How the Great Composers Taught Themselves: 11 Steps For Success

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / November 14, 2007

How The Great Composers Taught Themselves: 11 Steps for Success looks at the success traits of composers who've enjoyed long term career success.

How the Great Composers Taught Themselves 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 that question which came to me while studying one day in the Brookline Public Library.

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

See what happens when you go to the library!

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.

Next, using the Learning Styles Inventory, I took all this biographical information and organized it to determine the learning styles of successful composers as a group.

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

Here's the big picture. The path to success in music 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. For music, 11 principles emerged.

#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 three kinds of mentors in music.

The first mentor. This is the composer/teacher who goes beyond the class or the private lesson and invests something of himself in a talented student. Faure was an example of this with Ravel and other students outside of class.

The second mentor. This is the composer/teacher who takes his experiences and mentors through a printed document. Examples are Rameau, Tchaikovsky, Fux, Koechlin, Berlioz, Kastner, Prout, Henry Mancini, Dick Grove, Don Sebesky, Frank Skinner, Widor, Glenn Miller, Rimsky-Korsakov, Piston, Goetschius, Russ Garcia, Schoenberg, and others.

The third mentor is less obvious. Actually, it should be mentors, plural, because the third group of mentors are those the individual Learner consciously chooses to emulate and spend time with. These mentors can be composers, scores, media choices, etc.

Mentors 1 and 2 have one thing in common: their ability to be a coach and whether in person or in print, to encourage the student/reader 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. 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. Understanding Fux's approach lead to our *Instant Composer: Counterpoint by Fux* series which breaks out Fux's concepts in a pedagogical manner for the 21st Century.

#2) Successful Composers Learn to Teach Themselves.
Of all the findings, this is the most critical. People who teach themselves are technically called *autodidacts*. But the successful person, regardless of his field of work, ultimately learns to teach himself. The learner not bringing this skill to the table naturally, must learn it.

Learners must learn how, in any field of endeavor, 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 aren'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.

#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.

#4) Successful Composers Prefer to Study at a Desk.
This is an odd finding, but not when you realize from *Learning Styles Inventory* studies that students have specific physical 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, but the one most used by successful composers is sitting at 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.

#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, AlexanderPublishing.com now makes available to readers of the *Professional Orchestration.*™ series, DRM-free MP3s licensed from eClassical.com. In our *Professional Mentor Concert Package* that supports Volume 1, students get an average 20-minute concert per solo instrument representing 78-tracks of music. With Volume 1 and 2, students can order an MP3 audio package containing a majority of the examples in each book within the context of the complete movement. So with Volume 1, a student gets over 10 hours of recorded performances that can be played on any computer or CD player that can read MP3s.

There are solid career reasons I took this approach.

First, teachers across the USA whose schools subscribed to the Naxos Music Library or other quality streaming audio services repeatedly told me of the difficulty they had getting students to sit still and listen. Because they were "only listening" students felt they weren't accomplishing anything. Right here is a danger element in our culture – teaching that an individual must "multi-task" and at least be doing two or more things at the same time, otherwise they're not being productive. With this, we're observing in our own online classes that today's learners have a hard time focusing.

Second, students are under-exposed to music and have no idea of the breadth of music available to listen to. When you can get the student to actually sit and listen to a resource like

the Naxos Music Library, they're shocked! But the pieces have to be short and varied to command the student's attention.

The solution we found to the problem was providing MP3s that could be loaded on an iPod or a cell phone, thus giving the student the freedom to listen on their terms and schedule.

#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.

To support this success step, our *Professional Mentor* Workbook for Volume 1 of *Professional Orchestration.™*, gives students 13 different poems on which to base original compositions averaging two minutes in length.

#8) Successful composers adapt technology to teach themselves and earn a living. There are two notable breakthroughs in the 20th 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 themselves. 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 notation programs contain players with orchestral samples so that students can get some idea of what their compositions sound like.

In 2005, we 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 pianist 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.

#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 AlexanderPublishing.com 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 some cases supported the entrepreneurial world of composing by teaching at the collegiate level. In the 21st 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 Grout's *History of Western Music* by being completely candid with learners that they're entrepreneurs running their own business which includes writing, publishing, booking gigs, and understanding the ever changing world of intellectual property rights.

Music technology costs money. A music school will do their students a great favor by requiring classes in basic contract law, copyrights, intellectual property rights issues, and basic financial management, even if only with Quicken. Those who don't will destine many to career failure.

The Challenge
In the United States, many if not all of our educational approaches need to be looked at and challenged as to the results they're achieving in the field. A modern music curriculum must include music technology as the center piece for teaching composition, recording, and keyboard skills. If budgets are tight, and they usually are, a basic Mac Mini with 2GB of RAM and a portable MIDI keyboard is enough because GarageBand comes with it. So a basic instruction set can be created whereby students can not only do homework, but record it for class presentation.

This means that educational institutions are going to have to ask and answer tough questions:

1. Why should a student study with you?

2. What will they know and be able to do after graduation?

3. How will you measure results and define success?

These are not traditional questions. But then again, these are not traditional times.

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