of thematic material. But it has to be applied outside of the exercise to achieve that result.

## **#2) Successful Composers Learn to Teach Themselves.**

Of all the findings, this is the most critical. Students must learn how, in each aspect of music, to figure things out and teach themselves. Those who want to succeed don't just desire it, they thirst for it. They hunger for it. They're passionate for it. If their educational experience is too pedantic, as it was at times for the young, shoulder-length haired Maurice Ravel, they get bored and their achievement suffers. In this regard, successful composers don't looking for historical rules. They're looking for principles to be applied and expanded upon. They have the eye for it and most certainly the ear. They're self-directed. Some call this being a sponge for learning. Others call this having an inquisitive nature. In our *Professional Orchestration* series, for example, we teach the *8 Keys For Learning Professional Orchestration* so that the student has tools to learn so he can teach himself.

## **#3) Successful Composers Can Focus and Study for Long Periods.**

Successful composers don't have short attention spans. They have the ability to take a piece of music, from a piano piece to a full orchestration, and literally immerse themselves in it for hours and days at a time. No teacher can impart that to his or her students. The ability to sit and focus for long periods of time is either there or it isn't. It can be developed, but the learner has to be the one bringing it to the table.

In teaching today, and with the group of students arriving tomorrow, I fear we have a serious problem on our hands with low attention spans and high rates of ADD. With music demanding focus and attention, some students may need help in developing this skill. If not already, this will become a major challenge for collegiate music departments.

#### **#4) Successful Composers Prefer to Study at a Desk.**

This is an odd finding, but not when you realize from the Learning Styles Inventory that students have specific positions they study best in. For example, some students prefer to study at a desk, while others prefer to sit on the floor. There are established patterns and the one most used by successful composers is using a desk. In his office/studio, songwriter and film composer Henry Mancini had a piano and a desk in an L-formation. With the upright piano against the wall, his writing desk, at a 90-degree angle, was to the immediate right. Go into the studios of film composers who read and write music, and you'll find a similar setup.

#### **#5) Successful Composers Read Music and Study Scores.**

Go into the study area of successful composers and you'll find several shelves filled with study scores. Above being a source of technique and general instruction, study scores also represent problem/solution approaches to scoring issues a composer may be dealing with for a particular work. Starting with *How Ravel Orchestrated: Mother Goose Suite*, Alexander Publishing is now developing a line of study scores with the original Piano part at the bottom of the page.

#### **#6) Successful Composers Listen to Other Composers.**

Successful composers listen to other composers and other schools of writing. They don't just listen to film scores and a select group of favorite composers. They learn from these schools of writing by pulling out the best of those styles and applying it in their own music. In effect, a successful composer develops a liberal arts degree in listening. Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber talked about this once when he described how his father, a church musician, had their family listening to all styles of music with the understanding that as long as it was good, it was OK.

There's also a social experience with this. Up until the invention of the phonograph, composers heard the works of other composers by going to concerts and even attending church services. So listening was also a social, companionable event. In other cases, composers formed support groups to listen to and critique their compositions. You can see this with the Russian Five, Les Apaches and Les Six.

To support this success step, Alexander Publishing now provides to readers of the Professional Orchestration series a one-year renewable subscription to the Naxos Music Library that has over 150,000 streaming audio tracks available. With more than 700 composers represented from all styles (from Baroque to Film Scoring), required play lists can be created, thus giving the student broad exposure and an opportunity with WiFi connections to listen and learn anywhere.

In talking with many instructors, providing the Naxos Music Library solves the problem of students not having aural experience with the literature. I understand that, because I was one of those students. At Berklee, I knew the Woody Herman and Stan Kenton literature like the back of my hand. Ralph Vaughan Williams? *Who's he?* It wasn't until I realized I wanted to write dramatic music for the stage and movies that I even considered looking at classical. For me, jazz was my life. What I quickly learned on the street is that there's more to life than jazz, and if I was going to score for movies, I needed to expand my horizons, *significantly*.

### **#7) Successful composers read.**

Successful composers read poetry, plays, and books from which they adapt, create, and produce new musical works. They also look at paintings and photographs. This means successful composers are proactive in seeking out properties to develop that can be performed, and today recorded, with their music.

Even with the demands of music school, we need to be encouraging reading. Compositional assignments can be rooted in scoring a poem, a Psalm, a short story by O. Henry, etc. With today's students, I too often find that reading is for an English assignment and not for life. As vast as the Internet is, we still can't curl up with our monitors and read *Hornblower* or Barbara Tuchman, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Blake, Shelley, and so on. This is something that music instruction can encourage.

### **#8) Successful composers adapt technology to teach themselves and earn a living.**

There are two notable breakthroughs in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: records, and what is commonly termed the MIDI mock-up.

First, recordings. Not having the scores to study what Duke Ellington, or Count Basie or others wrote, arrangers and composers who wanted to learn did what they called take-downs. Here, they would sit for hours at the piano with the old victrolas, and would write down arrangements including the inner harmonies. That's how they learned song form, arranging techniques, voicings, and practical ear training.

The next great technological adaptation is what we call in professional circles, the MIDI Mock-up.

Here, with score in hand, composers key in a score line-by-line and learn how to edit and record it to build both their composition and recording skills. MIDI mock-ups represent a demanding hands-on experience where the learner must be able to make sampled instruments sound live. To do this successfully, both score and audio recording must be available so the composer can compare his efforts to the recorded result.

With this, successful composers learn to adapt technology to create income. Who championed the 88-note pianoforte by writing for it and performing on it? Beethoven. Until then, most keyboard music was written for a five-octave keyboard running F to F. Who championed the well-tempered system and wrote for it? Bach. After that came the performance instruction methods. When valve trumpets and French horns came into existence, composers wrote for them, and publishers put out instruction methods for them.

Here is a common path:

- New instrument or technology introduced
- Famous musician and/or composer champions it
- Begins performing on it/writing for it
- Public interest initiated/sales climb
- Publishers create pedagogy for the instrument along with other written works

With the new music technology, this traditional path is altered because circuits, software and operating systems are constantly in flux, whereas a piano is still a piano.

With MIDI, a performance change came for working composers. Using synths and samplers, a composer can produce and record himself. Once the recording is done, the composer is now, technically, a recording artist. With synths, and particularly samplers, composers are now guaranteed a performance of their work and can now market it directly to a mass audience. Instrumentalists and vocalists who have no ensembles to support their talent, with the right equipment, can create their own backing tracks and arrangements and, like the composer, can also be guaranteed a performance of their work. But to do this, learning to record is essential. But, because of the new technology, they have unlimited opportunities to produce themselves and be heard, whether they've been to music school or not.

Interestingly enough, while composers "on the street" have adapted the new technology, academia has been slow to move on it. However, some change is coming since now both Finale and Sibelius contain players with orchestral samples so that students can get some idea of what their compositions sound like.

In 2005, Alexander Publishing became the first music textbook publishing company to co-produce and bring to market a complete sample library orchestral program. Called the Modern Symphonic Orchestra, this package we created for E-MU Systems of Scotts Valley, California, comes with a full orchestral sample library, professional audio card with audio and MIDI connections, and all the software needed for music notation, music production, and burning the recording to CD. This is a value priced package for both individuals and schools.

### **#9) Successful Composers Have Keyboard Skills**

Successful composers have keyboard skills. They don't have to be at a concert pianists level (Berlioz was a guitarist), but in general it has to be at a level that pros describe as "arranger's chops." When you translate this into pedagogy, that works out to be Grade Level II Performance.

### **#10) Successful Composers Are Driven to Be the Best**

There's no way around it. Successful composers have a high performance rate and are driven to excel. As Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* expresses it in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, the successful types that companies want to attract are, "productively neurotic, those who are *self*-motivated and *self*-disciplined, those who wake up every day, compulsively driven to do the best they can simply because it is part of their DNA." This describes professional composers to a "T." This is a major reason why Alexander Publishing texts are not written in a traditional academic tone. Writing tone and material organization supports those internally driven to succeed.

### **#11) Successful Composers TCB – They Take Care of Business**

This is the least formed of all the habits, but in general, those successful composers who also enjoyed longevity learned to manage money, and in many cases supported their entrepreneurial world of composing by teaching at the collegiate level. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, today's composer must keep up with copyrights, licensing, publishing, recording and other areas that can create long term financial cash streams.

And this is one place where we must go beyond music history and be completely candid with students in explaining that on graduation, they're entrepreneurs running their own business which includes writing, publishing, booking gigs, and understanding the ever changing world of intellectual property rights. One day in his studio, Henry Mancini said it all when off the cuff he turned and said to me, "Always remember, Peter, you're not *in* the music business, you *are* a music business."

We support this critical training point through our online journal, [www.soniccontrol.com](http://www.soniccontrol.com) where we feature weekly coverage of the Sonic Control MusicTech 22, those stocks which affect everything in music from education to film scoring and beyond. With change happening so rapidly, only an online journal can keep up. Of all the music textbook publishers, only Alexander Publishing has an industry dedicated online journal.

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