

Advice to Young Composers

Introduction:

Many Australian composers are intensely involved not only in writing their own music, but also in imparting knowledge and strategies for composition to students through teaching. There are so many composers doing this, and yet to the best of my knowledge, there hasn't ever been a straightforward document outlining the gems of wisdom we so regularly impart to our students. Dimitrios Markatos has compiled Johannes Brahms' advice on musical composition (<http://members.aol.com/dmarko1/brahms/composition.htm>) and reading this lead me to wonder about what advice contemporary Australian composers and educators would give over a century later.

The differences and similarities between each of the Australian composers who have responded to this topic are fascinating. It is hoped this this document may provide student composers with both inspirational and practical advice, as well as starting points for discussion. Student composers are at the start of what may be a very long musical journey, and if any of these ideas can shed insight on the process, then these very generous contributions by these composers/educators have been more than worthwhile.

Matthew Hindson
9 September 2007

Matthew Hindson

It is most important to keep an open mind across a broad range of areas, from musical taste right through to career options. We are lucky these days in that there is a panoply of musical styles, genres, practices etc. available for easy consumption. There is no longer any anointed canon of musical masterworks (as if there ever was), and the online age renders the discovery of musical material extremely easy. You will never know when a particular piece of music may provide stimulus and inspiration for the rest of your compositional life. Hence, why shut yourself off from the body of magnificent work already completed by generations of composers before you, no matter what the genre or period from which it originates?

This is not to say that all types of music are necessarily going to be useful for study and/or emulation on every occasion. However I would like to think that careful consideration of just about any piece can reveal at least one interesting musical point, even if it's what NOT to do! Also, consider that whether you like or dislike a piece or even entire genre of music is not so important - it is much more important to consider WHY you have this reaction: what is it about the music or musical expression that evokes this reaction.

In their early stages, composers should aim to be 'crazy-brave', i.e. make very strong musical statements, deliberately embracing extremes of expression to ensure a strong sense of personality emerges from

their musical content. It is not really expected that composers will immediately have found an individual voice. However, having the guts to look for one will certainly help.

Acquisition of compositional technique is also extremely important. This may include, for example, a thorough study of orchestration so that ideas can be expressed very clearly in an ensemble context. Compositional technique will develop through practice, even through pastiche exercises. I make a point, for example, to try and incorporate at least one previously-unused musical technique in every new piece I write, whether it be a one-page composition etude or an entire concerto. This ensures that my own technical range is continually developing, and also I am becoming more skilled in a greater number of areas.

Combined with all of this is a sense of musical intelligence that will develop through time. Being a performer in ensembles such as orchestras, choirs or even chamber groups devoted to performing music of your peers will help you to learn more about music and to better understand the nexus between performance and composition. As many live concerts of music should be attended as possible, incorporating a stylistic eclecticism.

My final piece of advice is that it is through the performance process of your music - i.e. workshopping, rehearsing, presentation, selection, revision - that you will learn the most about what works and what doesn't. There is no point in writing a piece that no-one will hear - you are communicating to no-one.

23 July 2007

Anne Boyd

There are few things more satisfying than composing one's own music - but material success is rare so don't give up your day job. I believed John Cage when he told me 40 years ago that in the future he hoped everyone would be a composer! It's a fascinating journey that seems to go through three stages:

- (i) finding 'A voice' (this involves a lot of imitation, experimentation, trying out new things or trying out old things in new ways);
- (ii) finding 'MY voice' (individual expression - learning to create the sounds/using techniques and developing a personal musical language that is you constructing you OWN musical identity - WHO you are - WHY you are - WHERE you are);
- (iii) finding 'THE voice' - this is a possible last stage where you seem to tap into a kind of musical unconscious that belongs to all humanity and transcends TIME and PLACE - the VOICE of GOD perhaps. Maybe we don't all complete this journey and it is possible to get stuck in the first phase. Doesn't matter - it's all FUN and worthwhile.

Next - music only becomes music when it is created or performed. Composition is the human construction of sound(s) and it is essentially a social art - a triangulated process that involves composer - performer - audience. Take any one of those elements away and you're not really composing. Music MUST be heard - don't write music that you think might never be performed. To do this is the ultimate wanking ('sorry' but

at my age I can be rude!) On the other hand, take risks! My daughter used to have a poster on her bedroom wall: "If you are not living on the edge you are talking up too much space!" I think this should be a mantra for all composers. I can't honestly see much point in writing the same old stuff (which I or others have written before). Musical creative activity should extend the imagination. Have the courage of your convictions - BUT never lose sight of the imperative of performance. I used to imagine myself not only into my performers but into the instruments I am writing for - I try to BECOME the instrument itself - find its soul in its sound. Hence, most of my music is composed for people and instruments I know.

It's a fantastically interesting world - and as a composer EVERYTHING you experience has the potential to become music. So LIVE and LOVE with sensitivity, depth and every fibre of your being.

Don't chase SUCCESS let SUCCESS chase you. And accept that that will mean something different to everyone. To me it means simply writing as well as I can - when someone tells me they've enjoyed something I've written that's a wonderful bonus.

25 July 2007

Stuart Greenbaum

I think it is important to seek out music (live, recorded, written etc.) which you have not experienced before. Ideally, this is a life-long interest not just a stage. Along with a preparedness to experience new sounds, a student composer needs to be able to identify what is most exciting or engaging for them. Having an open mind is a pre-requisite, but so too is being discerning. And with this comes the responsibility of analysis. This does not have to be traditional or prescriptive analysis; but in order to be able to understand a great piece of music, or chord progression, a rhythmic syncopation or a sonic transformation, you need to be able to de-construct it. To see how it is made. The audience does not have to do this but a composer should. If you can learn how to replicate something that makes you feel musically alive, this is a great skill. It is not the starting point for a composition - that is a separate act, but it is general nourishment for compositional technique.

As to the actual process of composition, this requires unfettered concentration and something of a leap of faith. Analysis has its place but composition requires more than just good ideas and sound technique - it also requires free-wheeling abandon. Hopefully the intellect coupled with our emotional sensibilities forges something that is more than the sum of its parts. Something that somehow reveals something about ourselves, our society and the world we live in - regardless of whether the music is programmatic or abstract. Composition is often exciting but also often frustrating. Either way, I don't think it is ever straightforward.

Don't bother trying to find a style or genre. Just seek the music that you find most compelling and you will give yourself the best chance of sounding like yourself. Don't let anyone tell you that you need to get a 'real' job (although you probably will need to...). Music is a wonderful gift and the opportunity to contribute positively to the manner in which we as a society express ourselves sonically is of the highest calling. Good luck!

25 July 2007

Colin Spiers

Young composers should be aware that their studies should be geared towards one ultimate goal that is inextricably bound up with mankind's reason for making art in the first place, which is the desire to communicate on a deeper level than (say) the imparting of knowledge in a lecture or textbook, or swapping pleasantries in a casual conversation. Music, being the most abstract of the various art forms, does not have the ability to do this specifically, but the fact that various combinations of sounds have the capacity to affect the emotions directly is a type of communication that is both mysterious and very precious, and is the main reason people persist in creating it.

The 'something' that one might want to say as a composer could be quite specific (one's reaction to a personal incident) or general (an expression of an emotional state), but, in the end, the music one writes must be born from the desire to communicate this *something*, otherwise there is no point in doing it. (Some of you might now be asking, "how can music communicate anything at all if it is abstract?" The response to this is simple: it need not communicate the same thing that the composer had in mind, but if he or she had nothing to say in the first place, one can be assured that this music will have little or no meaning for the listener.)

It must be remembered that the acquisition of technique serves only the aim of maximising communication, and thus, while essential, is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end (in this case the creation of a personal 'statement' that says something about the composer). This process is built on the experience of life, and while this may sound corny, nevertheless needs to be said, because it is easy to forget this and view musical creation as some form of game involving mere note manipulation.

Writing great (and even good) music is thus a very difficult task and is the reason why the path to finding one's 'voice' as a composer is an unending, evolving process. As student composers you stand at the very beginning of a journey that will take you in unexpected directions, which is why - if you are committed to the task - you will become addicted to this strange practice of manipulating sounds. In the end, musical creation is addictive, so embrace it wholeheartedly, enjoy it, be challenged by it, love doing it with all your heart, mind, and soul, but also be brave and wise enough to stop, once you have nothing more to say.

28 July 2007

Bruce Crossman

I think probably the key thing to be aware of in creating music is that moment of creativity that sparks off a composition—a type of eureka moment. It is a good idea to develop sensitivity to those moments and record them (either via a diary or aural record via tape recorder). This imaginative spark, a bit like 'falling

in love', becomes the essence that drives the engagement with technique and compositional vision. In order for this spark to develop there needs to be 'input for output'. A wide range of ideas can feed this inner spark, such as accepted the accepted knowledge canons as well as a personalised history of favourite sources (Dylan might sit alongside Beethoven driven by the rhythmic engagement of Asian percussion music). Cross disciplinary sources are a valuable way of opening the sonic imagination up to new possibilities; in ancient Chinese scholarship the sources behind the visual, sonic and written are seen as the same—so utilises these connections. The exact collected range of sources related to your inner imagination (your musical DNA) is unique to you as a composer; they are related to your imagination so they will form a type of resonant frequency with it to explode that imagination into life. This inner sensitivity that resonates with aspects of the external becomes a personal voice thread through your sound world; be aware of exactly what this voice's materials and feelings are for current and future development. Structure this development with regular times for composing alternating between the intuitive and intellectual reflection for the birthing of the music. This development of musical ideas should be a reflective-process whereby your thoughts are in a type of dialogue with the music—reflecting on its strengths and looking for ways to realise that inner impulse.

31 July 2007

Ross Edwards

When I was a first year student in the Music Department of Sydney University, having not been allowed to take music as a subject at school, I got so frustrated by the fact that composition wasn't on the syllabus at university either, that I dropped out for a couple of years and joined the temporary staff of the ABC, where I wrapped parcels, delivered mail and ran messages. My objective – which seemed logical at the time (early 1960s) - was to save up enough money to leave these shores forever for what I imagined to be the musically greener pastures of Europe. I might still be wrapping parcels if it weren't for the intervention of people like Peter Sculthorpe, Richard Meale and Peter Maxwell Davies, who, whilst perceiving that I was a headstrong young idiot, nevertheless considered me worth salvaging as a composer. They persuaded me to return to university, graduate, and apply for scholarships to study abroad - which I did - and to this day I'm grateful to them. Having migrated to and graduated from the University of Adelaide, and spent several years in Europe, I decided that I'd rather contribute to the development of music in a young society – my own – which I optimistically hoped might now begin to take a fresh orientation rather than aping the European model with which I'd become disenchanted. Thirty five years later I still feel that Australian composers are in a position to play a unique and essential role in the custodianship of this planet's music. Consider how and why – the future is in your hands!)

Many of you who have studied composition at school will now be eager to build on your formative experience. You may already have a clear direction and/or be open to all kinds of exciting new possibilities. If you're fortunate, you'll be guided by teachers who respect the integrity and intensity of your current enthusiasms and are prepared to help you develop and explore them, and perhaps beyond them, without forcing their own ideas on you at an inappropriate moment. Often – and especially if you have a teacher who's a practising composer – his or her music will serve as a model for you as you wait for your

own voice to emerge. You may also have the opportunity to learn the practicalities of being a composer as an apprentice/copyist to one of your teachers. This kind of absorption by association has always been a perfectly natural way for composers to develop their craft.

An experienced, open-minded and sympathetic teacher will be able to suggest all kinds of areas you might like to explore while at the same time giving you exercises designed to help you develop your technique. These, ideally, should supplement rather than supplant the techniques you may already have been taught or discovered for yourself. Eventually you'll be faced with the unavoidable decision as to what's the right path for you to follow, and I'd like to suggest that this decision - whilst it's important not to disregard such pragmatic considerations as how to make a living! - should be based on your intelligently based intuition and ultimately guided by your heart.

I do hope you'll be exposed to an abundance of thought provoking ideas which will expand your vision of music in ways you may not have dreamt of. If you find they're not forthcoming, seek them out yourself! Creative music is a hugely rich field, as old as humankind, which it has played a crucial part in sustaining through millennia. Please listen, read and think widely and make connections with other disciplines – other arts, sciences, architecture, philosophy, anthropology, ethnomusicology and religion. Explore how music has functioned in other cultures far beyond the narrow confines of Western art music and the concert hall, a reflection of the upsurge of materialism that followed the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, which has recently presented us with the Global Economy and its attendant Global Belief System. What are the implications of this for music? How might the music you will compose reinforce, be reinforced by or provide an alternative to this system? And in what ways might you, through your music, nourish your own society here and now, perhaps with global implications?

We live in complex times. In choosing your own niche – call it developing a career if you like – please never lose touch with what is musically meaningful to you at the deepest level, follow your natural enthusiasms, extend them in amazingly creative ways, accept guidance only from people you instinctively trust, carefully assess the possible motives of those (disciple seekers?) who offer you academic acceleration and quick, slick, overseas career moves, especially if they're buying you drinks! When you've become musically centered – that's the true purpose, I believe, of your education - you'll have so much to give and receive.

3 August 2007

Garth Paine

Music is about sound. Much of the teaching you will have received is about the abstract formal strictures of music – harmony and counterpoint, the range of instruments and their function in orchestration, but I would protest that all this is somewhat irrelevant if you can not feel, see and engage with the qualities of sound itself.

Is the sound heavy, dense, thin, light, sparkly, sharp, intense, dynamic etc – I think if composing as

sculpting – I think of the sound as a viscous, fluid medium, sometimes I think of it as a lump of clay on a pottery wheel and we can draw it up and make it into forms of our choosing to represent something of our experience in the world. You can use one note/sound to call into being the entire universe, to create a vast emptiness as though in front of you is contained all the planets of the solar system in a peaceful solace. Or, you can use a single sound to send a chill up the spine, to make the space intimate, clammy, scary and threatening. What this means is that your music has the power to condition the space you and your audiences occupy – to change the scale and the emotional energy of that space. Good film music is a masterful example of this approach to composition, and you will see that it often engages electroacoustic techniques. The sound effects and the music work together to create the emotional world of the film. The same is true in theatre and music for contemporary dance.

All of the above illustrates some of the ways in which we engage in music as sound – as pure abstract communication. Electronic processes allow the expansion of an acoustic instrument or found sound to express a multitude of emotional states. Edgar Varese often called for new electronic instruments in order to realize his dream of a music “set free from the crippling forces of tonality” – the only purely electronic work he made was *Poeme electronique* (1957-8) for the Phillips Pavilion at the 1958 World Fair. His other work *Deserts* (electronic tape music and orchestra), 1953 was the first of these two electronic works he wrote after not composing for nearly 20 years due to his frustration with the strictures of tonal music and acoustic instruments. Around this same time John Cage composed *Imaginary Landscape no.1* (1939) for magnetic tape, and Stockhausen completed *Studie I*. All these composers were actively engaged in seeking sounds beyond the acoustic instrument and the formal notions of harmony and counterpoint. An explosion of electronic and electroacoustic works came there after in the 1960's and onwards – there are many works worthy of your consideration.

These works may not be to your liking – you may never have heard music like it, you may therefore need to learn to listen in a different way, but I strongly encourage you to listen to them, to think about the use of sound as raw material for sonic composition, and to think about how important Timbre is to musical composition. Strange then that we are not able within the Western Music Notation system to notate timbre, except by the limitations of orchestration techniques, mutes, bow positions etc.

Great music understands the integration of more traditional composition techniques and a deep feeling for the quality, the texture, weight etc of the sound, and thereby creates a rich and rewarding musical experience.

8 August 2007

Mark Isaacs

1. Be very involved in the rehearsals of your pieces wherever possible. People can wonder what you meant when you are dead, no point in them doing so when you're alive.
2. Cross your t's and dot your i's (i.e. the musical equivalents thereof). Poorly drafted scores waste everyone's time.

3. Get as much rehearsal time as you can. Tell the musicians what they need to know.
4. Ask for an advance of part of the fee upfront. You have to eat!
5. Deliver on time every time.
6. Be negotiable about what you write. Even virtuoso players make a better sound when they are not on the very edge of their technique. Unless this is the effect you specifically want, simplify wherever possible and the grateful players will sound heaps better.
7. Write what your heart believes in and what gives you goose-bumps, not what you think is fashionable, intellectual, popular, commercial or whatever.

16 August 2007

Robert Davidson

- Compose every day, even if it's just for ten minutes. Every day has its tune - you've got to find it and catch it.
- It seems to me best if you are involved in performing your own music.
- Each week, find some music you don't know. Listen to it intensely, analytically. One piece you love, one piece you hate. The piece you hate may become a favourite in later years. Can't stand Japanese/Britney Spears/Kasey Chambers/Wagner/Milton Babbitt/Turkish hip-hop/Andrew Lloyd Webber? Better start listening to them then.
- Go to concerts - you can get some of your best ideas there. Hearing live music stimulates the imagination.
- Use software to get inside music - put a recording inside a wave editor and listen to a couple of seconds repeatedly, working out what is going on in the arrangement.
- Be generous to other musicians - making music is very social, and we all need to help each other.
- Keep your ear in shape for the rest of your life. Transcription is a great way to do this - you'll also learn about the insides of other people's musical thinking.
- Regularly ask yourself what it would be like to be in the audience at a performance of your music, not having heard it before.
- Make music you love (forget about what you're "supposed to compose"). If you love it, there'll be somebody in the world who'll also love it (you're not that weird).
- It's ok to imitate, particularly when you're a student. If it was good enough for Bach, Mozart, Stravinsky, the Beatles and Nirvana (who were all good imitators), it's good enough for me.
- Is your music funny? Why not?
- It's often a good thing if your instrumentals still have lyrics - they're just not being sung. Actually, that's a good way to come up with a melody - get some lyrics (even nick them from someone else's song), sing them, then give the resulting tune to an instrument to play. It worked for John Coltrane and Mozart. It's no surprise that throughout the world, instrumental melodies aspire to mimic the voice. Then again, you might like to break that rule.
- Write your own lyrics - maybe it will help you to be ok with baring your soul with a little less terror (if you're like many of us).

Separate your stages of composing with clean boundaries. I have these processes:

1. Collect - quantity rather than quality. Brainstorm, jam, try things out, but whatever you do, don't evaluate the ideas. You'll only stop the flow that way. Record your sketches in some way - notepad, sound recording, computer notation. Some collecting tips:
 - I particularly favour the Moleskine music notebooks - I carry them everywhere so I won't forget ideas that come at the strangest times and places.
 - Another nice thing to do is improvise with a midi keyboard, recording it all into a sequencer. You can go back later to find the good ideas.
 - One last tip - schedule time to get inside your intuition. I like to get into a highly relaxed state in a darkened room (this takes 15-30 minutes) and then imagine, in as much detail as possible, being at a concert. The performers come on stage and play a piece I've never heard. The music you'll hear in this meditative state will often be very good, and it will be from your brain.
2. Sort - find which ideas might belong together, in which context. What ideas could work together if transitional music was composed to unify them?
3. Evaluate - don't do this prematurely, but schedule regular time to make sure you do it (you don't want a drawer full of sketches that are never mined for their gems). After you've sorted things into some categories, start thinking about which ones are worth developing. This involves some analysis - what aspects stand out? What characterises them? Are there patterns that could be extended?
4. Develop - with the ideas you've selected by evaluation, work on extending and polishing, placing them in a compelling structure.

These four stages should be repeated until you've got a piece you are happy with.

Another nice technique in composing is what I like to think of as a documentary film approach. In making documentaries, filmmakers typically shoot a whole lot more footage than they actually use. Similarly, you can make music by recording a lot of improvised music by yourself, a friend or a group. Select the things you like, put them into Digital Audio Workstation or waveform editing software (Sonar, Logic, Ableton, Cakewalk, Wavelab etc) and compose something from the passages (I like this approach as it gets away from the very individual approach that has been our lot in Western music recently). You may also compose transitional sections and other additional material, or layer individual tracks (it's good to record solo instruments so that layering is easy later). Now notate the music and give it back to the players who improvised it. "But I can't play something that virtuosic!" they will say. "Sorry, mate, you already did" is the reply.

7 September 2007

Maria Grenfell

In offering advice to younger composers who are just starting out, there are many things more experienced composers could suggest. All of these things are worth taking on board and acting upon. Here are a few tips from my perspective.

I suppose my first piece of advice would be to get plenty of advice! The insight and wisdom of experienced composers and teachers is absolutely invaluable, and you are less likely to be able to access it once you leave your place of study. Have lessons from as many people as you can, particularly active composers who are receiving commissions and performances of their own works.

Get involved in a performance group. If you play an orchestral instrument, don't stop playing or having lessons. Sing in a choir, join a percussion ensemble or a world music ensemble. Keep up your piano skills. Interaction with performers is absolutely crucial. It is from these experiences that you learn about music presentation, balance, orchestration, repertoire, and make contacts that may last your entire musical career.

Be open-minded about composers, styles, and instrumental combinations. Keep an ongoing list of composers whose music you don't know, and spend some regular time in the library listening to what you can and following with a score if possible. Ask your teachers to offer some suggestions. If your library doesn't have what you are looking for, enquire about inter-library loan or see if they can purchase what you need.

Go to as many concerts as you can. It is the only way to actually see what is going on with instrumental combinations and repertoire. If you can sit in on rehearsals with a score, make the most of any opportunities to ask questions and observe. When I was an undergraduate, I needed to learn about percussion. So I started attending rehearsals of the local percussion ensemble and plagued them with questions. Within a few months I wrote a percussion ensemble piece which was accepted for a composers' workshop, and this led onto performances with that group and others. It helped my orchestral percussion writing immensely as well.

When you are further in your studies, start applying for summer schools and composer workshops, either here or overseas. Do not assume that you won't be good enough to get into an international summer school. Also, do not assume that the 'big ones' – schools or teachers' names - are the best. Search around on the internet, scour publications and industry magazines or journals for opportunities. Apply to your local arts council for funding to undertake trips or projects – find out what you are eligible for. Enter competitions and send music to 'Calls for Scores'. Your aim should be to obtain as much experience as possible with putting together and sending materials and applications, and getting your name in front of people. You never know where or when it may lead to something exciting.

And above all, enjoy the ride!

14 September 2007

John Peterson

My main piece of advice for young composers would be to remain true to yourself: try to maintain your personal belief in your own vision for how your music should sound and don't try to be something or someone you are not. Many young composers ask me "How can I be a modern composer?" or they make the comment "I thought music had to sound dissonant to be modern or even relevant." The word 'modern' doesn't mean anything to me, and 'dissonant' is a relative term that can be applied to any musical situation – almost all music contains dissonance in some form or another. I believe words like these should not be of concern to young composers either: issues of how 'modern' a piece of music might be, or how 'relevant' it might be, will be decided largely by others so there is no point in worrying about these issues yourself. Audiences, on the other hand, are very sensitive to honesty and sincerity in music, and they can sense when a composer has honest and sincere intentions in their music. I believe that if you do not love your own music it will be that much more difficult to elicit a positive response from any potential audience member.

It is very hard to predict what an audience is going to like, or even what type of music will be successful, so I believe you must merely write the music that you yourself love and be prepared to accept any criticisms, both positive and negative, that may be aimed at the results. When a composer has their music performed publicly it is like baring their soul to the world; they feel naked and exposed, and are, therefore, very susceptible to any type of criticism that might be aimed at their creative endeavours. Accepting negative criticism is always difficult, but I tell my students that you should listen carefully to any negative criticism and try to adopt the role of critic for a moment: then, try to judge your music from that point of view and decide whether or not you believe the comments could possibly have any validity at all. This can be difficult to do but you should try to adopt the role of objective observer and, if you are honest with yourself, you may find that on occasion you do, albeit begrudgingly, agree with some of the negative points that were made. On the other hand, you may decide that the criticism was unwarranted and that the critic did not completely understand your motivation or aims for the music. Ultimately, what you should do is learn from the experience. Careers are not necessarily ended because of negative criticism, so you must have the conviction and belief in your abilities to continue composing and to continue to present your own point of view.

A carefully-crafted composition will usually attract its fair share of positive criticism, even amongst what might appear to be otherwise negative comments; so the acquisition and thorough understanding of compositional technique is imperative for a young composer. I always urge composers to set musical boundaries for each composition and to try to remain true to the limits set for each work. These limits may be defined in terms of structure, harmony, instrumental texture or technique, the use of rhythm, or whatever; but some of these limits will work well for a composer and may then become part of a personal style that may gradually begin to develop during the composition of a series of works.

Acquiring a thorough knowledge of all types of musical instruments, and the idiomatic techniques related to their performance, is essential for the development of a reliable understanding of how the music will sound in live performance. Composers using notation software to produce their scores should not rely on the MIDI playback capabilities of these programs as a means of testing the actual balance of instrumental

timbres within their work – this can only be judged accurately in live performance. I always urge young composers to work closely with performers: ask them to play their instruments for you and listen to how the qualities of the sound might change in different registers and how effective they are in performing different articulations.

Similarly, composers should attend many concerts and listen to many recordings of music, wherever possible with a score of the work at hand: in this way you can take note of how certain musical effects are achieved and how a variety of instrumental combinations might work together in a satisfying and effective manner. When I am listening to music I am also often simultaneously composing: I hear a passage of music and I think “That’s a great idea (or that’s a great sound) – but if I were writing it I would do something else with the material” and I might then go on to use that sound or particular effect in a work of my own. New musical ideas are not formed or created within a cultural vacuum. Composers often spend too much time in isolation, working on their own compositions, so it is important to take the time to listen to other people’s music so that you may continue to develop your critical ear and continue to be inspired by the innate power, both intellectual and emotional, of music itself.

15 September 2007