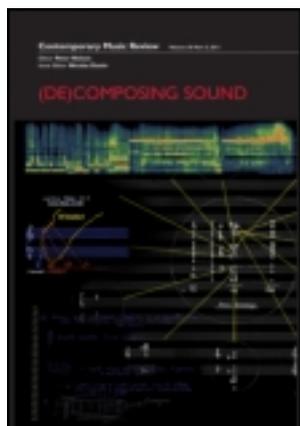


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'Teaching' Composition at Princeton

Dan Trueman

I summarize and reflect on the nature of pedagogy in the Princeton University graduate program in music composition, including perspectives of my colleagues as well as my own personal approaches.

Keywords: Music Composition; Pedagogy; Princeton

'You'll figure it out'
—Paul Lansky

If memory serves, this is what one would hear—in Paul's own voice—when clicking on the help menu for one of the early 1990s Princeton Sound Kitchen software applications (*rt*, perhaps, or *ein*). And while this humorous and seemingly unhelpful bit of 'help' may have been ostensibly directed at the user of a particular piece of software, it does, I think, fairly represent a crucial, pervasive attitude towards composition pedagogy at Princeton. In preparing for this symposium, I solicited thoughts from my colleagues and our graduate students regarding Mark Applebaum's prompts (See Appendix 2); here is part of what Paul had to say:

'I've come to think that at the graduate level most of our students have had too much instruction in composition and need to start weaning themselves away from composition teachers. They need to learn to become their own best composition teachers, especially since they will be studying with themselves for the rest of their lives. They also need to begin to unburden themselves of the need to please a teacher. This is not to say that I advocate abandoning composition lessons but rather that the focus should shift to advising rather than instruction.'

I also remember Paul saying that one of the things he loves about our program is that we bring in the best possible students we can and *let them teach us*. This notion is echoed by one of the responses I received from a recently minted PhD from our program, Andrea Mazzariello:

‘one of the real strengths, from my perspective, of the Princeton program has always been ... that we’re treated like colleagues and not like students. ... I feel like the faculty members here are hungry for what we can offer, that we’re trying to learn from each other more than we’re engaging in a one-sided exchange. It puts much more of a burden on the “student,” which is somewhat surprising: we’re more powerful, so to speak, [but] we have more to answer for ...’

These attitudes manifest themselves not just in how people express themselves, but in the curriculum itself. It is impossible to discuss the specifics of how I or anyone else ‘teaches’ composition at Princeton without consideration of this curriculum. So, at the risk of turning this into a program prospectus, here is an annotated overview of the essentials:

- (1) Composition ‘lessons’ are scheduled on an ad-hoc basis, as requested by the student; there are no assigned teachers, no weekly lessons (unless the student wants to arrange that). In practice, students choose to go about scheduling meetings in all sorts of ways, sometimes setting up serial meetings with all the faculty around the same time to get multiple perspectives on a particular piece, while other times they might schedule a number of successive meetings with one professor, to get some continuous feedback about their process. Sometimes months will go by without a meeting, sometimes there will be multiple meetings in a week. Two crucial consequences of this are that (1) the students get to choose how and when they want to have conversations about their music, and (2) professors know that their advice is being considered along with advice from colleagues.
- (2) There are no course requirements. Each semester, there are typically two to three seminars that students are invited to join. The topics vary from year to year, and there are no regular courses that are offered again and again. At the beginning of each semester, the department has a meeting where the seminars for the semester are introduced, so students can decide what to take. In practice, first and second year students sign up for most of the seminars, while third and later year students take them sometimes. The seminars are ungraded. Recent subjects have included:
 - a range of ‘Composing for ...’ seminars, including:
 - for String Quartet (Mackey, with the Brentano String Quartet)
 - for Orchestra
 - for Percussion (Lansky, with So Percussion)
 - for Shakuhachi (White, with Riley Lee);
 - ‘Theft by Ear’ (Lansky and Trueman; transcribing and recomposing Ligeti, Björk, others);
 - ‘House Band’ (Mackey and White);
 - ‘20th-Century Tonality’ (Tymoczko);
 - a couple of ‘Pitch-Nerd’ seminars (Lansky), with the focus on writing as opposed to ‘drawing circles on scores’;

- a number of analysis courses (White, Mackey, Agawu, Burnham);
 - ‘Songwriting’ (Tymoczko and Rinde Eckert);
 - ‘Technology and the Body’ (Trueman).
 - Upcoming seminars include:
 - ‘Wrong Notes’ (Mackey)
 - ‘Intercultural Music’ (Donnacha Dennehy)
 - ‘The Composer/Performer’ (Trueman)
- (3) The ‘Generals Exams.’ At the end of the second year, each student has two extended meetings with the faculty as a whole, where they in essence lead seminars on two broad and divergent repertoires (for instance, the Beethoven String Quartets and the Ligeti Concerti; or Chopin piano music and Radiohead; or Mozart operas and John Adams orchestral works). In addition, they share a new course syllabus they have worked up, and they write a paper (fairly short) about a subject of their choosing. Finally, the three to four second year students together present a concert of original works and works that their original works are in some way ‘responding’ to. They are given a full year to prepare for all this. A much smaller exam takes place at the end of the first year, to give the students a sense of what the Generals are like, and to allow the faculty to see if there are concerns that should be addressed.
- (4) The dissertation comprises an extended essay (usually 80–200 pages) and a substantial composition or composition portfolio. The essay and composition are typically not related, at least not directly (the essay is never about the piece, for instance), and the composition might be something that is conventionally scored, or a recording of improvisations, or a collection of varied pieces.
- (5) While not explicitly part of the curriculum, the Composers Ensemble is a major shaping force in the community. It is essentially a concert series that brings in ensembles to work with graduate students and perform their works; ensembles have included So Percussion, eighth blackbird, Synergy Vocals, Ensemble Klang, the Flux Quartet, and others. The Brentano String Quartet has been in residence for over a dozen years, and So Percussion is in residence this past year. In addition, we regularly host ‘freelance’ concerts, where players are hired to perform pieces that don’t easily fit with existing ensembles. We also sometimes bring in the student’s own ensembles—the Now Ensemble and Newspeak are examples. The dozen or so concerts that make up this series are always followed by a reception, and the conversations that naturally occur here often lead students to make appointments with faculty, or result in conversations in subsequent seminars—the relationship, then, between these concerts and the rest of the curriculum is intentionally informal. The students also run their own ‘ffmup’ series (Free Form Mash Up), for informal presentation of new projects, usually with a significant improvisational component.

- (6) Finally, students have the opportunity to teach, leading ‘precepts’ for undergraduate courses. The core introductory theory courses require many preceptors, and sometimes serve as an opportunity for graduate students to address perceived holes in their own schooling. Courses in 16th and 18th centuries counterpoint, electronic/computer music (the Princeton Laptop Orchestra), and introductory composition workshop courses also provide teaching opportunities.

I am in the unusual position of having been both a student in this program in the not-so-distant past and (after a few years away) also on the faculty (for nearly 10 years now), so my thoughts here will be largely from a mentor’s perspective, but will also inevitably reflect my experiences as a ‘student.’

I continue with a quote from another colleague:

‘I refuse to accept any idea I can think of.’
—*Steve Mackey*

Steve is channeling Marx here, Groucho Marx, that is: ‘I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.’ Steve’s refusal might seem like an odd, vaguely anti-intellectual notion at first, but if we unpack it (the way he does in his article *Music as an Action Sport*), we find that it is in fact reflective of a rich and well thought out attitude towards the compositional process, one that has—like Paul’s sage pat-on-the-back that opened this paper—pervaded the ether in our department.

To begin with, Steve is talking about musical material, and how he comes up with and transforms his own:

‘I have tried to incorporate a variety of activities—including, but not limited, to staring at a blank page waiting for divine intervention—that allow me to engage the material, and the creative process itself, in a way that will more likely shake out an idea that surprises and delights me. My aim is to enlist the whole organism in collaboration with the gray matter in the hope of being true to a wider range of experience.’

He goes on to detail his compositional process in a number of pieces, a process that includes improvisation, working with random numbers, working with notation and staff paper, recording oneself and transcribing, abusing conventional instruments with strange tunings, collaborating with others, ‘cacophonous’ vocalizing, interpretive dance, and more, all with the aim of making music that ‘is quirky and psychedelic and deals with fringe states of consciousness rather than logical thought or brand-name emotion.’

What I think is important here is the recognition that the *process* of composition is crucial; how we go about making music is inseparable from the music itself.

To paraphrase something Steve said to me in preparation for this symposium: activity springs from culture and community, music from activity: *how* you compose is key. And of course these all feedback into one another in complex, hard-to-identify ways.

I have long felt that good teaching is more about establishing rich contexts (or cultures) for learning than it is about the direct transmission of knowledge, skills, or ideas. This, surely, is one of the reasons I was drawn to Princeton for graduate school in the first place. But it goes back much earlier, to my adolescent years of violin lessons with my intense, German hippie of a teacher, who would start our lessons with yoga, after which we would sight-read together before proceeding to anything that might resemble a traditional ‘lesson,’ and then she would send me home with Krishnamurti or Summerhill to read. We made music together more than she ‘taught’ me, and it was through conversation, example, and the sheer intensity of collaborative engagement with music that I absorbed her lessons, such that they were. After that, anything more conventional, more hierarchical, less collaborative, or less intense, was simply intolerable to me.

At the same time, I was raised by a theoretical physicist father and a visual artist mother (also a reluctant atheist), and was profoundly drawn to both sensibilities; I majored in physics as an undergraduate and went on to work for a research group at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, all the while independently studying and playing music. Perhaps ironically, the physics studies made me deeply skeptical of numerical or scientifically inspired approaches to composing or theorizing about music, so I was never drawn to subjects that lend themselves to old-fashioned information-transfer approaches to teaching, while my mother’s somewhat radical views on religion and art—she is not one to suffer fools—left me feeling similar to Marx and Mackey in my refusal to accept given structures and my suspicion of my own limited imagination.

[A brief aside: I feel I should apologize for the bit of personal history here, but on the other hand, ‘teaching’ composition *is* personal, in deep and unavoidable ways.]

So, when I meet with a student for a composition ‘lesson,’ it is within this larger framework of ideas, attitudes, energy, and structure—really, within this larger culture. What do we do? Like the composition process itself, this ‘lesson’ can be wide ranging. We might improvise, recording as we go, listen back, and discuss (there is a now long tradition of doing this sort of thing, dating back to Steve Mackey’s early years at Princeton with Jim Randall). We might spend 40 minutes in near silence studying the student’s score. We might work on the code for a digital instrument that the student is developing for a piece. I might roughly recompose a moment of his piece on the spot, or provisionally continue a phrase she has written, to convey as vividly as possible what I’m thinking, but also to share some of how I myself go about composing. We may try to play the piece, in some ad-hoc way. I may, ultimately, have nothing to say or offer (I found this difficult to accept when I began as a professor, but I’ve learned that *no* advice is better than forced advice). There are no

set expectations. It is a conversation, a dance, an improvisation, an intense and variegated process in and of itself.

My colleague Barbara White characterizes it this way:

‘... there are a few values that I aspire to practice consistently. One is individuality, or flexibility: I don’t really have one way of interacting with a composition student but rather aim to adapt, somewhat, to the student, the situation, the particular piece at hand. A second, related one is transparency: I find it very useful to discuss explicitly with the student what it is we are doing in our meetings and how we are choosing to interact. Third, I hope to get out of the student’s way by seasoning my enthusiasm with a touch of detachment: *i.e.* I think we can discuss just about any vocational matter as long as it is clear where the boundary is between self and other, and that my advocacy is, I hope, in support of the student on his or her own terms, rather than as a puppet or mirror of my own unacknowledged impulses.’

For me, there are some common themes that arise. For instance, I find myself helping students discover and develop their strengths, rather than, as Steve puts it, ‘shoring up their weaknesses to a uniform level of mediocrity.’ Another: the ‘apprentice’ relationship emerges regularly—what would *I* do, they want to know, so I might show them, as best I can. Steve recounted the story of a student years ago requesting to ‘watch him compose.’ He declined, after some thought (like Heisenberg’s wily particle, the composition process would surely change when observed), but the student’s wish was clear: don’t tell me what to do, show me what you do.

Speaking of ‘doing,’ another theme: I find myself regularly questioning the student’s self-imposed ‘dos and don’ts.’ As Steve put it, we try to break down the walls between the ‘guilty pleasures’ and the ‘composing.’ Sometimes students have the feeling that they are ‘selling out’ if they nurture musical impulses that they love but feel are outside the purview of ‘classical music,’ but, really, what exactly are they selling-out to? And hasn’t ‘classical music’ always been omnivorous? It’s far more important to be truly tickled by what you do, excited about it, than concerned about perceived, received boundaries, and in the end my hope is that we can help students maintain and engage in this endeavor with excitement, energy and integrity for a lifetime. Composing is something that is personal; it should be important to them, their vocation, their hobby, their passion. They should wake up in the morning hungry for it. If there is one overarching goal for my own ‘teaching’ and for the design of the graduate composition ‘culture’ as a whole at Princeton, it would be to nurture this, to help our students establish the groundwork for a long life of intense and creative engagement with music.

There is a certain amount of psychology involved, of course. Some students are too comfortable with what they do; recently I had a student respond to an observation I had about some persistently square phrase structures in his work, with ‘it’s never really bothered me.’ I suggested he might want to set the bar higher, given the endeavor (we’re not writing a book report, after all). Some are too self-critical, to debilitating extremes, and I tell them how Herbert Brün argued that we can’t really

know one of our pieces until we've performed it ten, or better, 100 times, or how some of my best pieces are ones I thought were trash while working on them (and, alas, the inverse is also true). Put these bits of advice together, we end up with: set the bar high, but be willing approach it slogging through the mud.

The structure of our curriculum, or lack thereof, is liberating in this regard; I can challenge or coddle and engage in specific, sometimes collaborative (or combative) ways, all the while knowing that the student will be visiting my colleagues as well, getting different or similar advice. I often preface feedback I give to new students by telling them I'll be most happy if they ignore my advice in the end. Ultimately, as Paul Lansky told us at the beginning of this talk, the student needs to figure it out.

Of course, this approach, this culture, is not for everyone, and it has many challenges. Some students get lost, wishing for 'more hoops to jump through,' and can never adapt to the openness (I remember Brad Garton telling me, before I entered the graduate program years ago, about the 'first-year free-fall' that many students felt at Princeton). It's also enormously challenging for the faculty; without the regularity of required courses with fairly fixed materials, we are constantly inventing new seminars, and just hoping that the students will show up (they always do), and the lack of regular private lessons and their implied hierarchy can make it more difficult to establish deep ongoing relationships with the students, to monitor their progress, or, as Scott Burnham puts it, 'to take their temperature.' Needless to say, however, these challenges also continually inspire me, and the students keep me on my toes, making me a better composer, and by extension, a better teacher.

I would like to close with two quotes that have inspired me over the years, both of which are from mentors of former mentors, and both of which I have repeated as a mentor:

'Beethoven wasn't carrying around his bedpan because he was worried about his urlinie.'

—David Lewin to Steve Mackey to me

'Keep learning as if you are going to live forever.'

—George Perle to Paul Lansky to me

Reference

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