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Going for the Goals: How Teachers and Students Set and Meet Goals in Music Composition

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Going for the Goals:  
How Teachers and Students Set and Meet Goals in Music Composition  
AND  
*Psalms and Meditations* for flexible ensemble

By

JOSEPH MARK VASINDA  
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Music Composition and Theory

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OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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## **Abstract**

Learning to compose might, at first, seem like drinking an entire ocean. There are an overwhelming number of things to consider when sitting down to composing a piece of music: what instruments are going to be involved, what notes should I use, do I want to focus on notes or sounds, or maybe gestures, who's going to play this piece, what do I want to say? This especially affects young composers who might have even more philosophical questions about composing. Even after years, staring down a blank page can continue to intimidate more experienced composers. Wrapped up in thoughts about what pieces could become, students need a person whose role consists of unraveling that sticky web of thoughts. This person should further focus the student's attention on specific ideas in the student's music or in their approach to their music so that they begin to understand how to navigate these questions on their own.

There are as many ways to compose as there are composers, and likewise with composition teachers, there are several different roads which teachers can set students down. This dissertation attempts to map several different paths which newer, younger, or differently experienced teachers might use as trail headings in their own teaching. This study looks for those landmarks that many teachers can use to choose a particular goal or destination that either the teacher or the student has chosen and guide the student to it. And by drawing on literature from the fields of music education and composition, through this dissertation I seek to contribute to conversation regarding these two fields and the ways in which they might benefit one another.

## Preface

Before diving into the dissertation, I feel the need to comment on the act of writing and how the act of writing this document has changed have changed me. When you have been told your whole life that the only method to improve in a discipline is to spend hours plying your trade, it becomes useful to find comfort in the work. To provide further nuance, if you grow up believing that to reach your finish line, the only way to progress is step by step, you become uncritical of the processes which you find comfort in. In the metaphor of a race, you take comfort in the daily motion of your body and can become complacent. Think of the story of the tortoise and the hare, which exemplifies the idea that we only need to be persistent in order to succeed. The story tells us that if we keep our heads down and if we don't rest, we will eventually reach our goals. And as long as we forget that a tortoise has more time in their life to reach the finish line, we can be lulled into that fantasy: that all we need to do is keep at it.

By taking comfort in the slow steps you take toward the finish line, you become uncritical of the ways in which you progress. You not only enjoy the motion of your body but resent any roadblocks that force you to wait impatiently to begin your steady marathon again. But as humans, we do not only have our legs and feet at our disposal. If we value more than just practice, there may be healthier ways to reach our finish lines, or further finish lines we would otherwise never make it to. By taking moments to rest, by taking moments to reflect on how we have moved so far, we can think "Instead of walking today, since we are rested, we will run." Given enough distance we might think, "Do we have to use our legs? Can we exercise our unique human brain and devise a new method of travel? A wheel, a bike, a car, a jet?"

I have felt the weight of month upon month of slowly walking toward the finish line, getting frustrated when other tasks blocked the road. But there is more to finishing a task or

mastering a discipline than participating in the practice itself. Practicing is important, but thinking about practicing apart from the act itself is also important. Furthermore, only participating in the practice can shut us off from useful diversity of thought, keeping us from considering moving with anything other than our legs. Time spent not practicing could contribute to mastery, too, if we take the time to think about how to use our rest as part of our process. This could not only increase our mastery in our disciplines but maybe lead to a healthier relationship with our work as well.

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## Part I: Going for the Goals

*At the end of class, Mr. Murphy, an elementary school music teacher, is directing his students to put away instruments. On the way to put up his xylophone, Steven rushes up to Mr. Murphy and shouts “Mr. Murphy! Listen to this!” Steven rushes through a quick flurry of notes and looks up at his teacher expectantly. Mr. Murphy hurriedly responds, “Sounds good!” Steven’s expression falls a bit, almost imperceptibly. Mr. Murphy can’t help but feel like Steven was expecting a more enthusiastic reaction from him.*

*As the class leaves the room, Mr. Murphy can’t get Steven’s disappointed expression out of his head. He sits down at his desk and wonders how he could possibly incorporate something as open-ended as composition into his normal lesson plans which usually focus on skills that are easier to master like tapping the beat or singing “sol-mi.” He thinks to himself, “If a composition can be anything, how am I supposed to tell if a student is getting better at composing?”*

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*Michelle, a young composer, meets with her teacher Dr. Andrews for the last time before summer break. Dr. Andrews is happy to see that Michelle has finished the final draft of the piece she has been working on the whole semester, especially since the performance is coming up during finals week. At the end of the lesson, satisfied with the edits on the piece, Dr. Andrews asks, “What are you planning to write over the summer?” Michelle thinks for a moment, “I don’t know, I guess I won’t have any of my friends around to play my music...”*

*“You could play your music yourself,” Dr. Andrews responds. Michelle furrows her brow. “Maybe... it’s just hard to write when I don’t have a deadline...”*



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Description of the Problem

Determining what goals are worth pursuing is a tricky topic for both composers and their teachers. When a teacher sets goals for their students, there is always some tension between what the teacher wants the student to accomplish and what the student wants to accomplish. A teacher's goals might align with students' goals, oppose students' goals, or allow for student goals to exist apart from the teacher's. Some teachers might take a hands-off approach and simply be content with their students meeting deadlines. However, other teachers like Arnold Schoenberg and Nadia Boulanger may want students to have a strong grasp of the historical context of the styles in which they write.<sup>1</sup> Others still, like Eleni Lapidaki and Sam Reese may want students to develop an understanding of the idiosyncratic process of making music.<sup>2</sup> Although these goals are widely varied, they are not mutually exclusive, and some teachers may expect that a student who consistently meets their deadlines will, *eventually*, achieve each of these goals. However, the methods for reaching these goals and how to prioritize them will differ from teacher to teacher and student to student.

Because students have different needs or gaps in their knowledge, teachers using multiple approaches may reach a higher level of efficacy. John Hattie's meta-study of effect sizes presents this differentiated learning in one of its most impactful influences: "response to intervention,"

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Lamb Crawford, "Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles," *The Music Quarterly* 86 (2002); E. Douglas Bomberger, "Rheinberger, Boulanger, and the Art of Teaching Composition" *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 12 (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Eleni Lapidaki, "Learning from Masters of Music Creativity: Shaping Compositional Experiences in Music Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 15, no. 2 (2007); Sam Reese, "Responding to Student Compositions," in *Why and How to Teach Music Composition: A New Horizon for Music Education* ed. Maud Hickey (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2003).

which is a tiered approach to identifying and supporting students' learning and behavior needs.<sup>3</sup> Hattie's study also ranked this influence as the fifth-most positive out of the 256 total influences included. And this need for individualized instruction appears to only be heightened in compositional pedagogy because of its highly personal, idiosyncratic, and open-ended nature. Those like Eleni Lapidaki specifically argue that teachers should help students "immerse in learning experiences that respect the mystery of [the students'] intuitions, liberate their own practices of critical thinking in music, and dare to create innovative music that expresses against-the-prevailing-grain musical belief."<sup>4</sup>

It follows that developing this level of differentiated or individualized instruction would take a considerable amount of work compared to a one-size-fits-all approach. To develop a variety of teaching approaches, teachers would have to design, test, and implement their own methods over periods of years to see which methods work best for which students. Beyond that, it may take even longer to understand *why* a given method works for one student and not another. Alternatively, teachers could pool methods with one another to understand how best to teach towards a student's needs and intentions. However, according to Greg Simon, to pool methods with other teachers, there must be a general understanding of the types of goals for which a given teaching method is most useful. In Simon's own words: "Establishing clear goals is an indispensable precursor to any meaningful discussion of teaching methods."<sup>5</sup> If teachers keep in

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<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Waack, "Backup of Hattie's Ranking list of 256 Influences and Effect Sizes Related to Student Achievement," last modified 2018, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://visible-learning.org/backup-hattie-ranking-256-effects-2017/>;

John Hattie, "Response to Intervention," Corwin Visible Learning plus, accessed July 29, 2021, [http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/influences/view/response\\_to\\_intervention](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/influences/view/response_to_intervention).

<sup>4</sup> Lapidaki, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Simon, "Tell Me a Story," *College Music Symposium* 59, no. 2 (2019): 2.

mind that different methods facilitate different goals, they will be better prepared to respond sensitively to their students' individual needs and intentions.

Yet, in the literature on composition pedagogy, many sources still provide either a goal *or* a teaching method instead of both. Moreover, many of the texts that *do* provide both a goal and a method to reach that goal present methods which require considerable expertise in music composition, making these methods difficult or impossible to use for general music educators. Additionally, these authors lament the scant scholarly attention to composition pedagogy, and to the question of music composition's teachability.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Maud Hickey, a music educator, argues that "It is time to dispel [the notion that composition is a specialized skill that only an elite few can do] and offer classroom and studio teachers not only reasons for making music composition an integral part of their curriculum, but also provide practical ideas and activities for doing so."<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, Hickey, in addition to a small handful of other authors, has begun working to fill this gap. However, we still need more research which presents teachers in real-life contexts that also explores their decisions in setting goals, how they communicate those goals, and the methods that they use to reach those goals.

## **Statement of Purpose**

In this study, I explore how teachers set goals for composition lessons with their students and how they help their students achieve those goals. Additionally, I consider what roles students

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<sup>6</sup> Maud Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines: Ideas for Composing Music in K-12 Music Classrooms* (New York, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 13;

Michael Searby, "Composers are Born and Not Made': Some Preliminary Thoughts on How to Construct a Pedagogy for Music Composition," *Journal of Music Pedagogy* 31 (2017).

John J. Carbon, "Toward a Pedagogy of Composition: Exploring Creative Potential," *College Music Symposium* 26 (1986): 112-113.

<sup>7</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines: Ideas for Composing Music in K-12 Music Classrooms*, 13.

take in conversations regarding compositional goals and whether teachers take students' input into account. Across the U.S., schools follow national or state standards which exhibit defined goals for education at K-12 programs.<sup>8</sup> There are, however differences between subjects. For instance, the standards for a subject like math include products that teachers may have an easier time grading; either a student successfully solves a polynomial or logarithmic function or not.<sup>9</sup> National standards for music composition, on the other hand, understandably have a more ambiguous relationship with goal-setting. Students could present vastly different pieces that might fulfill the national standard: "Describe and demonstrate multiple ways in which sounds and musical ideas can be used to represent extended sonic experiences or abstract ideas," meaning that the outcomes for music composition are generally more open-ended than correctly solving for  $x$  in a polynomial function.<sup>10</sup> Even for general music educators, there is a significant difference between teaching students to properly sing a sol-mi skip in solfege and guiding students toward their own idiosyncratic writing process. By examining and explicitly discussing goals in composition pedagogy, I intend to contribute to the discussions that Simon calls for, which may help teachers and students alike to understand their goals as well as the teaching and learning methods to reach them.<sup>11</sup>

By observing and interviewing a selected group of composition teachers and their students, I will attempt to understand how those teachers set goals with their students and how

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<sup>8</sup> "Algebra," Index - National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, accessed July 30, 2021,

<https://www.nctm.org/Standards-and-Positions/Principles-and-Standards/Algebra/>;

"2014 Music Standards," NAfME, April 1, 2021, <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Algebra," Index - National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, accessed July 30, 2021,

<https://www.nctm.org/Standards-and-Positions/Principles-and-Standards/Algebra/>.

<sup>10</sup> "2014 Music Standards," NAfME, April 1, 2021, <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>.

<sup>11</sup> Simon, 2.

they help students meet these goals. I will present multiple settings in which teachers and students grapple with compositional problems in the hopes that their solutions to those problems may provide some insight for younger, less experienced, or differently experienced teachers. More specifically, my aim is to help general music teachers as well as composition teachers discover or better grasp multiple approaches to teaching music composition through choosing, setting, pursuing, and meeting specific compositional goals.

## **Reasoning and Positionality**

As a teacher and composer, I feel a certain personal vulnerability that pushes me to take on this study: I'm not sure that I've ever set a concrete goal for my own composing other than to finish the piece that I'm working on and to make it better than the last in some way. Like many composers I know, I've wanted to develop my own compositional voice or style, but I've never set a goal specifically to find that voice. Maybe I just expected to find it at some point, but determining exactly when a composer has found their style is not an easy task. On top of that difficulty, developing a personal style is still an absurdly open-ended goal, albeit with a number of solutions limited to whatever the composer enjoys. It would probably be easier to say when a listener or group of listeners finds a piece of music interesting, either of which could represent some kind of success. But the composer then has to ask themselves: Who are the listeners? What will they think is interesting? What is "interesting" anyways? Does it matter how I feel about the music? Therefore, although writing music that listeners find interesting may seem like a worthy goal, it is an even more nebulous and open-ended goal than developing a compositional style.

## **Justification and Significance**

By setting clear and constructive goals, teachers can help their students grow and if the student is able to internalize and understand how to construct those goals, they can *continue*

growing on their own after their time with their teacher is over. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to discuss methods and perspectives from five composition teachers to uncover the ways these teachers and their students set goals as well as how these teachers guide their students toward reaching those goals. I intend to frame the practices which I observed in terms that teachers who are used to close-ended goals can understand and benefit from. The practices from the five participating teachers will ultimately provide five answers to the main research question guiding this study: How do music composition teachers help their students set and achieve goals? By relaying the five answers to this question, I hope to help other composition teachers, whether they are continuing or just beginning their pedagogical journeys.

## Overview

The next section of this dissertation discusses the literature on compositional pedagogy. This discussion presents ideas on common types of goals, as well as some basic ideas about goals based on John Hattie's model of goal-construction.<sup>12</sup> The following section on methods draws on the literature review to provide a framework for the analysis in Chapters 4-8 which present the case studies. Teachers looking for real-world teaching scenarios, the contexts that prompt them, solutions to those scenarios, and the reasoning behind those solutions can find that information in these five chapters. Chapter 9 uses the above analyses as a diving board into some commonalities between cases.

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<sup>12</sup> John Hattie, "Which Strategies Best Enhance Teaching and Learning in Higher Education?," in *Empirical Research in Teaching and Learning: Contributions from Social Psychology*, ed. Debra Mashek and Elizabeth Yost Hammer (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 134.

## Definitions

Throughout this dissertation, I will use some language that is specific to this study. For instance, I use the word “mentor” to refer to the primary teacher of each of the teachers interviewed for this project. I use the term mentor to differentiate between generations of teachers. By keeping these terms separate, I hope to reduce confusion when I refer to the teacher that I interviewed as opposed to the mentor who taught that teacher.

I have also chosen to use the phrase “research associate” to refer to those whom I interviewed and observed. I came across this title in an essay by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, an ethnomusicologist in the U.S., and I feel as though it shows that the people that I interact with are not objects to study.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, they are not just passive research subjects or informants but actively produce and theorize like me.

Additionally, I use the phrase “individual lessons” instead of “private lessons” to refer to one-on-one composition lessons, since, strictly speaking, these lessons were not private because of my observation. Beyond grammatical accuracy, I want to further delineate between private lessons and individual lessons because some of the teachers with whom I wanted to work did not want to invite a researcher into a safe space designed for them and their students. I deeply respect their decision to say no to participating in this research in order to maintain the sanctity of their students’ lesson space.

Other technical terms that require clarification include the phrase “process-oriented goals,” which refers to goals focusing on understanding systems and helping students understand

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<sup>13</sup> Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition,” in *Shadows in the Field* ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 151.

*how* or *why* something occurs. On the other hand, “product-oriented goals” refer to goals which focus on a final product and concern themselves with knowing *that* something occurs. For instance, the practice of composing “in the style of” a particular composer is typically a more product-oriented goal, because the aim is often to produce a piece that sounds like it could have been written by that composer.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, product- and process-orientation are not mutually exclusive, as I will explain in the next section.

“Model composition” is a term I use for composing “in the style of” a specific composer. When teachers give assignments to compose like Mozart or Beethoven, they are using model composition. But the goals of model composition are not always *exclusively* to understand the model composer’s language better. In fact, some teachers may use model composition to help students understand a particular compositional process or to learn something about how to construct music by using a process.

“Parameters” is a term I use throughout the dissertation to refer to a number of measurable factors which composers use to manipulate music. Common parameters include organization of pitch (melodically, harmonically, or modally), organization of rhythm (and by extension, meter), timbre, dynamics, register, texture, instrumentation, and form. There may be other ideas that composers and scholars use to think about the organization of music which may also be included under this term, but my interlocutors most often referred to one of these ideas when they discussed parameters.

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<sup>14</sup> This is not always the case, and this practice is therefore not *necessarily* product-oriented. If a teacher asks a student to compose in the style of Bach, they may be more interested in the process of writing counterpoint or what the student might learn as they write counterpoint.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

During my education as a prospective music teacher, I encountered several teaching philosophies related to practices such as vocal and instrumental pedagogy, ensemble pedagogy, and early childhood and elementary music pedagogy. However, I never encountered methods to teach students to compose, only moments where a mentor would mention that it would be possible or fun to teach a student the major scale by asking them to compose using one. So, as a teacher-in-training who was interested in teaching composition, I had to look into methods on my own. The following review comprises texts that discuss pedagogical approaches to composition.

Throughout this review, I look for patterns of compositional pedagogy contextualized in their time and compare these patterns between generations of teachers. Therefore, I build a few analytic spectra reflecting ideas that seemed important to the teachers at that time. The proposed spectra are lenses to understand teachers and demonstrate trends between generations. For instance, some early teachers argued that counterpoint should be taught rather than harmony while others argued that teachers should focus on compositional practice rather than theory. Both of these approaches focus on processes rather than particular products, outlining the first analytic spectrum (process- and product-orientation) I analyze below. However, this spectrum became less productive in the late twentieth century where teachers developed other concerns about the use of historical versus idiosyncratic models. So, as I continue I will present new spectra which explain how one generation's approach may differ categorically from the previous generation.

After looking over the literature, I discovered that many of these discussions on composition pedagogy present goals but ignore how to reach them. Or, alternatively, they describe a method without mentioning potential outcomes or long-term goals. In fact, a

significant portion of the literature aims to create a theory of compositional pedagogy rather than to build a practice. These pedagogues might focus on theory for a variety of reasons: a reliance on well-defined methods like counterpoint, a focus on more “teachable” historical subjects such as harmonic or post-tonal theory, or a general discomfort in choosing long-term creative goals for such a personal craft as composition. However, because I intend to fill this gap, I focus on both the concrete teaching practices and their long-term benefits, in this literature review I will remark on the goals that the authors focus on, any methods they suggest to teach composition students, and whether they include methods in a relationship with specified goals.

## **Early Twentieth Century Literature**

As far back as 1922, when Rosario Scalero and Theodore Baker published an article titled “A Contribution to the Pedagogy of Composition,” and certainly earlier than that, teachers have argued over different approaches to how composition should be taught.<sup>15</sup> Scalero and Baker were perturbed by the fact that “the system employed by Eduard Marxsen in teaching Brahms... [did] not differ... from those... which took shape after the death of Beethoven.”<sup>16</sup> What Scalero and Baker were skeptical about was the focus of composition teachers on harmony as opposed to counterpoint. When they thought about worthwhile compositional goals, they thought of mastering counterpoint as a more suitable goal for a composer than mastering harmony.

Here Scalero and Baker not only tacitly argued for goal formation in general, but they also mentioned and discussed two goals which they characterize and code in specific ways.

When Scalero and Baker wrote about teaching harmony they likened writing harmonic

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<sup>15</sup> Scalero and Baker represent the earliest English-language scholarship I could find on compositional pedagogy. Rosario Scalero and Theodore Baker “A Contribution to the Pedagogy of Composition,” *The Music Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1922).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

progressions to a formula which the composer repeats by rote. They described these formulas the same way a math teacher might describe memorizing multiplication tables: useful, but lacking the deeper understandings of how and why the system works.<sup>17</sup> A focus on knowing these harmonic formulations indicates a product-oriented, or didactic, goal. The other goal they discussed, understanding the underlying counterpoint from which the harmonic formulations are derived, would then be a process-oriented, or heuristic, goal.

In other words, if a process-oriented goal is “knowing how or why,” then a product-oriented goal is “knowing that.”<sup>18</sup> Continuing with our example, the product-oriented goal is knowing that Harmonic Formula *X* solves Harmonic Problem *Y* as opposed to knowing why Harmonic Formula *X* works and extracting only the functional parts which the composer wants. But process-oriented goals also go beyond musical understanding. Composition teachers may also pursue and teach process-oriented goals that help the composer understand themselves as a creator. Scalero and Baker mention this idea as well: “Whoever teaches the art, or intends to become a teacher, should be by nature and above all an artist. But he should strive with all his might to raise the pupil to a mastery of himself and his resources.”<sup>19</sup>

These two authors put forward three different potential goals for teaching composition: mastering counterpoint, mastering harmony, and mastering the self.<sup>20</sup> As I stated previously,

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<sup>17</sup> Scalero and Baker, 488.

<sup>18</sup> The spectrum of product- to process-oriented goals is one potential spectrum along which we can measure pedagogues’ goals. It is by no means the only spectrum, but it seems to represent some sort of pattern in these texts.

<sup>19</sup> Scalero and Baker, 494.

<sup>20</sup> These authors’ goals at the end tend toward instilling proper values, falling along the same lines as the Ancient Greeks who thought of working in particular modes as affecting an individual’s *ethos*. For instance “Plato endorsed two *harmoniai* – the Dorian and the Phrygian, because they fostered temperance and courage – and excluded others.”

Donald Jay Grout, J. Peter Burkholder, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th ed. (W.W. Norton, 2010), 9.

these goals are listed without offering a method to reach them. With these particular goals, there is a reliance on other theoretical frameworks, for instance, the wealth of books on counterpoint, that students could dive into. And the same can be said for harmony: there are a wide variety of books on how to improve a composer's use of harmonies. Mastering the self, on the other hand does not have the same surplus of texts, and Scalero and Baker provide no methods for how a composition teacher would go about helping their student do so beyond saying that the teacher should place restraints on the student as a means to help them ultimately attain liberty. This setting of restraints, although far from a concrete method, presents a taste of potential methods which others explore in later articles.

Leonid Sabaneev presented similar thoughts, writing about the difference between theory and practice, which fit neatly into the same paradigms as harmony and counterpoint.<sup>21</sup> Sabaneev even referred to theory, rather derisively, as “mechanically memorizing the old formulae.”<sup>22</sup> He set theory at odds with practice which he defined as an “aptitude for thinking in terms of science.”<sup>23</sup> The author went as far as to say it was common knowledge that composition students could graduate with a deep understanding of their theoretical exercises but without being able to “put two notes together neatly when [they try their] hand at independent creative work,” mirroring Scalero and Baker's skepticism for the ways in which composition was taught.<sup>24</sup>

And, in the same manner that Sabaneev's and Scalero and Baker's dichotomies mapped neatly onto process- and product-orientation paradigms, Sabaneev likewise expressed goals with barely a hint of methods. Although Sabaneev mentions that his students should be able to write

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<sup>21</sup> Leonid Sabaneev and S. W. Pring, “The Teaching of Composition,” *The Musical Times* 76, no. 1112 (1935).

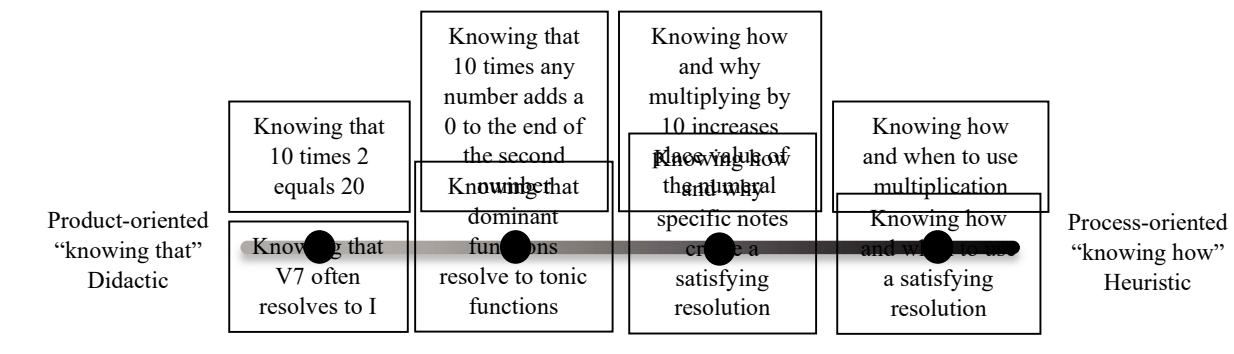
<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 881-882.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 881-882.

<sup>24</sup> Sabaneev and Pring, 882.

“music in definite modes or in a particular harmony or style,” he also comments that “it is always better to connect these exercises with the music of the present or the future.”<sup>25</sup> Sabaneev even goes on to mention that he sometimes eschews classical four-part harmonic writing to study figurations in order to help his students understand contemporary music that they may hear. Just as Scalero and Baker mentioned, Sabaneev has particular goals that he expects students to achieve, such as being able to write in a particular harmony or style. These goals may rely on style guides or theoretical analyses which may aid a student to understand how to write in a specific manner, just like with a textbook on counterpoint. Then Sabaneev mentions another goal “to connect these exercises with the music of the present or the future,” a wonderful skill which has no handbook for a student to study out of. Similar to mastering the self, this sounds like a fantastic goal for the student, to wed theory and analysis of contemporary music to the practice of writing it, but Sabaneev made no mention of how to go about learning or teaching it beyond studying harmonic figurations. So, although Sabaneev pointed out the gap in how music composition was taught, and how music was actually written, he ultimately did little to change that state of affairs.

Sabaneev’s indictment of the way that composition was taught in the 1920’s and 30’s does highlight a pattern in the pedagogy that teachers in the second half of the twentieth century



<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 883.

Figure 2.1 - Spectrum of Product- to Process-Oriented Goals

inherited. Namely that these early twentieth century teachers appeared to favor learning goals which were process-oriented instead of product-oriented. But to be clear, although these authors set up dichotomies of harmony versus counterpoint or theory versus practice, the mastery of these domains as goals exists on a *spectrum* between process-oriented or product-oriented, as I have depicted with Figure 2.1. They are not simply one or the other. Moreover, this apparent preference for process-oriented goals does not mean that process-oriented goals are preferential to product-oriented goals. In fact, Sabaneev even hints that both theory and practice together *could* aid a composer. However, this spectrum will continue being a useful lens as I examine the goals professed throughout the rest of this literature review, and it may continue to be useful as I begin analyzing the teaching goals and methods of my research associates.

## Mid Twentieth Century Literature

Arnold Schoenberg and Nadia Boulanger were iconic compositional teachers of the twentieth century. Schoenberg argued that the only way to teach composition might be to allow students to “[proceed] gradually by absorbing the cultural achievements of [their] predecessors.”<sup>26</sup> This historical approach to composition teaching reveals itself through Schoenberg’s use of model composition as a teaching method, which many modern composition teachers argue against. However, many of his students praised him as an excellent teacher, among them John Cage, who believed that Schoenberg “put his students in touch with musical principles.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Schoenberg’s approach contained elements of both process-oriented

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<sup>26</sup> Crawford, 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

goal (as the term “musical principles” suggests) and product-oriented goals (as model composition indicates).<sup>28</sup> It appears that Schoenberg led his students through model composition with the intention that they would understand the principles and the reasoning that governed those composers’ compositions. He even wrote that the idea behind teaching his students principles of harmony was so that that they would “be able to apply these [principles], not only to phrases, but also to many other segments,” such as medium- and larger-scale forms.<sup>29</sup>

Schoenberg was deeply invested in building and maintaining unique compositional voices in his pupils. He did not show exercises in his own style and offered feedback “in whatever personal style the student was using...”<sup>30</sup>. And so, between encouraging students to compose in the style of Beethoven and correcting students’ examples of counterpoint in the student’s style, Schoenberg reveals that a mastery of Beethoven’s style was not necessarily the point of the exercise. In *Models for Beginners in Composition*, Schoenberg wrote that “The student should realize that these models show merely **one way** of approach to the technique of composing.”<sup>31</sup> [Emphasis in the original.] Therefore, the body of Schoenberg’s teaching suggests that his students began to find musical principles which felt significant to them through an examination of the cultural achievements of their predecessors. Essentially, Schoenberg wanted his students to understand Beethoven and Brahms’ compositional reasoning to inform their decision-making process rather than to reproduce materials in specific styles.

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<sup>28</sup> Schoenberg seemed to focus on Beethoven and Brahms as model composers. For a definition of model composition, please see the “Definitions” section in Chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Models for Beginners in Composition: Musical Examples* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1943): 3.

<sup>30</sup> Crawford, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Schoenberg, *Models for Beginners in Composition: Musical Examples*, 4.

Among the pedagogues in this literature review, Schoenberg stands out as one who provided methods to improve compositionally, through counterpoint and analysis. And although he did not discuss the goals that those methods might achieve, he certainly understood the importance of exploring the products of other composers and the development of a student composer's voice. As such, he employed a mixture of product- and process-oriented methods, although his reasoning seemed to bias him toward a process-orientation.

To speculate on the potential goals of Schoenberg's pedagogy, we can read through some more of his thoughts. In *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, he argued that composers should "Change the method of variation frequently. Try each method several times. Join the best sketches to produce others and improve them until the end result is satisfactory."<sup>32</sup> Here Schoenberg describes how students should remain flexible and open-minded in pursuit of something which they enjoy. These ideas imply open-ended and idiosyncratic approaches and indicate more broadly the process-oriented concepts which suffuse Schoenberg's teaching. To further reify this process-orientation, Leonard Stein, a Schoenberg scholar, wrote "Schoenberg ... liked to describe his method of working in the class as 'proceeding systematically,' that is, trying every possible solution in turn," which "has the ... practical aim of encouraging the student to discover for himself every *possible* solution or consideration of a given problem with ever-widening limits."<sup>33</sup> [Emphasis in the original.] This systematic approach presents a fitting segue into Boulanger's teaching which is even more intently focused upon the choices a student

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<sup>32</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*. ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 117.

<sup>33</sup> Arnold Schoenberg and Leonard Stein. *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint*. Pacific Palisades, CA: Belmont Music Publishers, 2003, xi.



composer makes and winnowing those choices down until all that remains is the composer's voice.

In David Ward-Steinman's quasi-autobiographical article on his time studying in France with Boulanger, he comments on how his process changed under her instruction. Ward-Steinman writes that when he began studying, he was too easily satisfied with his own music, but that over time the way that he wrote music changed. He sums up Boulanger's approach to the pedagogy of composition as a "systematic exhaustion of all the possibilities within a given musical context..."<sup>34</sup> This process apparently influenced Ward-Steinman considering the change from easy satisfaction to understanding what he calls a "meta-lesson:" "that there is really no point at which we should stop growing and declare ourselves satisfied with whatever level of ability we have attained... There is always more to learn."<sup>35</sup> This change of perspective underlines a change in the understanding of the compositional process, that the student understands that the product is never really finished. Throughout his article, Ward-Steinman continues to remark on this particular goal: to remove the excess in the music until all that remains is what the composer truly wants. Boulanger's method used is not particularly clear from the outset but can be characterized as a developing a critical ear and constantly adopting a critical stance.

U.S. musicologist E. Douglas Bomberger mirrors these statements by quoting Copland, "[Boulanger] had a teacher's consuming need to know all music functions, and it was that kind of inquiring attitude that registered on the minds of her students."<sup>36</sup> Bomberger goes on to reveal,

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<sup>34</sup> David Ward-Steinman, "On Composing: Doing It, Teaching It, Living It," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 19, no. 1 (2011): 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ward-Steinman, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Bomberger, 55.

with more clarity, a different facet of the goal Boulanger had for her students: she “concentrated primarily on the materials of music and, through these materials strove to equip each student to attain [their] own creative goals.”<sup>37</sup> This type of goal-setting, which aligns the teacher’s goals with the student’s through centering the student’s compositional goal, will begin to recur more in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. And although equipping students to achieve their own goals is process-oriented, by centering the student’s preferences, this approach decenters the product- versus process-orientation dichotomy. It focuses on equipping students with an understanding of their compositional process to the point that they can create whatever product they would like. The question then becomes whether the teacher’s goals for the student focus on an understanding of historical styles or idiosyncratic styles.

Boulanger focused on tasks such as having students “reduce orchestra scores at the piano,” sometimes at sight, “play Renaissance choral music in four to six different clefs” simultaneously, or even knowing “every note of *Don Giovanni* by heart.”<sup>38</sup> These exercises are all not only product-oriented but are also focused on historical European compositional styles. But just as with Schoenberg’s teaching, these tasks may lead to similarly profound revelations for students when they examine the works of model composers over a long period of time. These product-tasks, including a long list of counterpoint exercises, when used critically and in new and unique ways, may provide students with processes or figurations that they could use to develop their own idiosyncratic style. Boulanger appears, then, to have had specific larger

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<sup>37</sup> Bomberger, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ward-Steinman, 11-12.

process-oriented and idiosyncratic learning intentions for her students, even if realized through smaller product-oriented and historically focused lessons.

## Late Twentieth Century Literature

Teaching in the shadow of Schoenberg and Boulanger, the pedagogues of the late twentieth century continued with the trend of teaching students how expert composers made decisions. But rather than presenting specific composers, Otto E. Laske and John Carbon attempted to generalize or synthesize the approaches of various expert composers. Laske, for instance, argues that we should be “teaching the heuristic processes of experts.”<sup>39</sup> Schoenberg and Boulanger likely would have agreed with this goal. In fact, understanding the heuristic process of experts appears to be one possible interpretation of Schoenberg and Boulanger’s goals when they focused on model composition and counterpoint. However, Laske broadens Schoenberg’s and Boulanger’s approaches, stating rather plainly that the goal of teaching composition is to help novice composers reach the level of experts.<sup>40</sup> Thus, he focuses on the differences in practices and tasks between expert and novice composers.

For instance, from Laske’s point of view, novice composers may struggle to keep a central idea or focus in a piece, whereas an expert composer writes formally cohesive pieces.<sup>41</sup> By discussing goals linked to specific methods, he diverges from Schoenberg and Boulanger. Instead of arguing for the importance of counterpoint or following particular model composers, Laske outlines compositional tasks that expert composers use and ranks them from easiest to hardest. For instance, in Laske’s taxonomy of composition tasks, “Transformation Tasks,” such

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<sup>39</sup> Otto E. Laske, “Toward a Theory of Musical Instruction,” *Journal of New Music Research* 5, no. 3 (1976): 127.

<sup>40</sup> Laske, 128.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

as varying a melody to suit a particular mood, are the easiest tasks for a novice composer to accomplish.<sup>42</sup> He reasons that these tasks are the simplest because most of the information can be “given” by a teacher. On the other hand, Laske argues that “Creative Composition” is the hardest task because the composer must invent most of the goals and methods to accomplish those goals in a historically informed way: hence, Laske’s use of the term “evolved.”<sup>43</sup>

Figure 2.2 - Laske’s Taxonomy of Composition Tasks<sup>44</sup>

By creating this spectrum, Laske outlines a trajectory for student composers to move along from task to task until they operate in a similar manner to expert composers. Through this trajectory, Laske presents a goal, albeit a rather diffuse one: understand the methods and

Task	A Transformation Task	B Assembly Task	C 1 Transcription Task	C 2 Variant Production Task	D Free Composition	E Creative Composition
1 TOPGOAL	Given	Given	Inferred	Invented	Invented	Evolved
2 DIFFERENCES	Inferred (1,7)	Inferred (incomplete)	Inferred	Inferred	Evolved (partly determined)	Evolved (undetermined)
3 (MODIFICATION) OPERATORS	Given	Given	Invented	Inferred	Invented	Invented
4 TABLE OF DIFFERENCES	Inferred (1,7,2)	Inferred	Inferred	Inferred	Evolved (partly determined)	Evolved (undetermined)
5 TABLE OF CONNECTIONS	Inferred (2,3)	Inferred	Invented	Invented	Invented	Invented
6 REPERTORY (STIMULUS CONFIGURATION)	Given (complete)	Invented or Evolved (incomplete)	Given (incomplete)	Given (complete)	Evolved (i.e. incomplete)	Evolved (i.e. incomplete)
7 CURRENT LAW (SEMANTIC SPECIFICATION OF THE STIMULUS CONFIGURATION)	Inferred (6,1) (complete)	Inferred (incomplete)	Inferred (complete)	Inferred (complete)	Inferred (incomplete)	Inferred (incomplete)

operations of expert composers generally. The methods for achieving this goal involve

<sup>42</sup> Laske, 127-128.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 139. For further explanation of the above table, refer to Laske’s “Toward a Theory of Musical Instruction,” especially pages 128-132.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 128.

completing increasingly harder tasks, moving from 1) variation of an extant melody, harmony, etc. to 2) construction of one parameter, such as a chordal scheme, to 3) creatively transcribing abstract musical information into a piece of music to 4) inventing music within a specified framework to 5) creating music whole cloth with a unique style.<sup>45</sup> Through these tasks, Laske defines his teaching method. However, this teaching method is once again vague; the tasks themselves are not particularly well defined, and it is unclear when a student would “graduate” to the next level. Additionally, this method begins with the assumption that the novice composer already has a strong understanding of music theory and ends with large leaps in skill from task to task. This method also presupposes that the teacher is an expert in music composition, which *could* be true, but limits the usability for prospective or general music teachers who may not know how to compose variations let alone write pieces which exhibit a unique and personally-evolved style.

John Carbon, a composer and teacher, takes a similar approach to Laske. In an article discussing the failings of particular theories of composition pedagogy, Carbon argues that many theories tend to consider themselves closer to hard sciences, sideline practice, or ignore the student’s own approach to composition.<sup>46</sup> Sabaneev and Scalero and Baker argued similar points about pedagogies which they likened to hard sciences and argued against an over-reliance on music theory. And although Schoenberg didn’t discourage students when they wrote in their own style, he didn’t seem to empower them to develop a style either. A similar accusation can be levelled against Boulanger. Her teaching emphasized counterpoint and pushed many students through the same initial lessons either to assess fit with Boulanger’s teaching style or to weed out

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<sup>45</sup> Laske, 132-140.

<sup>46</sup> Carbon, 112-113.

students who were not deeply invested in composition. These teaching techniques were obviously effective; however, Carbon might argue against this style of teaching on the grounds that it might give rise to a teacher-student relationship lacking in personal involvement and empathy.<sup>47</sup> Carbon’s methods, on the other hand, are specifically designed with the student composer in mind.

Carbon’s initial goal is remarkably similar to Laske’s: to examine the compositional processes of a “mature (perhaps, say, a historically important) composer” and equip students with those processes.<sup>48</sup> [Parenthesis in the original.] Carbon wrote that novice composers often

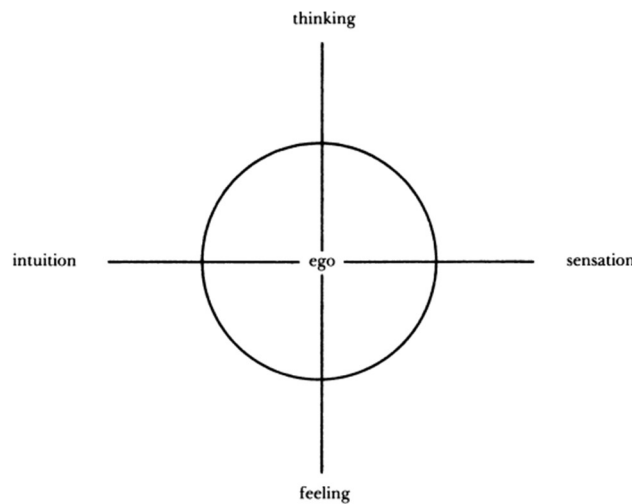


Figure 2.3 – Carbon’s Four Approaches to the Creative Process<sup>49</sup>

understand only three of the major four compositional processes outlined in this article (see Figure 2.3), with the fourth being a “blind spot,” and expert composers as having and using all four processes, even if they do not use each process equally. To be clear, Carbon acknowledges

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<sup>47</sup> Carbon, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 114.

that there are as many approaches to composition as there are composers, but that these four major processes, or paradigms as Carbon calls them, are especially worth noting. These approaches are: 1) a “thinking” approach, characterized by processes such as serialization and counterpoint, 2) a “feeling” approach, characterized by an expression, not a depiction, of emotion, 3) a “sensing” approach, characterized by the depiction of something external, such as in programmatic music, and 4) an “intuitive” approach, characterized by processes such as aleatory or stream-of-consciousness composition.<sup>50</sup>

After Carbon outlines his goal to integrate the novice composer with all four paradigms, he goes on to describe his method. The main path towards maturity for each composer begins with identifying and refining the paradigm they best align with. After the student becomes comfortable with the initial approach, they then expand to the adjacent two paradigms. For instance, if a student worked well with a “thinking” approach, they would next expand to “intuiting” and “sensing” approaches. Finally, they use and refine the approach which is their “blind spot,” ultimately enabling the student to incorporate any paradigm for any piece they write. Continuing the above example, after understanding “intuiting” and “sensing” approached, the student would go on to practice a “feeling” approach.

Compared to their predecessors, Laske’s and Carbon’s methods are both process-oriented. However, these two do not align in terms of their focus on historical versus idiosyncratic styles. Although Laske’s methods focus more on developing the student’s

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<sup>50</sup> Carbon, 113-117. Carbon notes that these processes are based on Jungian psychology, which is why these terms may sound familiar. As my own note: teachers might not value these approaches equally, and these approaches might not be equally valuable. Certainly, historically, “thinking” approaches seem most common in modern pedagogy. Additionally, “feeling” approaches seem difficult to differentiate from both “sensing” and “intuitive” approaches, although the latter seem distinct from one another.

idiosyncratic style than those of Schoenberg, Laske still takes inspiration from a platonic expert composer who may be a product of the cultural achievements of their predecessors. Additionally, Laske's compositional tasks directly reference historical styles. Carbon, on the other hand, establishes his approaches based on a platonic expert composer but then uses these paradigms to assess the student's approach. This focus on the student's approach more clearly demonstrates how a teacher might preserve *and* encourage a student to write using an idiosyncratic process and within an idiosyncratic style.

## **Early Twenty-First Century Literature**

The literature thus far depicts teachers as generally process-oriented, with emphasis on idiosyncrasy over historicity, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century. My review continues to look at methods from each source in terms of idiosyncrasy, historicity, process-, and product-oriented goals to prepare for the analysis of teachers participating in the present study. Greg Simon presents similar arguments to the earlier authors discussed above: he argues for particular goals and again voices a distaste for the state of composition pedagogy. However, Simon's arguments about goals require significantly less interpretation than the authors listed above due to the plain language in which he writes his goals. He clearly outlines that "In [his] composition pedagogy, [he] has two prominent goals: (1) to help a student express most effectively those things he or she is hoping to communicate musically (that is, their compositional intention), and (2) to help a student develop strategies for creating new material that can aid him or her in overcoming writer's block."<sup>51</sup> [Parenthesis in the original.] This directness is unprecedented in the sources discussed above.

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<sup>51</sup> Simon, 2.



The first goal which Simon writes about, helping a student effectively express whatever it is that they want to express, is both product-oriented because it concerns itself with the ultimate expression and process-oriented because the teacher focuses their students on *how* to express ideas. Therefore, this goal leans toward process-orientation, but is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. On the other hand, this goal is more idiosyncratic than historical because of its focus on what the student wants to express. The second goal, developing strategies to create new material, is the inverse: it is absolutely process-oriented because it focuses on strategies and understanding systems, but the strategies presented could be based on either historical processes, such as counterpoint, or idiosyncratic processes that the student and teacher develop together.

Simon goes on to describe his complex opinion of model composition, referencing several other composition teachers, including Arnold Schoenberg. Simon even makes an argument for model composition similar to Laske's: by giving the student a framework of a form or a particular style, the student can focus on other compositional problems because that major parameter has already been chosen for them. However, Simon goes on to imply that composition studios in the U.S. default to focusing on the European classical tradition at the expense of other genres. Not only might there be students that are simply interested in other genres, but that "more musicians from non-Western Art music backgrounds [are entering] music programs" and that "a student's existing familiarity with classical music and its formal conventions is less assured" the more this pattern continues.<sup>52</sup> Far from being upset about this change of demographic, Simon simply argues that if a teacher's only tool for teaching young composers is model composition,

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<sup>52</sup> Simon, 3.

they are going to find their students less and less able and willing to learn. Here, Simon begins arguing for a new teaching method.

The method which he proposes focuses on an understanding of form through narrative. Simon argues that because storytelling is universal, teachers can productively communicate about music with any student through the use of narrative.<sup>53</sup> To approach this potential universality, he draws on formal designs from “The Hero’s Journey” discussed in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell.<sup>54</sup> Simon’s idea is that this form of storytelling is so ubiquitous that it can be understood and used by most if not all students to construct pieces of music which are formally cohesive. Simon further remarks that this method will be most helpful for students whose pieces have “a limited sense of interconnectedness between the various musical sections” or whose “whole piece may feel like “noodling” and lack a sense of direction or motivation.”<sup>55</sup> Clearly Simon values a sense of formal cohesion.

In his anecdotes, Simon gives two examples of using this method to help students experiencing writer’s block, both of which involve expanding on ideas that the students had already written.<sup>56</sup> These anecdotes support the idea that Simon’s method focuses on helping students develop idiosyncratic processes, albeit using a historical narrative framework. Furthermore, by going back through what they had written previously, the students could understand how to differentiate sections and create a feeling of progression throughout their pieces based on their understanding of narrative structure. By gathering experience

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<sup>53</sup> Simon, 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> Simon, 4;  
Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Fontana Press, 1949).

<sup>55</sup> Simon, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Simon, 14-20.

differentiating sections and trying new formal approaches, Simon also clearly wanted his students to better understand specific compositional processes.

Betty Anne Younker falls into the same camp as Simon when it comes to understanding and communicating goals. In her article, Younker discusses feedback at length, and specifically the process of engaging in teacher-directed versus student-directed feedback. She characterizes teacher-directed feedback as feedback which “identifies teachers as the sources for recognizing and defining the problem and for generating, evaluating, and refining solutions.”<sup>57</sup> Student-directed feedback, on the other hand, enables students to “have ownership over framing and solving problems, increasing the aesthetic appeal of the composition, and refining the craftsmanship of the details.”<sup>58</sup> Essentially, when Younker argues for student-directed feedback, she argues for students to have and express compositional agency as they learn. Teachers would then take on a role guiding students by helping them answer their questions, describing their compositions, and asking questions to motivate further thinking. Ultimately, Younker argues for this method as a path towards another explicit goal: “to increase opportunities for students to independently make and assess their own musical decisions while composing.”<sup>59</sup>

Both this method and the goal which it supports are undeniably idiosyncratic because they center the student as the primary agent in the learning process. Additionally, this method and goal are designed to build independence in the student. Of course, the method and goal are not solely idiosyncratic, the student may ask questions or give descriptions which point towards

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<sup>57</sup> Betty Anne Younker, “The Nature of Feedback in a Community of Composing,” in *Why and How to Teach Music Composition: A New Horizon for Music Education* ed. Maud Hickey (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2003), 234.

<sup>58</sup> Younker, 234.

<sup>59</sup> Younker, 235.

historical models. However, when the student directs the focus historically, the method is uniquely idiosyncratic *and* historical, neither compromising the other.

Both Younker and Simon articulate clear goals. This open communication about goals represents another trend that continued from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century. However, Younker and Simon took the more vague or interpretive goals which Laske and Carbon put forward and made them easy to understand for the reader and the student. “Understanding the heuristic process of experts” may not be something that average 19-year-old students can immediately understand, let alone accomplish. “Independently [making and assessing] their own musical decisions while composing,” on the other hand, is not only more comprehensible, but also more feasible. This communicability of goals is another lens that will be useful when examining different teacher’s approaches to discussing goals, and Younker and Simon both appear to value that communicability highly, given their methods which are designed to be intelligible to every student and to center the student in the process of learning.

The next author, Sam Reese, presents several situations in which expert composition teachers give feedback and outlining major issues with giving feedback in an open-ended activity such as composition. He initially outlines similar points to those that I made in the introduction of this paper. Namely, Reese comments on the fact that in “band, choir, or orchestra rehearsals, the teacher knows clearly what the ensemble members should change in their playing or singing and can give direct instructions on what students should do to improve.”<sup>60</sup> He goes on to classify composition teaching as fundamentally different from the product-oriented approach of a choir rehearsal, saying “There are many ways to fulfill a composing assignment and unpredictable

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<sup>60</sup> Reese, 212.

composing problems and possibilities to take into account with each student.”<sup>61</sup> Reese is certainly not alone in this kind of thinking, Simon expressed the same idea:

Although composition is usually classified as an applied study, like clarinet or cello or voice performance, teaching strategies are much less defined because composition study lacks the clear goals of other applied areas. Most applied teachers can identify a set of benchmarks for student mastery that are largely agreed upon by the field at large. For example, violin teachers would likely agree that every undergraduate performance major should finish their degree by learning at least one Bach partita. However, to the best of my knowledge, no such consensus exists on what the educational benchmarks should be for an undergraduate composition major.<sup>62</sup>

Reese then argues, in harmony with Simon, that ultimately “Teaching composition requires us to adopt a disposition that emphasizes inquiry and creativity rather than to seek closure and judge by strict criteria.”<sup>63</sup> This is certainly a process-oriented frame of mind, although Reese also points out that relying solely on heuristic or process-oriented teaching methods will deprive the student of the full benefit of their teacher’s knowledge of historical practices.

The above quote also provides the overarching compositional goal which Reese puts forward: to model a disposition of inquiry and creativity for students so that they can approach problems that are more personally meaningful for them. Similar to Reese’s process-orientation with an acknowledgment of the utility of product-oriented tasks, this approach appears to focus more on idiosyncrasy than historicity while acknowledging that students may develop interest in or stumble upon historical models or methods.

Reese uses four methods:

“First, [expert] teachers stress the importance of initially responding to the student’s whole work and trying to grasp the overall expressive character, or musical meaning, that the student is creating... Second, these experts recommend sensitivity to students’

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<sup>61</sup> Reese, 212.

<sup>62</sup> Simon, 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Reese, 230.

readiness to receive critiques, which differs for each individual and at different points in their composing... Third, experienced teachers understand that neither a primarily directive, didactic approach nor a heavily facilitative, heuristic manner is adequate on its own..." and "Fourth, veteran teachers recognize that appropriate responses to student compositions are strongly related to the purpose of the composition within the larger education of the student."<sup>64</sup>

Many of these methods, or in some cases frames of thought, involve understanding the student's perspective and their short-term and long-term goals. For instance, the teacher's focus on grasping the student's musical meaning represents the intention of understanding the student's idiosyncratic approach as well as a willingness to communicate about musical goals. This first method is equal measures of product- and process-orientation because it deals with the product, the student's composition, itself, but as Reese argues, to course correct, the teacher should facilitate inquiry instead of judging, which is process-oriented. The second method is focused on idiosyncrasy, and more so than the other methods listed, is also focused on the act of communication. It represents less a teaching method and more a teaching skill which could be applied to many methods. The third method, when viewed in the context of the entire essay, indicates that sometimes a teacher should offer their expertise on historical approaches to composition without forcing the student to leave their idiosyncratic approach.

For Reese, idiosyncrasy appears to be correlated with process-oriented approaches, and historical approaches with product-orientation. That is not to say that Reese believes these correlations always exist, but that the idiosyncratic approaches appear to coincide with process-oriented approaches more often than with product-oriented approaches. Additionally, although Reese argues for the use of both heuristic and didactic approaches, he spends significantly more time discussing the benefits of heuristic approaches. The last method is, once again, directly tied

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<sup>64</sup> Reese, 217-219.

to the ultimate goals of the student and their education, summed up by an adage about teaching prose writing: “teach the student, not the paper.” This method is not necessarily focused on idiosyncrasy or historicity. It does, however, indicate a desire on Reese’s part that teachers respond in ways which are most helpful to the student in the long run. As opposed to focusing on a specific composition, the teacher should orient the student to think critically about the process which yields that product.

Finally, although none of these methods are particularly concrete, communicating these methods and goals with students could facilitate communication between teachers and students. Ultimately, many of Reese’s points mirror Younker’s. By arguing that teachers should “adopt a disposition that emphasizes inquiry and creativity rather than to seek closure and judge by strict criteria,” Reese suggests that students should do the same. This goal is not so far removed from Younker’s goal of students “Independently [making and assessing] their own musical decisions while composing.” The only critical difference between the two is that Reese’s goal is less student-centered because it less explicitly involves the student’s agency.

Rob Deemer takes the position that “asking students to compose ‘in the style of’... [does] not effectively prepare students to explore the entire creative process.”<sup>65</sup> Deemer echoes Laske in this line of thinking. He argues that operating within a given framework does not adequately prepare students to compose without any framework. Throughout the majority of the article, Deemer focuses on the need for composition to be taught and presents some challenges which

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<sup>65</sup> Rob Deemer “Reimagining the Role of Composition in Music Teacher Education,” *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 3 (2016): 43. Deemer’s article more broadly focuses on the challenges to teaching composition and why we should do so. At the end he presents several feasible and productive solutions to help composition become a more broadly taught skill. Along with these solutions, he briefly presents the method which I discuss.

prevent composition pedagogy becoming widespread. At the end, however, Deemer discusses some solutions to the bureaucratic issues preventing composition from being taught widely and presents some teaching methods.

One of Deemer's methods involves the students observing his creative process by watching him compose "without a net."<sup>66</sup> There are many ways in which this method can be useful: broaching questions about how Deemer mediates his process, why he makes specific decisions, as well as seeing him grapple with some musical questions. Each of these possibilities could show the students different ideas and facets involved in his process; however, in this essay, Deemer doesn't confront how students might adapt his compositional reasoning to their own work.

Ultimately, Deemer's method does reveal a significant amount about *one person's* compositional processes. However, this method does not necessarily prompt students to think beyond that individual's process and could lead students to adopt the process as opposed to the reasoning behind it. Herein, a problem arises with the process- and product-orientation dichotomy. Deemer's method is process-oriented because of its focus on the compositional choices and the reasoning behind those choices. But the students are learning by imitating a single process and therefore, the process becomes the product. Likewise, this approach is neither idiosyncratic to the student nor historical to canonical composers. Rather, this method situates Deemer as the expert composer to be imitated. Therefore, this practice can neither be characterized well on either of the spectra I have used thus far.

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<sup>66</sup> Deemer, 45.



So, I propose a new spectrum focused on teacher- vs. student-centricity to understand Deemer's method and subsequent goal. This spectrum is useful because even though it conceptually overlaps with idiosyncrasy and historicity (student-centered approaches are necessarily idiosyncratic), this lens can also describe teachers who do not fit neatly into either category. Deemer appears to guide his students through his process, which seems teacher-centered. To be fair, Deemer lists this method among several others which focus on helping students build critical skills. So, this method could fit into a student-centered curriculum as a way to develop good rapport with students through vulnerability, and to show the students that composition can often be non-linear and frustrating. However, this is just one possible goal among the many that this teaching method could support.

Lapidaki is much more explicit when she discusses her goals using the above method. Interestingly, Lapidaki touches on the same method that Deemer uses, composing in front of students, or using the teacher's compositional process as a blueprint. However, similar to Schoenberg, Lapidaki argues that students should examine the creative concerns of influential professional composers in order to "liberate their own practices of critical thinking in music and dare to create innovative music."<sup>67</sup> Lapidaki seems to agree with Schoenberg's goal of understanding prior cultural achievements but more explicitly argues that students should build past their predecessors. Furthermore, Lapidaki seems to agree with Deemer that students should understand their teacher's compositional process, but goes beyond his recommendation by writing, "music teachers' compositional processes should not become the prototypes of critical

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<sup>67</sup> Lapidaki, 107

thinking in music but the trigger of productive musical conflict, resistance, transformation, and transgression.”<sup>68</sup>

Although Deemer and Lapidaki’s arguments begin in the same place, they seem to have different end goals. Lapidaki wants teachers to focus on the moment when students move beyond what has been done in the past. She argues that students are not required to accept the past as a foundation, that they can transgress previous cultural achievements, or accept them, as they choose. This is a significantly more idiosyncratic take on a similar teaching method because, although the tasks are comparable, the pedagogical framing around the task is fundamentally different. Whereas Schoenberg uses Beethoven as a model, and Deemer uses himself as a much more complex model, Lapidaki argues that Beethoven’s or Deemer’s processes should only be the beginning, and that the student should take, leave, or modify those processes to fit their needs.

This method, as well as the goal to “liberate [student] practices of critical thinking in music and dare to create innovative music,” are idiosyncratic. They are also student-centered since the student is encouraged not only to resist, transform, or transgress the processes that they learn about, but also to “develop their musical individuality, by exerting control over their own musical thinking and learning.”<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that students should always resist or transgress their teachers, but that students are obliged to consider the information they receive and how they will use it. The major difference between Lapidaki and Deemer’s methods is that Lapidaki expressly communicates that students should think critically about the processes which

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<sup>68</sup> Lapidaki, 110.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

they inherit. This situates her method as unambiguously process-oriented because there is more than one model to examine. Finally, this goal is not only communicable to the student; it also builds them up as a creative agent. With this approach, the teacher doesn't just say, "make the music that you would like to make." The teacher gives their student something to focus on by further guiding, "create the music that you would like to create through a variety of diverse processes to see what you enjoy about each one." This not only tells the students what they are expected to do, but how they are expected to do it and why, in an open-ended way.

The final author I will discuss and analyze here is Maud Hickey. Hickey has conducted an incredible amount of research on music composition including, but not limited to, using technology to increase student interaction with composition, the use of professional development to help general music educators feel more comfortable teaching composition, frameworks for performing ensembles to compose, and assessing creativity. She has two books, one of which features Sam Reese and Betty Anne Younker, among others, and another which compiles a series of composition lessons for K-12 classrooms, many of which could apply to undergraduates. Not only does this book represent an excellent list of composition lesson plans, Hickey writes in a format which is readily discernable to prospective teachers, general music educators, and composition teachers alike. Many of the above authors are clear about their educational and compositional goals for their students. However, Hickey is one particular author who not only discusses why composition should be taught, she clearly outlines her goals and how to reach them, and provides lesson plans which are *designed* to be comprehensible to any educator. Hickey is the *only* author among those on this list who intentionally designs lesson plans to be approachable for band teachers, choir directors, prospective teachers, general music educators, and composition teachers as well. Part of the reason that I originally wanted to pursue this study

was because I had not seen any research like Hickey's, and I knew it would be helpful for teachers everywhere. That is the gap I aim to fill with this research.

For the purposes of this literature review, I will mainly focus on Hickey's book, *Music Outside the Lines*, which contains a concentrated mixture of methods and goals for students. However, before looking at Hickey's book, I will discuss another article from 1999 which contains an important idea related to goal communicability. This article focuses on rubrics for assessing music composition. Although assessment of goal achievement is beyond the scope of this dissertation, to evaluate a student, there cannot only be a goal, there must also be criteria to know whether that goal has been reached. Additionally, some teachers, like Hickey and Hattie argue that students should not only know what the goal is, but also know what success looks like.<sup>70</sup> Understanding how to be successful on a given assignment represents another layer of goal communicability. Not only does the teacher explain why a particular goal is worthy and how to accomplish it, but also what that success looks like. Hickey's article argues that "Some students have an easier time composing within well-defined limits, while others prefer the freedom of few specifications."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, approaching goals with students should take into account their needs for instruction and goal-construction. If the student is involved in this process, then the goals set between teacher and student will be highly student-oriented and idiosyncratic. Not only that, but because the student and teacher decide in tandem, these goals must definitionally be highly communicable.

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<sup>70</sup> Maud Hickey, "Assessment Rubrics for Music Composition," *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 4 (1999); Hattie, "Which Strategies Best Enhance Teaching and Learning in Higher Education?," 130.

<sup>71</sup> Hickey, "Assessment Rubrics for Music Composition," 27.

In *Composing Outside the Lines*, Hickey focuses on the K-12 classroom; however, many of the lessons, and not only the more advanced ones, would be right at home in an undergraduate curriculum.<sup>72</sup> Within, Hickey argues that “Our ultimate goal should be to get students to become critical listeners as well as creative music explorers on their own. To do this, we need to imbed creative and exploratory activities such as music composition and improvisation into the daily music classroom instruction.”<sup>73</sup> Although this goal is beyond the scope of *how* to teach composition, Hickey argues *why* composition is important for students to learn before diving into how to learn it. In terms of communicating a goal, she ticks all the boxes. However, this is the tip of the iceberg for Hickey. Because the entire book lays out her thoughts on composition, there are several other facets of this goal which Hickey describes such as understanding unity/variety, balance, timbre, density, pitch, and form, all of which come with different teaching methods, and impeccably clear and communicable goals.

Instead of trying to unpack every goal, looking at the overall process will be more beneficial for this research. Hickey argues that students should understand five primary areas: 1) defining, listening to, and exploring music, 2) inspiration and identity, 3) musical form, 4) musical elements, and 5) big elements, which includes ideas like unity/variety. Hickey’s premise is that to become more developed composers, students should understand all five of these areas. Some of these areas are more historically-based, some are more idiosyncratic, some focus on the process of composition, but many blend these ideas together.

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<sup>72</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Defining, listening to, and exploring music are all process-oriented and student-centered activities. In this section Hickey discusses the ideas which come before music is written. Hickey argues that these actions are something that student and professional composers do continuously as they work. The acts of listening to and subsequently exploring music are fundamentally process-oriented, which Hickey explains by arguing that “The process of brainstorming and messing around with many ideas before finding the right one is more important than finding the perfect product.”<sup>74</sup> Composers go through this process whenever they sit down to write, and interestingly, Hickey appears to be of two minds about this process. On the one hand she quotes Bernstein who wrote, “All musicians write their music in terms of all of the music that preceded them.”<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, Hickey also remarks that “For student composers, listening at the level of the musical plane adds to their subconscious repertoire of tools for their own composing.”<sup>76</sup> This problematizes the spectrum between idiosyncratic and historical approaches by arguing that a student’s idiosyncrasies are, to some extent, derived from their position in history. There is a position in history that they can construct and reinforce through their choices of what music to listen to, but their agency does not remove them from their historical position.

Inspiration and identity are highly student-centered and have a strong pull towards idiosyncrasy, still somewhat problematized by the ideas in the preceding chapter. Here, Hickey discusses the idea that students should write music that they find exciting. She argues that “Perhaps nothing is more important or inspiring than giving students this chance to tell their stories and share their experiences through music composition rather than spending so much time

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<sup>74</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*, 38.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

getting them to sound like composers of the past, or even to sound like us.”<sup>77</sup> This has implications beyond just identity and inspiration, and we will return to this quote when discussing musical form. However, this reveals that, to Hickey, for inspiration and constructing a compositional identity, idiosyncratic and student-centered teaching is more important than ensuring outcomes related to craft. “Although successful composition requires both imagination and craftsmanship, the quest for releasing our students’ imaginations should come first.”<sup>78</sup> In terms of product- and process-orientation, through encouraging self-expression and acknowledging craftsmanship and student imagination, Hickey appears to implicitly argue for a process-oriented approach.

Hickey’s approach to form muddies the water of analysis. Because Hickey focuses on student needs and tells students that they can use form as a tool, her approach to teaching form is somewhat idiosyncratic. However, it is not fully idiosyncratic because Hickey argues that there are specific forms and processes which teachers should provide. In the context of form, Hickey provides nuance for that idea that students should express themselves by arguing that it is still important to understand historical musical forms. This resembles Lapidaki’s argument that students should be aware of the achievements of their musical predecessors and to use those achievements as triggers by resisting, transforming, or transgressing those predecessors’ processes. But Hickey’s view on form is more product-oriented. Students lead discussion toward outcomes of form, which makes these lessons student-oriented and *somewhat* process-oriented, but it is important to Hickey that the students have a strong understanding of historical formal schemes. But it is also process-oriented because Hickey includes several methods which focus on

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<sup>77</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*, 66.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

understanding and constructing beginnings, middles, and endings, similar to Simon’s methods. So, these methods are *mostly* product-oriented and historical because they focus on achieving a somewhat close-ended final product based on historical models of form. This contrasts the continually process-oriented direction which previous teachers had established.

Hickey discusses other musical parameters such as pitch, rhythm, timbre, texture, and density similarly to how she discusses form, but each with particular goals. For instance, Hickey writes, “Introducing the world of the subtleties of timbre... provides a wonderful ‘ear-opening’ experience for students. This takes time and patience, and I would say should be made deliberate in almost all music composition activities.”<sup>79</sup> This is a case in which Hickey actively argues that students should include these ideas in composition, which is not necessarily common among composers. And, although it is an opinion with which many professional composers may agree, actively telling students to consider which mallet to use in a piece for vibraphone encourages the student to make the sounds they use to compose more personal. This is an area where the teacher can adjust the student’s focus to the student’s preferences even more, allowing for more student-centered and idiosyncratic learning.

On the other hand, Hickey appears to approach pitch and rhythm historically. She wrote, “The exercises described here teach students, through their own creative and aesthetic decision making, about ‘rules’ of harmony and chord structure.”<sup>80</sup> Certainly, because students are learning through their own creative and aesthetic decision making, they are still learning in a student-centered and process-oriented way. However, with the outcome of learning about “rules,” or

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<sup>79</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*, 115.

<sup>80</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*, 112.



more generously, common practices, of harmony and chord structure, Hickey's goal is product-oriented and historical. At the same time, by putting quotes around rules and allowing students to choose idiosyncratic approaches, there is an acknowledgment that some students may not identify primarily with those historical approaches. So, although these *methods* are often idiosyncratic and student-centered, the *outcomes* are historically-based.

Hickey's introduction into the book's final section is beguiling: "This chapter, and the final point in the five-stage curriculum model, is about that which makes music *interesting*. I call these the 'big elements,' and they are (a) unity and variety, (b) tension and release, and (c) balance."<sup>81</sup> [Emphasis added.] As I noted in the first chapter, writing "interesting" music is a highly open-ended goal. However, Hickey boils it down into topics which, to her, create interesting music.<sup>82</sup> This section, similar to the chapter on musical form, contains process-oriented methods and product-oriented goals. In this chapter, some methods include discussions and analysis of melodies which the students are particularly attracted to, and the goal is to write interesting music using the understanding developed through analysis. Likewise, these methods and goals are focused on historical melodies of the students' choosing, returning to the problematization of differences in historical and idiosyncratic approaches. And, just like the rest of the book, this chapter is unapologetically student-centered.

Fascinatingly, these goals do not fit comfortably into the analytical spectra of process- and product-orientation because these methods and goals can be both product- and process-oriented simultaneously. Likewise, the learning method can be process-oriented while the goals

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>82</sup> I am not sure whether using these concepts within a piece of music will actually *make* that piece interesting, however, in my experience, many interesting pieces use these concepts.

are product-oriented. As Hickey argues, “Music composition for our students is mostly about a process (rather than a product) that contributes to creative and musical intellectual growth” but “for professional composers, music composition is more about developing a product using the tools and experiences they have developed (through disciplined study) over the years.”<sup>83</sup>

[Parentheticals in the original.] So, for Hickey’s overarching plan, the methods of learning composition are process-based, and Hickey argues that they should stay that way for a significant amount of time. However, the ultimate goal, if the students go on to become composers, is product-oriented. And according to Hickey, *that is a good thing*: “too often it is assumed that students are able to work only within the strictest parameters and that giving fewer parameters means a loss of teacher control. Neither extreme is educational or conducive to creativity.”<sup>84</sup>

## Summary

Although earlier articles in this literature review support process-oriented and historical approaches, as time passed through the late twentieth and into the early twenty-first century, many teachers’ thoughts appear to have shifted toward balanced approaches. Epitomized by Hickey, but present with Simon, Younker, and Lapidaki, historical approaches begin to make more sense as *points of departure* for students to build upon idiosyncratically. Schoenberg and Boulanger would likely agree, but the emphasis of their methods was more historical compared to Hickey et al. Pedagogues in the twenty-first century appear to argue that students should have an understanding of the past compositional methods, but that these methods should not form the basis of a student’s compositional style. Instead, according to these pedagogues, students should take methods which they identify with and build upon, transform, or update them. Likewise,

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<sup>83</sup> Hickey, *Music Outside the Lines*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

although process-orientation appeared to be the preference of many teachers, those teachers who were highly regarded in the mid- to late-twentieth century as well as modern teachers, especially Hickey, Reese, and Younker, appear to use both product and process-oriented methods and goals. However, it is important to note that earlier composition teachers still seemed to focus on processes as opposed to products.

In terms of being teacher- or student-centered, the earliest authors here give very little indication as to whom their methods focus on. In doing so, they give an inclination that they may be more teacher-centered because they consider what students *should* be doing, not what students *would like* to do. The same can be said for Schoenberg or the late twentieth century teachers who would follow along in the student's style as they understood it. However, allowing student-centered teaching to occur and actively pursuing it are two different ideas. Schoenberg and Boulanger would likely fall somewhere in the middle of these two for that reason. In literature about Boulanger, it is difficult to tell whether she encouraged the growth of her students' voices, or if she whittled away everything that wasn't that student's voice. And although these methods both appear student-centered, Boulanger's predilection to put each student through the ringer with lessons on counterpoint and Mozart seems to indicate a more teacher-centered approach. Even in the early twenty-first century, there are still many teachers who take a somewhat teacher-centered approach, such as Deemer. However, other twenty-first century teachers, such as Lapidaki take a more aggressively student-oriented approach.

Lastly, the communication between student and teacher about goals seems to have become significantly more pronounced in the early twenty-first century. Either the authors who discuss Schoenberg and Boulanger leave out sections in which they discussed their goals with those teachers, the educational goals of these teachers were understood, or they were deemed

unnecessary to understand. In the twenty-first century, teachers appear to feel differently. Many teachers even in the late twentieth century began to explain why they used a particular method, such as Carbon. Some would go on to say how students should accomplish those goals, such as Laske. Finally, those like Hickey have explicit conversations with their students to set particular goals that fit the students' needs.

The analytical spectra outlined above are not meant to imply any sort of criteria that I intend to use as I observe my research associates.<sup>85</sup> I will not attempt to evaluate them and place them along these axes. In fact, I have only built these spectra because they reflect ideas which seem important to these pedagogues. These spectra merely represent the product of a process which I continue to use for each case study. As I examine each teacher, other codes and spectra will become more relevant as my research associates direct conversation to them. And as my research associates direct conversation toward some ideas, they may leave behind ideas which they have either intentionally removed from their classrooms or simply haven't considered. Where appropriate, I may mention ideas that my research associates have left out, however, the function of this dissertation is to describe how teachers teach in the context of their classrooms. To that end, the description of the methods and goals which occupy a given teacher's focus will always come first. Through my analysis, which I have modeled above, I will provide descriptions of each teacher's approach, conversations about why the teacher has chosen that approach, and a serious discussion about potential hazards that teachers may not have considered as they practice particular teaching methods. I hope to do all of this to generate more

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<sup>85</sup> Process-/product-orientation, historical/idiosyncratic approaches, student-/teacher-centering, and goal communicability.

conversation about compositional pedagogy and to provide for my readers a set of useful and actionable approaches to teaching music composition.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Researcher Positionality

Ethnography is research in which the researcher uses their own experience for interpretation.<sup>86</sup> Because of my prior experience as both a composition student and teacher, I exist in a position that is not quite insider and not quite outsider. Kay Kaufman Shelemay, an ethnomusicologist from the U.S., discusses her experiences becoming a part of the transmission of the Syrian Jewish *pizmonim* tradition.<sup>87</sup> She remarks that her research into, and attachments with, a community and culture that she was not initially a part of shifted slowly until she became a significant part of that community. She argues that as researchers “become engaged in research with living musical traditions and the people who carry them, they both intentionally and unwittingly become caught up in the processes and politics of transmission of tradition. Sometimes their interventions support continuity; at other times they engender change.”<sup>88</sup> Although this study focuses mostly on supporting continuity through the documenting the approaches of some experienced composition teachers, in each case study I will discuss potential consequences of taking an approach too far. At these points, I will propose an intervention by encouraging teachers to think critically about the possibilities of particular methods.

As someone who is a part of the field and raised in one of its many veins of tradition, I do not feel as distanced as Shelemay did from the culture I am examining. However, cultures and traditions will vary from state to state, university to university, and program to program. Therefore, although I have some understanding of the teachers’ and students’ experiences, when

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<sup>86</sup> Johnny Saldaña, *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research*, (2011): 22.

<sup>87</sup> Shelemay.

<sup>88</sup> Shelemay, 148-149.

I was on-site conducting observations, I kept in mind that I was ultimately an observer with a passive role in their interactions. Additionally, to some, my observations may appear particularly optimistic, focusing on what teachers do well rather than critiquing what they do poorly. Where possible, I have attempted to voice my thoughts relatively neutrally, looking for potential benefits stemming from teaching methods which I would not typically consider. I take this approach to, once again, center the teachers and their thought processes, while acknowledging this approach also aligns with my optimistic and people-pleasing nature. In the contexts of the teachers' studios, I consequently emphasize my outsider position by acknowledging the fact that there may be procedures and practices in place that I do not understand and inquiring about the reasoning behind them. Asking for the reasons behind a given practice will not only help me circumvent ambiguities, but also translate each teacher's approach more clearly.

Existing in this liminal space prompts me to both holistically describe each composition studio as an outsider, and prescriptively discuss potential learning outcomes based on my personal experiences in composition pedagogy as an insider. I have ultimately attempted to give a holistic view of each teacher, including the context of their teaching, such as: the teacher's own experiences learning composition, their students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences in learning composition, as well as the teachers' positions within the context of their school's music program. With both the context of the teacher's approach, the teacher's approach itself, observed in interviews and lessons, and the students' reactions to those approaches, in addition to my own interpretations of this data, I hope that readers can arrive at their own conclusions and understand how I drew mine.

## Theoretical Framework

The following research and methods are based on the premise that education in music composition follows a socio-cultural learning framework. From the socio-cultural perspective, a student's development

is understood by exploring the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which the children have grown. One is obliged to consider how the thinking of a particular group of individuals has directed the children's thinking, how the children understand who they are in relation to others, and how they interpret their world... The sociocultural approach attempts to be nonjudgmental and to understand and employ the practices of culturally diverse groups to foster [compositional] learning. The sociocultural belief is that cognitive reasoning works in conjunction with beliefs, values, and habits of mind that form an individual's identity and that need to be considered when interventions are designed for maximum learning.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, in order for teachers to teach most effectively, they need to approach teaching their students individually, taking into account each student's background and experiences. With music composition, these experiences include students' understanding of musics that they have listened to at home, including certain genres or songs that are relevant to their culture.

Depending on their institution, it may include historical music theory such as Beethoven's or Schoenberg's music. Lastly, their experience may also include contemporary trends in one of several different styles of music composition such as modern art music, popular music, avant-garde music, or jazz. The overlap of these three different social and cultural milieus, in addition to other potential pressures, may or may not feel problematic to navigate for a teacher. However, interpreting educational practices through this model means that I will examine not only the teachers' methods, but how the students react to those methods based on their own experiences. Finally, this framework will work better with a diverse sampling of students to understand how a

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<sup>89</sup> Katherine Davidson, "The Integration of Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories of Literacy Development: Why? How?" *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 56, no. 3 (2010): 249-251.



teacher's methods adjust or change from student to student. As such, my research associates will be chosen from various schools such as state schools, private schools, and conservatories in different parts of the U.S. to represent a variety of teachers and students.

## **Format**

This research takes the form of an abductive, holistic, exploratory, multiple-case study which examines the practices of five composition teachers in five different studios.<sup>90</sup> I conceptualize each studio as a community centered around a teacher to highlight how the members of each studio interact with and influence one another. After presenting each studio, I will analyze themes and patterns narratively, through anecdotes which encapsulate particular ideas, and phenomenologically, through reactions and experiences from teachers and students. I gathered data from teachers, students, and syllabi, building each case study on its own before connecting it to any other. As I conducted my research, the theories which I developed in earlier case studies invariably shaped and influenced data collection as I progressed through my observations and analyses. I have attempted to keep those theories and hypotheses subordinate to the understanding of each case. As themes arise in each case, I discuss them in their own context, only comparing them after completing every case analysis. I do not attempt to pass judgment on my research associates but rather to find trends. In my final over-arching analysis, I highlight the strengths of these varied approaches so that readers can understand the unique values of several different approaches and points of view from a wide array of university composition teachers in the U.S.

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<sup>90</sup> An abductive study, as opposed to a deductive or inductive study, is one in which incomplete observations lead to plausible conclusions. Especially given the finite amount of time observing and the exploratory nature of this research, an abductive approach suits this study best.

## Constructing a Case Study

As I stated previously, each of the five case studies will center around a studio treated as a community. The teacher at the center of each studio was my primary research associate, chosen as outlined below. I interviewed each teacher to develop an understanding of their teaching style, methods, and how they help their students set and achieve goals as well as how that teacher's education under their mentor(s) has affected their teaching. I then observed them teach to see how their intentions came to fruition and to see what strategies the teachers used in addition to those that they mentioned. After starting to develop an understanding of the teacher's point of view, I interviewed their students, specifically those whose lessons I observed, to develop an understanding of how they felt their voice was heard, and how their lessons affected both their compositional process and goals. At the end of the student observations and interviews, I interviewed teachers to follow up. These observations and interviews make up the central data for the characterization and analysis of each case study, supplemented by teachers' syllabi.

I focus primarily on one-on-one lessons to reflect the fact that individual lessons tend to be more common at schools of music than group lessons.<sup>91</sup> However, two of my case studies will include a wider classroom context. In Dr. Cohen's case, the students primarily met with their teacher as part of a composition seminar. However, I also observed one-on-one lessons which were part of this class's structure. In Dr. Dylan's case, the class only met as a group, but Dylan isolated each student's piece, focusing on just one work at a time, such as in a masterclass. Although these contexts vary from straightforward private lessons, in them I still saw teachers engage with students primarily one-on-one. Furthermore, after observing group classes, the

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<sup>91</sup> In a sampling of 96 schools, 91 offered one-on-one lessons, and 52 offered group lessons (47 offered both).

modes of communication between teachers and students were not radically different. In the case of the group class, the teacher simply asked for other students to provide input in order to foster every student's ability to discuss composition. Moreover, as I discovered sampling schools to visit, roughly half of the sampled schools had group lessons. Therefore, I included two schools with group lessons to explore a different but related context of compositional pedagogy.

## Selecting Research Associates

For this study I examined five composition studios targeted toward college-age students in the U.S., focusing on one teacher situated at the center of each exploration. These teachers and their students became my research associates, a term I initially came across in Shelemay's writing. I use this term to place these teachers and students at the same level of authority and expertise as me, the researcher.<sup>92</sup> My sampling methods went through several changes as I progressed through research associate selection.

Initially, I sought to construct a pool of mentors. I followed procedures similar to other qualitative case studies, such as one investigating revitalizing urban neighborhoods in which a large number of possible applicants is gathered and then narrowed incrementally.<sup>93</sup> My initial list of music schools included 227 universities with schools and departments of music in the U.S. To sample a particular school, they needed to: (1) be ranked in the top 50 music schools in one of the many existing online ranking systems for schools of music in the U.S.; (2) offer a bachelor's in music composition; (3) and offer both individual and group lessons. With these criteria I aimed to select schools of relatively good quality which hopefully had a similar quality of

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<sup>92</sup> Shelemay, 151.

<sup>93</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 2018.

teachers and whose teachers would have learned from similarly capable mentors. Ultimately, I used this type of sampling with the hope that schools with high quality teachers would provide a list of mentors whose students would be of similar, although certainly not the same, thoughts and interests.

The first criterion, being ranked in the top 50 music schools in an online ranking system, was intended to create a baseline for quality among the large pool of schools. Since the mentors should not represent only conservatories, especially at the expense of state schools, I was not strict about how the rankings were produced. Some ranking systems were focused on music, others on academics, some were focused on tuition and its relationship to the value of the education, and still others were focused on the number of musicians graduating and getting jobs. Twelve rankings were consulted for this process resulting in 117 schools fulfilling the top 50 ranking criteria.<sup>94</sup>

My next criterion was that each school needs to offer bachelor's degree in music composition. Out of the 117 schools, 102 offer a bachelor's degree with a focus in composition. Subsequently, I decided to only include schools who place an emphasis on acoustic concert music to highlight studios which focus on composition as a self-contained subject, apart from specific markets such as film or video games. This was important in terms of the tradition that these composition programs prescribe to. Of the remaining 102 schools, 97 include this focus on acoustic concert music. The five schools excluded with this criterion explicitly focused on film scoring, music production, licensing, or sound design. Teachers operating in this branch of

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<sup>94</sup> universities.com, (2021); greatvaluecolleges.net (2021); stateuniversity.com (2021); colsllegeraptor.com, (2021); best-music-colleges.com, (2018); majoringinmusic.com, (2015); musicschoolcentral.com, (2014); successfulstudent.org, (2017); hollywoodreporter.com, (2019); insidemusicschools.com, (2020); niche.com (2021); careersinmusic.com, (2020)

musical culture would be interesting to observe and interview in juxtaposition to teachers operating in the classical branch of music culture. However, that exploration had idiosyncrasies that merit a study of its own.

Lastly, I included only schools that provided both individual and group support for their composers through individual and group lessons. As with the focus on acoustic concert music, my expectation was that the initial pool of teachers would reflect my final list of teacher research associates. Only 45 schools fit this final requirement, all of which are listed in Appendix A. Following the creation of this list, I compiled a new list of teachers at these schools. I included every teacher listed as a composition professor on the faculty website as long as they also listed the mentors they studied with in their biography on the school's or their own personal website. When noting mentors, I included all mentors with whom it appeared the teacher studied for at least a semester to increase the likelihood that the mentors included had a significant impact on that teacher.

With all the mentors listed for each teacher, I compiled and counted each mentor to see how often they appeared across all of the teachers. Initially, I hoped to include a diverse set of mentors with the idea that it would generate a diverse set of teacher research associates. However, as I reached out to various teachers who had studied with these mentors, I struggled to get responses. Eventually I stopped this initial process of choosing teachers based on their mentors. This process of choosing mentors still had its uses. In fact, all of my research associates had mentors who appeared at the top of this list. However, as I continued, my sampling approach shifted away from this rigorous and idealistic approach toward convenient and practical sampling.

## Selecting Teacher Research Associates

To narrow down and select teachers, I initially looked at the teachers across the 45 schools used in the sampling above. However, upon compiling a list of teachers who had studied under the selected mentors, it became apparent that these teachers were not particularly diverse in terms of race or gender. Therefore, I expanded past those 45 schools to look for other composition teachers, still looking at schools of music at colleges and universities in the U.S. By allowing this broader selection of schools, I hoped to achieve a higher diversity in response, and hopefully relay a better array of methods for prospective and active music composition teachers.

Ultimately, my process for selecting teachers focused on teachers who (1) were taught by one of the mentors on the list, (2) were actively teaching individual lessons to students above the age of 18, (3) came from a different area of the U.S. than the other teachers, and (4) were willing to meet with me, typically because of a connection to the faculty at my institution, the University of California at Davis. This criterion was significantly less rigorous, but increased the response rate of my research associates and helped me to develop a better relationship with each of my research associates. Lastly, to further increase the diversity of responses, for the final selection of teachers, I selected schools in different regions of the country to avoid potential geographic biases.

Therefore, the final selection criteria were that (1) the teachers studied under one of the listed mentors, (2) that they taught individual, although not necessarily private, composition lessons at an institution in the U.S., (3) and that they have a connection with someone at my institution. Ultimately, this sampling process was based on convenience sampling. In the future, I hope to use some of the initial sampling techniques to conduct studies of several teachers who

had the same mentor, as well as studies of teachers with different mentors. With the teachers chosen, I reached out to them using the teacher email script copied in Appendix B.

As it stands, my major concern with my sampling is that my ultimate pool of research associates lacked racial diversity. I reached out to many teachers of color, but unfortunately, each possibility fell through for various reasons such as teachers working only with graduate students, not having three composition students whom I could observe, or some teachers who simply wanted to protect their students by keeping their private lessons private. Given more time to complete a dissertation, I could have waited for teachers to gain more enrollment of undergraduates, but to meet my own deadlines, I opted to work with the teachers who were available.

## Selecting Student Research Associates

Students had to be 18 years or older and taking lessons with a teacher in one of the chosen studios. To build a pool of students from the teacher, I asked the teacher for their students' email addresses or talked with students in person. When I introduced the study via email, I used the script in Appendix B, otherwise I explained the study using the consent form, highlighting that the students could opt out of the study at any point. The students interviewed were sampled by convenience based on which students the teacher thought would be most comfortable with my observation and most likely to respond to requests for an interview. In each studio I was able to interview three students whose lessons I had observed beforehand.

## Data Collection

Throughout this study I collected information through four streams of data: (1) program curriculum and syllabi; (2) teacher interviews; (3) observations; and (4) student interviews.

Although each stream of data helped me understand multiple facets of the process of choosing,

setting, pursuing, and meeting specific compositional goals, the primary data collection occurred through interviews and observations. Starting with teacher syllabi informed my initial conversation with teachers. This stream of data was contextual compared with the interviews and observations. However, understanding the program and its expectations may help my readers understand how my research associates' institutions relates to their own.

Following the syllabus review with teacher interviews provided a basic understanding of the teacher's point of view as well as their thoughts and reasoning for using particular methods with students. Additionally, conducting interviews first allowed me to understand the spirit of the instruction being given before seeing the instruction itself. Finally, teacher interviews gave me a bird's eye view of the teaching method, of which I only witnessed a sliver in action. Since the observations could only show one part of a journey to reach a larger goal, and since the reasoning behind choosing a goal could go unsaid in the observation, the interviews provided background knowledge and context. This context often revealed useful insights to this study which I would otherwise have had to infer from the observation. In each studio, I also conducted a second interview with the teacher at the end of the student interviews and observations to clarify any other data that I received throughout my time on site.

Observations, on the other hand, helped to reinforce the insights from the interviews. These observations grounded each teacher's methods in real-time situations, providing insight into how the students responded to particular teaching methods and how the teachers reacted to student responses. In their lessons, the teachers' points of view and methods combined in a way which was either improvised or planned, depending on the teacher's style. But the combination of the point of view and method into words and actions meant to influence the student provided a much clearer idea of exactly how the information presented in the interviews coalesced. The



observations were the actual act being studied, the process of learning itself, why and how teachers transmitted information.

Lastly, student interviews followed observations so that when I gauged student reactions to different teaching methods, the student and I had some common understanding of those methods. Interviews with the students helped in many of the same ways as teacher interviews, just from the opposite perspective. The student's point of view often confirmed why teachers used particular methods, provided a deeper understanding of the relationship, and brought richer detail to the context in which the teacher helped choose, set, pursue, and meet specific goals. Additionally, student responses to their teacher's methods may help anyone reading this dissertation to reach their own conclusions about the effectiveness of a given method based on how it made a student feel.

## **Triangulation and Reliability**

Returning to the main question of this study: How do music composition teachers help their students set and achieve goals? Each of the streams of data outlined above corroborates the others, each showing a different facet of the same process that this research question examines. This type of corroboration, also called triangulation, is especially necessary for case studies where research methods are less directly replicable compared to laboratory experiments, for instance.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, using converging lines of inquiry, or streams of data, can lend assurances to the findings if the streams align with one another.

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<sup>95</sup> Yin.

The curriculum and syllabi provided some context for my research associate's program. This stream showed the types of goals which students were expected to accomplish either during a semester or before graduating, depending on the teacher, as well as how the teacher communicated those goals. The initial interview took this information into account, giving me the chance to ask similar questions to see how the teacher's perspective corroborated, qualified, or contradicted the goals outlined in syllabi or the overall program curriculum. In each case, during the first interviews, the teacher and I discussed their thoughts and ideals for teaching lessons and the reasoning behind their methods. The observation allowed me to see those thoughts and ideals in action, corroborating, qualifying, or contradicting what the teacher outlined in the interview or what the syllabi suggested as well as giving me a taste of the student's point of view. Finally, the student interview corroborated, qualified, or contradicted the information that the teacher presented, the reactions that teachers or students might have had in the context of the observed lesson, and the syllabi or program curriculum.

Interacting with the streams of data in this order allowed each stream to inform the next and comment on the previous, following principles of triangulation. Toward the end of my time at each site, I had additional questions which needed more context or explanation. So, I interviewed each teacher a second time. This second interview provided further clarification and corroboration for any perceived inconsistencies. A sample schedule for on-site data collection can be found in Appendix D.

## **Interview and Observation Procedure**

For all interviews and observations, I reminded my research associates that I would be recording them. All audio was recorded to my computer or phone and then sent to a private cloud folder during any break after the interview or observation was over. Audio was transcribed and

coded afterward to identify the role of the person speaking, teacher or student, and to keep track of which student-teacher observations corresponded to which student interviews. After recording interviews and observations, I used Temi and Zoom to transcribe the audio into written format.

Each interview was semi-structured with different basic questions for teachers and students which I have listed in Appendix E. The questions were not meant to be exhaustive, and I did not use every question in every interview. Research associates often answered one question as part of another, and in general my first few questions were intended to start conversation to help put my research associates at ease and to let them indicate their interests with less direction from me. For teachers, the first few questions regarded their learning experience with a mentor before we dove into similarities and differences between their perceptions of their mentor's teaching and their own. Teacher interviews orbited around the questions "What skills do you want your students to have when they leave your program?" "How do you help them reach the skills that you want them to have?" and "What specific methods or exercises do you use to help them reach the skills that you want them to have?" I asked many of the other questions situationally or to support these main questions.

Student interviews started in similar ways, but focused mainly on the questions "What are your goals as a composer?" "How would you describe your experience with your composition teacher?" and "If you were going to teach a student, what methods that your teacher uses would you want to use to help that student learn to compose?" The first student interview question put me in position during my analysis to look over observations to see how the teacher supported students' goals. Whereas the second and third questions gave me a stronger understanding of what the student found meaningful about the teacher's approach, often guiding me toward particularly salient ideas as well as pointing out areas where students subtly or overtly took on

aspects of their teacher's approach. Although these questions did not directly connect to my research question, they typically commented on how the teacher communicated with students and which tools or pieces of advice stuck with students. These tools and pieces of advice frequently revealed which goals the teachers found most important or confirmed that teachers had communicated effectively.

In terms of location, teacher interviews were conducted wherever the teacher liked, although most often in their office or over Zoom. Student interviews were conducted similarly, however, I encouraged students to meet away from where their teacher could see or hear us in order to maintain their anonymity and encourage their honesty. Additionally, during interviews, to focus myself and to make sure that my limited time with my research associates remained productive, I continually asked myself a series of questions:

1. Do teacher or student responses point toward a particular goal, if so what goal?
  - 1a. Does the teacher or student communicate that goal to the other?
  - 1b. Is the teacher or student emphasizing exploration or emergent learning?
2. Does this teacher discuss how they relate with different kinds of students?
  - 2a. Does this teacher shepherd students toward a particular idea?
  - 2b. Does this teacher guide students towards an idiosyncratic answer?
  - 2c. Does this teacher let students take the initiative?
3. Does this student feel as though their own needs are being met?
  - 3a. Does this student appear excited when they go into/come out of lessons?
  - 3b. Does this student appear to be motivated to compose outside of their lessons?
  - 3c. Is this student being invited to write the music that they want to write?

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began during data collection as part of the process, each affecting the other reciprocally. This reciprocity, based on one common qualitative analytical model, is reflected through a spiral in which collection and analysis constantly inform one another, shown below.<sup>96</sup> Before visiting each studio, I familiarized myself with the program curriculum and syllabi. Looking over each teacher's syllabus both initiated my analysis and informed my data collection

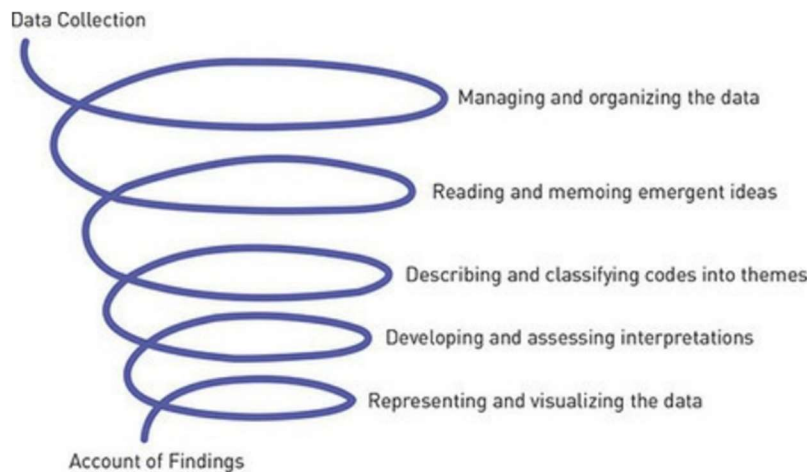


Figure 3.1 - Creswell and Poth's Data Collection/Analysis Spiral<sup>97</sup>

by influencing the questions I asked teachers and their students. My observations became a significant portion of the data and further influenced both student interviews and the second teacher interview. Student interviews provided a way to review teaching methods and determine how students perceived their teachers. Secondary teacher interviews provided opportunities to ask specific questions regarding the intentionality and reasoning behind specific teaching methods. Therefore, I continually examined and modified my data collection and analysis processes as I moved not only from observation to observation but also from case to case.

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<sup>96</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publication Inc., 2018): 255.

<sup>97</sup> Creswell and Poth, 255.

As I wrote previously, I intended for this study to provide examples of thoughts on pedagogical goals in music composition and how these teachers and their students develop and meet those goals. I chose this approach based on the advice of experienced qualitative researchers such as Robert Yin who wrote, “In a case-based approach, the goal is to retain the integrity of the entire case and then to compare or synthesize any within-case patterns across the cases.”<sup>98</sup> As such, I primarily focus on each studio in its own context, only comparing them after they have all been independently analyzed.

To structure each analysis, I begin with a vignette to highlight a salient moment, typically from my observation. Following the vignette, I give a general description of the teacher, identify their region of the U.S., and provide a basic description of their college or university. I based these descriptions on teacher comments, my experience working with each teacher, and my impressions of students’ feelings. Following general information about the teacher, I analyze my observations using a system of codes which I developed from syllabi and transcriptions. I developed these codes “to identify ‘meaning units’ in the data,” as U.K. ethnographer Simone Krüger puts it.<sup>99</sup> These codes represent “units (snippets of text) that stand out because they occur often, are crucial to other units, or are rare and influential.”<sup>100</sup>

In addition to the codes which I developed by reviewing syllabi and transcripts, I also returned to codes which seemed important during my literature review (process-oriented, historically-focused, etc.). These codes helped me remain flexible and consider multiple options throughout my analysis. They also helped me remain grounded in my research question and

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<sup>98</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Simone Krüger, *Ethnography in the Performing Arts: A Student Guide* (JMU/Palataine, 2008), 111.

<sup>100</sup> Krüger, 111

pushed me to consider multiple options and interpretations for why a teacher might choose a particular method. Additionally, while analyzing my interview transcriptions, I took notes alongside my codes. These notes helped me continually reflect on my understanding of each teacher's approach and consider rival explanations.<sup>101</sup>

Following the initial general description, I began analyzing teachers' goals. Teachers did not regularly state their goals to their students, but the goals that teachers set in their syllabi and in conversation significantly influenced their teaching methods. Following Krüger's guidelines, goals often became codes because they were rare but influential. Occasionally, teachers appeared to have goals which they did not mention in our conversations, their syllabi, or during lessons. I typically only coded these goals when they were so prominent that they seemed to influence all of the teacher's other goals or their methods. After presenting teachers' goals, I provide a synopsis of their lesson structures. Contrasting goals, I developed codes for lesson structures by observing several lessons and attempting to find repeated behaviors or methods of communication. Because of the recurrence of these modes of communication, I developed codes which represent how teachers responded to their students.

After the above descriptions which I present in each case study, I move into a more in-depth and individualized analysis. Based on the same coding I used for goals and lesson structures, I continued analyzing approaches that teachers mentioned in interviews, that I witnessed in my observations, and that students discussed in interviews. In my analysis, I particularly focused on methods that I observed and which students mentioned. These two

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<sup>101</sup> Creswell and Poth, 262.  
Yin.

approaches to understanding teachers' methods were not only easier to corroborate, but also easier for me to understand the impact of because either I saw the impact on the student, or they told me their perspective. Often these methods of finding meaning in the repeated use or large impact of particular teaching methods corroborated one another. Teachers might mention a particular method they used, which I then personally witnessed, and students commented on without prompting.

As I accumulated codes, I examined not only how I arrived at those codes, but also how the codes worked together to support themes within teachers' approaches. For instance, Buckley strove to put himself on the same level of his students (code: relating with students). He also talked with them about the pressure that they might be putting on themselves (code: emotional support). Krüger wrote "[one] way of identifying themes emerges from corroboration in the data, that is, when one piece of data is confirmed by others."<sup>102</sup> In relating with students, Buckley showed an understanding of their emotions and could therefore provide better emotional support. For these reasons, when I began to analyze Buckley's teaching and its emotional nature, I started to better understand how he related to his students not just compositionally but also emotionally.

In each case study, I present a number of key methods, such as "Relating with Students," which are the themes of my analysis. I initially intended to present my themes as archetypes similar to the title of Alan Kendall's book on Boulanger: *The Tender Tyrant*.<sup>103</sup> However, I abandoned this approach because thinking about teachers in terms of what they *do* (methods) as opposed to who they *are* (archetypes) better suits the goals of my research, and by focusing on

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<sup>102</sup> Krüger, 112

<sup>103</sup> Alan Kendall, *The Tender Tyrant: Nadia Boulanger: A Life Devoted to Music* (London: Macdonald & Jane's, 1976).



methods, my analysis could concentrate on how teachers helped students move toward the teachers' and students' goals. After all, I intend for this research to generate conversation about composition pedagogy. So, although archetypes like "The Tyrant" may be evocative, they may also pigeonhole teachers and reduce their practice to a soundbite. Discussing methods, on the other hand, allows conversations to expand as teachers consider potential upsides and downsides to using a method to pursue a particular goal, as well as how to refine a method to pursue a goal more efficiently.

After deciding on central teaching methods, I supported the centrality of these themes with several less prominent but related codes. Often, these supporting codes corroborated the theme but appeared less often in observations such as when teachers listed goals in their syllabi which corroborated the importance of particular methods but never directly linked the goal to the method. Alternatively, sometimes teachers presented several related methods, any of which could become a theme. In these situations, I chose more straightforward and actionable codes to become themes. For instance, in Buckley's case, "Relating with Students" represented a clear method which readers could easily implement in their teaching compared to the more ambiguous "Emotional Support." Therefore, I chose "Relating with Students" as an umbrella theme corroborated by several related codes.

To sum up this analytic process of coding and theming and to explain how I express my analysis, I have created Figure 3.2 which loosely follows Krüger's four steps of analysis.<sup>104</sup> In this graphic, small streams gather into a larger river, representing how multiple codes corroborate one another to build into a theme. The theme then coalesces into two forms of

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<sup>104</sup> Krüger, 111-121.

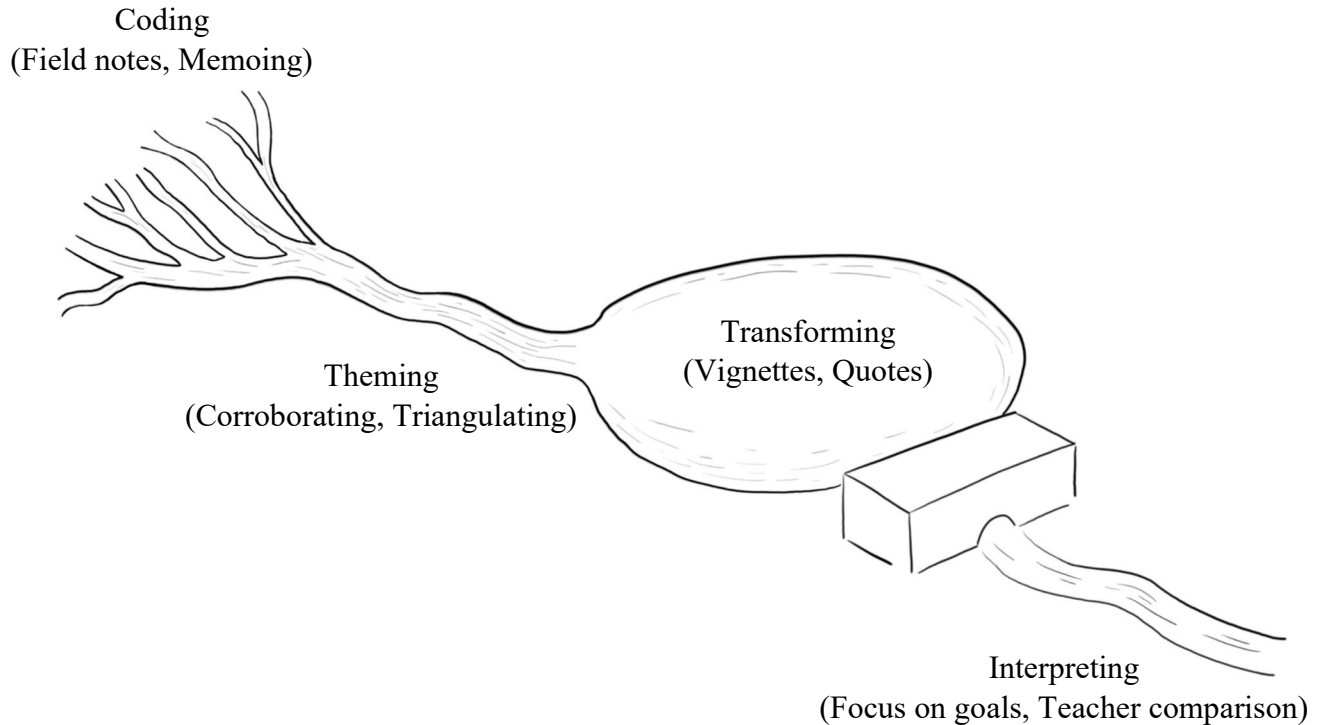


Figure 3.2 – Visualization of My Analytic Process Based on Krüger’s Four Steps of Analysis<sup>105</sup>

expression. The first is a reservoir of data, out of which I have pulled quotes, vignettes, and student or teacher interpretations. This reservoir symbolizes both the wealth of data my research associates supplied as well as a direct source of information. And while I present the data from the reservoir relatively unchanged, the subsequent dam and river reflect my interpretation of that data. This second expression of the data makes up a significant portion of these chapters. In fact, my focus on goals indicates an initial interpretation even of the codes and streams. So, although the reservoir in this analogy symbolizes primary information, even that information is generated and framed within the context of my focus on goals and communication.

In addition to my interpretations of each case study, in the final chapter, I analyze across cases to note a few patterns which I observed. I approached this secondary analysis similarly to

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<sup>105</sup> Krüger, 111-121.

the first: looking over my own text to once again look for units of meaning represented through new codes. To develop these codes, I looked for repeated ideas and asked myself questions like “What surprising information did you not expect to find? What information is conceptually interesting or unusual to participants and audiences?”<sup>106</sup> These codes were sometimes familiar, and sometimes different than my original codes. In this secondary analysis, I examine a few ways in which the five teachers in this study compared, how their goals aligned, and how participation in this study impacted them. This brief analysis, although not generalizable to the larger population of composition teachers in the U.S., provides a few ideas which I intend to continue researching, and which I hope will help teachers develop new frameworks through which they can improve their own teaching.

Ultimately, by focusing on the descriptions of each case and clarifying differences between them, both the primary and secondary analyses support the final aim of this research by providing five answers to the question: how do music composition teachers help their students set and achieve goals? By first analyzing repeated phrases and actions and understanding how they tie into patterns in the teacher’s approach, this research can relay several teaching methods and the goals they support. I hope that by relaying this information, this study can fill a gap in the literature for younger, less experienced, or differently experienced teachers. By returning to these repeated phrases and actions in a secondary analysis, this research can reveal five different decision-making processes so that both beginning and experienced composition teachers can make more informed decisions about how to approach the practice of teaching composition.

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<sup>106</sup> Creswell and Poth, 262.

## **Chapter 4: Case Study 1 – Dr. Buckley**

*As the student entered the doorway, the teacher's eyes lit up. "Come in, how are you doing? There's tea and coffee there, help yourself if you'd like some." The student slid onto the piano bench, flanked on all sides by hanging art and open books bathed in a warm light from the lamp in the corner. "I'm doing okay, I have a giant midterm this week. Of course, I've been working on my allemande as well; I have ideas that I haven't written down yet but maybe I could play them...?" The teacher gave a warm smile as he sipped his own coffee. "However you want to present them is fine." The student began to arrange their music on the piano which dominated the room. "Actually, I wanted to show you what my theory teacher had said."*

*The teacher set down his drink and sat forward, ready to start. "Well then, let me ask before you show me her critique: how do you feel about it?"*

### **Analysis and Case Description**

In my first interview with Dr. Buckley, I was overwhelmed by his hospitality. His office was full of poetry books, scores, and paintings, all situated around a baby grand piano which students would sit at throughout their lessons, ready to improvise. Before I went out to his state university on the east coast, Buckley sent me his syllabus and some materials that he used with his students, including some poetry by Ogden Nash and Emily Dickinson. The syllabus highlighted Buckley's focus on communicating with his students about goals: "At the start of each semester of private composition study, students and their teachers will identify and articulate reasonable and attainable goals in terms of how much music will be created during that semester." This syllabus gave a clear snapshot of who Buckley was as a teacher: someone who focused on communicating with his students, who created action plans to accomplish those goals, and who understood that those plans may change as the semester progressed.

Each of these elements, in addition to Buckley's warm and friendly disposition, contributed to an overall welcoming and inviting studio culture, which several of the students commented on. In one lesson, when Buckley finished giving feedback to a student on their piece, he wrapped up that segment of the lesson by simply asking, "Would you play it for me one more time? I just want to enjoy it." Another student, who was not a composition major and was taking composition lessons for the first time, mentioned that they felt lucky to be treated just like the composition majors and to have the same opportunities. Comments like these cast Buckley's teaching in light of its emotional impact and highlight his focus on meeting each student at their level.

## Buckley's Goals

My analysis of the syllabus and my first interview with Buckley revealed seven goals that Buckley wanted their students to accomplish during their undergraduate degree:

1. Write for a wide variety of instruments, preferably writing once for each instrument family<sup>107</sup>
2. Write a single movement or piece that extends beyond five minutes, or preferably seven minutes for more experienced students
3. Develop an understanding of music from the last several centuries, but especially the last 50-100 years by developing a listening practice
4. Know how to conduct a rehearsal from a composer's point of view
5. Know how to meet and interact with performers as well as how to maintain connections with performers and work with them to make music
6. Understand how to take critique and deal with being let down when ideas don't work out
7. Experience the compositional process from conception through post-premiere edits

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<sup>107</sup> By families of instruments, Buckley meant woodwinds, brass, percussion, voice, and keyboard instruments.

Although the first two goals did not come up often during my observations, they seemed designed to put students in situations which required deeper levels of knowledge about writing for various instruments and how to maintain dramatic flow and interest. Buckley mentioned that he tried to have new composition students start with a piece for an instrument they didn't play so that they had to meet performers. Additionally, by writing for an unfamiliar and monophonic instrument, he removed potential concerns about simultaneous harmony or multiple-voice counterpoint. This simplified the hypothetical young composer's writing process and helping them think about line. Similarly, writing a piece longer than seven minutes pushed students to examine how to maintain a listener's interest over a longer period of time.<sup>108</sup> To help students build this understanding, he often turned to listening. And while we talked, he discussed showing his students different formal structures, such as the opening to Brahms' *Symphony no. 4* which appears to begin in the middle of a phrase, or the fade out in Reich's *Come Out*. Buckley thus drew connections across his goals to help students understand how they could use repertoire to pursue their interests.

His third goal, developing an understanding of music within the last 50-100 years not only supported other goals but also students' listening practices. In our first interview Buckley made it clear that he attempted to identify student interests early. This awareness afforded him a chance to recommend specific pieces which would stretch the student's knowledge of repertoire and push them barely out of their comfort zone. Buckley often accomplished this goal by presenting a range of listening assignments. For instance, one student was interested in jazz and working on a clarinet piece, so Buckley recommended a range of examples from Eric Dolphy to

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<sup>108</sup> Buckley specified that this goal was not a requirement, but something which he felt would be helpful for the student to accomplish, and which he might push students who were interested in graduate school to achieve.

Berio's *Sequenza* for clarinet. Furthermore, as students expressed interest in writing particular projects, Buckley assigned them pieces that allowed them to absorb various compositional techniques and learn on their own.<sup>109</sup>

The following goals (4, 5, and 6) seemed designed to develop different skills gradually throughout a student's time at college and related specifically to students' abilities to discuss their own music in various contexts. Working with performers was primarily a practical goal which Buckley emphasized by introducing his student composers to student performers to create connections. He mentioned taking his students to practice rooms during their lessons and introducing them to student performers, telling the young composer that this performer was their first collaborator and to go to that performer with questions about how to write for their instrument.

Buckley's urging to write for instruments that students didn't play also pushed them to develop rehearsal skills.<sup>110</sup> Most students seemed to appreciate Buckley urging them to practice their directing skills and spoke about how they valued the performer's verbal and sonic feedback as a part of their compositional process. During one lesson, Buckley even spoke about times when he had worked with performers to edit pieces and how he had disagreed with performers about how particular performances had gone and what could be improved. This highlighted the importance of and relationship between building rehearsal skills and learning to take critique.

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<sup>109</sup> Buckley attached grades to listening reports, telegraphing to students that they should work on their listening outside of class. This may have helped students avoid relying on Buckley, however, attaching a grade to these assignments and pushing students to explore and report back may still result in a reliance on the teacher.

<sup>110</sup> Also, to this end, Buckley began an initiative in which the school brought prominent composers onto campus for a multiple year residency in which the student composers interacted with this influential composer and could watch that composer deal with performers and direct a rehearsal.

To scaffold student learning regarding rehearsal, Buckley mentioned in two lessons that he would like to attend rehearsals with the students and gave them specific advice for how to structure parts of those rehearsals. Later, Buckley and I discussed his approach to coaching students on rehearsing. He said,

As we work towards the premiere and the final rehearsals and work through the rehearsal process there will inevitably be things that [the student] might be really unsure about, but I want to encourage [them] to let it sit and I will say, 'You can always take it out later after you hear it in context,' because part of what we need to talk about is the experience of listening to a premiere. And it's very different than listening to a rehearsal. And for many students, I know it was for me up until maybe just years ago, it was often kind of an out of body experience. It's not a good opportunity to evaluate what's going on.

Buckley's response showed an emotional understanding of the ways in which many composers evaluate their own music, but it also revealed a deeper relationship between these three goals and Buckley's final goal.

Each of the six goals discussed above related to a part of the compositional process or implied that the student should travel through the compositional process several times, expanding and diversifying as they gained experience. Through these goals, students accomplished Buckley's final goal, to experience the entire compositional process from conception to post-premiere editing, and to experience that process several times in different contexts.<sup>111</sup> One process may produce a two-minute clarinet piece, and if it does, Buckley might encourage the student to think about a new process that might produce a three-minute piece for trumpet and piano. Buckley would surely still take the students' interests into consideration, but he put a big emphasis on keeping students just outside of their comfort zone.

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<sup>111</sup> Buckley didn't define a compositional process for his students at any point during the interviews or observations, instead he seemed to have a flexible approach to what the compositional process could entail.



Buckley also encouraged students to enjoy the compositional process, supporting his seventh goal. He said to one student, “I just want you to have something on the concert, if it's just one of these [movements], that's fine. I want you to be happy with it. Okay? I don't want you to sort of rush and push.” This moment clearly supported Buckley’s goal to help the student experience the entire process, while also considering that students who enjoy the process of composing will be more motivated to continue composing. In general, this final goal seemed to drive the curriculum of each semester, starting with that conversation each semester about the students’ goals.

Setting the goals for each of these kids is very different, for obvious reasons, but we talk, and they list a piece or two that they want to write, an instrument or two they want to write for, and I say, ‘do you think that with your workflow is attainable or a little too much?’ And they articulate what they think, and we negotiate until we get to something that might be reasonable.

Just as particular parts of the compositional process did not seem to be set in stone, these plans changed to suit students’ interests and needs, providing them with the space to reflect on those interests and needs in addition to their process. Some students indicated that as Buckley started this conversation, they didn’t know their goals for the semester. However, one student indicated that in discussing their goals for the semester they gained clarity about why they were interested in composing at all. Again, this mirrored how students did not always know what their process entailed, but in reflecting on their process with Buckley, they gained new insights about it. Ultimately, through these conversations and the orientation of his goals, Buckley showed a remarkable understanding of student interests in addition to their music, workflow, and emotional capacities.

## Lesson Structures

One of Buckley's strengths as a teacher was his ability to generate a conversation with the student while encouraging them to direct the flow of the lesson. He often had his students decide what the focus of the lesson would be but would always be prepared to ask a student to explore a response more deeply. That isn't to say that Buckley only reacted to what the student put in front of him. In fact, in two of the three lessons I observed, he was clearly interested in checking on student projects that the students hadn't mentioned, and in some cases, Buckley would plan to have certain discussions with his students. Buckley commented on that impulse in an interview, "If somebody comes in with a piece that's just been performed and premiered, then we are at a stage of evaluating and possibly editing or listening and trying to figure out what might be a good idea to move ahead on."<sup>112</sup> But even in these cases, Buckley followed the student's lead and gave feedback on what seemed important to the student even if he had to prompt the beginning of the conversation.

Whenever there was a moment of transition and a student didn't immediately bring up a new topic, Buckley would quickly ask "Do you want to play through this or tell me what you're working on...?" or "Which other movement might you think about? Do any of these appeal to you as 'that is something that I want to do'?" On the other hand, when the student brought up a topic, he would ask them to say more about a particularly salient point they had made. For instance, during their respective lessons, two students mentioned how much they enjoyed a talk the previous day with a visiting composer. Seeing their interest, Buckley responded, "What were some highlights for you?" before asking the students *why* those moments were highlights. At

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<sup>112</sup> Buckley specifically said that he would have that conversation in the lesson or two following a premiere.

another point, after discussing one movement of a student's piece, Buckley began to comment on another movement, pointing out something which seemed as though the student was still processing a particular thought. As soon as the student indicated that they were still thinking about it, Buckley asked them to think aloud. No matter whether Buckley began by prompting the student or encouraged the student to reflect aloud, he opened up conversations in which he related to the students, discussing his own experience or trying to better understand the student's experience. And in discussing their experiences, the primary structure of each lesson began.

By putting students in situations where they directed the flow of the lesson, Buckley created continuous opportunities to analyze them and their music. As the students answered his questions, Buckley took time to understand each student's point of view before discussing the idea with them, often articulating the student's ideas back to them. After analyzing what the student was interested in and articulating back to them to confirm the student's interest, Buckley would develop that idea, often stretching the student or encouraging them to think about the topic from a new perspective.

Buckley reified this approach in his description of how a lesson with a brand-new student might go. He said he would first analyze student interests by looking at an earlier composition or listening practice "So I can see where they're coming from already and where their predilections are." Then they would enter into a discussion together, articulating those predilections more clearly, "We will talk a lot in early lessons about what music they listen to, what they like and what appeals to them about that and perhaps try to emulate some of that." Buckley helped his students explore these emulations both through further articulation and development. More specifically, if a student loved jazz piano and wanted to write a piece for solo violin, Buckley would first analyze and articulate with the student: "We'll talk about jazz pianists that they like"

and then further articulate why: “maybe it’s harmony, maybe it’s the right hand, or the lines.”

Alternatively, he might encourage the student to develop something they already enjoy by giving them a prompt: “How does that translate to a solo violin idea?”

I noticed this lesson outline of analyzing, articulating, and developing not just in our conversations, but also through my observations. In one lesson, Buckley analyzed the student’s piece and identified that the student had a sighing gesture. He then encouraged them to analyze that moment: “Give some thought to how you take that moment of intense grief that is represented by this sigh.” Then Buckley guided the student to articulate those ideas “How does that become a longer moment?” Before giving an idea about how the student might expand that moment “Similar to how on an iPhone, when you take a picture, it can also capture a few frames before and a few frames after. You have a picture, now look for the frames in front and the frames behind.” This represented a quick version of this process, however, in other lessons, this process unfolded over the course of an entire lesson instead of just a couple of minutes. For instance, returning to a conversation following a piece’s premiere, Buckley indicated he would start with analysis. “If somebody comes in with a piece that’s just been performed and premiered, then we are at a stage of evaluating and possibly editing or listening...” Then he would articulate “...trying to figure out what might be a good idea to move ahead on...” Before finally developing, taking that good idea and “...adapting it in a new way and in a new piece.”

This lesson framework was not set in stone. In the first example above with the jazz student writing for violin, Buckley said he would ask the student to analyze and articulate their predilections, then analyze and articulate those interests himself before asking the student to emulate some style, which would represent another articulation of the student’s interests. Only after clarifying what the student liked, would Buckley talk about how they could develop those

ideas, translating them to solo violin. In the second example above with the student using a sighing gesture, Buckley analyzed and articulated on his own before asking the student to analyze and articulate, ending with a prompt for the student to develop the idea. These ideas often nested in one another. In fact, in lessons, Buckley's analysis often took place in silence or as the student was speaking, so that the student wouldn't be aware the analysis was happening until Buckley articulated his thoughts.<sup>113</sup> Other times the articulation was the analysis, such as when one student mentioned that in describing their goals, they gained clarity. But Buckley always ended structure by helping the student further develop their ideas: identifying how they could expand their music, diversify their compositional practice, or approach something in a new way.

By consistently ending with some potential development for the student's work or process, Buckley gave students different paths forward based on their conversations. In one case, Buckley had identified that one student was using minor seconds as a central interval in their piece and after a discussion, he encouraged them to think about harmonic minor seconds in diatonic and non-diatonic contexts. He told them to think about melodic minor seconds and to take the idea of minor seconds to an improvisation ensemble rehearsal as a prompt to explore as a group. These prompts gave the student several new ideas to work with and put them in a position to continue the process of analyzing, articulating, and developing their work.

Buckley also discussed the concepts of analyzing, articulating, and developing ideas in terms of compositional processes. When one student discussed their current compositional

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<sup>113</sup> This analysis also not always literally of the student's work and sometimes included analyzing the student's process or their emotional state.

process, Buckley first listened, analyzing the student's approach. The student indicated that they were hitting a wall and that they were frustrated and feeling like they were starting from scratch with every new piece they began to write. Buckley shared that it was a common issue among composers both young and experienced, and that it was okay to return to old ideas. Buckley talked about how Beethoven had pieces which were obviously from a specific period where he might have been working out one compositional problem over several pieces. In this case, the developmental path that Buckley offered took an emotional approach: "This idea that every piece needs to be a complete reinvention of oneself... that's way too much pressure." Essentially, he showed his student that they might have created an emotional block by trying to generate material in highly specific and potentially arbitrary ways. Ironically, by discussing how his student could return to their old ideas, Buckley stretched them, encouraging them to dip back into the same creative well. But this instance demonstrates a deeper point about Buckley's teaching: this process of analyzing, articulating, and developing was not solely tied to one aspect of a student's work. Buckley applied this process to musical materials, compositional processes, and listening practices, and although it typically pushed students to think more divergently, Buckley did not use this approach to push the student away from what they had created previously.

## Key Teaching Methods

### *Removing the Teacher from the Student's Process*

In our second interview, Buckley commented, "To me, the point of working with a teacher is that by the time you're done... [the student] can be their own teacher." Through this sentiment, he pointed out that he had limited time with his students and that *they* ultimately had to put in the work. He could only point them in productive directions and help them develop the skills to improve on their own. He was a single part of their musical journey and he could not

become tied to students' compositional processes.<sup>114</sup> This comment highlighted a key aspect of Buckley's teaching by revealing a broader goal: throughout their journey studying with Buckley, students should become more independent. To that end, Buckley consistently approached students' works by encouraging them to reveal their thoughts or providing them with a number of critical lenses which they should use to examine their own work.

Buckley often explained his thoughts from an outsider's perspective, using metaphor to keep himself somewhat removed from commenting on the work itself. When he used these metaphors, he began by speaking abstractly and gradually shifted the conversation toward the piece at hand. Typically, as he continued speaking, his examples became more concrete until he asked a question which suddenly brought the focus of the conversation to the student's work. For instance, in one lesson, a student said that they wanted to embody silence in a musical motif, discussing how impactful a moment of silence could be in a stage drama. The student initially talked about using caesuras to build in these pauses but went no farther. Buckley took this idea, further examining the abstracted dramatic presentation and then affirming the idea that caesuras could be powerful. Then Buckley illustrated the student's idea rhetorically. He said haltingly, "I also think that sometimes someone is speaking... And in the context of their sentence... you know... it's going to continue... but you have to lean forward to wait for the very... final... words... right?" By speaking so slowly and introducing pauses, Buckley took a more abstract concept and realized it concretely, ending in a question which clearly tied the student's ideas to their music.

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<sup>114</sup> This would not only create the potential for students to begin to rely on him, but also invest him in their process to the point where he might lose his perspective as a third party.

Buckley also concretized abstract conversations about the students' compositional processes. One student said during their lesson that they had an idea for a moment in the piece they were working on, and Buckley asked "Did you want to play that moment through? I love that moment of seeing an imagined sketch become real for you."<sup>115</sup> This quote again highlighted how Buckley often positioned himself as an observer rather than someone involved in the compositional process. By telegraphing his interest in the student traveling through the compositional process, he created a space in which the student could more comfortably bring their work to fruition. In so doing, he involved himself in the student's process at that moment. But, by watching how they composed and how they provided feedback to themselves, he could provide his own feedback on more elemental parts of the decision-making process in which unformed ideas become real.<sup>116</sup> And especially with students who typically make intuitive decisions, Buckley's feedback could provide them with a critical lens through which they could begin to understand their compositional process.

Furthermore, by asking students to improvise and encouraging them to reflect on the experience, he helped students develop ideas on their own, once again removing himself from the process. Specifically with improvisation, Buckley encouraged one student to present diatonic minor seconds as a prompt for their improvisation ensemble. Buckley wasn't planning to attend

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<sup>115</sup> Buckley seemed to have carefully curated his students' lesson experiences so that they felt comfortable improvising in front of him, which Buckley's teacher, Olly Wilson, had done with him. Buckley may have accomplished this simply by improvising in front of his students. In some of our conversations, Buckley mentioned that he sometimes did four-hand improvisations at the piano. Alternatively, he may have expected the students to improvise from the very first lesson, giving them some measure of comfort that it was going to be a regular occurrence which they wouldn't be judged on.

<sup>116</sup> Especially by encouraging the students to improvise on instruments other than their main instruments and to reflect on the process, Buckley enabled students to express their abstract thoughts through actual music, which helped them generate and refine musical materials. (As he asked students to improvise, he generally wanted to hear where the students wanted the high-points and the low-points, the overall contour, and the general shape of the phrase.)



their rehearsal, but by encouraging the student to explore ideas through improvisation with their peers, he further removed himself from the student's process of evaluating whether musical ideas were worth pursuing.

By giving his students tools to both develop materials and modify their compositional approach, Buckley sought to help his students become independent. To contextualize an earlier quote, he said, "To me, the point of working with a teacher is that by the time you're done... [the student] can be their own teacher. They can adopt whatever they want from a teacher and implement it themselves. They're obliged to think carefully about what they want to adopt and what they want to reject." One student echoed this sentiment, characterizing Buckley's approach as giving students a toolbox of questions to ask, processes to go through, and different ideas to think about. The student even said that they felt like Buckley didn't teach them what to think but how to express their thoughts. This student seemed to correctly characterize Buckley's hands-off approach. He did not tell them where they needed to go, but he provided directions when asked. In so doing, he gave his students the freedom to make discoveries for themselves. As he put it, "I think we learn best when it feels like a personal discovery rather than received wisdom."

Given significant freedom to explore, some teachers may worry that students would accomplish little. However, Buckley ensured that his students still completed their work by applying some light pressure. By having students improvise in lessons, he pushed them to make musical decisions on the spot and press concepts into physical existence. When a student felt particularly stuck, Buckley mentioned that he would use the immediate time pressure of improvisation to break students out of unproductive mental spaces and help them generate material. And through improvisations played alongside Buckley at the piano or short five-minute

writing sessions working on something new, he used time pressure to remind students that they didn't have to perfect ideas on the first try.

During one lesson, a student who had only ever heard their pieces performed through MIDI playback mentioned that they could ask one of their violin friends to play through a portion of the piece. Buckley responded, "That's right, I'm glad you mentioned that. None of these [movements] are going to be particularly long. I don't think any will be particularly technically challenging... And [these instrumental parts are relatively] small forces, right? I mean this isn't a string orchestra piece. You and a friend or two [could play it]... Let's see... when is our premiere performances concert?" The student immediately understood that Buckley was implying that they should have the piece performed soon and got excited. Buckley even pointed out to the student that he was applying pressure through this deadline, and they responded that it would help them finish their work.<sup>117</sup>

As a final example, another student asked Buckley how to build objectivity into their editing process. Buckley discussed how working in the context of a rehearsal setting helped him listen to his own work from the audience's perspective. Put another way, he told his student how certain settings helped him listen from an outsider's perspective. He indicated that especially when he was conducting, it became much easier for him to change the balance, add a doubling, or cut measures to make sure that the piece worked with the players in the hall. He described the process as a kind of compartmentalization where Buckley the conductor took over to make

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<sup>117</sup> By the time I interviewed this student, they had already begun working with one of their violin friends to rehearse the piece. This type of pressure likely works differently on different students, which makes analyzing the students themselves all the more important. Some students may melt under the pressure of accomplishing something on such a short time frame as this deadline, which was coming up in a few weeks.

changes which Buckley the composer could later reevaluate. Essentially, he described a process of approaching his own work from an outsider's perspective.<sup>118</sup>

### *Analyzing Students and Their Work*

Analyzing students and their work related to Buckley's method of removing himself from his students' processes in that they both involved analytical lenses. However, not all of Buckley's analysis was intended to foster independence; some of it simply facilitated his understanding of his students so that he could better help them. To that end, he constantly analyzed students' pieces, interests, processes, and emotional states. If the student brought music out, Buckley always gave it a thorough read, in one lesson spending two minutes in silence audiating a student's work. When a student played their music from memory without a score, Buckley's early prompts usually led the student to play the piece more than once. Even in discussion, Buckley led with basic questions to either gauge student understanding of a topic or clarify the student's point of view. In our second interview, I asked about Buckley's ability to match student energies, and he responded that he evaluated and responded to a student's mood, giving a student space by making tea if they came into a lesson agitated or trying to excite students who seemed overly subdued. Buckley said that he typically tried to match energy the way he would with any friend, not forcing himself into a different mood to match them, but evaluating at a subconscious level, analyzing the student's mood, and responding to reinforce or negate that mood to benefit the student.

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<sup>118</sup> This revealed another reason why Buckley included working with performers and dealing with rehearsals among his goals. These goals put students in situations where they grappled with compositional problems and developed solutions under pressure, often without Buckley's direct guidance. This precisely paralleled how he used the goal of traversing through the compositional process multiple times and allowed students to develop their own solutions with only some orientation from the teacher.

To encourage students to analyze their musical materials, Buckley modeled analysis and asked questions about the students' works. He remarked that if he wanted students to take just one thing away it would be "that constant question of 'Is this the most important thing going on? Is this the idea you want to work with? Are we going to work with square Legos today because you like square Legos?'" He wanted to model how students should talk with themselves as composers so that they could become more independent. "I find it important to say that, so that they will start to say it to themselves: 'Here's my idea that I'm going to focus on today.'"<sup>119</sup>

In one lesson, the student was working on a few short movements. As they presented one of them, Buckley characterized it as a vignette, saying that it was a pointed and concentrated gesture. He went on to restate the initial assessment more concretely: "Whatever the emotional point [is], in this case it is very undistracted. It is really succinct. You don't need a second theme if you're writing a 15 second piece, so it's very much to the point." By this point, Buckley had articulated a general analysis, noting the overall gesture as having a sighing quality, a negative analysis, stating what the piece likely wouldn't need, and continued with a positive analysis, giving the student feedback about what they may want to include as they continued writing. He said, "You could be infusing a rhythmic life into it," and clarified that rather than a diffuse and homogenous sighing gesture, "a loose 'ahh,' it [could begin] to take on a little definition" if the student chose to continue adding to the gesture's rhythmic profile. With this feedback, Buckley went beyond the general description he initially gave and the negative analysis of what the student wouldn't need to comment on and affirm the direction that the student wanted to travel.

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<sup>119</sup> This question certainly came up in each lesson, even if no one asked it.

Other times, Buckley pushed the students to analyze through questions. Sometimes Buckley had particular answers in mind which he led students to, such as when he had a student conduct while listening to their piece to point out that the student was moving back and forth between quadruple and triple time. After conducting and playing a few times, the student said that they understood what Buckley was implying, to which Buckley responded, “what am I saying?” By pushing the student to answer the question, he encouraged them to finish the analysis of their own work and ensured that they were both on the same page. At another point in the same lesson, the student was discussing a song they were working on with Buckley. Buckley had pointed out that the final line changed the meaning of the entire poem, and the two brainstormed about how that analysis might affect the A section of the piece. The student went on to say that they should ask Buckley how it would affect the B section as well, at which point Buckley simply tossed the question back: “What do you think?” This put the student in a position to analyze and gave Buckley the chance to provide guidance as they did.<sup>120</sup>

Buckley also used poetry as a part of the compositional process. He mentioned an assignment from his introductory group composition class to set short poems by Ogden Nash and Emily Dickinson. Most of these poems were easy to analyze with clear rhyming schemes and line structures, and although the emotional content of these poems was similarly easy to understand, it was often difficult to express through music.<sup>121</sup> By presenting students with something that was easy to analyze but difficult to express, Buckley put them in positions where they could interpret the poem in similar ways but express the poem idiosyncratically. In addition,

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<sup>120</sup> This question was remarkably similar to Buckley’s other questions like “What struck you?” and the other listening questions I have provided under “Actionable Concepts for Analyzing Students and Their Work.”

<sup>121</sup> The tone of these poems was often silly, sarcastic, irreverent, or regretful.

by using poetry, the student always had a well of material that they could go back to and analyze to generate new musical ideas.<sup>122</sup>

During one lesson, Buckley and a student discussed how the student could make the form of their piece mirror the form of the poem, which had a twist ending. Later, during my interview with the same student, they became animated as we discussed their song. They talked at length about how they made metrical and rhythmic decisions based on the religious imagery in the poem and excitedly mentioned that they planned to implement Buckley's feedback. Leaving that interview, I was struck by all of the different concepts Buckley could teach using poetry. He could teach phrase structures using rhyming schemes in the poetry, formal structures using larger structures in the poem, and how to use mode and rhythmic language by incorporating imagery from the poems. But no matter what concept Buckley taught, he could always encourage the student to return to an analysis of the poem to generate these structures. Especially when using such short poems, setting poetry allowed Buckley to build productive compositional mazes for students to travel through in their own way. Buckley mainly selected a number of entry points, these potential poems, an exit, ending with a finished piece, and then oriented the student from their entry point to their exit as needed.

Buckley also analyzed the compositional approaches that students used. During the lesson in which a student was emulating Bach, Buckley analyzed the student, providing insight into the student's process: "When you are improvising... you like to sit at the piano and improvise lines, which is great. But realizing that when you, [Alex], not [Alex] imitating Bach,

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<sup>122</sup> One student talked at length during our interview about how they made metrical and rhythmic decisions based on the imagery in a poem they were setting. During their lesson they also discussed with Buckley how they might mirror the form of the poem, which ended with a twist, with the form of the music.

[but] when *you* improvise lines, you are very free rhythmically and improvisatorially, and that's actually a feature, not a bug."<sup>123</sup> By discussing the student's compositional process with them, Buckley was able to clarify for the student how their process affected their music. He also modeled this behavior in another lesson, saying, "When I complete a piece, I will go back and review it and ask myself 'What do I wish I had done more of in this piece? What did I sort of underestimate the power or impact of?' I will say, 'Okay, let me pull that concept out,' maybe it's a few notes, maybe it's a rhythm, maybe it's a gesture, and say 'What would happen if I built something on this? Now let me write a whole new story on this, what was a minor character.'" Buckley presented this analysis as a possible solution for a student beginning a new composition, but it also revealed Buckley's practice of self-analysis, and this moment had a profound impact on the student. In our interview, the student mentioned that they began extrapolating this idea of musical ideas as characters, and they were excited to use this new approach to start their next composition.

### *Relating with Students*

As I have mentioned several times, Buckley seemed to intentionally take students' emotional states into account as he engaged with them. Moreover, he seemed to consistently put himself on the same level as his students, to equate their learning experiences with his, and to work alongside them. During our first interview, Buckley mentioned his time studying with Mario Davidovsky. He remarked that during his lessons he would come in with two or three measures of music and Davidovsky would attempt to help him think about how he could expand those measures. Buckley said, "he used to put down these ideas, and it wasn't a matter of whether

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<sup>123</sup> I have anonymized this student's name according to my agreement with my research associates.

I could smash them or not, it was that they were mine.” Buckley further clarified that Davidovsky had put down the very ideas which Buckley wanted to pursue. He said that, to him, it seemed as though those ideas were no longer his own after Davidovsky had put them on the page. This overlap in musical ideas frustrated Buckley to the point that he found it difficult to compose, creating a vicious cycle where in each lesson he would only come in with a few measures, and Davidovsky would again make suggestions similar to how Buckley wanted to continue.

Recognizing this vicious circle in which Buckley’s emotional state kept him from significantly progressing with his composing, I asked how he would approach a student if he had been in Davidovsky’s position. He responded, “I would just say ‘let's get out a piece of music and some crayons and draw some.’ Or ‘let's do a five minute [composition].’ Or ‘let's improvise for four-hand piano.’ Whatever the case is, I would take them out of their interest [and] try to free them so that they gain some confidence.”<sup>124</sup> Buckley’s response revealed more specifically how he used improvisation to remove students from unproductive habits and mental spaces. Especially by using a lighthearted writing implement, he created safe emotional spaces for his students to make mistakes or try things out as well as to better understand their own process. He wanted them to not only understand how they could make music by thinking deeply about it, but that “[they] can even make music when [they] don’t think about it too much.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> One student actually described this method with crayons, saying unprompted that this technique helped them feel free. Buckley’s instructions were: using a blank piece of paper and these crayons, take thirty seconds to a minute to draw an idea that you don’t have any plan for.

<sup>125</sup> Buckley also specified that this type of over-analysis and over-justification can be a big problem for advanced master’s or doctoral students.



So much of Buckley's approach seemed to carry the influence of his experience with Davidovsky. More than once he said, "we're all just trying to figure out the next note, so we all share that," and this sentiment cut to the core of his approach. If a student came in with little to no material, he wouldn't show them what material should come next. He would sit with them, listen to them, and work alongside them. In so doing, he could help them understand what about their process was not serving them so that they could change it themselves. Similar to how he had erected emotional barriers for himself when he worked with Davidovsky, Buckley helped his students see and remove the barriers that they erected for themselves.

Even in the poems he suggested for young composers to set (mostly short poems by Nash and Dickinson), Buckley wanted his students to choose attainable goals grounded in realistic and healthy expectations of their abilities.<sup>126</sup> Likewise, when he suggested that they write on manuscript paper rather than into a digital notation program, he wanted them to avoid making decisions about key signatures and meters too early.<sup>127</sup> He instead wanted them to have the freedom to write down a rhythm or a chord without needing to know any other details. Viewed through this relational lens, Buckley seemed to want students to make realistic decisions which would keep their options as open as possible, like he would in his own compositional process. And according to his students, he demonstrated that he would support them in whichever direction they chose to travel, as long as they set reasonable expectations for themselves. In fact, when I asked one student what they would emulate from Buckley's teaching, they answered that

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<sup>126</sup> When students expressed interest in poetry beyond Nash or Dickinson, Buckley encouraged them to use the poetry they preferred. He simply wanted them to engage with the poem fully.

<sup>127</sup> His students had taken to writing on manuscript paper wholeheartedly. One of them said that they felt freer working with manuscript paper because they could write a single chord without having to worry about when it was going to happen.

they would like to have Buckley's flexibility to understand and positively interact with a wide variety of musics from diverse students.<sup>128</sup> But underlying that flexibility was a firmness that Buckley used to encourage students to continue writing to have their music performed.

He mentioned that pressure mounted as performance deadlines approached at which point some students would need emotional reassurance from him. In these moments, Buckley said he calmly but firmly encouraged students to sit with their discomfort and reminded them that they could still edit after the premiere. As students reached these critical moments, Buckley coached them through their emotions, "I think it's really important to tell oneself: 'I really care about this thing. It's just music. I still really care about it. But it is just music. If I get the wrong note, no one will get hurt.'" By consistently thinking about and maintaining an even emotional state, Buckley kept himself in position to sympathize with students and reassure them as they traveled through their myriad compositional processes.

### *Articulating about Students and Their Work*

Returning to a different method from his lesson structure, as Buckley pushed students to analyze themselves and their music, he encouraged them to articulate those analyses back to either him or themselves and to reflect on the underlying reasons. This key method may have also stemmed from an interaction with a mentor. In our first interview, Buckley mentioned a time when Olly Wilson asked him to self-analyze and articulate that analysis:

[Wilson] said 'there's two kinds of composers, there are composers who sit alone and write and then there are the composers who really go out there and they sell themselves.' He said, 'You know which one you are,' and I said, 'Yeah, I don't sell myself.' And he said, 'Yeah, so change your expectations for what your career is going to be. It doesn't

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<sup>128</sup> He made this flexibility especially apparent to one student who commented that after their initial conversation about their goals for the semester, they had wanted to switch to different projects, and that Buckley followed along willingly.

mean you're better or worse as a composer, but you have to understand that there is salesmanship involved. And you have to do some things that other people don't find distasteful, and you may. So, either change or temper your expectations.'

Buckley stressed that Wilson said this in a supportive way, trying to help make Buckley aware of who he was as a composer. And Buckley said it was perfect advice to encourage him to be aware of who he was and how that might affect his long-term goals as a composer. By pushing Buckley to define the relationship between his own compositional process and long-term goals, Wilson forced a secondary analysis which compelled Buckley to reconcile who he was with who he wanted to be.<sup>129</sup>

Buckley seemed to pass this type of self-analysis and articulation on to his students. Even when they had already done some analysis, his questions and clarifications about the ways that students articulated their analyses triggered secondary analyses that went deeper. Multiple students indicated that they valued these clarifications and subsequent analyses. One student mentioned that if they were teaching, they would emulate Buckley's ability to ask thought-provoking questions which caused them to think about their process. Another said that they wanted to emulate Buckley's ability to not only talk about *what* happened in a piece or process, but *how* those ideas unfolded or interacted as well. They also mentioned that Buckley didn't teach them what to think, but how to express or articulate their thoughts more clearly.

Typically, Buckley articulated these analyses of student works or pushed students toward deeper understandings of initial analyses through metaphor. He talked with one student about

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<sup>129</sup> Buckley's ultimate decision appears to have been learning to self-promote and to take advantage of the opportunities before him, making connections with performers wherever possible. And that connection with performers was an important part of this conversation. Buckley mentioned that to be this type of self-promoting composer, a student should put themselves on performers' radars, go to concerts, approach the performers afterward and ask if they would be open to reading through the young composer's work.

viewing musical ideas as characters in a story. He encouraged them to understand the difference between major and minor characters and the roles that they might play in a piece.<sup>130</sup> He described a process of getting to know the characters and seeing them in different contexts. Since they had both been discussing how the student could shape their own compositional process, Buckley then described how, as the student composer finished one piece, they could take a minor character from that piece and begin to flesh that character out in a new story. The student loved this idea and felt like they had been conceiving of their music in this way to some extent, but that hearing Buckley explain this approach pushed them to think of their materials literally as characters instead of as musical abstractions. And Buckley offered the student several variations of this metaphor, some more focused on general dramatic ideas like tension and release, as well as more specific character ideas. “What happens when you take this character that you present as anxious and loud, when you put them alone with the object of their love?”<sup>131</sup> By asking this question, Buckley encouraged students to think deeply about their musical materials, not only what the essential nature of those materials were, their character, but also to describe them aloud, and to think about how that character might react in a highly emotional situation: excited, anxious, and happy.

This prompt in particular, describing the character of a particular idea, came up more than once. At another point, Buckley described one way he might prompt students to articulate: “If they are very blasé about all their ideas, I’ll say, ‘Why don’t you describe to me why you find

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<sup>130</sup> This absolutely rhymes with Buckley’s focus on ascertaining what the most important idea is within a piece, finding the main character.

<sup>131</sup> This is similar to a point about analyzing, understanding the essential nature or character of the musical materials to contrast them, to excite the character, to throw it into a context in which it has a complicated emotion, both anxiety and joy.

your ideas interesting?’ When they give me a list of adjectives, I’ll say, ‘Now make another list of those adjectives that’s opposite.’ This is low, slow, and sad. Okay, well let’s go high, loud, and exciting.” By taking an old character in a new direction, the student can vary old material and see how the change affects the overall piece. This provided another reason for secondary articulations and analyses; they frequently complicated something already occurring. As a practice, this may encourage students to revisit ideas, providing different insights as students re-analyze, and potentially adding dimension to these characters that the students create.

Even when students had ideas they had not yet written down, Buckley asked them whether they had clarity about what they would be doing next. After their initial answer, Buckley asked “Do you think you could articulate any of what you think you’re after?” By leading students to articulate their intention or to re-articulate something that Buckley said, he often interrupted a student’s analysis in ways which allowed them to improvise on ideas that they had only just conceived. And by having the student extemporize, Buckley essentially watched them compose, analyzing and helping further articulate whatever the student seemed interested in developing. It therefore seemed as though Buckley encouraged students to articulate or re-articulate to keep them from over-analyzing and to shift their attention to how they could continue composing.

Buckley often shared analyses of his own compositional practice, modeling the processes of analysis and articulation and the utility of those practices. “When I complete a piece, I will go back and review it and ask myself, ‘What do I wish I had done more of in this piece? What did I underestimate the power of?’ I’ll say, ‘Let me pull that concept out, maybe it’s a few notes, maybe it’s a rhythm, maybe it’s a gesture. What would happen if I built something on this?’” With this quote, Buckley revealed the power of articulating ideas that impacted him and re-

articulating those ideas in new pieces. By revealing his own mindset, Buckley helped his students learn to better navigate their own compositional processes.<sup>132</sup>

### *Helping Students Build Constructively*

During our final interview, Buckley said that his aesthetics as a composer crept into his teaching through his desire for his students to learn how to make the most out of their musical materials.<sup>133</sup> When students wanted to expand their music, he encouraged them to use the same material but change its context, building on the meaning of the original idea. One student commented that they emulated this presentation and re-presentation in their own work by focusing on gestures and motifs and allowing those gestures to change each time they appeared. They even said that thinking about gesture and presenting the same idea multiple times was something they would stress if they were teaching. However, this style of composition which focuses on an economy of materials did not only appear compositionally. This style includes an examination of the material already on the page to mine for materials and structures which composers could re-articulate in new sections of music. As may already be obvious, Buckley also expressed this style in his lesson structures, the ways he responded to student work, and the ways he encouraged students to look inward and build their careers using the emotional and social materials they were already working with.

Starting with *musical* materials, when Buckley encouraged students to write longer pieces, he didn't tell them to add on or simply restate ideas. He used the metaphor of an essay: "Think about the difference between a short essay and a longer essay and the difference in depth.

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<sup>132</sup> One student attested to this.

<sup>133</sup> He clarified that he wasn't proud of his aesthetics creeping into his teaching, but that students would get different aesthetics from different teachers.

The difference isn't restating things... It's furthering the investigation [and] going somewhere you haven't yet gone, taking it a little bit further and exploring the drama in a different way.” It’s about taking the raw materials and repurposing them or recontextualizing them to make something new. This process represented a particular tool which Buckley used in his own compositional process, and one which he passed onto his students. However, beyond giving his students this tool, Buckley also encouraged students to understand tools that composers have used historically. To that end, he assigned listening journals to help his students better understand other composers’ decision-making processes.<sup>134</sup> Buckley intended for these journals to be tools for students to continually develop new perspectives on other composers’ musics in addition to the student’s own music.<sup>135</sup>

As Buckley discussed constructing a piece of music, he also encouraged students to remain flexible in where they placed materials. Using the metaphor of building a house, he wanted students to understand what kinds of rooms they wanted before they decided how hallways might connect them. In one lesson, a student tried to decide how different sections might connect before they knew what order they wanted them to occur in. Buckley paused for a moment before asking the student to analyze: “Does this [section] come after this [one]?” The student said that they didn’t know yet. “So don’t worry about how to push [one section] to [the other].” When Buckley inquired about the order, and his student indicated that they didn’t know what order the sections would occur in, he told them to stay flexible and keep their options open.

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<sup>134</sup> A listening journal could be used in a variety of ways, Buckley seemed to encourage students to listen to specific pieces of music and to keep a log of what they did and didn’t like about those pieces of music.

<sup>135</sup> One student remarked that Buckley gave them questions to ask themselves and processes to go try, making a toolbox from which they could pull different critical lenses.

To me, it seemed as though if the student's composition were a staircase, Buckley always asked the student to think about how the first step aligned with the foundation. Whenever he asked how the student might expand on what they had, he only asked how the second and third step might build on the first. He wanted the students to think more granularly. He didn't want them thinking about how the second floor might meet with the landing for the first floor. In the lessons themselves, Buckley would ask questions like "What if this [movement] is the last movement of three? How does the other music get there? What's the story or the world in which this is the closing scene?"<sup>136</sup> Buckley consistently encouraged students to build on the potentials they saw in their music rather than hoping for a particular outcome.<sup>137</sup>

Thinking beyond any single composition, and continuing with the metaphor of building, Buckley not only wanted his students to have facility with the array of tools he discussed, but also to operate in different workshops. That is to say, Buckley wanted his students to not only understand the tools that he considered, but through their listening and interacting with other composers, to understand the arrays of tools that other composers used as well. In fact, when he had mentioned that he wasn't proud that his aesthetics came through in his teaching, he mentioned that students would eventually interact with the aesthetics of multiple teachers, which seemed to bring him some comfort regarding the fact that his teaching was grounded in his own aesthetics. To facilitate students understanding multiple compositional workshops, Buckley encouraged students to rotate through different teachers as they took lessons at this university.

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<sup>136</sup> This kind of question also reframes the analogy of the staircase so that the students aren't necessarily working from the beginning to the end. Perhaps the student only has the railing in place for their staircase and they have to work from side to side, or maybe they have the stairs in place, but need to build a landing for the second floor and a landing for the first floor.

<sup>137</sup> This also applies to the compositional process, especially when Buckley mentioned ideas such as taking minor characters from a previous piece and fleshing them out, making them the main character of the student's next piece.



More concretely, one student had just started studying with Buckley again after having studied with the other teachers at the university. This student described their process to me as focusing on experimentation and adopting new compositional techniques. At one point in this student's lesson, Buckley told them to revisit old ideas rather than experimenting with new ones. This presented an interesting tension. Buckley's aesthetic naturally oriented the student towards revisiting old ideas in new ways. And in some ways, this represented a divergence from the practice of experimenting. Paradoxically, these ideas meshed together quite well, as the new technique the student would experiment with would be revisiting old ideas. And by encouraging them to return to old concepts, Buckley essentially asked them to experiment with their process in a different way: ironically, by experimenting with their materials less.

Buckley also gave this recommendation to revisit old ideas in the context of how the student had described their compositional approach. During their lesson they felt emotionally drained by continually coming up with new ideas. So, at an emotional level, Buckley helped the student take an account of what served them in their old compositional process and build a new process using the materials of the old one, leaving behind the ideas which would not facilitate the new process. He encouraged them to analyze their process, articulate what did and didn't serve them, and to develop a new process based on what they learned.

Lastly, at a career level, Buckley mentioned one student who, early in their time with said, said they wanted to earn a doctorate from Juilliard. Buckley asked his typical questions, prompting some reflection: "why do you want to go to Juilliard?" The student responded that it was the best school for music. Buckley went on to tell me that the student's music was stylistically unlike the music at Juilliard and how the student's lofty goal was misaligned with the student's musical interests. He didn't discourage them from achieving that goal, but with his

students who wanted to move on to graduate work, he made a point to talk with them about how they might fit in at different graduate programs. This conversation represented yet another way in which Buckley's compositional aesthetics came through in his teaching. He wanted students to aim for goals and career which would suit them and build on top of their strengths.

## **Discussion**

The memories of my time with Buckley are incredibly dear to me. Talking with him, I felt understood, and it seemed as though the students often felt the same way. Every conversation seemed to take the students' emotional states into account or to ask philosophical questions about what the students wanted to accomplish. Buckley's empathy for his students was perfectly encapsulated in one of the refrains which I have already mentioned: "We're all just trying to figure out the next note, so we all share that." Buckley showed a strong belief that every student was unique and that teachers should put in effort to deeply understand where each student is coming from by asking what they listen to, what they prefer to hear, and what's going on in their personal and compositional lives. Moreover, this comment telegraphed to the student that he faced the same fundamental challenges that they did, making him more relatable. By so extensively discussing the student's interests and inner lives, Buckley supported students in their varied and unique passions, not just to meet his goals, but to meet theirs as well.

## **Goals**

Most of Buckley's goals were experiential. Many of them specifically aimed at giving the students a wide range of experiences or confronting specific problems which may keep a student from progressing. Put another way, each of these goals targeted a potential problem or pitfall that a young composer might experience. And rather than giving the student a particular solution, Buckley simply presented the problem. Therefore, Buckley's methods encouraged students to

develop an idiosyncratic toolbox which they could use in myriad ways to solve or make the most of the situations presented by Buckley's goals.

For instance, encouraging students to write a piece longer than five minutes put the students in situations where they had to think about how to expand their ideas. And while Buckley supported his students and offered explanations and metaphors about how to expand the music, ultimately the students developed their own approaches to extending pieces. By writing for a wide variety of instruments, students were consistently put in situations where they wrote for instruments that they still had a lot to learn about. So, while Buckley encouraged the students to continually interact with performers for specific instruments, students also developed other methods to learn to write for those instruments, such as through their listening practice or interacting with performers online.

The goals related to rehearsals clearly aligned with Buckley's interest in idiosyncratic development. He consistently encouraged students to interact and collaborate with performers without telling the student precisely what to do. Of course, when students asked for help, he offered advice on how to handle a particular interaction such as how to ask for an extended deadline. However, in general, Buckley seemed to simply guide students to the performers and to allow the two to define the relationship. In terms of the rehearsals themselves, it seemed as though Buckley tended to be more hands-on. He asked students if he could sit in on rehearsals, most likely still playing a supporting role and only stepping in to make sure the young composer checked and double-checked that they got what they asked for. By observing rehearsals, Buckley had a chance to observe the young composers and offer private feedback about how to interact with performers or to take and implement feedback.

Developing a listening practice occupied a unique space among these goals because it was a tool itself. Of course, a developed listening practice has open-ended applications and can be used in a number of situations to help a composer improve; however, this goal had a clearer learning outcome than the other goals. As a tool, a developed listening practice could have even been useful in the situations presented by the other goals: as a reference in interacting with performers, as a way to understand a critique, as an emotional refuge from a harsh critique, and absolutely as an approach to understanding how other composers extended their music.

Buckley's ultimate goal was perhaps the platonic example of his idiosyncratic developmental approach. By encouraging students to repeatedly go through the compositional process from conception to post-premiere editing, Buckley ensured that his students experienced every part of the compositional process leaving no major rock unturned. He was not dogmatic about how students generated material or edited their work, but he encouraged them to repeatedly traverse the various parts of the process and put them in situations where they had to develop idiosyncratic approaches for each. This approach also seemed to support Buckley's argument that the point of studying composition with a teacher is so that students can become their own teachers.

## How Did Buckley Help Students Set and Achieve Goals?

Buckley began each semester by discussing the student's goals for the term, specifically asking what pieces they wanted to write and for what instruments. However, this conversation extended from the goals themselves to the attainability of those goals. Especially as he attempted to further remove himself from his students' processes, Buckley helped his students recognize for themselves whether their goals were attainable. He even followed up with them at the end of the term so that they could check in with themselves. So, by spending the semester going through

the process as many times as the student could manage, and by helping students reflect on how they met their own goals, Buckley put students in situations where they learned to iterate and adjust their compositional processes to suit their needs. Buckley then helped students put those reflections and adjustments into words, giving students finer control over their process. He provided insight as needed but gave his students the space to develop their own methods idiosyncratically. He provided his students with some direction but then stepped back. He told me, “[the students] are obliged to think carefully about what they want to adopt and what they want to reject.”

This initial conversation about goals created opportunities for Buckley to discuss a wide variety of goals and gave students a chance to reflect on their expectations as composers. He discussed everything from the goal of a phrase to what type of graduate program they should go to. This type of communication represented one of Buckley’s greatest strength in helping students achieve their goals: helping them to understand what would best suit them. Whether in their music or in their careers, he asked his students to look at the internal structures of their thoughts to see how they might blossom into larger constructions.<sup>138</sup>

At a more granular level, Buckley often let students dictate the flow of lessons by asking what they wanted to look at. When the major resource that students and teachers have together is the time spent in a lesson, asking students what they want to look at centers the student in the lesson. And by allowing students to lead, Buckley not only put himself on their level, but was always in position to serve the student’s goals. Of course, he did not *always* let the student lead;

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<sup>138</sup> Buckley mentioned that he wanted students intent on continuing their education at the graduate level to get their pieces performed at the highest level possible, to meet people, and to experience teaching, and for them to search for graduate programs which would suit their needs for those three basic goals.

in every lesson, he checked in on pieces which were nearing their performances. However, the majority of the time spent in lessons was at the student's discretion. It seems mundane; composition teachers typically look at whatever work the students bring in. However, by asking what the students wanted to look at, Buckley telegraphed that there wasn't a particular assignment that they *must* be working on. And Buckley's students felt comfortable asking important questions because of this disposition. By undermining the assumption that there needed to be a particular focus to the lesson, students felt comfortable asking questions about the compositional process and developed a method of shaping their compositional process across multiple compositions. In fact, some students felt comfortable shifting their goals for the semester and expressed gratitude for Buckley's flexibility and willingness to work on whatever piece had most recently caught their interest.

Beyond his flexibility, Buckley seemed to encourage students to reflect on their goals and how they achieved them. And to support students, he helped them examine their practices and put them in situations where they had to develop those practices. At the most basic level, Buckley's initial list of goals represented baseline goals for the short-, medium-, and long-term. And by providing these goals, he created a foundation on top of which students could build their own personal goals. In the short-term, Buckley encouraged them to talk with performers, conduct rehearsals, and put themselves in positions to take critical feedback. In the medium-term, over the course of several pieces, he urged them to diversify the kinds of music that they wrote in terms of length, instrumentation, and style. And in the long-term, he expected them to develop a diverse portfolio and helped them adjust their focus to look at programs beyond their undergraduate degree, not dissuading students from certain options, but encouraging students to look for graduate programs or jobs that suited them.

Therefore, Buckley designed his goals to support student growth based on the students' individual needs and hopes. He encouraged them to pursue their goals constructively, taking into account their assets; the students did not always maintain the same goals throughout a semester or their early careers. But whenever their goals changed, Buckley encouraged students to reflect on their own potential, their interests, and which goals that student's potential and interested might best fulfill. This reminded me of Wilson's advice that there are two kinds of composers, and that a young composer needs to understand whether they are writing just for themselves or writing pieces that they will actively promote. Buckley's teaching, especially when he related with students and encouraged them to articulate their thoughts, echoed that sentiment: be aware of who you are, and if that's who you're going to be, understand what that means for your career. Buckley encouraged students to be themselves, to explore their interests, and to keep a few possible roadblocks in mind as they did. And ultimately, by allowing students to be themselves, but pushing them just outside of their comfort zones, Buckley managed to help his students learn how to grow as composers in their own varied and idiosyncratic ways.

## Chapter 5: Case Study 2 – Dr. Spektor

*As their lesson began to wrap up, the teacher’s cadence quickened, “Just a couple of quick things: You can’t see this quite as well on the computer, that’s the cool thing about paper. This accent could come down on the page slightly. This ritardando moving to the a tempo in measure 12 could be a little more clear if you used a dotted line.”*

*The student was hurriedly keeping pace marking down the teacher’s notes to address later. The teacher continued, excited, “And if you have a sense of how much ritardando, it wouldn’t hurt to say at the end of the dotted line that your quarter note is now at 56. So, if you have a sense of it, notate it. If you don’t have a sense of it, get a sense of it, then notate it.”*

### Analysis and Case Description

My time with Dr. Spektor was, at first, difficult to characterize. Her approach seemed to involve a certain kind of mysticism which I found striking.<sup>139</sup> Through reading her syllabus and meeting with her, I could tell that she put a great deal of thought into exercises designed to help students develop an understanding of their tastes. And after visiting her university in the southwest U.S., I began to understand that Spektor had structured the composition curriculum so that early in the program, her students delved deep into understanding themselves.<sup>140</sup> But as the students graduated into individual private lessons, the focus of student learning tended to shift toward their pieces rather than solely developing their tastes. She managed to balance these

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<sup>139</sup> In reading back through all of my case studies, I want to voice a concern that many of my case studies focus on male-identifying teachers whereas this case study focuses on a female-identifying teacher *and also* includes a focus on mysticism. I chose to focus on Spektor’s approach in this manner because of both her and her students’ thoughts about her teaching approach. Additionally, to me, there are few better ways to discuss flexibility and a willingness to accept multiple truths than through mysticism.

<sup>140</sup> Spektor had built the composition program along with two other teachers at this school a little more than 10 years prior to my visit.



approaches, building her students' musical tastes both through studying other composers' pieces and studying their own work. This approach brought to mind a saying I had heard before: "Teach the student, not the paper." Spektor's approach provided an interesting challenge to this idea, and when I asked her about it, she revealed this delineation. She said that in group classes she often taught the students rather than focusing on student pieces, but that as they moved into individual lessons, she became quite focused on the student's work.

In lessons, Spektor mentioned that she typically had a hard time remembering exactly what happened in a given lesson, although that didn't keep her from holding her students accountable for what they had said they would do in the previous lesson. At least part of the reason seemed to be that Spektor focused intensely on whatever the student presented at any given moment. She had a unique capability to be deeply present with her students; she seemed to hang on their every answer. Another reason may have been the sheer amount of information that Spektor both took in from the student's point of view and conveyed to the student from her perspective. She generously offered feedback to her students, and this benefited them in the task at hand and with their future work.

Spektor commented in our first interview that the student body she worked with was diverse, much more than where she grew up before immigrating to the U.S. She said, "There's some stuff that comes up that just didn't ever come up in my own upbringing, because I didn't come into a lesson and compose something that sounded like Rachmaninoff and say, 'Here's my piece.' [But] that has happened here." But Spektor was aware that growing up and learning composition for her was different than it was for her students, and that knowledge informed her teaching approach.

Her consistent focus on notation frequently centered around how the score would cross the communicational barrier between the composer and the performer. When she gave suggestions on how a student might continue composing, it was never an assignment to force students to try a new technique, but rather a possibility the student might explore. And these relatively hands-off approaches to students' musical decisions seemed to stem from Spektor's awareness of the differences between herself and her students as well as the knowledge that she only gained a fuller understanding of what students hoped to achieve through their music when she had spent time working with them. And until she developed that fuller understanding, Spektor focused on trying to understand what the student wanted to achieve musically and helped them pour that intention into the score. By asking students to explore what interested them in the piece that they were actively working on, Spektor not only helped her students build pieces and compositional processes, but also helped them develop methods of understanding their musical tastes and critiquing their work.

## Spektor's Goals

In our first conversation together, Spektor outlined the following goals, which complemented her syllabus:

1. Compose something that uses complex, consistent notation
2. Compose for as many instruments and voice types as possible
3. Compose for a large ensemble
4. Compose something that involves electronic music
5. Have an experience as an improviser
6. Develop strong ear training skills
7. Develop an understanding of diverse repertoire, especially focused on modern repertoire

The first goal which Spektor mentioned concerned notation, which influenced nearly every aspect of her teaching. Although she discussed notation in a number of contexts, most often she used notation as a vehicle to provide feedback on students' works. While Spektor intended most of her goals to help students develop different compositional processes, this goal also seemed to engage the student in critical thought about how they communicated with performers. By encouraging students to think about both their material and how they communicated that material, Spektor put students in situations where their musical materials developed clarity as the student notated their materials. And as the student looked over their notation, they developed a stronger sense of what they wanted their music to accomplish, establishing a positive feedback loop between the student's understanding of their music and notation.

The next four goals on Spektor's list presented potential roadblocks for student composers. These goals put students in positions where they needed to modify their writing process or develop new compositional processes as they confronted a wider array of performance media. At several points, Spektor mentioned the small differences between writing for clarinet or oboe, presenting a relatively straightforward instrumental difference. Likewise, she discussed with some students how they composed for ensembles and how the individual parts of the ensemble can develop and change relationships throughout a composition. Spektor aimed to help students understand the subtle differences between these various performing media as well as to view those differences as containing musical meaning that the students could use to their advantage. For instance, helping students understand when to use clarinets to blend in orchestral settings or when electronics might realize a musical idea better than live musicians. These four goals provided compositional challenges for students to overcome and to develop new methods

through overcoming. One student working on a choir piece mentioned that they did not enjoy writing for vocalists, so as they wrote, they instead attempted to imitate instrumental writing techniques.

Although improvisation fit well among these four goals, fewer students were working on pieces which included improvisation when I visited. However, Spektor noted at one point during our first interview that even though improvisation was a large part of her musical practice, she had had students in the past few years use improvisation in scores for ensembles that do not usually improvise. After having a student misunderstand how to implement improvisation, Spektor seems to have re-oriented her studio to better understand performers' capabilities and how improvisation would align with those capabilities. Especially given her focuses on ensuring good communication with performers and understanding performers' points of view, shifting toward goals which help students understand when and how to implement improvisation makes sense. Therefore, Spektor seemed to want her students to have a structured experience, potentially a performance, improvising in some way. Furthermore, this reorientation also revealed part of the reason why Spektor brought in a wide variety of groups for her students to write for. She wanted her students to overcome challenges writing not only for vocal ensembles, but also ensembles which rely on, or actively avoid, improvisation or electronics.

Spektor did not focus on the final two goals in the lessons that I observed. Occasionally a student asked her about repertoire, or she asked for a student to identify an interval, but Spektor made it clear that she primarily expected students to primarily accomplish these goals through ear training classes. And even though she checked those skills sometimes, she ultimately expected students to continue developing them on their own. At some points, however, Spektor mentioned opening up students to possibilities and pushing students to listen to John Cage or

taking students on sound walks to open their ears to different conceptions and perceptions of sound, and some students mentioned that these walks transformed the way they thought about music. However, overall, these goals appeared to focus more on understanding what was happening in the landscape of modern composition and developing student faculties to use that knowledge in their own work.

## Lesson Structures

One student had a particularly apt explanation of Spektor's lesson structure. They described the beginning of lessons with Spektor as empty of pre-conceived notions; they felt that when they entered a lesson they could take Spektor in any direction based on what they wanted to discuss. They went on to describe how as the lesson progressed, they built up problems to solve with Spektor and that as they built up those issues, the focus of the lesson coalesced so that by the end the student felt like they had practical ideas to try out and manipulate. This student's explanation aligned neatly with what I saw as I observed Spektor teach, beginning with a series of questions, diving more deeply into a few topics that were relevant to the student's work, and ending with particular suggestions for the student to explore on their own.

As Spektor reviewed the student's work, her questions focused on the student's intent, and her comments on adding clarity in the notation. The high volume of information and gentle feedback may have contributed to the feeling of openness that the above student experienced in their lessons. Her comments ranged from "You have a decrescendo but no indication of what dynamic it goes to," to "The rhythm and duration of your notation is unclear here." Giving the student an array of notational ideas to work on from relatively simple close-ended feedback to qualitative and open-ended feedback for students who had been composing longer. Her questions, on the other hand, seemed expressly intended to clarify what the student was hoping

to achieve with a particular piece of notation.<sup>141</sup> She seemed to constantly try to understand what the student was after; in the three lessons I observed and our interviews, she always had a humble attitude toward her students. She opened each lesson with a series of questions, continuously trying to understand students' musical choices based on what they brought into their lessons, no matter the format they brought their work in.

Through the different kinds of notation systems students brought in, including mock-ups in digital audio workstations (DAWs), printed scores, and abstract sketches, Spektor commented on how the work might be perceived both by performers as well as the student themselves, and how those perceptions might affect their work. And as Spektor combed through the score, she mediated the student's intent, ensuring that the score accurately translated the student's ideas to performers. By looking through the score, asking questions, and providing comments, Spektor acted as a filter for the ambiguous parts of the notation which clouded the student's intent. Furthermore, she reinforced ideas that the student hadn't put yet put on the page.

As Spektor came across parameters which the student seemed to have left unconsidered, her questions often became more pointed, leading the student to think about new dimensions of their music. This happened throughout the lesson, but especially toward the ends of lessons, Spektor seemed to suggest a greater number of changes, considerations, and approaches to her students, asking them to think about notational issues such as the spacing of text above a system or sonic aspects like vibrato in a vocal piece. By the end of a lesson, Spektor had provided students with checklists of different typos to fix and techniques to try to help them edit and build

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<sup>141</sup> Although in several cases Spektor attempted to lead students to think about specific parameters through her questions.

more material on top of what they had already written. Far from a to-do list, Spektor almost never gave specific suggestions on the music itself such as to add a phrase, but rather pointed out patterns to consider, typos in the notation to fix, or new directions to think in.

## Key Teaching Methods

### *Reconciling Students' Intentions with Students' Notations*

One of Spektor's major goals included helping students create scores using complex and consistent notation, and several times she mentioned helping students make beautiful scores which articulated their intent. This teaching method is multi-faceted because although helping a young composer clarify their intent through their notation facilitates an accurate performance of the composer's intent, the notation itself is not music. Some teachers might therefore argue that focusing on a notation as a skill supplements good composition but does not complement it: that notational skills do not translate to compositional skills. However, as Spektor discussed notation with her students, she also specifically pushed them to understand their intentions better, and to deeply consider how they realized their musical intentions through the use of a score.

Spektor spent a significant portion of each lesson helping students clarify ambiguities both in their notation and in their intentions. She continually asking questions to point out areas of misalignment between the student's notation and standard notational conventions, on the one hand, and the student's intentions and what they actually communicated to the performer through their score, on the other.<sup>142</sup> When students had gone against a standard notational convention, Spektor often simply corrected the student, but would sometimes ask why a student had chosen to notate something in a particular way. However, when students left instructions ambiguous or

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<sup>142</sup> Spektor used Elaine Gould's book, *Behind Bars: The Definitive Guide to Music Notation*, as a reference for notational conventions, and used it as a reference in many lessons.

if the student's intent and notation seemed at odds, Spektor asked what they wanted or made suggestions to consider an unexamined parameter of the music.

Spektor's focus on helping students articulate themselves also occupied a prime position in introductory composition courses. Spektor discussed an exercise she used which pushed students to present notation that fully captured a musical idea. In this exercise, Spektor asked students to develop a musical gesture, to consider it deeply, and then to notate that gesture as specifically as possible. The final goal was to present an unambiguous gesture that another student in the class could play. This exercise revealed a virtuous cycle between composing and notating that mirrored the content of Spektor's private lessons. As the students developed highly specific musical gestures, they notated those figures, and by notating those figures, the students could assess how specific they had been and reconsider or refine the initial gesture to include unconsidered parameters. With these strategies, students could develop editing processes which may help them clarify or specify their musical intent using notation as a continual assessment.

To show the importance of clarity and specificity, Spektor put students in contact with live performers.

For the students to see notation be a communication in action with the Arditti Quartet is a very cool thing. They understand immediately why they have to be specific. For example, the Ardittis will sit down, have a score by someone who maybe forgot a few details, and they will ask, 'Do you mean this or this or this? What you wrote is not quite clear. Which one of these 10 versions is it?'

Furthermore, Spektor's explanation of why students should include every detail illustrated one of the primary ways in which Spektor gave feedback: from a performer's point of view. Spektor continually emphasized what the performers would interpret from the student's score, especially in areas where students wrote ambiguously, and helped them notate their intent so that when the performers interpreted the score, the composer's intent would come through.



For instance, in one lesson a student discussed how they wanted to use a growl, which they demonstrated and then began talking about its contour which they were considering notating. Spektor quickly encouraged them to include the contour of the growl to communicate to the performer that despite the noisiness of the growl, there would still be pitch shaping.<sup>143</sup> Then, looking at passages in which the student asked performers to breathe audibly, Spektor performed some of the parts with their contour in mind. As Spektor tested out some of the breathing, she commented “When I do it, there's a contour change. It happens automatically. So, the question is, are you okay with that? Do you want that? Do you want to notate that?” By asking these questions, Spektor modeled the kinds of questions she expected students to ask themselves. With the first question, she ensured that the student wanted the contour, then asked if there was something else that they might want instead and ended with a leading question to help the student notate their piece in a consistent and detailed manner. These questions cast Spektor’s gesture exercise in a clearer light, providing more specific examples of the kinds of questions Spektor wanted students to ask themselves as they notated their composition.

These three questions, “Are you okay with that? Do you want that? Do you want to notate that?” seemed to help students reconcile their musical ideas with their notation. One student thought of these questions in a different way, saying that Spektor often asked, “This is what it seems like you want, is that intentional?” To this student, Spektor seemed to act almost like an auditor, making sure that they weren’t simply going through the motions of composing. The student went on to say that Spektor always wanted the student to make it abundantly clear

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<sup>143</sup> The two also talked briefly about potential performer concerns regarding growling, to which Spektor commented that the student should notate that the part could be amplified if necessary.

that what they put on the page was what they wanted the performers to do so that the performers would not be confused.

Spektor often gave feedback as though she was a performer looking at the piece. For one student, she commented on the clarity of a student's durational notation in a *senza misura* section, she pointed out that there were two considerably different interpretations for the way a student had ended the phrase. One interpretation would have all of the singers end on a "ss" sound together, stopping together and breathing, whereas the other would have them end on their "ss" sounds individually, leading directly into the next section. Spektor commented, "If I was a singer in the ensemble, I have this barline and that could be where I'm breathing. And so, then the question comes up... Is there a hole? Is there a sliver of air? Or are the sopranos breathing when the tenors are still singing?" As Spektor began her response, she voiced her concern through the lens of the performer, but as she continued to ask questions, she once again prodded at the composer's intent for their piece before offering notational options to achieve what they wanted.

At another point, Spektor encouraged a student to focus not on the performers' potential interpretation but on their experience. One student wrote a decrescendo from *piano* to *pianissimo* over several measures, which Spektor pointed out and said that it could "make [the performers] feel like they don't have a lot of license to actually do this decrescendo." By highlighting this moment, Spektor implicitly argued that composers should consider how their notation affects the overall performance through both the performer's interpretation and their experience. This provided an interesting wrinkle to the way the student considered their notation; Spektor implied that even if the composer intended for a certain dynamic shift to occur, writing an exaggerated version may contribute to a better performance despite the fact that the new dynamics didn't

align with the composer's intent. This moment, as well as the others which focused on the performer's perspective, revealed the presence of an additional goal which Spektor did not mention: for students to understand performers of any background.

Reconciling intentions and notations seemed so ingrained in the students I observed that each of them developed different compositional processes which used notation as a tool to iterate and refine their work. One student drew idea boards for their pieces before transitioning into time-based proto-notation before notating on the computer. Another student simply re-wrote their music, starting from scratch several times, but also used a DAW as its own form of notation to mock up their music. With yet another student, Spektor suggested that they refine their system of notation for different voicings such as speaking, sprechstimme, and singing, so that performers could understand it intuitively and so that the composer could more deeply consider potential patterns in the shifts between these techniques. By moving through these notation systems, Spektor was not only about to understand their thought process better, but these students seemed deeply invested in the work they did with these different kinds of notation.

Spektor encouraged this process by asking students to map out their piece when they had already done some of the preparation, allowing them to begin refining their intentions and expressing those in some kind of notation. She encouraged the students to remain flexible in their frameworks, but she certainly wanted them to develop musical intentions within their pieces both locally and globally. In one lesson she said, "It could be that you're actually working on variation three and that then... before you even go to another movement, you can thin it out and arrive at variation two and then thin it out more and arrive at variation one." This quote in particular revealed how Spektor wanted students to develop intentions and create patterns by extending

those intentions into unexplored areas of the piece, refining the local by defining its relationship to global ideas, as well.

### *Maintaining a Middle Path*

Although Spektor didn't reference Buddhism in any way, as I interviewed one of her students, they mentioned that at the beginning of each lesson they felt like Spektor's demeanor was empty. When I asked for clarification, they described an almost Zen or Buddhist emptiness which embodied a calm and alert state that Spektor took on at the beginning of lessons to respond to her student's work. In this state, Spektor asked repeated questions, helping students build a more critical lens of their own work and adopt a contemplative disposition toward their music rather than a primarily confident disposition. Hearing this student's explanation crystallized this method in my mind, and I began re-evaluate the ways in which she went with the flow of students' interests, which then resembled a meditative practice. By being so present with her students, Spektor maintained a keen intensity on and interest in what they composed.

Spektor's students seemed to take on this in-the-moment disposition, and their focus on the present seemed to contribute to their intensity about the compositions that they were working on. When I asked students about their goals, their responses typically focused on the present. One student said that in their lessons they mostly focused on the project they were actively composing. Another student said that they talked with Spektor about what they wanted to accomplish right then and how they could achieve short-term goals. Focusing on these short-term goals, Spektor seemed to help maintain students' excitement about their work and keep them in a flow state.

Spektor's focus on living in the moment also came out in the kinds of music she wrote and encouraged her students to write. She characterized her approach as a "deep dive into your

inside and making this art that wants to be expressed.” Viewed in light of her almost Zen practice, encouraging reflection and exposing something internal through music again spoke to a meditative practice. When one student indicated that they felt a cultural pushback against their minimalist style (from contemporary music circles, not at their school), they said Spektor helped them understand how to make their music as interesting as possible. She didn’t push her students to conform to cultural tendencies but asked them to look inward and reflect on what they actually wanted.<sup>144</sup>

In our interview, she also mentioned how she attempted to help students stay in a flow by playing devil’s advocate. When students felt dejected about their music, she talked with them about what they considered “failures” and why those may not actually be failures. Discussing how she might recontextualize a failure, she said, “it has to do with what they want and whether [they achieved] what they wanted. And sometimes they wanted *this* and *this* and then they do *this*, and they actually like it; it’s not a failure. So, it really has to do, then, with if they can integrate what they’re doing, if that can be part of the piece that they’re working on, or if it can become another piece.” This consistent reframing kept students from falling out of a flow while working on their pieces if they ran into what Spektor called a “cul-de-sac, a dead-end street” with their work.<sup>145</sup> But Spektor didn’t only recontextualize “failures.” On the contrary, when students felt high, she pointed out parameters they hadn’t considered or taken advantage of.

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<sup>144</sup> Another student corroborated this idea, saying that they appreciated Spektor’s discipline in not imposing on or influencing her students. They said Spektor was open to whatever they presented in lessons. Additionally, she still made her aesthetic interests known, but she said, “that’s not so much to make them feel the same way that I feel, but what I’m passionate about is, of course, what I can teach better.”

<sup>145</sup> Spektor mentioned an example of one student whose failures she helped re-orient. The student had been continually restarting a choir piece and had built up many fragments of ideas that the student felt were failures. So, to help the student build momentum working on their composition, Spektor encouraged them to take the fragments and collage them onto a fresh piece of staff paper to turn their failures into a success.

By using this approach to constantly re-orient students toward a middle path, Spektor demonstrated how students should think critically about their feelings concerning their music. She encouraged them to be skeptical of highly positive or negative feelings in order to maintain their compositional flow. She also likened this compositional flow to the flow of learning a language. “I often compare [composition] to language acquisition, that it is ideally done by doing a little bit every day, and that has to do with how our brain works.” But again, not focusing on either extreme, she problematized a simple view of this flow state. She both acknowledged that students should build their practice by maintaining a daily flow and that students could better evaluate their work by stepping out of that flow.

In one lesson, a student mentioned they had been struggling to assess their music. Spektor recommended that they stop working on the piece for a week to gain some perspective. When I asked her about this moment in a follow-up interview, she said that younger students should not typically remove themselves from their process, but that more experienced composers might *need* time away from their pieces to better understand an outside listener’s perspective. However, Spektor only recommended “stepping out” of the flow of a piece to students who were already relatively fluent with their compositional process. Conversely, with younger students who were grappling with broad philosophical questions, she often had to keep them in a flow by urging them to care less about their final product.

Pushing students to maintain this middle path meant consistently pushing them to be critical and sometimes considering the final product less. Spektor wanted her students to consistently ask themselves questions, and while asking questions might at first build a healthy skepticism and humility, it could also lead to self-doubt and timidity. So, this questioning practice needed tempering. U.S. philosopher, Henry Cavell, discusses threading this emotional

needle, writing “The artist’s survival depends upon his constantly eluding, and constantly assembling, his critical powers.”<sup>146</sup> This neatly mirrors the maintenance of some middle path between a questioning approach and a confident approach. This seemed so relevant to Spektor’s case study because when we first discussed the students I would observe, she described them to me in terms of whether they knew what they wanted or if they were still asking questions about their personal musical language. She said her younger students were still asking themselves a large number of questions not only about the music that they preferred, but also about how they could achieve that music in their piece, as well as larger questions about what music is, all while developing their compositional process and attempting to exist in a flow state. The pressure of all these questions could have seemed overwhelming to students, but Spektor kept them balanced by tempering her critical lens with her next teaching method.

### *Pushing Students to Decide*

As with many aspects of Spektor’s teaching, moderation was key. So, to balance the questioning approach of maintaining a middle path, she also urged her students to focus on details and make decisions. In one lesson she told a student, “If you have a sense of it, notate it. If you don’t have a sense of it, get a sense of it and notate it.” This quote encapsulated the compositional process which Spektor passed onto her students. The beauty of the word “sense” in this quote is that a sense doesn’t imply that the student needs to notate, understand, or even conceive of the final product, they simply need to develop an idea that they can continue to manipulate. For students who struggle to develop their pieces, this quote is a directive not to finalize their thoughts, but to develop a basic understanding of what they would like and to

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<sup>146</sup> Cavell, 192. I explore this idea more deeply in Appendix G under the section “How Do I Reconcile Student Intentions with Student Notations.”

notate it. When Spektor urged students to get something onto the page during their lessons, whether she wanted them simply to notate an idea or include a clarification, she asked them to make decisions on the fly. In these moments, she reassured them that they could change those decisions later but would remind them that they would not be able to edit something that didn't exist. Spektor's intention in these moments was not to force students to make decisions that they would stick with, but to have an idea on the page which they could later refine.

The above quote came from a moment in which Spektor had already tried to clarify some notation. A student had written a *ritardando* and begun the next phrase *a tempo*, but hadn't indicated how slow they would ultimately like the performer to go at the end of the *ritardando*. She quickly brought up two potential performer interpretations for the *ritardando*, either slowing down drastically to 30 beats per minute or more subtly to 56.<sup>147</sup> This recalled Spektor's focus on specificity in notation but honed the student's focus in on a musical choice that they needed to make. After offering the two potential performer interpretations, Spektor simply said "If you have a sense of it, notate it," which clearly came from Spektor's methods of reconciling student intent with notation. But when the student lacked an initial intent, Spektor took the idea deeper, "If you don't have a sense of it, get a sense of it and notate it."

To develop that sense, she often told students to think about their performers. During our last interview she said, "You want to compose specifically for the performers you will work with, so you have to get to know them. It's a little bit like... When you play soccer, you have to look at the other team. What are their strengths?"<sup>148</sup> She did not only mean this in terms of the

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<sup>147</sup> This also happened to represent a moment in which Spektor wanted the student to clarify ambiguous notation.

<sup>148</sup> This simile corroborated her reminders to think about how the "other team," the student's performers, might perceive their score.



specific performers, but also the instruments that they played and the ensembles they worked in. Her goals mirror the wisdom in this quote; she wanted her students to have experiences working with a variety of ensembles to understand their various strengths and to consider those strengths from the outset.

During one lesson, a student had not yet considered whether they would include vibrato in their choral piece. Spektor pointed out, “These folks do mostly contemporary music and they also do quite a bit of medieval and renaissance...” She asked the student how they thought the ensemble might typically use vibrato, given that information. At her student’s hesitation, she discussed this specific ensemble’s use of vibrato as a way to inform the student’s decision about vibrato in their own piece. Spektor wanted this student to understand who they were working with and to evaluate the strengths of the “other team.”

Spektor went on to tell the student that they needed to include *some* instruction on vibrato for the choir so that they would feel cared for. She paused a moment before asking, “Do you have a sense of [the vibrato] or do you want to think about it?” By asking this question, Spektor essentially pushed the student to compose on the spot, and when the student said they didn’t think they wanted much vibrato, she urged them again “Do you want to go all in and say, ‘*non vibrato*’?” While not subtle, this example revealed how Spektor wanted students to make decisions thinking about these players on the other team. Although, given that the performers would realize the student’s work, perhaps it makes more sense to consider them to be on the

same team. And given her goals to work with a wide variety of performers, it seems that Spektor wanted her students to be able to play on the same team with performers of any background.<sup>149</sup>

Spektor continually used these small pushes to short-circuit any second-guessing on the student's part as they began critiquing even before they started composing. In so doing, she moderated her contemplative approach and helped students reach a flow state more quickly. They were certainly aware that if they didn't come into the lesson with an idea ready to go, Spektor would push them and help them to come up with one. In an interview, one student said that they felt as though Spektor consistently nudged them to make decisions on their own by asking them why they didn't like something, why they felt an aspect of the piece didn't work, or just generally how a particular aspect of a piece was progressing. The student remarked that after Spektor let them speak for a while, she would cut in and enable them to rework a specific part of their piece. These moments highlighted how pushing students to make decisions did not exclusively mean pushing them to make compositional decisions, but often meant helping them reach decisions about their *opinions and processes*.

Excepting a few moments such as when Spektor said she thought a section worked when the student didn't, Spektor rarely gave her opinion at all. Instead, she encouraged students to come to conclusions on their own. The above student mentioned that they would often present a particular solution to which Spektor would respond with something like, "Why don't you try that?" This question and others like it seemed to stick with Spektor's students and help them

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<sup>149</sup> While I visited, a few students mentioned that they had not written much for vocalists before. One student said they instead had to imagine that they were writing for another instrument like cello to progress with their music, which interestingly complicated the idea of learning to write for an instrument since it both helped the student write for the vocalists, but also meant that they may have considered another instrument's limitations and strengths.

build enough self-trust to try different ideas apart from what their critical perspective might tell them would or wouldn't work.

Especially with her younger students, Spektor urged them cut through their internal critics and focus in on particular parameters, coming to conclusions and refining their opinions along the way. For instance, in Spektor's beginning composition course, she assigned students to write 10 chords each with three notes and without a common classification such as major, minor, or diminished.<sup>150</sup> After her students wrote the chords, she assigned them to rank the chords from most tense to least. Then the students took one of those chords and voiced it 10 different ways and ranked the voicings from most tense to least. To finish the assignment, she had them write a short response about what they discovered with their ordering.<sup>151</sup> By isolating harmony and then voicings, Spektor had her students drill applications of harmonies beyond what they would typically think of in order to make decisions about and classify them. Additionally, this assignment provided an opportunity for her students to explore sounds focusing on a single parameter (harmony, in this case).

More broadly for younger students, Spektor discussed one method that worked for her as a young composer which could help students who struggle less with motivation and more with developing basic musical impulses:

My childhood teacher would do this exercise with us... He had us close our eyes and imagine we're sitting in the audience and we're hearing the piece we composed. Which was fantastic... By closing our eyes and putting ourselves in the concert hall, suddenly it

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<sup>150</sup> Spektor also did not let students write dominant seventh chords which were missing the fifth or the third.

<sup>151</sup> Another exercise tasked students with writing 11 bars each with different meters and one "interesting" rhythm that ran throughout the 11 bars. Spektor mentioned that the class had a conversation about what makes a rhythm interesting to support this exercise.

became apparent I just composed a piece for guitar, clarinet, and cello and I hadn't known before that that was the instrumentation I wanted.

And for a wider range of students at all experience levels, Spektor discussed how working with and being taken seriously by professional performers can flip a switch in a student's brain, encouraging them to take their work seriously and work on their compositions responsibly. She mentioned that when she was younger, the first time she had her piece performed by an adult, she was blown away by these adults taking her seriously and that that motivated her and helped her think about how she had to live up to that attention.

Even as Spektor discussed the three students I would observe, she talked about them in terms of their experience and whether they knew what they wanted out of composition, effectively commenting on their decision-making and opinion-refining skills. As she described her students, she commented that her more experienced students tended to know what they wanted to write and simply used Spektor to fine-tune their approaches through feedback. For her younger students, Spektor commented that they were still finding what they wanted, and it also seemed as though she had to draw out what interested these students. With one student I did not observe, Spektor even commented that they frequently tore down their latest works and had difficulty composing without deadline pressure. She attributed these behaviors to the student's questioning of composition as a whole and their lack of knowledge on what they wanted to write. But Spektor mentioned a few ways that the methods she used, such as deadline pressure, helped this student reach decisions by keeping them from becoming overly-invested in the outcome of their work.

Ultimately, by pushing students to decide, Spektor focused on helping students develop opinions and act on them. She said,

If I was someone who was an expert in wine, I would really strive to make [students] develop taste. And I've tried to do that too, more through experiencing other art and repertoire. And I do think if they ever developed their own taste and it eventually really differed from mine, that's completely fine. I do want them to have a taste. I want them to be kind of opinionated, still open minded, but to really have an opinion.

For some students, pushing them to develop opinions took the form of asking them questions about their preferences; for others, Spektor told them they may need make a map of the whole piece to inform their decisions about individual sections. But developing opinions was only part of pushing students to decide, the students also needed to enter the right frame of mind to put those opinions into action. Therefore, to push students to decide, Spektor not only helped them find the motivation to approach making decisions and develop their opinions, but also enabled them to trust their opinions and to take action on their own.

### *Affirming Patterns and Challenging Assumptions*

As I considered how Spektor balanced between fostering skepticism and building confidence, I began to think of how she likewise balanced affirming and challenging her students. She talked about riding this emotional and motivational line to keep her students in a flow state, but it also seemed as though she navigated between these two ideas aesthetically. I thought about how, when she asked students whether staff notation would suit their needs best, she challenged a status quo, both culturally and in the context of the student's work. And she tempered this approach by noting and affirming patterns within the students' works. These two approaches may not seem as balanced as some of Spektor's other methods; in the following examples, Spektor mostly noticed patterns and challenged them. However, as she did so, she encouraged her students to think critically about the patterns they had set up already in order to create new patterns. These two methods are paradoxical in the sense that affirming patterns *seems* contradictory to challenging assumptions, but the two actually coexist, which neatly fit

into Spektor's approach. They managed to coexist because by noticing a pattern and challenging it, Spektor demonstrated to students how they could create more complex patterns and fulfill more of the potential within their work.

In one lesson, for instance, a student consistently used one vocal texture in which the voices moved homophonically. As she noticed the student's pattern, she treated it like an assumption, first pointing it out, and then suggesting instead that they play with the texture, creating a new pattern using contrasting thicker and thinner instrumentation. By challenging the student's assumption, Spektor validated the pattern that they created, but encouraged them to think critically about it and create a new pattern with that critical understanding. In doing so, Spektor demonstrated to the student how they could generate material by looking for patterns in their work and varying those patterns.

She repeated this procedure in a different lesson. One student used different languages as distinct layers, similar to a motet, setting up a pattern. She communicated this pattern to them before mentioning that, for a U.S. audience, texts in English would come across more clearly than texts in other languages. In pointing out how their work would be perceived by an audience, Spektor challenged a perception that the different layers of music would be roughly equivalent in the balance. By commenting on the student's patterns, she demonstrated that they could use the language of the text to affect the texture, revealing a new pattern which the student could use to generate new material.

Spektor wanted students to be able to recognize patterns within their own music so that they could begin challenging ideas which they took for granted. In the conversation about vibrato between Spektor and one student, she wanted the student to realize that they created a pattern by not using any vibrato throughout the piece. Before revealing what parameter the student hadn't

used, she asked them to sing a note two different ways. The student sang a long note long and a short note. She continued, “Now sing the same pitch, the same duration, and the same dynamic, and do it two different ways.” Faced with these parameters, the student had a difficult time coming up with how else they could change the sound. Spektor gently persisted, “On clarinet, you don’t do this very much. Say you play oboe, flute, or violin, what do you do besides dynamics?” The student talked about different ways to bow a violin and how the different bowings change the timbre. Spektor then asked “What would that be on a wind instrument? You don’t have a bow. How do you change timbre or tone?” When the student still struggled to come up with an answer, Spektor demonstrated, singing the same note twice once with straight tone and once with vibrato.<sup>152</sup> In delaying the answer and urging the student to dig deeper, she pushed them to think through multiple layers of assumptions that they might make about a piece of music, revealing several new ideas which the student might choose to activate in the piece at hand.

These examples came to a head during one lesson, where a student mentioned that they felt somewhat stuck in a kind of modern counterpoint influenced by 16<sup>th</sup> century counterpoint. As the lesson continued, the student critiqued their own work. They had wanted each voice to change roles within the texture but said that they were reaching a point where they felt confined by the patterns they had established. As they continued, Spektor consistently affirmed the student, but asked them questions about where they felt the issue was with the design of the

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<sup>152</sup> Spektor also typically did not hand the answers to her students, instead allowing them to practice thinking outside of the box in a safe space. Some teachers may feel that demonstrating for the student can constitute giving the student the answer, but by encouraging the student to still say the answer without the teacher saying it, Spektor both prolonged the experience and pushed the student to make the connection as opposed to making the connection for them.

piece. The student finally said they were worried about the pattern they had fallen into with their compositional *process*. Spektor again supported them, talking about how she enjoyed the piece, but that if the student felt uneasy about their process that they may want to recontextualize how they approached the roles of the singers. The student continued Spektor's thought, saying that they had only considered how the functions of individual voices might change from section to section, but that they may want to think about the texture from point to point and within phrases instead of larger formal contexts. This particular example stood out both because it represented a refining of the student's compositional process and because the *student* recognized that the refining needed to occur and became excited to implement a change in their compositional approach.

Thinking further about how Spektor affirmed patterns and challenged assumptions in students' processes, she mirrored this aesthetic approach of recycling patterns that were already present. She wanted students to streamline their processes enough to functionally produce music, but she wanted them to ask themselves questions about the paths they took through their process: "Does it *need* to be this way?" She said, "some [students] are super happy with everything they write and it's hard to get across that you do have to ideally shape it and craft it once it's there. There is more to it than just producing it. And then others are at the opposite extreme, and they question everything they make 15 times." She wanted students to understand that they needed to strike a balance between function and form the way an architect might. She wanted them to be able to produce music, but to problematize that ability at the same time. In fact, in her syllabus and again in our first conversation, she said "I find, more often than not that, they think that's how composition works: 'There's a recipe and that's what I will learn.' I have to disappoint them. There is no recipe." But by problematizing the compositional process herself *and then helping*



*students find deeper structures for themselves*, Spektor helped her students become independent.<sup>153</sup> She didn't give them a recipe, but she taught them how to build up their compositional process.

## Discussion

My time with Spektor was defined by questions. Spektor obviously asked her students many questions, but she also used questions as a means of transmitting information about compositional parameters and notation that students should include in their scores. When I asked if she felt like questions were an essential part of her teaching, she said yes, and later qualified, "I love asking questions that will guide [students] to understand more about their own process, but also about the piece at hand." Spektor didn't explicitly outline those questions, but by asking students to explain their processes their opinions about their own music, Spektor equipped her students with the critical tools to explore their musical practices more fully.

Spektor mentioned in our first interview that her memories of her lessons growing up were foggy, and that she experienced a similar fog in the lessons she taught. Being in the room with her as she worked with students, it became clear to me that at least part of that fogginess seemed to come from Spektor's intense focus on existing in-the-moment with her students. Even I, as an outsider, was not immune to what she had described; after each observation I found that I had more questions than answers. The rate at which she asked questions of such wide variety left me, as someone without a deep understanding of the student's work, reeling. The students on the other hand seemed more than capable of parsing all of Spektor's questions due, at least in part, to

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<sup>153</sup> Deeper structures such as seeing patterns and challenging or modifying them, or checking, testing, and refining their work.

their insider understanding of their own work. But again, the stream-of-consciousness line of questioning evolved out of Spektor's humility as she worked with students; she did not assume that she knew everything the student intended, and therefore always asked. She constantly tried to understand them, their work, and their processes, and encouraged her students to understand themselves as well. Her humble demeanor set an example for students learning to ask questions.

Spektor certainly instilled a spirit of questioning into her students. She remarked that students who struggled, struggled because of how much they questioned the act of composition. Meanwhile, young students questioned what they wanted to accomplish through composition and Spektor's more experienced students questioned their musical materials and processes. At each of these levels, students built critical lenses with which to view themselves and their work. Of course, this approach meant that some students struggled, although productively, with philosophical questions. But this approach also meant that as students developed answers to those philosophical questions, or accepted the mystery of those questions, they began to develop thoughtful approaches to their music and thoughtful critique on their approaches as well.

## Goals

As I wrote at the beginning of this dissertation, when a teacher sets goals for their students, there is a tension between what the teacher wants the student to accomplish and what the student wants to accomplish. A teacher's goals might align with students' goals, oppose students' goals, or allow for student goals to exist apart from the teacher's. In this last category, teachers plan their goals so that students can enter the composition program with any goals, and the teacher would be able to fit the students' goals into the curriculum. Spektor's two final goals which focused on ear training skills and developing an understanding of diverse repertoire, fit neatly into this category. Beyond these two, many of Spektor's other goals were likewise meant

to benefit any student entering the program, which helped her to support a diverse array of students. However, Spektor also acknowledged the potential for misalignment between what she felt equipped to teach or thinks may interest a student and what actually interests different students. Again, she was humble about her understanding of her students.

Spektor's other goals appeared to push students to sample different techniques which students may become interested in. The primary focus on notation may have been due to the fact that most of these other goals, and indeed many types of composition, are supported by a composer's skill notating their intention. If a composer can notate their intention well, not only in staff notation, but in other types of notation as well, they can more effectively communicate with their performers. Therefore, based on the fact that notation was the first goal that Spektor discussed, one which defined her approach to feedback, and because it supported many other goals, this goal seemed to represent Spektor's primary focus. Even in cases where students seemed to become more interested in fixed-media electronic music where they would need less facility with notation, Spektor said she still asked these students to compose something that used complex and consistent notation. She acknowledged that her goals may not necessarily align with the student's goals in these circumstances, but that the student might still gain important skills from crafting intricate scores.

By discussing how student's goals might not align with Spektor's main goal, Spektor revealed that several of her goals were designed so that students sampled different approaches to see if they enjoyed them, even if those approaches were not their primary focus. Students may not have improvised or worked with large ensembles before either, but she wanted students to have those experiences to see if they developed interest in those techniques. Likewise with composing for as many instruments and voices as possible, Spektor wanted students to both

develop an understanding of the differences between, and to see how they enjoyed working with different instruments. Beyond these two goals, several of Spektor's students developed new compositional processes for working with vocalists, both because of the qualities of the voice as an instrument as well as because of the intersection of text and music. Several students commented on this phenomenon, saying they hadn't known how to compose for voice and that they developed new approaches to be able to work on their pieces. Developing compositional methods in response to different musical media therefore became a kind of hidden or oblique goal of Spektor's.

Critically, students frequently built new compositional methods on their own. They developed idiosyncratic solutions to the issues of working with new media of which they had an incomplete understanding. For instance, by thinking about how parts of an ensemble interrelate, a student can begin to consider their piece in terms of shifting textures. Of course, the students did not develop these solutions in a vacuum. Spektor asked frequent questions to temper these new solutions and to help ensure that students challenged themselves without biting off more than they could chew, once again keeping them on a middle path.

## How Did Spektor Help Students Set and Achieve Goals?

My perspective on the alignment between Spektor's goals and her students' goals is mixed. Some students said that she respected their interests and helped them realize the kind of music that they found interesting, but I also got the sense that some students were interested in exploring vernacular musics, which only came up outside of the context of lessons. Likewise, it seemed as though students gravitated toward styles which Spektor found interesting, but at the same time many students said that they enjoyed the fact that Spektor did not impose her musical style or taste onto them. These ideas coexisted in a complex manner. In the same way that

Spektor's goals had a deeper layer which helped students develop compositional processes for different media, Spektor did not necessarily try to transmit her style to her students, but she did communicate that having a style, or taste, was okay. She said so herself, "If they ever developed their own taste and it eventually really differed from mine, that's completely fine. I do want them to have a taste."

When I asked students how they discussed goals with Spektor, they said that they did not have extensive discussions about what interested the student. Instead, Spektor seemed to study the students for a long time, both in lessons and through their music, to ascertain for herself what interested the students. Spektor then typically looked for areas where students' preferences overlapped with her expertise and enabled the students to try new techniques, develop new processes, or bend old processes to a new product. Conversation about goals was typically incidental. One student made a comment during their lesson that someday they would like to write a mini-opera, but otherwise the students seemed intently focused on what they were writing at the time, which mirrored Spektor's own in-the-moment approach to lessons. Students even commented that when they discussed goals, it tended to be on a smaller scale.

Focusing on the relationship between student preferences and teacher expertise, Spektor acknowledged several times that a complex relationship exists between what a teacher feels well-equipped to teach and what interests students. Areas in which the two overlap reflect areas where the student and teacher work better together. A student interested in harmony because they play piano may easily slip into conversation on different types of harmony with a teacher who has spent their career writing jazz music. Teachers and students may find multiple areas of overlap when teachers present a wide variety of goals that include topics which interest the teacher and which they have experience with. Spektor's acknowledgment of the relationship between student

interests and teacher capabilities helped her to align herself with many students in ways which felt unimposing because Spektor worked to find points of overlap. This didn't mean that Spektor could teach every style that interested students: there were still negative spaces between the areas where Spektor's capabilities overlapped with student interests, as there are in every teacher-student relationship. However, Spektor played to her strengths and used her time with her students wisely by focusing on topics which she had the most expertise with and which the student would find most engaging.

The beauty of Spektor's humble, questioning approach was that she constantly gathered information, spending most of her lessons finding out what students engaged with musically and how they approached their compositions. She set goals for students to have different experiences, but otherwise listened to students about what they wanted to achieve. She then helped them achieve their goals by enabling them to make decisions or encouraging them to test and refine their work, but she also helped them by putting productive roadblocks in their path. These roadblocks not only came in lessons as she discussed students' "failures" with them, but also in her goals, which represented tasks for students to overcome and grow through.

Ultimately, Spektor provided her students with opportunities to grow and listened to them as they grew throughout the process. Her goals seemed ancillary to whatever interested the student: they were important, but they took on a supporting role. Meanwhile, Spektor watched her students for signs of interest, identifying which student interests her expertise readily aligned with, and helped them figure out what it was that they wanted in the first place. She assigned them exercises in which they came up with chords or rhythms, and then asked them why they liked some more than others. She acknowledged that what they enjoyed musically might change or evolve during their time with her and that it was okay to have opinions. So, although they

talked about their goals infrequently, Spektor constantly kept her fingers on her students' pulse. She did not assume that she knew the answers to the questions that she asked, and she always tried to understand where the student was coming from as well as where they wanted to go before she enabled them to push forward and pursue their goals.

## **Chapter 6: Case Study 3 – Dr. Wainwright**

*The teacher and student both pulled off jackets as we got into the warm classroom. The student placed two large scores on a desk and began to flip through one of the scores, excited, as they started talking, “I want to get your help figuring out how to digest this because even though it’s really hard to understand what he’s doing; the effect is really cool.”*

*“Well, we can look at the score together,” the teacher said, starting up a computer, “I’ll play it on here, and then if you like, we can start with an analysis.”*

### **Analysis and Case Description**

Before going to meet Dr. Wainwright at a state school in the Midwest, I had the opportunity to look over his syllabus and see his focus on having students work with performers, present their work, and participate in lessons, readings, and performances at the university. As with many composition teachers, the syllabus that Wainwright sent me was only a glimpse of his perspectives on music which I began to see more of in our first conversation. My first understanding of Wainwright’s approach was that it was deeply tied to a European Classical tradition of composition. But as I talked with him more, I began to understand how his perspective focused more on understanding many different musics and synthesizing several approaches to composition idiosyncratically. When Wainwright talked about musical traditions, he would constantly focus on the traditions which interested the student, specifically noting how those traditions exist in modern times. I was also impressed by the range of pieces that Wainwright referenced and recommended during lessons. In our first meeting, he explained that the reason he focused on understanding a wide breadth of music was that he believed



understanding as many traditions and ways of making music as possible was an important component to writing interesting music.

## Wainwright's Goals

In our first conversation together, Dr. Wainwright mentioned six main goals with two supporting goals that he hoped to achieve with his students:

1. To expose the student to as many different types and pieces of music as possible
2. To help the student express themselves with clarity
3. To help the student make interesting music
  - a. To build on the student's creativity and originality
  - b. To encourage the student to consider options that they haven't thought about
4. To guide the student through the process of working with performers
5. To encourage the student as they give and receive critical feedback
6. To help the student affect more people through their music

Wainwright appeared to prioritize these goals in terms of what would help students learn the most while they pursued their degree which included finishing significant pieces and working with performers. The goals which appeared most in the analysis were exposing students to as many different types and pieces of music as possible, helping students express themselves with clarity, encouraging students to consider options they hadn't thought about, and guiding students through the process of working with performers. Especially given the funds that a school or department of music has to bring performers for residency projects, maintain a library of scores, and hire full-time composition professors, these four goals seem to be most easily achieved at a college or university. Therefore, these goals aligned with Wainwright's focus on encouraging students to use the resources available to them while pursuing their degree, which he commented on in nearly every lesson I observed.

Many of these goals interrelate. For instance, Wainwright's focus on exposing the student to as much repertoire as possible connected to helping students produce interesting music. In this case, he seems to use the term "interesting music" in an educational context to refer to what students find interesting in their own listening. However, Wainwright also said, "One aspect of what makes a piece interesting is originality and creativity." Originality and creativity seem to be external ways of evaluating whether a piece is interesting, rather than focusing on whether the student found the music interesting, so there seems to be some tension in this definition of interesting music.

To help students develop interesting music, in our first interview, Wainwright said, "I think that the more music they've heard, the more music they can hopefully understand... [and] the more interesting their own music could be." This connection stemmed from several impulses such as the idea that students should understand how original their ideas are and how they can synthesize new ideas from old ones.<sup>154</sup> These overtly connected ideas likewise link the goal of exposing students to as much repertoire as possible to the goals of building creativity and considering options that the student has not thought of. These goals, as well as helping the student to express themselves with clarity, likewise connect to the final goal on the list: helping students affect more people through their music. And although this last goal appears quite abstract and ambitious, the student should achieve it over time as they accomplish the other goals.

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<sup>154</sup> Wainwright also wanted students to understand what was currently happening in the genres the students cared about and operated in, as well as what had been done with a particular genre or instrumentation.

Lastly, teaching his students to work with performers seemed to be one of Wainwright's main priorities. He certainly expressed that working with performers was an important and educational part of the compositional process in his lessons. In one lesson, he said, "If you can get [the performers] together in a room for half an hour just to read through a few different things, that could be really educational for you." Through this comment, Wainwright communicated that by working with performers, students could receive feedback they might not otherwise hear. Furthermore, this sentiment telegraphed to the student that they would continue to have avenues to pursue feedback when they stopped working with him; performers could introduce students to new pieces as well as new perspectives. And critically, the performers could provide low-bias feedback on the student's notation and musical intent. By being some of the first people to interpret the composer's musical expression, and through their interpretation, the performers could reveal to the student composer whether the clarity of their intent.

The above comment also cast Wainwright, not wholly, but in part, as a stand-in for the performer's feedback. In some ways, he implied that although he helped students refine their compositions, he existed in the compositional process to facilitate communication between the student composer and their performers. To that end, until students were fully prepared to seek out and engage with performers on their own, he helped students refine their work *and* advised them on how to develop relationships with performers. He seemed to put special emphasis on helping students develop relationships with performers who played instruments with which the student had little experience. One student who was writing for guitar indicated that they needed some guidance. So, Wainwright advised them, "Find a friendly guitarist who is willing to sit down with you for a while and is willing to go through what you've written. And, if you're

flexible enough and open enough to changing things, perhaps even significantly, then that's the other way to go about it. Just write what you want and be prepared to change a lot of it."

## Lesson Structures

Each lesson I observed was structured uniquely. However, across the four lessons I sat in on, I saw two teaching processes unfold.<sup>155</sup> The first process included:

1. Either of their own volition, or at the teacher's prompting, the student discussed a particular piece that they had listened to and were trying to emulate in some way, even if obliquely.
2. The teacher and student worked together to identify what the student liked about the influential piece.
3. The teacher and student discussed the composer's expression and the audience's perception of what the student liked about the influential piece, commenting on how specific ideas functioned within the context of the influential piece.
4. The teacher and student brainstormed different ways the same idea could function in the context of the student's piece, often presenting multiple options.
5. The teacher provided new pieces which explored functions similar to those that the student indicated interested them.

As part of this structure, the student had typically already done some research looking over scores, allowing the teacher and the student to discuss the context and content of ideas that the student enjoyed and providing opportunities for the pair to think of applications to the student's own music together. This structure was typically high-energy because the students tended to be excited about what they had discovered through their listening and score study.

The second teaching process relates to the first, but focuses on the student's music:

1. The student presented their music either through MIDI playback or by discussing a particular issue they were having and then playing their piece.

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<sup>155</sup> There were some lessons in which this process unfolded three times, and others where this structure took up the majority of the lesson time.

2. If the student had not yet identified moments that they were either happy or unhappy with, the teacher would prompt them to do so.
3. The teacher and student discussed the student's expression and the teacher's perception of the student's piece, especially at moments the student identified as pleasing or displeasing, commenting on how the ideas functioned within the context of the piece.
4. The teacher and student brainstormed ways the student's musical intent could be more clearly expressed, often presenting multiple options.
5. The teacher provided pieces which explored similar functions as what the student indicated interested them.

These processes obviously share many ideas. However, the main difference between them was how much new compositional material the student presented to the teacher. When the student had relatively little material, the first lesson structure afforded Wainwright the opportunity to brainstorm and generate ideas with the student. Alternatively, when the student brought in a significant amount of material, the second process helped Wainwright and the student to develop the student's music and clarify the student's musical intent. Condensed even further, the flow of both lesson structures could be framed with these questions:

1. What does the student composer like or dislike?
2. Why do they like or dislike it?
3. How can they use or change it?

In terms of the focus during lessons, most of the students indicated that individual composition lessons focused on decision making processes. For instance, one student mentioned that individual composition lessons tend to be process-oriented, focusing less on *what* the compositional choices were and more on *why* the student made those choices. Another student felt similarly, saying that compared to other classes that they'd had with Wainwright, they felt their individual composition lessons were focused less on the particular choices the student made and more on critical thinking. It would make sense that composition classes with more students participating in them at once tend to be more product-oriented, engaging with specific

compositional techniques and grading the students based on the correct use of those techniques. In fact, during one lesson Wainwright said that he was glad the student was in counterpoint because he thought that the counterpoint class would give the student tools to help in their harmonic writing.<sup>156</sup>

Lastly, before getting into the themes of this case study, I want to mention grading. Wainwright's school was the only school I observed where students were given a weekly grade based on their progress in private lessons. During our discussions, Wainwright said they felt grades helped the students evaluate their progress and went on to frame grades as a motivating force. Furthermore, he intended for grades to be tools to help students gauge their progress more precisely. One student expressed in an interview, however, that going to lessons and receiving Wainwright's feedback was their primary motivator and a way of establishing progress toward their goals. Most of the students seemed to share that sentiment. They saw attending lessons as the primary motivating factor, and some even expressed that they tried not to look at their grades. In some ways, Wainwright agreed with them, that the primary motivators should be producing for lessons, readings, and performances. However, the grades were intended to *enhance* that primary motivation.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Because many of the group lessons that Wainwright and his students discussed were focused on a particular approach to composition, group lessons appear to be detail-oriented (according to the students), focused on a style or a model, and necessarily more product-oriented because of the higher number of students the teacher must interact with. Private lessons, on the other hand, allowed Wainwright to focus more on the individual student's process, less attached to a particular style. While both the product-oriented and the process-oriented approaches seem important to Wainwright, it is interesting to note that when given the opportunity to work one-on-one with a student and focus on anything, Wainwright chooses to focus on the reasoning behind compositional choices instead of pushing students to learn through model composition.

<sup>157</sup> It appeared in my interviews that some of the students intentionally disengaged with their grades instead of viewing them as this motivating force. Wainwright also intentionally graded students based on their progress

## Key Teaching Methods

### *Curating Repertoire for Students*

When Wainwright gave feedback, he often related particular pieces from a vast catalogue of repertoire to specific aspects of a students' work. He seemed to think through this catalogue to look for ideas that all shared some theme; in fact, he seemed to me like a museum curator putting together an exhibit through which a single person could learn something profound. He developed these listening lists in order for students to discover new solutions to problems that they had found in their own music. Moreover, as Wainwright continued to present solutions, he also asked students if they had any recommendations for pieces that might belong to this personalized exhibit. In so doing, he subtly encouraged students to begin curating for themselves so they could become more independent.<sup>158</sup>

In one lesson, a student interested in post-minimalism presented their piece which featured a harmonic figure moving like chords between D and C tonalities for several phrases. After some discussion, the student indicated that they were interested in exploring these relatively static harmonic figures throughout their piece. Following the student's lead, Wainwright's recommendations homed in on pieces with similarly static harmonic figures: "Neptune, the Mystic" from Holst's *The Planets*, Brahms' *Sextet No. 2*, and David Bowie's "Space Oddity." Wainwright not only mentioned these pieces, but also discussed how each

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towards the completion of the piece, which they defined broadly, going as far as to say that a student who got rid of material, as long as it was productive, and started fresh, could receive a good grade as long as starting over was a productive way to reach their goal (implying that it was okay as long as the student was carrying something forward from their previous work). With this in mind, it appears difficult to help the students understand that students should view grades as a measuring tool.

<sup>158</sup> Wainwright also demonstrated the importance of curation when he described to me an experience where a student had mentioned a genre that he hadn't listened to before. The student had wanted to write chiptunes, and true to form, Wainwright took the time to listen to and understand the genre so that he could better understand the student's perspective.

generated interest while using repeated harmonic figures. By targeting the student's concept, discussing how other composers generated music using that concept, and framing the influential pieces as potential solutions, Wainwright presented options for how the student might proceed and modeled a compositional process. Not only did this type of exchange occur in nearly every lesson I observed, but the students also commented on Wainwright's ability to recommend pieces that were relevant to their work.

In this particular lesson, Wainwright went on to venture past what might immediately interest the student and presented pieces that were tangential to the student's idea. Wainwright went on to recommend Debussy's "Footsteps in the Snow," which features a similar back and forth motion but in more a melodic context. Beyond Debussy, Wainwright recommended Lukas Foss' *String Quartet No. 3*, which presented oscillating figures in a highly focused melodic context, repeating just two notes without any contextual material for two minutes. By recommending pieces beyond the student's indicated interest, like those by Debussy and Foss, Wainwright put the student in a position where they were *required* to think creatively if they wanted to incorporate those composers' solutions into their music. Essentially, by first presenting music that had a clear connection to the student's work, Wainwright showed relatively easy-to-incorporate solutions before presenting music which still connected to the student's music but less overtly. By offering two kinds of solutions, some easier and some harder to incorporate, Wainwright gave his students the chance to approach their music more comfortably, using music that clearly resembled their own, or more creatively, stretching themselves by using music that only bore a faint resemblance to their compositions.

In another lesson, a different student indicated that by studying Debussy's *La Mer*, they had had an orchestrational breakthrough in which they realized that for larger instrumental



settings, overlapping voices which moved at different times helped every voice to be heard, creating a unified texture. Critically, in this moment, Wainwright asked the student “Can you go back to your piece and talk about how you could apply what you observed in the Debussy?” By tying the student’s abstract breakthrough to their concrete work, Wainwright focused the student on generating solutions to their problems and empowering themselves to express their musical intent more independently.<sup>159</sup> As a bonus, by asking this question, Wainwright prompted them to compose, allowing him to observe the student and provide guidance as needed. One student pointed out in a later interview that moments like this helped the students understand how to begin curating for themselves and by extension, to incorporate research on influential pieces into their compositional process.

As a final example, in another lesson, a student wanted to discuss the score for Hans Abrahamsen’s *Let Me Tell You*, which Wainwright had previously recommended. The student was excited to pick Wainwright’s brain about two textures that they enjoyed, one featuring a mixture of bass drum and double bass at a low rumble, and the other focusing on high violins.<sup>160</sup> Wainwright analyzed one spot alongside the student and over time they unpacked how Abrahamsen achieved the second high and “glassy” texture. He told the student that Abrahamsen built the texture of this moment using several violins, high in their range and rhythmically desynchronized, to create a blurred effect. After analyzing the piece, Wainwright prompted the student to think about how understanding this moment in the Abrahamsen might affect the student’s work. By looking at this particular texture, thoroughly analyzing multiple aspects of the

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<sup>159</sup> As the students begin to understand how to tie their listening practice to their compositional practice, they can afford to rely on their teacher less, meaning that as the student graduates or moves on from their teacher, they can continue to evolve without that teacher’s help.

<sup>160</sup> I learned in later interviews that this excitement was not unique to this student or this lesson.

texture, and prompting the student to think about how the same texture would sound with different instrumentations, registers, and rhythms, Wainwright opened up a series of possible experiments for the student to try in their own work.

By recommending pieces, Wainwright pushed his student to sort through various works and look for solutions that they enjoyed or found effective. This worked especially well because Wainwright did not typically provide solutions to musical problems, rather he made recommendations of pieces, promoting students' creative skills.<sup>161</sup> This is remarkably similar to Younker's approach where students frame problems and provide solutions. By recommending multiple pieces, Wainwright essentially provided students with a map to get from point A to point B but did not tell them which path to take.<sup>162</sup>

Wainwright also helped his students structure their compositional process. Continuing with the thought above, when students had a problem, Wainwright taught his students to look for other composers who had similar problems in order to generate solutions. Additionally, he encouraged students to begin their compositional process by looking at pieces in similar genres. For instance, he told me about one student who wanted to write for string quartet. After some discussion, Wainwright discovered that they had not written a string quartet before. So, in order to jumpstart the compositional process, he "rattled off a lot of string quartets [they] should go

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<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, Wainwright acknowledged that his students were likely to only engage with pieces they enjoyed, causing him even less concern as he recommended works by other composers.

<sup>162</sup> I particularly enjoy this metaphor because can be used in unexpected ways: combining multiple paths, using an old path to reach a new destination, or forging a new trail. Furthermore, Wainwright acknowledged that his students were likely to only engage with pieces they enjoyed, reducing concerns that he would over-influence their work by recommending pieces.

listen to.” This again encouraged students to begin curating on their own, building exhibits for themselves to understand genres that they wanted to contribute to.

Wainwright not only implicitly encouraged students to use repertoire as part of their process, he also explicitly asked students to recommend pieces for themselves. Often after a student explained their piece, he asked “Can you think of other pieces of music that have aspects in common with what you put together here?” This provided his students with potential next steps as they continued their compositional research. And as the students became acquainted with researching as a part of their compositional process, they seemed to gravitate towards it as they worked on their music.<sup>163</sup>

At the level of student’s musical materials, Wainwright encouraged them to look for what they liked in other musics and to include it in their compositions. He also actively encouraged students to pursue the ideas, styles, and sounds that interested them. Essentially this meant that Wainwright encouraged students to build multiple exhibits for themselves to compose one piece. Some exhibits related to understanding the genre and some the particular musical materials. When one student wanted to explore pastoral sounds, he gave recommendations such as *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughn Williams, followed by David Kirkland Garner and Caroline Shaw to evoke a folk idiom. He then commented “If you were to incorporate some influences from popular culture, I don’t think that would be a bad idea, depending on what interests you.”

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<sup>163</sup> Additionally, as I outlined in “Lesson Structures,” students may have been drawn to studying influential pieces because of Wainwright’s emphasis on the practice within lessons and as part of the compositional process. By asking students what they have been listening to, Wainwright built accountability, and may have helped students build a practice of listening. Likewise, by ending portions of lessons with the question “Can you think of other pieces that have aspects in common with what you put together here?” Wainwright helped students reflect on how they might continue their work.

And during another lesson, he said that before the lesson progressed any farther, he wanted to see what the student had enjoyed about a specific piece by Abrahamsen.

By showing interest in, and therefore emphasizing, ideas that interested his students, Wainwright rewarded students who pursued deeper understanding of their preferences. In one lesson, as a student talked about a particular technique they wanted to use for their music, he said, “I encourage students to explore systems like this, because you end up discovering things that you like or don’t like and those can be applied to later pieces.” By telling his student that he encouraged the processes that the student was engaging with, he essentially told them that they were on a good path. Furthermore, by encouraging students to continue looking at new systems specifically to see what they “like or don’t like,” Wainwright prompted his students to curate for themselves.

Lastly, students reacted positively to the ways in which Wainwright helped them understand their own preferences. One student expressed that in looking for modern musical material to research and build on, they had been continually frustrated before working with Wainwright. The student said that through Wainwright’s expertise and recommendations, they figured out what they wanted to compose. Another student indicated that they felt as though Wainwright understood where they wanted to go with their music and helped them reach new realizations. As they left their lessons, these realization left them feeling confident about the direction they wanted to take their music. Presenting the students with new pieces, then, achieved more than just Wainwright’s goals. Helping students understand their preferences by

presenting influential pieces motivated and energized his students to travel through different parts of the compositional and learning process, as well.<sup>164</sup>

### *Providing Function-Based Feedback*

Throughout our conversations and the lessons I observed, Wainwright mentioned that he focused on the function of particular moments, phrases, cadences, and textures in the students' music. "I try to push the student to think about the function of each part of the music they brought in." This is what I have called "function-based feedback." The way Wainwright described these functions, they often related to rising and falling tension, primary or secondary themes, and transitions. However, in my observations I saw Wainwright ask students to not only think about function in terms of how their musical material might affect the audience, but also how their compositional process affected the musical materials in the score.<sup>165</sup>

In one lesson, a student presented their music and expressed that they were dissatisfied with the transition between the material in their main theme and the material in their secondary theme. As the two began discussing this moment, Wainwright clarified, "is this moment supposed to be transitional?" before assessing: "I don't hear this moment as transitional because it is still strongly rooted in the tonic and sounds like a new melodic idea to me." By couching his feedback in terms of the student's intent and comparing the intent to the material, Wainwright presented feedback in an emotionally neutral way. With the feedback presented this way,

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<sup>164</sup> Beyond specifically *musical* preferences, one student indicated that they enjoyed the rigor of Wainwright's feedback as part of the learning process, representing a different kind of preference, but one which a teacher should remain aware of: which forms of feedback students prefer and which will be most beneficial to the student.

<sup>165</sup> In encouraging students to think about the process, a third function emerges as well: a function of the student on the process itself. This perhaps represents a more emotional level in how the student approaches their time composing, which I did not see Wainwright explore with their students in lessons, but which may be fruitful to consider.

Wainwright simply pointed out that the student hadn't achieved what they wanted because they repeated the tonic chord several times, and that they *could* achieve the desired effect if they emphasized the tonic less.

At this point, Wainwright gave a definition of transitional material: “transitional material tends to be more vague, so you avoid a strong tonic, present several contrapuntal lines which flow from one place to another, or use some kind of harmony that is unstable.” Using this definition, Wainwright provided a broad view of transitional material before inviting the student to compare the current function of their materials with the desired function of those materials. The remaining feedback focused simply on how to bring the two to parity.

I think, given your style, sticking with something like sequential counterpoint or something that takes us from one place to another with line would make sense, or choosing some kind of harmony that is not tonic or doesn't sound like it could even be tonic or something that seems to imply motion to another chord like a dominant seven or a fully diminished seven or something would be one way of indicating that we are moving away from one thing and toward another.

Here, Wainwright presented several actionable solutions, expecting one or two to resonate with the student.<sup>166</sup>

Sometimes Wainwright provided more granular feedback rather than discussing whether material fit into the function of an overall section. When he presented more granular feedback, he did so through if/then statements. In one lesson, he did this four times in quick succession: “if you have two tones a second apart then you can get a resultant tone...” “if you put them up high, then the effect will be intensified...” “if you have the players play not quite in rhythmic unison,

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<sup>166</sup> This harkens back to the concept of a map of solutions that I mentioned earlier. By providing several solutions, Wainwright allows the student to use any one or several of these methods to reach the student's desired goal or destination.

then you will get a blurred effect...” “if you were to change the instrumentation, what would the difference in sound be?” Especially when phrased as a question, this technique pushed the student to consider options that they hadn’t thought about and put the responsibility to provide the “then” portion of the statement on the student.

In another lesson, Wainwright looked through a student’s vocal piece which had a unique text-setting choice. After an analysis, Wainwright pointed out that nine words were spread out over 6 beats, and the final word of the line was spread out over 7 beats. He inquired about the student’s intent: “why place so much emphasis on that word? I’m not objecting to it, I think that is one interpretation, but I’m curious why you chose to do that?” In so doing, he encouraged the student to think about the cause-and-effect relationship of what they had written. The student answered that they felt that the poem read the way the poet had originally placed the text into lines, to which Wainwright responded, “Ask your poet to record him or herself reading it.” Wainwright then said that sonically representing the construction of the lines of poetry may result in phrases which sounded unnatural.

With other teachers, I could imagine the student shutting down or becoming less excited about their music. However, between Wainwright clarifying four times that the student wanted this particular figure, and aligning himself with the student’s musical goals, the student understood that he was trying to clarify their intent.<sup>167</sup> Wainwright went on to say, “If you had

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<sup>167</sup> To be clear, Wainwright clarified in different ways each of the four times, asking first “that’s all [on the word] ‘be’?” Then asking, “What is your intent in setting ‘be’ that way?” Then, “Why place so much emphasis on that word? I’m not objecting to it, I think that is one interpretation but I’m just curious why you chose to do that?” and then stating “You mean because the way we say it is [the teacher went on to read the poem with the student’s emphasis].” Wainwright didn’t badger the student, they brought attention to it, asked simply about the intent, asked more seriously about the decisions behind the intent, and then stated the student’s intent back to them before giving feedback on the musical decision.

said ‘I wanted it to build to a point where the audience is expecting [the next word],’ creating tension... conveying angst or distress, I mean all those reasons, I think, would be justifiable.” By voicing several potential good reasons to set the text this way, Wainwright expressed that there wasn’t anything inherently wrong with the student’s decision if they wanted to achieve a particular effect, neutralizing even this potentially harsh feedback.

By giving feedback specifically on the decision-making process, Wainwright pushed students to consider how their decisions ultimately affect the musical materials and how a listener might perceive a moment with this kind of text setting. In this way, the student could feel comfort when he said, “I would like you to consider other possibilities for [the next word].” In my view, Wainwright wasn’t being harsh; he was helping the student understand how their music might be perceived. As Wainwright encouraged the student to think about the decisions they made while composing, he simultaneously encouraged them to think about how an audience might perceive the materials that came from those decisions.

This approach seemed to intentionally align Wainwright’s goals with his student’s; “If you want the audience to know that you are transitioning between themes, what can you do?” When Wainwright accurately summed up the student’s musical intent, which he often did, the students expressed that they felt understood and were impressed by Wainwright’s ability to understand their work at a glance. This contributed to a feeling that the student and teacher were a team united against the students’ dilemmas and that ultimately, they wanted to accomplish the same goals. Of course, a teacher needs to understand the student’s preferences for this method to work properly. But, by telegraphing that understanding and discussing with them what they actually achieved, Wainwright presented feedback which was relevant, honest, and motivated his students. Presenting feedback this way also allowed Wainwright to provide even harsh feedback



in emotionally neutral or potentially positive ways, all while continuing to build up trust and respect.

### *Guiding Students through a Workflow*

Especially as I interviewed Wainwright's students, I understood the deep respect which they had for him. His students consistently mentioned his brilliance and seemed to find comfort in his guidance. This seemed in no small part due to how Wainwright presented curated repertoire and provided feedback; he always had a relevant repertoire recommendation and showed students his train of thought through cause and effect. And by demonstrating his compositional competency in these ways, Wainwright seemed to create a trusting hierarchy between himself and his students in which understood that he would steer them in the right directions. They seemed to trust him to guide them down meaningful and constructive paths as they navigated a compositional process.

As Wainwright guided his students, he encouraged them to focus on refining different parts of their compositional processes, their workflow, as they worked on different projects. When ensembles came to participate in reading sessions with young composers, he encouraged them to only submit sketches and to experiment more. When projects culminated in concerts, he wanted them to involve themselves more deeply with the performers throughout the compositional process and to submit fully formed compositions. In these ways, students could understand where to apply their energy to efficiently learn from the opportunities at hand.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, by submitting only sketches sometimes and fully formed compositions other times, students could build some emotional resilience.

Additionally, only sketching for some projects and editing more thoroughly for others allowed students to refine specific parts of their workflows with particular projects. Throughout the lessons that I observed, Wainwright invited his students to explain their compositional processes through open-ended questions. He then provided feedback on the process specifically, helping the student refine it. By providing feedback on their processes, he steered his students toward particular processes which he found helpful, such as the broadly applicable process of examining influential pieces. But additionally, by commenting on processes, he refrained from commenting as much on their materials. This seemed important to him given his statement, “I’m not interested in cultivating a studio of students that all write like me.”<sup>169</sup> This sentiment again put Wainwright in conversation with Lapidaki who wrote, “music teachers’ compositional processes should not become the prototypes of critical thinking in music but the trigger of productive musical conflict, resistance, transformation, and transgression.”<sup>170</sup>

Wainwright seemed to follow Lapidaki’s advice for teachers to explain their processes so that students have a baseline compositional process which they could resist, transform, or transgress.<sup>171</sup> In fact, at one point he clarified, “I want the pieces that I recommend to them to influence their style if they resonate with the student... if the student doesn’t like the piece that much, then it will not probably influence their style, or if it does, it might do so in this sort of

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<sup>169</sup> I found this comment curious because although his students did not write similar material to him, they wrote in similar ways.

<sup>170</sup> Lapidaki, 110.

<sup>171</sup> There are potentially multiple interpretations both of Lapidaki’s and Wainwright’s arguments including that the student should use their teacher’s processes as spring boards.

unexpected way.”<sup>172</sup> Therefore, both Lapidaki and Wainwright appear to argue that it may be more beneficial to give a student a baseline compositional process instead of pushing the student to try to discover their own compositional process divorced from the composers that came before them.

The lessons themselves gave a separate view of how Wainwright wanted his students to navigate a workflow. During one student’s lesson, they indicated that they were excited to improvise as a part of their compositional approach. Wainwright expressed some interest but warned the student to temper improvisation with thorough editing. When I later asked about his response, he said that a freshly improvised piece typically didn’t have the clarity of function that a composed piece might have.<sup>173</sup> Through this clarification, Wainwright revealed a deep concern for *how* his students traveled through their workflow and *why* they made specific decisions. During the lesson, he had said that through sung improvisation “you [can] tend to fall back on things that you’re comfortable with as opposed to sitting at a piano and playing two notes together that you would never sing.” So, because improvisation bypasses why a composer makes a decision, Wainwright wanted his students to focus on other methods which more critically examined the decisions and processes.<sup>174</sup> From Wainwright’s point of view, it seemed that

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<sup>172</sup> By putting the emphasis on recommended pieces, Wainwright does somewhat remove himself as an influential force, as I stated in the section on presenting influential pieces. Furthermore, Wainwright said that they wanted the pieces that resonate (positively or negatively) with the student to influence their style, indicating that the only influences that Wainwright hopes affect the student are those which the student enjoys. Additionally, by examining influential pieces, students can iterate on more processes than just their teacher’s. Wainwright also nods to the idea that students *must* be creative if they want to incorporate ideas from pieces which they dislike or which are different from their own.

<sup>173</sup> Without knowing what the end will be already, the improviser might not effectively support their ending musical material.

<sup>174</sup> These two approaches, one focused on improvisation and the other focused on critical examination, are not antithetical to one another, and in actuality lend themselves to thinking about the compositional process in different ways. In some circumstances it may be more beneficial for a student to critically examine their decision-making, and in others, the student may benefit more from simply making the decision.

improvisation could still be a useful tool, however it needed to be tempered with a careful examination of the resulting materials.

Additionally, the questions which Wainwright asked his students to evaluate their workflow further demonstrated his deep concern for how and why they made decisions:

- “How did you decide to do this at this point in time and is there a reason for it?”
- “In this moment, how did you change your notes?”
- “Any other ideas about where you’re going to go here, or contrasting ideas, or form for this piece?”
- “Could you say anything about what you learned from this piece [of repertoire] that maybe influenced what you wrote?”
- “What attracted you to this idea you came up with?”
- “Why did you make this decision?”

These questions allowed students to begin directing the feedback and therefore their workflow as well, in line with what Younker suggests.<sup>175</sup> But they also show how Wainwright encouraged his students to think clearly about how their compositional and decision-making processes affected their musical materials. Through these questions, he encouraged his students to think critically about their workflow and began to put the onus on his students to critically examine the ways in which they wrote music.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Younker, 234.

<sup>176</sup> This allowed the improvising student to understand how that process could affect their music by continually pushing them toward gestures which were comfortable to the student. Thinking further along these lines, if a student composer only composed by improvising with their voice, they may end up focusing on lyrical melodies at the expense of harmony, chromaticism, and timbral variation. If they wrote for a stringed instrument, they might think about phrasing at the expense of bowing or different instrumental effects. They might even use vowel shapes to generate interest as they improvise without considering how those changes may translate to stringed instruments (although that translation may encourage productive creative thinking).

### *Iterating and Brainstorming with Students*

Wainwright typically ended lessons or sections of lessons with iterating and brainstorming.<sup>177</sup> These two processes seemed to represent another compositional approach in which he wanted his students to invest their time. But by structuring lessons so that they ended with brainstorming, Wainwright positioned his students to get excited about generating creative solutions as they exited their lessons so that they could consciously explore multiple options. As they brainstormed together, Wainwright seemed to want his students to focus on the possibilities available to them or different ways of achieving similar effects. He wanted his students to remain flexible as they continued writing so that when they began interacting with performers, they could shift their expectations to match the reality of performers' limitations on their instruments.

Throughout the lessons I observed, Wainwright specifically offered students chances to brainstorm, saying, "We could brainstorm how to accomplish that together, if you'd like." During one lesson, the student had written an introduction which the teacher indicated was well-written, but somewhat middle-of-the-road. "You might brainstorm all the other ways that you would score something like this, I think what you have works pretty well, it is sort of in the middle of the range of what you can do with the strings at your disposal. You could have a much richer low register sound if you bring the cello down the octave... or you could slowly introduce them if you want that build, slowly add on to that shifting fifth..." Even in this somewhat limited

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<sup>177</sup> These two concepts relate closely to one another, but I coded them separately based on their relationship to students' pieces. If the teacher and the student were focused on how they could generate ideas within the context of the student's piece, I coded the moment as brainstorming, and if the teacher and the student were working more abstractly, I coded it iterating.

context of scoring and instrumentation, brainstorming pushed students to consider a variety of options as opposed to locking themselves into the first option that they enjoyed.<sup>178</sup>

In some lessons, the brainstorming was more deeply tied to the feedback process, such as when one student wanted to transition between themes but used similar harmonies to those they used in the main theme as opposed to more ambiguous harmonies. After discussing the function of transitions, which I described earlier, Wainwright discussed the harmony with the student asking, “How many different versions of harmonization did you come up with before settling on this?”<sup>179</sup> Just by asking, Wainwright indicated that they expected the student to come up with multiple different harmonies, and therefore gave the student implicit feedback on the compositional process. After further discussion, he presented a few basic harmonic options. One student later indicated that if they were teaching composition, they would emulate Wainwright’s approach of presenting options and then helping the student winnow down to a particular solution. Wainwright followed up his harmonic options by suggesting the student spend an hour developing different chords or progressions without setting a specific number of options the student should develop.<sup>180</sup>

As a final example, in one lesson Wainwright discussed a blurring effect that could be achieved on piano and discussed with the student how, working with an orchestra, the student might be able to achieve a similar effect or a variation of the same effect. Sometimes Wainwright asked the student what the sonic change of a particular variation would be and other times, he

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<sup>178</sup> To be clear: this type of brainstorming was not meant to dissuade students from their first idea, but to help the student find the idea which is most attractive to them.

<sup>179</sup> For the conversation on the function of transitions, look under “Presenting Influential Pieces” and “Actionable Concepts for Presenting Influential Pieces.”

<sup>180</sup> Naming a specific amount of time seems like a highly concrete way to help students engage in this kind of thinking by simply encouraging them to spend a certain amount of time in the process.

simply explained what the change might sound like. By brainstorming together, the two not only came up with answers for how a composer could achieve the effect for orchestra, but also dove into links between instrumental writing and what figures or effects work well with different instruments.<sup>181</sup> However, brainstorming also presented another kind of negotiation, a system of checks and balances between what the student had, what they wanted to have, and the options that they hadn't yet considered.

## Discussion

Wainwright's teaching was marked by a distinct clarity and efficiency of methods. He consistently approached student works with an analytical eye as well as an understanding that many of these students are in the process of composing and learning to compose. The themes above reflect an approach that focused on a canon of works, they show a teaching style that is oriented toward spending time in a process, and a teacher who attempts to cut through ambiguity to present clearly defined ideas and directions. Wainwright often went straight to the heart of the matter at hand. When I asked how Wainwright navigated the territory between his goals and his students' goals, he responded that he didn't navigate that territory often and said, "I tend to teach through my own lens... I tend to tell [the students] what I think and where I'm coming from." Wainwright acknowledged that the tension between a teacher's goals and a student's goals represented a challenge for teachers but went on to say that he tried to teach from his perspective. Based on what I observed, Wainwright's goals seemed ambiguous in a useful way: flexibly aligning to most students' personal goals. But Wainwright's response implies that he specifically chose his goals to be agnostic of the student's goals which seems reasonable if a teacher is

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<sup>181</sup> This discussion regarding instrumental writing and what effects work well for different instruments further related to Wainwright's goal of preparing students to work with performers.

worried about overly influencing their students. Put another way, he expressly designed his goals so that he could align with his students' goals no matter what the student wanted to accomplish.

Through most of Wainwright's methods, he typically influenced students' work without directly manipulating the student's compositional materials. When he guided students through workflows, he kept them brought to their attention how a particular process might affect their composition, allowing them to use that information however they desired. When he provided function-based feedback, he typically mentioned what effect the student was achieving. Rather than saying "This transition doesn't work," he said, "This doesn't sound like transitional material to me." This seemed similar to the differences between giving qualitative and quantitative feedback. Through both of these methods, Wainwright intentionally tried to assess what a student's goals were in the context of a phrase or a composition and attempted to move students closer to those goals through the methods described above. However, by providing function-based feedback specifically, Wainwright intentionally aligned himself with students' goals by verifying with students what their short-term musical goals were. And ultimately, by assisting the student in assessing what they had, and in thinking about how the student might achieve what they want to have, he also managed to walk students through a process which they could use on their own, away from his guidance.

Wainwright's method of curating repertoire also influenced student work, but more overtly. Instead of directly influencing the process or articulating whether the student was communicating clearly, as he curated, Wainwright actively put his students in contact with relevant and novel ideas. A curator directly affects an audience's perception by bringing different pieces of art into contact with one another, and Wainwright often did this with his students. By bringing several pieces with similar qualities together, Wainwright pushed his students in



particular stylistic directions based on their interests. So, although Wainwright more overtly influenced student's works through this method, his focus on suggesting related pieces and pieces which aligned with student goals implied that he attempted to stretch his students' ears and supply them with new solutions to achieve those goals. Ultimately, by supplying students with new solutions for musical problems, Wainwright supported student goals in particular phrases and by extension students' overall compositions. But by supplying new pieces of music and approaches from influential composers, Wainwright may have also helped the students understand what their stylistic preferences were, supporting goals beyond a single composition.

## Goals

Several of the goals that Wainwright initially listed would align with most student composers' goals. Most young composers likely want to write interesting music and express their musical intent with clarity. However, some students may not be focused on these aspects of composing. Some students may want to focus on a particular genre of music rather than encountering and considering different genres of music, choosing instead to hone their skills in a particular style. I don't mean to indicate that these students will actively push back against the teacher, but that they may resist diversifying their listening practices. Encouraging students to consider options that they haven't thought about occupies a similar space; some students may want to focus more deeply on ideas they've already had rather than consider a diverse array of musical options. These students may regularly try to solve different musical problems using pitch without trying to fix similar problems with rhythm or texture, for instance. Some students may opt to work on by themselves rather than with performers in an increasingly digital age. However, as I pointed out earlier, working with performers provides composers opportunities for feedback on the clarity of their approach, which approaches a nearly universal goal. Lastly, most

students that seek out composition lessons are likely prepared to critically examine their practice. Students who find joy in uncritically pursuing composition seem unlikely to begin taking lessons. However, in either case, considering students' perspectives on and dispositions toward their own compositional practices is critical to aligning with their compositional goals, and teachers should be aware of whether their students want to critically examine their own practices.

The goals of helping students express themselves with clarity, helping students make interesting music, building creativity, and helping students affect more people through their music may be as close to universal as compositional goals can be. Characterizing interesting music as music that might affect more people certainly ameliorates the opacity of this initial goal, mirroring some of my initial arguments in this dissertation. It provides a way to measure whether or not music is “interesting,” but that also seems to imply a different definition of interesting music. It seems to say that interesting music is defined by external perspectives rather than internal ones. So perhaps some tension remains in this definition of “interesting” as it relates not only to what students find interesting, but what audiences find interesting and perhaps even what is creative and original. Perhaps interesting music requires both internal and external interest. However, I must note that helping students affect more people through their music was a particularly exterior goal. It did not focus on the students' abilities per se, but rather how they connected with their audience which is remarkable in its uniqueness among Wainwright's goals and among goals from other case studies as well.

## How Does Wainwright Help Students Set and Achieve Goals?

Wainwright helped his students achieve their goals first by communicating with them about the types of pieces they would currently like to write and then orienting them towards other pieces within the same tradition. Many of the students expressed their goals as jobs or

degrees they would like to have. But several students mentioned in lessons and interviews the types of music that they wanted to write. For instance, in one lesson a student said that they would like to write music that is accessible to performers and to listeners, and Wainwright's feedback took that into account. When the student discussed set theory as an organizational structure, Wainwright mentioned that the student may want to use specific sets which may be more approachable if they wanted their music to be accessible to a general audience. A similar moment occurred when Wainwright encouraged a different student to pursue vernacular idioms, which the student later expressed to me was one of their main musical foci.

Because so many of Wainwright's goals and methods intentionally reacted to the student and their interests, Wainwright seemed to have developed methods which focused on helping students find paths to express their musical intent. However, in other ways, Wainwright's goals simply aligned with his students'. As I mentioned previously, many composers want to make interesting music, to express themselves clearly, to know and understand musical traditions, and to build their creativity and originality. One student even reiterated Wainwright's goal of reaching more people unprompted.

Ultimately, the three roles that I outlined represent both the most apparent teaching methods that Wainwright employed as well as teaching methods which would serve the goals of any student. Between presenting influential pieces and iterating and brainstorming with the student, Wainwright helped students build approaches which focused both on tradition and student individuality. These two ideas are paradoxical; tradition often concerns itself with collectivism, and individuality often expresses itself through novel ideas. However, it is just as impossible to operate outside of tradition as it is to operate without expressing any individuality. Therefore, composers operate at interstices between these two ideas. When students indicated

that they wanted to focus on understanding the language of a specific tradition, Wainwright helped them learn more about that tradition and how to express themselves clearly through those idioms. Alternatively, when students focused on their own unique expressions, Wainwright oriented them toward languages that asked similar questions and idioms in which their expression would be best understood. Students were often more interested in focusing on one or the other, but Wainwright encouraged his students to pursue both ends of the spectrum. In this way, Wainwright tasked students with creating spaces for themselves within whatever tradition they exhibited interest. Wainwright used the third method, providing function-based feedback, simply as an approach to help his students understand and evaluate how they expressed themselves and to work to clarify those expressions in the context of the student's current work, and also in works yet to come.

Therefore, helping students express themselves with clarity seemed to represent Wainwright's ultimate goal. To help students understand their intent, Wainwright presented pieces related to each student's various interests, helping them to understand their preferences and guiding them through a compositional process. By curating these pieces for his students, Wainwright helped them set personal musical goals. To help the student express their intent, Wainwright attempted to understand each student's intent and compared it with their written materials through function-based feedback. By managing the student through feedback and questions, Wainwright helped students assess whether they were achieving their musical goals. To help students grow and to ensure that they fulfilled the potential of their intent, Wainwright pointed out different possibilities available to the student in the forms of performers and experiments. By negotiating between students and performers as well as students and their

materials, Wainwright pushed students to consider multiple options, and settle on the option which best achieved their musical goals.

In these ways, Wainwright supported his students' goals despite differences from student to student. Wainwright listened to each student's goals and helped them refine their compositional process to achieve those goals. No matter what those compositional goals were, Wainwright helped students set those goals, helped them to assess whether they were achieving those goals, and helped them better realize the potential of a goal by continuing to assess musical options, all to express the student's intent with clarity.

## Chapter 7: Case Study 4 – Dr. Cohen

*As the lesson wound down, the student turned back to the teacher and said, “I’m excited to be working with you next quarter, I think I’m going to try to write four pieces.”*

*“I’m looking forward to it, too, but I would like to say one thing: this is your capstone. Think about your creative voice. Don’t think about checkboxes.” The teacher let that sentiment fill the office for a moment before he continued. “I want you to clear away thoughts about ticking off certain checkboxes; we’ll make those work. Think about what goals you want to accomplish with your music. Next quarter is about Alex the Artist, not Alex the Student.”<sup>182</sup>*

### Analysis and Case Description

Meeting with Dr. Cohen for the first time, I felt an excitement in the air of his office. In our first meeting at his state university on the west coast, I walked in to find instruments from different traditions strewn about, looking like they had only just been put down and as though Cohen would pick them up to continue practicing as soon as I left. As we began talking, it felt as though we had only been together for a few minutes when I realized an hour had passed and that we had only gone through three questions that I had prepared for our interview. Cohen was kind and talked with me for a second and third hour as well, revealing a deep care for the ways he approached music composition and the ways he approached his students and even my dissertation. He never rushed into an answer for a question with me or with his students, often giving significant explanations of his point of view before beginning to answer the question I had asked. But his excitement about composition and teaching composition was obvious. At one

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<sup>182</sup> I have anonymized this student’s name according to my agreement with my research associates.

point during our interview, to give me a better grasp of his teaching, he even recounted in full a small lecture he regularly gave on Brahms' *Intermezzo* Op. 119 No. 2.

Cohen's excitement and care were apparent to more than me; his students also frequently mentioned how much he loved music composition. And as he and I dove deeper into his philosophies of teaching and of music, it became clear that Cohen also unambiguously centered students in his teaching. At one point, he explained how he thought about what his students needed in terms of what he had needed as a young composer at their age. "What did I need to do in order to gain confidence and to broaden my scope of what's possible as a composer?" This sentiment positioned Cohen as a teacher who not only wanted students to reach their goals but also wanted to help students understand how their work related to their medium- and long-term goals as well as to develop an understanding of how they grew as composers over time. Cohen's approach did not focus on lofty goals. In fact, Cohen's approach generally had a complex relationship with goals and Cohen himself seemed to focus mainly on what music students had grown up with, what work they had just finished, and what the student could accomplish *that day*. This focus on prior experiences and immediate goals dovetailed quite neatly with his focus on process and practice. For his own goals with teaching, Cohen said, "If I have one North Star as a teacher it's that the biggest gift any of us give to a student is their practice."

## Cohen's Goals

Cohen's syllabus gave a clear view of his goals for the students in his class, which he later validated, providing additional nuance.

1. Learn strategies for composing music and practice them
2. Develop competency with terms commonly associated with compositional practice
3. Understand problems and questions associated with contemporary music

4. Establish personal and collaborative practices of music-making that lead to meaningful and distinctive musical experiences<sup>183</sup>

These goals focused primarily on learning objectives within the students' immediate control, mirroring Cohen's focus on what music students already enjoyed and what work they had just finished or were about to start. Likewise, these goals mirrored some of the philosophical concepts which Cohen discussed in our first interview. For instance, Cohen spoke about understanding the wider commonwealth of musical experiences within a culture and rejecting the idea that a piece begins as a blank slate in a cultural vacuum. This idea related directly to the first three goals above which focus on developing facility with the compositional process as it has been understood by others.

Cohen's first goal provided a call to action for his students and a path to recognize the importance of understanding multiple compositional processes. It likewise provided an entry point to all of his students, but especially to those with little experience composing. For students with more experience, on the other hand, this goal provided a method to broaden their understanding of what a compositional process might entail or produce. Discussing this range of experience levels with Cohen led to conversation about how to differentiate instruction across levels of experience and knowledge. Cohen said,

The students are at wide ranges of both the experience and knowledge, two separate ways in which they're at a wide range. So, we have relatively inexperienced composers that are very knowledgeable musicians and can instantly manifest any practice that I display... I [also] have very experienced composers who have very little technical knowledge, and I've got all other combinations across the gamut.

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<sup>183</sup> These goals were structured somewhat differently than goals from teachers in other case studies because Cohen taught a composition seminar for undergraduates, which had a more limited time frame than private composition lessons. However, based on our conversation, these goals still seemed representative of how Cohen would teach private lessons, especially because Cohen gave one or two private lessons to each student enrolled in the class.



Characterizing his students across these two spectra painted Cohen's next two goals in a different light. Developing a competency for compositional terms suddenly seemed to target students who lacked knowledge, and understanding problems associated with composition benefited students who lacked experience. With this understanding, Cohen's second and third goals seemed to shore up any technical deficiencies that students might have had. So, while Cohen's first goal appeared to benefit students broadly by providing an entry point and also gave Cohen a better chance to understand where his students strengths and weaknesses lay, the pursuit of the following two goals helped bring students up to par either in terms of their experience composing, including facility with a practice, or their technical knowledge and flexibility moving between practices.

If the first three goals represented an introduction and two parts of a development, then Cohen's last goal was the climax. It quickly became clear to me that Cohen's primary focus in teaching composition was to guide students to their practice. He sometimes framed this focus as "giving students their practice" or "encouraging students to cultivate a new practice," by which he meant a daily habit and compositional process. Not only was this concept his final goal on the syllabus, but he discussed it in nearly every conversation we had and pointed to it as his North Star. Our conversations invariably led back to cultivating a practice. When I asked him how he went about evaluating final projects, he said he didn't really evaluate the projects themselves because

Works of immense quality are the consequence of practices. I want students to show me evidence that they have invested in a practice and have reflected. That's why they have reflection assignments. If they produce something beautiful in the practice, I will write feedback that says I love this and here's why I love it. It's not that I'm not assessing greatness in a piece of music; I will help them seem why I think their work is great... But the grade is based on their cultivation of a practice.

Cohen clarified that he didn't want to hold final projects to the same standards when one assignment came from a student who submitted their first ever composition and another came from a student who had composed for a long time already. Therefore, Cohen looked over students' drafts and reflections to inform the grades he assigned on the final project.

By including reflections and drafts in his grading, Cohen structured his curriculum to focus on compositional processes instead of compositional products.<sup>184</sup> Likewise, Cohen attempted to engage his students in different kinds of assignments from week to week, which he said he ultimately could not maintain as well as he would have liked. These assignments would have guided the students through different approaches every other week, half of which would have focused on experimentation and the other half on executing students' specific compositional visions. Cohen seemingly intended these two types of assignment to help students work through a variety of potential barriers to the process by stretching students who had entrenched themselves in what they perceived as a valuable compositional process or helping students understand how to deal emotionally with open-ended versus close-ended compositional visions. And although Cohen didn't fully maintain this structure, his plans for this curricular structure revealed a complex and flexible decision-making process for setting goals.

Cohen further displayed his thought process and flexibility in discussing how he wanted to differentiate his instructions for students with low self-efficacy or perception of their ability to complete a task. Cohen intentionally designed his assignments so that students could take them in whatever direction they preferred, making the assignments more approachable for his less

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<sup>184</sup> Cohen said that achieving particular compositional products, such as Palestrina-style counterpoint was important to the learning process, but that that was the purview of other courses at his school, and that his process-oriented approach provided an excellent complement to those product-oriented approaches.

confident students. He remarked that typically his assignments focused on compositional processes which could lead to potentially infinite compositions. “I position myself as somebody who actually is very open with regard to what [students] might turn in, what they might submit to me, and I reposition my sense of what I want to that question of practice that I raised earlier.” Cohen went on to say however, that some students struggled with his more open-ended approach which consequently focused on practice. He said that students with lower self-efficacy, who have been taught to believe that answers can only be correct or incorrect, seemed deeply concerned with his more flexible approach to goals and products. And he showed concern for these students in particular, discussing how he could develop baseline goals for them to ensure that they knew what he intended for them to get out of an assignment. Despite his comments about developing these baseline goals, Cohen displayed a similar type of flexible, consensual, goal-setting approach several times throughout the lessons that I observed, in one lesson crystallizing this approach in the metaphor of a North Star.<sup>185</sup>

In most lessons, Cohen discussed goals with students, asking them what they would like to talk about, asking about their next projects, or discussing how a piece would fit into their other creative work over the next few months. Toward the end of one lesson in particular, Cohen asked the student if they had anything else they wanted to talk about and the student began describing a project they hoped to start soon. Cohen quickly told the student that for a long-term project involving multiple people, they should have a North Star. He explained, “Having a North Star

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<sup>185</sup> This consensual style of goal-setting often took student consent into account as part of the goal-setting process, meaning that students with low self-efficacy often understood what they would accomplish if they did not set the goal themselves.

means knowing that there is a time and a place in the future where something comes together, and you have a vision for what that will look like, even if it may have many different forms.”

The North Star metaphor encapsulated Cohen’s flexible goal orientation. As long as students developed a vision or goal that they could imagine taking part in, it wouldn’t matter if they got lost among other ideas because they could look at that vision and develop a set of steps to turn themselves in the right direction and follow their North Star. Along the way they might need to adapt to different conditions, but using their North Star to navigate, they could reach a number of different destinations which would suit them. This metaphor specifically pointed out how the student could persevere despite momentary setbacks and how they could even conceive of their destination or final goal as a flexible target to which they had the power to respond.<sup>186</sup> Giving the students their practice, which Cohen mentioned as his own North Star in teaching, included that perseverance and ability to respond to changes in goals and motivation. Giving students their practice meant that Cohen wanted to teach students how to remain on course or to chart a new course no matter what was thrown their way.

## Lesson Structures

Cohen’s focus on process and practice unsurprisingly manifested in his lesson structures. He spent most of the four lessons I observed discussing the students’ processes in the past by reflecting, in the present, by assessing, and in the future, by converting. As often occurred with lesson structures, these components did not always happen in this order. Reflections could lead directly to conversions through questions like “How will your experience composing using set

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<sup>186</sup> After Cohen had explained the metaphor of the North Star, the student expressed sincere appreciation to Cohen for having broken down how to accomplish a major long-term goal into manageable steps.

theory influence your next project?” Likewise, assessing often led back to reflecting. However, lessons overall tended to start with students reflecting, to include some assessing in the middle, and to end with converting the knowledge gained through reflection and assessment into something the student planned to apply in their upcoming work.

As Cohen moved through lessons, reflecting, assessing, and converting with his students, he often brought up two topics and asked students which they would prefer to discuss, giving the student some agency over how the lesson flowed. Cohen did not always come up with two topics, but he frequently presented bifurcations in lessons saying, “We could look at this Chopin piece, or you could tell me what you plan to work on next.” Furthermore, Cohen telegraphed to his students that he wanted lessons to flow in directions which most suited that student. In one lesson, he told a student, “In your description... I detected a sense of a question. So, I’m going to give you a chance to clarify what questions I might be able to help you with.” This practice of giving students some control and encouraging them to ask for what they needed served Cohen well in this particular lesson by leading to a breakthrough where the student candidly showed some concern about their process. This sort of homing in on what could best help students typically took place during the reflective process, sometimes kicking reflection into gear and sometimes transitioning reflection into assessment, but it always pointed the student in a direction that could help them better understand how to navigate their process. Typically, to prompt these reflections or transitions Cohen asked if the student had specific questions, like above, or in other cases asked questions about specific moments, what the student had done as part of their process to achieve those moments, and how their actions could shift to better suit their intentions.

Cohen's curriculum likewise emphasized reflection throughout; he included it as a portion of the grade and as its own assignment for students. However, beyond simply encouraging students to reflect without additional support, during the first lesson I observed with Cohen, he spent time at the beginning of the lesson reading the student's reflection back to them to talk through their compositional process. I was frankly amazed. The student provided wonderful insight into why and how they made certain decisions which helped Cohen pinpoint a number of places where the student used different levels of thought to solve compositional problems. Reading and discussing the student's reflection also revealed other places where the student had left stones unturned. In other lessons, Cohen helped students reflect on their journey up to that point, recounting how they had reached the music that they presented to him. These conversations laid excellent foundations for the remainder of the lesson by beginning to investigate whether particular compositional practices limited the students or if the students had new directions they could explore. Essentially, by having these conversations, Cohen typically ascertained whether students had made musical decisions based on an impulse, based on intuition, or based on more a more conscious exploration of possibilities. By comparison, in lessons where students had not already reflected on their compositional process, Cohen spent the majority of the lesson reflecting with the student on the work they had done so far, demonstrating just how integral Cohen considered reflection as a part of students' practices.

Assessing seemed to occupy the smallest portion of each lesson, often just enhancing other sections. Cohen primarily assessed student's compositional processes during lessons by asking questions like "if some of these pitches hadn't been what you wanted, what are some ways you could have fixed them?" Questions like these also helped Cohen see whether students jumped straight for their first intuition or if they listed multiple options and became interested in

a third or fourth intuition. These assessing questions typically involved a fixed element and a changing element. In one lesson, Cohen engaged the student in an exercise where they kept their pitches and rhythms the same but added *ritenuto* or *non-ritenuto* to the ends of each phrase.<sup>187</sup> By encouraging his students to explore specific parameters in front of him during their lesson, Cohen could again assess how students made musical decisions, perhaps based on an external impulse about changing back and forth in consecutive phrases, using their intuition and singing through the piece, or trying several options and selecting the version they liked best. By assessing each of these levels of thought, Cohen gained insight into how students processed their own music and made musical decisions and in turn passed that insight on to his students.

In a couple of lessons, assessing involved comparing compositional processes by evaluating different results, often from canonical composers. During one of these lessons, Cohen showed his student a Chopin piece to talk about differences in approach to phrase length and how the student might expand their thinking on phrases. A similar sequence unfolded in a different lesson when he showed a student one of Schoenberg's twelve-tone pieces to complement the student's understanding of set theory. Cohen pointed to the student's reflections on how they chose rows in a matrix and compared the student's decision-making process Schoenberg's and discussed why the student might use one method or another. But the assessing phase also helped Cohen to point out when students had goals which appeared mutually exclusive of one another. One student struggled with a process that they wanted to be random but to sound "nice." The student repeated that they wanted it to be random, and Cohen responded with a conversation about how intervening to make the piece sound nice undercut the student's

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<sup>187</sup> Cohen then encouraged the student to add *piano* and *forte* over the end of each phrase to consider dynamics in the same way they had considered time.

decision to use randomness in their compositional process. Cohen went on to talk about how the student might explore pieces that attempted to accomplish similar goals. This led into a conversation about how to convert processes that the student observed in canonical composers' works into processes which they themselves could use, as well as how to satisfyingly convert one work with potentially mutually exclusive ideas which each interested the student into multiple future works which explored the ideas more thoroughly.

Converting almost always aimed at the next project the student wanted to work on and relied most heavily on the previous two portions of the lesson. After reflecting on the parameters that one student chose to manipulate when given fixed pitches and rhythms, Cohen asked them how they might apply some of their thoughts and experience to their next piece. Converting seemed highly open-ended, but Cohen typically initiated these conversions by taking the information he gained from the student's reflection and assessment and simply asking how the student intended to use that information to inform their upcoming work. For example, a basic conversion could take the form of a question like "Given that you have been focusing so much on the phrases in this piece, what do you think you could apply from what you have learned to your next piece?" This type of data collection and application appeared also in Cohen's assignments when he asked students to come up with two different versions of an assignment. Invariably, developing two versions of the same assignment meant that the first compositional process informed the second, helping students acquire an understanding of how compositional processes can change. This transfer of knowledge from the previous task to the next not only provided an opportunity for student growth, but also seemed to motivate students to dive back



into a compositional process with a significantly better understanding of how to manipulate compositional processes to execute their vision.<sup>188</sup>

## Key Teaching Methods

### *Exploring Inner and Outer Musical Cultures*

In one of our first interviews, Cohen discussed how multiple processes acting at different magnitudes of time can shape pieces of music similarly to how they shape landscapes. Whereas landscapes are actively shaped through plate tectonics, volcanism, glaciation, and erosion, a piece of music is shaped through gesture, phrase, section, and movement order.<sup>189</sup> On another level, composers are shaped by their current work, their compositional practices, the musics that they enjoy, and the trajectories of their careers as composers. Similar to how these processes affect a landscape or a piece, Cohen seemed to affect changes in his students' work by focusing primarily on their composition practices and the musics they enjoyed. As he did so, he pushed students to confront difference within themselves and their music, and asked them to confront overlapping cultures within and without.

During our first interview, Cohen talked about a frame of thought in which some composers operate, approaching their music as though it were the first piece of music to exist. Put another way, these musicians compose in a cultural vacuum where they imagine their work as the consequence of a poetic interaction between sounds.<sup>190</sup> Cohen pushed back against this idea, retorting, "I don't think [these frames of thinking] help composers, especially young

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<sup>188</sup> Interestingly, it follows that this renewed motivation would correlate with an increase in self-efficacy.

<sup>189</sup> This metaphor not only demonstrated how vastly different processes act in the present and shape our perception of a landscape or a piece of music, but also helped students think across processes by encouraging them to consider how their gestures interact with their phrase, and how their phrases operate within a section of their piece, etc.

<sup>190</sup> This seemed similar although not the same as absolute music. Rather than absolute music that relied on a tradition, this frame of thinking operated in a cultural vacuum.

composers, at all.” Instead, he wanted students to understand that “we have some things in common that we build as a community and that evolve, which have frontiers that we could push up against and we could move beyond.” These common musical ideas which Cohen referenced represent a shared commonwealth of musical ideas, or a tradition.<sup>191</sup> He pushed his students to both try to understand the tradition(s) that they grew up with and to grow beyond these traditions. This presented a classic tension between the idea of exploring what a culture builds and expanding upon those structures with influences from other traditions. And this tension came to the fore as we discussed how students grow as composers.

As his students developed compositionally, Cohen said “No matter where they are, I’ll be nurturing a practice and trying to develop it further. But I’ll also be trying to acquaint them with something outside their comfort zone so that their music doesn’t end up being reducible to the practice.” He didn’t want his students to devote themselves to any single practice; it seemed anathema to him for his students to stay in any one tradition because he considered them to be so much more than a one-dimensional representation of whatever they were primarily interested in.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, he wanted that multi-dimensionality to include a healthy skepticism for any single point of view. I already mentioned one example in which Cohen tried to expand a student’s understanding of phrase lengths and how phrases participate in a larger section of music. He likened the student’s music to some cinematic traditions, but wanted the student to explore farther afield. He showed them a new way to think about phrases by listening to a

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<sup>191</sup> Cohen clearly disliked the idea that this commonwealth contained universal musical structures, and seemed to think that it might instead share cultural ancestors with other traditions

<sup>192</sup> Cohen also mentioned his own background, growing up loving jazz and arriving at school only to work with mentors solely focused on classical and romantic musics. The passion his mentors displayed for these musics moved him and compelled him to a new practice which included not only jazz, but classical and romantic music, too.

Chopin piece and guiding their attention to a longer phrase which lingered on one harmony for 6 measures. Cohen pointed out that this phrase structure differed vastly from the student's by varying both the length and harmonic rhythm. By pointing out these different kinds of phrase structures, Cohen wanted his student to grapple with a culturally different approach to phrasing.<sup>193</sup>

One practice that Cohen consistently encouraged students to develop concerned creating belonging between disparate ideas. This took various forms in various assignments as Cohen encouraged students to branch out from the traditions most central to their experiences. Bringing together disparate materials also became an aspiration for some students. These students attempted difficult compositional tasks by bringing musical materials and even compositional processes together which did not simply contrast one another but differed categorically and/or multidimensionally. For example, in one student's final project, they chose to base the melody for their B section on the melody for the A section by keeping the same rhythm but otherwise creating maximal difference between the two lines. On the other hand, another student attempted to generate material using a completely random process and then edited using an intuitive process.<sup>194</sup> Cohen also encouraged students to use these kinds of drastically different processes to create different sets of material which they could then attempt to bring together and create belonging between. This focus on the relationship between materials brought Fred Frith's

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<sup>193</sup> His students also remarked on how Cohen helped them step into another composer's shoes or another tradition to re-examine their own compositional practices and assumptions. One student commented that Cohen did a good job of stepping out of the way and letting students provide their perspectives on one another's work and also provided ways to self-examine compositional practices and assumptions.

<sup>194</sup> Without having reflected this student seemed to experience cognitive dissonance from focusing on two potentially mutually exclusive compositional processes.

practice into mind which he described as trying to make sense of the harsh and busy sounds of the city and the idyllic and peaceful sounds of the beach.<sup>195</sup>

The idea of encouraging students to look at relationships of different sound worlds also elided smoothly with encouraging students to explore their musical commonwealth while also trying to transcend it.<sup>196</sup> Cohen pushed his students to take these risks and make cultural shifts in their thinking by “[giving] them assignments that [weren’t] what they wanted to do.” He didn’t give out assignments to make students miserable, but he considered what they wanted and then constrained them from getting it easily. By giving them assignments that did not neatly align with what they wanted to do, he expected them to compose music that still interested them but to use processes from other traditions. For instance, multiple assignments tasked students with using the same process to generate two maximally different pieces. By providing these assignments, Cohen encouraged his students to experiment and reconcile different sonic worlds for themselves, similar to Frith.<sup>197</sup>

Using difference to compel students to new ideas and to make cultural shifts in their practices seemed baked into nearly every facet of Cohen’s teaching. In fact, during one of our conversations, Cohen talked about evaluating composers in terms of their ability to manage wider and wider gulfs of difference and still create belonging.<sup>198</sup> As such, throughout lessons,

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<sup>195</sup> Fred Frith, “On Dirt, Revelations, Contradictions, and Breathing Through Your Elbows,” in *Arcana V: Music, Magic and Mysticism*, ed. John Zorn (New York: Hips Road, 2010), 130-131.

<sup>196</sup> One specific example that Cohen gave was how Schoenberg both wanted to incorporate Brahms’ piano writing while also wanting to escape some of the trappings of romanticism. And with a student using set theory, Cohen told them that since they seemed so interested in serial processes, their favorite non-serial musical worlds could become models for their serial work.

<sup>197</sup> Additionally, these assignments encouraged students to think past initial impulses or intuitions, and to reflect on old practices to inform new ones.

<sup>198</sup> This frame of thinking likewise emphasized relationships *between* materials instead of creating interesting initial materials.

Cohen pointed out places where students could begin to include more and more difference in their work, often stemming from external influences. As he did this, he once again named traditions and composers who asked different questions than the student, all with the goal of helping students build a sense of the myriad possibilities available to them as they sat down to compose.

### *Building a Sense of What Is Musically Possible*

When Cohen helped his students build a sense of what was possible, he wanted to help them see what lay beyond the horizon by making maps of new possibilities. He typically did this by asking questions to help students produce that information during the assessment section of a lesson.<sup>199</sup> As a result, building a sense of what was musically possible focused primarily on the student's compositional process at that present moment. Furthermore, questions that Cohen asked during assessment and reflection often explicitly acknowledged unmet potentials or possibilities. In one lesson Cohen said, "I want you to know that while we're talking about those interventions and the way you shaped this, I'm also hoping that in the back of your mind you're thinking, 'what are some unmet potentials?'" Naming and keeping unmet potentials in mind helped students begin to understand on their own what areas of their work would yield new results if they chose to put in more work, exploring, experimenting, and attempting to fulfill those potentials.

With one student, Cohen drew a clear connection between experimentation and building a sense of what was musically possible. After talking about the student engaging in the experimental process of serialism, Cohen took the metaphor a step further saying, "The

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<sup>199</sup> Cohen also asked these questions as part of reflection, but not as often as assessment.

hypothesis is that these combinations of pitches have musical potential, and the confirmation of the hypothesis is you fulfilling that potential.” This moment clearly illustrated Cohen’s belief that students gain a sense of musical possibility through experimentation. Additionally, it elided neatly with Cohen’s position that profound work comes about through an everyday sort of experimentation which ultimately attempts to fulfill the potential of more and more humble or mundane materials. To further help his students develop this type of humility, Cohen also put them in touch with practices which they might not otherwise have come into contact with and pointed out when students had made decisions that reflect their background. During one lesson, while working on an exercise that Cohen had assigned, a student had conflated where their notes began with the lengths of their notes. Essentially, they had randomly chosen when notes would start, but always made each note take up the full length from its start to the next note’s start. Cohen pointed this out as a common assumption that Western musicians often made, framing it as a kind of cultural bias. He went on to point out that although the student had chosen the starts of their notes semi-randomly, they had made an unconscious decision and acted on impulse with regards to each note’s duration. So, as a direct result of encouraging this student to experiment through the assigned exercise, Cohen began to have conversations with them about parameters that they unconsciously linked and the ways in which they could flex their newfound sense of their assumptions to take their music in new directions.

The above example, in addition to helping reveal a student’s bias, also complicated parameter-based thinking by pointing out depths of possibility beyond simply thinking about rhythm to instead thinking about duration and note onset. And as students begin to think about some parameters, they may begin to think about others in similarly critical ways. For instance, in another lesson, Cohen used experimentation with parameters to begin conversations about not

only dynamics, but also the how composers can use tempo and phrase length to shape their pieces as well. Rather than telling the student to go home and think about dynamics and tempi, Cohen asked for his student to make musical decisions in front of him, giving him the opportunity to see how his student made decisions and whether the student used their impulses, intuitions, or conscious thought as well as if they made any assumptions.

As Cohen observed his students make compositional decisions at these different levels of thought, he frequently asked questions that pushed students beyond first impulses and intuitions, encouraging them to more consciously and critically consider their options. This more conscious and critical examination seemed to further help students avoid assumptions, allowing them to access an even wider variety of possibilities. When a student presented a piece in which they had determined pitches and rhythms randomly, he asked what other elements those random numbers could apply to, encouraged the student to list several, and waited patiently for them to think of a several before he continued.<sup>200</sup> By asking the student to list many elements, Cohen once again observed the student's thought process, saw which elements came most readily to the student's mind, and once again complicated parameter-based thinking by encouraging the student to go beyond basic parameters.<sup>201</sup> After the student listed different elements the numbers could apply to, Cohen encouraged them to use the same random numbers to write a new piece using some of the new elements the student had considered. By pushing them to not only think about new

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<sup>200</sup> In this exercise, Cohen tasked students to independently determine two parameters of a short piece of music, giving examples of semi-random determinations in class, and to combine the two parameters. As written, the assignment didn't mention using other parameters to make the initial two parameters fit with one another, but in practice, the two fixed parameters did not always fit neatly with one another and needed student intervention through unfixed parameters to fall into place more musically. One student said that this exercise was something that they would copy if they taught younger students.

<sup>201</sup> Often basic parameters (pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and articulation) came to student's minds first, at which Cohen pushed them to think about phrase, texture, instrumentation, and notation.

applications for their numbers, but also to pursue those applications, Cohen effectively helped students overcome their bias toward certain parameters and to explore new possibilities.<sup>202</sup>

Pointing out student biases created a vector along which Cohen could further point out where and how students limited their thinking, going beyond the specific examples of assumptions to a more categorical understanding of ways that biases could creep in. For instance, one student had produced a random string of durations that happened to have a range of 1-20 sixteenth notes. When Cohen asked why they chose a range of 1-20, the student said they chose that range based on the number of cells across the width of their graph paper. Cohen pointed out that the student didn't need to limit themselves because of their paper, allowing the student to not only evaluate their process, but also to think more broadly about how physical materials might unintentionally affect musical materials.<sup>203</sup> Of course, Cohen also focused on student bias and assumptions in the context of the practice in which they worked. In a different lesson, he pointed out to a student that they had a note on beat one in every measure of their piece, indicating a specific kind of rhythmic writing that did not align with the student's practice. By pointing out this pattern, Cohen had shown the student that they had a bias toward a particular kind of rhythmic and metric thinking which did not help them meet the full potential of their musical materials. This last example made it clear that by pointing out biases, Cohen not only outlined new directions the student could travel in and experiment with, but also helped them recognize

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<sup>202</sup> This secondary task to use the same information in a new way reminded me of Boulanger's exhaustive approach to counterpoint where she pushed students to produce tens and hundreds of contrapuntal lines for the same cantus firmus. Cohen's approach was not as exhaustive as Boulanger's, but it did engage students and pushed them to think about how the same inputs could provide several vastly different outputs.

<sup>203</sup> Another student mentioned a similar kind of thinking during their interview, mentioning how meter and barlines affected their compositional process within the context of staff notation.



when their assumptions about music or their compositional process limited their musical possibilities.

Lastly, in our interviews, Cohen pointed out that some practices entrenched students, introducing a more insidious stylistic bias. He mentioned that producing music using sample libraries could limit students who may have enjoyed finding new sounds by taking risks in traditional notation. He likewise mentioned that emulations of romantic music might result in pieces which garner a positive response from the students' friends, but that that positive response might cause students to crave more positive responses, leading again to a risk-averse and limited practice. As with reducing social bias, Cohen's approach intentionally introduced students to a wide variety of practices to reduce bias that might come from having a singular point of view on music. By putting students in touch with a diverse array of practices and encouraging them to experiment while examining their own practice and assumptions, Cohen did his best to keep students from becoming entrenched and biased toward any particular practice which would not sustain them. And by consistently helping students build these sustainable, critical, and diverse practices, he supported his students as they developed not only a deeper understanding of their own musical worlds, recognizing when they made assumptions or operated on bias, but also a method to expand those worlds, giving them a way to overcome those biases and fulfill the musical potential of their work.

### *Fostering Healthy Humility*

When Cohen talked about great works of music, he often described them as consequences of the relationships between concepts. These relationships took myriad forms like maximally different concepts, which I discussed above. But more broadly, Cohen discussed pieces of art in general as sets of relationships, not only between the musical materials, but also between the

composer and the piece, the audience and the piece, and the piece and other pieces.<sup>204</sup> By presenting art and more specifically composition as relational in these varied ways, Cohen attempted to help his students develop critical, skeptical, and humble mindsets. He wanted them to avoid the egocentrism of composing in a cultural vacuum. He told them that writing a singular groundbreaking melody or using the model of the divinely-inspired genius would not benefit their learning the way that developing a robust compositional practice would. This again illustrated how Cohen's teaching and philosophy folded into one another and how each of these concepts tied back to cultivating a compositional practice.

Briefly returning to difference, Cohen cited one of Gilles Deleuze's arguments that "Western philosophy never really grappled with [the concept of] difference."<sup>205</sup> More specifically with music, Cohen pointed out that composers often think about contrast without deeply considering difference. He said, "The definition of bigotry is looking at something and defining it according to what it doesn't have in common with you, but that too is a kind of egocentric view of something." In his own teaching, on the other hand, Cohen said, "I make it clear to my students that the kinds of difference I want you to explore are not merely contrast, but a difference of a freer sort: the difference between things that you might not believe could be in the same composition because of their character being different."

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<sup>204</sup> In one interview, a student mentioned these sets of relationships without prompting, saying that Cohen had put them in situations where they began to consider who they wanted their audience to be as well as who their audience *would* be and how those two concepts related to one another.

<sup>205</sup> This quote is from Cohen, but he was citing Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*.

Cohen explained this while walking me through his analysis of Brahms' *Intermezzo No. 2, Op. 119*, which he had also given to his class. He identified two motifs which differed categorically as opposed to merely contrasting one another. The first occurs at the very



Excerpt from Brahms' *Intermezzo No. 2, Op. 119* <sup>206</sup>

beginning, with sixteenth notes landing on an eighth. The second begins in the third measure specifically as the *sostenuto* begins over the quarter note D#. These categorical differences often meant that the ideas in question contrasted one another multidimensionally, such as something blue and something fuzzy. In this particular case with the Brahms *Intermezzo*, these ideas differ not only in terms of character, one being rhythmic and the other sustained, but also their texture, one being harmonic and the other more melodic, and further their pitch relationships, one leaping between several notes and the other skipping up and down a third. Because the two ideas contrast one another in so many different ways, they take on a fully different character from one another and hardly seem to belong to the same piece, which was Cohen's point. As he played through the piece, he described how Brahms eventually created belonging by looking for similarities between the two ideas, moving beyond contrast.

By focusing on difference, Cohen both kept his students from egocentrism and also built skepticism. He referenced many of the famous composers of the twentieth century who

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<sup>206</sup> Johannes Brahms, *Intermezzo No. 2, Op. 119*. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1926-27), 3.

intentionally avoided cultural legacy and its potential baggage. For instance, with the student who did not distinguish between note onsets and duration, Cohen pointed this out as a feature of the tradition in which the student operated and outlined this idea as cultural, opening up space for the student to experiment and build flexibility.<sup>207</sup> Given an understanding that the student had defaulted to an assumption on the basis of their culture, they could then begin to ask about concepts beyond their tradition or continue operating in their tradition more critically, becoming beneficially skeptical about their tradition. This critical lens not only helped Cohen point out where students had made assumptions based on their musical background, but also positioned him to discuss how students could fall into a kind of conceptual bigotry based on how they viewed difference culturally.

Cohen's focus on relationships also decentered composers in the compositional process in healthy ways. Cohen wanted his students to view not only art, but also artists such as the students themselves, as relational. He wanted students to work with non-musical impulses and to focus on relationships between materials rather than the materials themselves. But he also wanted students to build practices and styles that came from their relationships with a variety of musics, again to avoid any singular viewpoint and to foster humility. Cohen said that he did not want students to cultivate narcissistic practices that focused on their own crystalline uniqueness but rather to use practices which made them "not so much an origin as a lens through which what [they] have heard is passing."

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<sup>207</sup> In this particular instance, Cohen communicated that the European art music tradition doesn't strongly differentiate between notes that are held for 80% or 90% of their total possible duration.

Put another way, Cohen said that he wanted to help students find a way out of themselves “through a particular kind of humility which says ‘I don’t know what’s true or beautiful... my perspective is too partial. But I have a chance at discovering it by doing more concerted work at listening than at pronouncing.’” Again, these words reminded me of Frith’s improvisational and pedagogical approaches which focused on learning how to listen rather than telling fellow musicians or one’s students what to do or how to perform.<sup>208</sup> Beyond these sentiments, Cohen fostered humility by encouraging students to cultivate daily practices and by peeling back the glamour around the myth of the divinely-inspired genius. And as a show of efficacy, his students each talked about their practice in our interviews, some of them commenting specifically on this focus of writing regularly and emphasizing that great composers achieved their greatness through practice and daily work. Cohen likened this approach to the pragmatists, characterizing their philosophical approach:

It’s a much humbler view of what the philosopher should do; not to get [to] this big Truth with a capital ‘T.’ It’s like meeting an immunologist at a cocktail party. They don’t say ‘I’m looking for the cure for AIDS.’ They say ‘I’m studying the way mice respond to immunocompromise. And the mice in my lab, when we introduce this immunocompromise to them, they respond better to...’ That’s very humble.<sup>209</sup>

Cohen also *modeled* humility. He said, “I believe that we are lulled into a sense of our importance as individuals in the role of teaching... We favor the teaching plans that will help us come across as having the right to be up here in the first place.” Therefore, in his teaching he

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<sup>208</sup> And further reminded me of the more ambiguous and amorphous improvisational assignments which Frith gave to his students, such as simply telling them that he would be gone from the class for two weeks and that when he returned they would put on a concert of the students’ works.

Fred Frith, “Teaching Improvisation. Not Teaching Improvisation,” *Dissonance: Swiss Music Journal for Research and Creation*, no. 111 (2010): 15.

<sup>209</sup> Cohen went on to say that he thinks the best art is humble in these ways rather than reaching for some grand truth.

centered students at their most active by focusing on their processes and how those processes led to the materials rather than the materials themselves. He also de-centered himself by reading through and engaging with their reflections. He even modified his language, often repeating the students' phrases back to them, both sharpening his own listening and helping the student maintain their place in the dialogue. Cohen's shifts in wording also helped students track his trains of thought as he traveled from more abstract ideas back to actionable concepts.

### *Building a Practice of Reflecting*

Reflecting represented a major aspect of Cohen's teaching not only as part of the lesson structure but also as a way to evaluate students' processes. Throughout and between lessons, Cohen provided several opportunities and assignments which encouraged students to reflect on their practices and the results of those practices. In lessons, he used reflections to help students examine their compositional process and to engage them in future projects: "Do you think that you might put into practice any of the principles of text setting that we talked about this quarter?" Between lessons, he gave the students assignments to reflect on the work they had just submitted and used those reflections to *inform* students' grades.<sup>210</sup> Additionally, during lessons, Cohen sometimes read these reflections back to his students, allowing them to expand verbally on the thoughts they had already written down. Encouraging students to reflect not only gave them an opportunity to practice examining and modifying their practices to help them achieve their goals but also gave Cohen the opportunity to give them feedback on their process.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> He used reflections to judge how far the student had progressed in terms of developing their compositional practice and in some ways, setting and achieving compositional goals.

<sup>211</sup> Additionally, because of this emphasis on self-examination, students readily reflected throughout their lessons and even in my interviews with them.

As his students reflected, Cohen frequently had the opportunity to examine what level of thought students used as they travelled through their compositional process. This allowed Cohen to identify moments where students made decisions arbitrarily such as when they made musical decisions based on the limitations of their physical materials. Likewise, reflections allowed Cohen to understand whether students made decisions based on impulses (following their own fundamental rules for their piece), intuition (following an inner compass separate from the rules of the piece), or a conscious exhaustion of possibilities. By understanding where and when students relied on assumptions or rules, the students could more readily spot assumptions and break through them when they did not suit the young composer's vision. And by encouraging students to go past impulses and first intuitions, Cohen likewise pushed students to diversify their compositional toolboxes and helped them come out of their comfort zones.

Reflections also gave Cohen a sense of students' satisfaction with their own pieces and additionally oriented him toward areas where students felt confident or insecure. By understanding where students felt most strongly or weakly about their music, Cohen had the opportunity to pick at assumptions which might lead to false confidence or to help students think about how they could navigate their practice to achieve results so they could feel more secure.<sup>212</sup> In one lesson, he asked a student "Tell me a little bit about the trio and what you're thinking as you composed what begins in measure 49." Likewise, toward the end of the lesson, Cohen gave a similar prompt: "I love your ending, tell me about it. What are you thinking? What does it mean to you?" These kinds of questions pushed students to think critically not only about their

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<sup>212</sup> Sometimes Cohen already had a general understanding of where the students felt secure based on looking at the same piece multiple times and seeing where they had made changes, allowing him to orient the student's reflection even more accurately.

music but also the practices they employed to achieve particular musical results. Furthermore, Cohen argued:

It's not only reflecting on 'What are my intentions?' It's also reflecting on 'What am I doing to get there?' and then reflecting on 'How did I stumble?' 'What did I learn that was unexpected?' and then, finally... most students, hopefully, had a rewarding experience somewhere in the 87 bars that's in front of us that they could emphasize more, and if they identify that... the thing that's from this process that you want to bring into your next process, if that helps them to see what part of the current project was rewarding, then obviously they can bring that and hopefully expand it to make their next practice more rewarding. But it's also a foothold for me as a teacher, because as they begin to use language about what was rewarding, I can build or recommend an exercise for them that directly draws on that rewarding experience and that also maybe or maybe not sneakily pushes them out of a comfort zone.

In most of the lessons I observed, students had already written a reflection in preparation for their lesson. In these lessons, students easily responded to questions regarding their thought process when they composed. In one lesson, however, the student had not reflected beforehand. So instead of reading the student's reflection, Cohen continually urged the student to reflect during the lesson in an attempt to understand how to help the student best. Upon reflection, the student realized, with Cohen's help, that they had operated in two potentially mutually-exclusive practices: one entirely random, and the other intuitively shaped. The student's reflection afforded both Cohen and the student the opportunity to step back and examine what they wanted to accomplish and why the student's goals might be difficult to accomplish within one piece. Ultimately, Cohen pushed the student to reflect further, telling them to ask themselves "What do I find most compelling about this process?" By urging the student to pursue more reflection, Cohen helped them reframe their piece as an experiment through which the student could gain insight into what they enjoyed about two different practices.

Because of the above lesson, I later asked Cohen about the importance of reflection with his students, at which point he provided insight about how he used the reflection in the context of



lessons. He talked about how he could have performed better as a teacher if the student had reflected prior to the lesson, giving examples of potential prompts like “Let’s talk about this part of your reflection, where has that gone?” or “Where are you with this and how does it manifest in your work?” or “Let’s talk about a relationship between what you noticed about yourself while you were reflecting and what your practice is. Let’s bring these into a tighter relationship with one another.” Cohen instead characterized his approach during the above lesson as relying on hunches, demonstrating his belief that students can set lessons up for success when they have not only composed, but have reflected on their compositional practices.

Reflection gave Cohen’s students a path to continually talk about their goals for their music, and the consistent reflection and goal-setting that Cohen undertook with students additionally seemed to help them discuss their own goals. During one lesson, Cohen asked a student how this piece tied into the rest of their work over the next three months, essentially putting the student in a position to tie their short-term compositional goals to what they wanted to accomplish in the medium- or long-term. By encouraging this reflection, Cohen importantly provided opportunities for students to talk about their goals and furthermore helped students think across compositional processes to find similarities and ideas which most excited them. Additionally, by thinking both across compositional processes and about how processes related to particular goals, Cohen paved a path for students to think about how to achieve more ambitious compositional goals.

Many of Cohen’s students enjoyed reflection and the metacognitive skills that it helped them build. One student mentioned that it gave them a path to think about *why* they composed the way that they did, allowing them to break away from the rules they learned in music theory and to identify the different ways they began generating music. Another student said that

reflection helped them to think more critically and productively about accomplishing their goals by encouraging them to ask themselves questions about *why* they wanted to accomplish particular goals and *how* they might achieve those goals in ways that better benefited them. These reflections did not begin in lessons; they began at the start of the quarter when Cohen asked his students about what they wanted to accomplish through the class. Possibly because of this early and continual reflection, many of his students seemed to not only have accomplished their compositional goals for the quarter but seemed consistently motivated to work on their projects throughout the semester *and also* to start working on their next pieces as Cohen asked them how they might transfer their skills to a new project.

But especially as students finished pieces, Cohen asked them to discuss what did and didn't work for them so that they could chase parts of the process they enjoyed and experiment with new solutions for parts of the process that they didn't. He then discussed with students how they could begin constructing these processes on the bones of old ones. In these conversations he seemed to say, "the practice that you used to write these notes is over now; it's dead. How can you use what you learned from its passing to build a new practice?" These post-mortem discussions relied heavily on reflection but provided Cohen with a vehicle to validate students' feelings about their past compositional work while tying those feelings to a new compositional practice. This excited his students as they became emotionally invested in a new compositional process. For instance, for one student who had just completed the aleatoric methods project, Cohen pointed out that the random numbers gave the student only discreet points of data, that *do* is *piano* and *re* is *forte*, but that the student made intuitive decisions about how to travel from *piano* to *forte*. In so doing, Cohen pointed out that the student's process had focused on the data points and that going forward the student could more deeply consider how they moved between

their points of data. At the end of the lesson, the student seemed to overflow with ideas about how they could manipulate the data in less straightforward ways as they revisited the process using the same data to compose a new piece.

For the student working with set theory, Cohen first talked about how young composers can be tempted to include many versions of different rows to expand their 12-tone pieces. He validated the student's intuition and pointed out that many students would make similar decisions. He then pointed to Schoenberg's practice of using only a small handful of rows and attempting to combine them in new ways and reminded the student that they had mentioned clearing away some "noise" in their piece.<sup>213</sup> He told them that their consistent use of new variations of the rows might be the source of the perceived noise in their music. And to ground his point in the student's process, he said that when the student cleared out some of the noise, that they were doing more than just cleaning up,

... you're actually composing. You're intervening with your instincts in order to make things happen at particular times and for phrases to develop in particular ways and I see evidence of that in your score, but it does feel like an incomplete process. It feels like something that you could sculpt more, and you could think more carefully about what it is that you want these rows to express.

To summarize, Cohen provided actionable critique about the student's process, backed it up with another composer's practice, aligned himself with the student's goal, and then encouraged them to pursue this process again armed with more knowledge and experience. And it seemed that because this portion of the lesson began *and* ended with actionable feedback, the student felt motivated to return to the process and continue composing. Additionally, by providing an

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<sup>213</sup> Again, Cohen pointed out how students relied on impulses and intuition to shape their music but provided another path: leaning on famous composers who invested themselves in similar practices. By relying on other composers, these students could begin to research and develop new practices without the help of their teacher.

opportunity for this student to reflect on their practices, he gave them a chance to use their newfound knowledge and experience to begin building new practices for themselves as part of a continually improving virtuous cycle.

As part of another exercise, Cohen wanted students to “contemplate the nature of a creative impulse” and in so doing “recognize that at some juncture, a vision for how a composition should go, what it should feel like, and what its results should be will emerge in our heart and mind.” He specifically wanted students to look back at how they *conceived* their music in the past to contemplate the moment when a compositional idea formed in their head. He not only wanted students to examine this part of the compositional process, but to circumvent perfectionism. In our final interview, Cohen hinted that students who struggle with perfectionism may struggle because of the perfection of the *formless concept* of their piece. He said that asking students to reflect on impulses meant that they “also reflect on the fact that there's a big distance between an impulse and the moment when a pianist sits down at the stage and plays your work... There's a huge gulf between that basic impulse to express something which is wordless and formless and the form that we give it.” Cohen then described how giving an initial impulse form by tying it to notes on a staff could also be a painful process. “It's very much like shifting from some myth of the soul to the reality of a body.” By presenting perfectionism in this way, students who become paralyzed in the initial stages of a composition could begin to examine and grapple with how to overcome that paralysis.

In our conversation about the birth, death, and rebirth of musical practices and ideas, I couldn't help but be drawn to the image of a phoenix born again and again from its own ashes. Cohen's discussions consistently supported his students as they built new processes on the remains of the old. He often invited his students to reexamine their work, first validating them by

saying they had done a good job with their eight-bar phrasing and then saying, “Now I’m inviting you to do a good job with something else.” By consistently redirecting their compositional energies in this way, he excited them to revise and to work on new projects.<sup>214</sup> He asked them to “take stock of what is compelling... and go back to your compositional process to see what process led to it.” And in moments where students needed more guidance, he seemed to present two paths for how they might progress. When I asked Cohen about how he presented these bifurcating paths to students, he said “If I [do] my job right, each [path] would include some challenges, some point where I would say: ‘To go further in this direction that you seem to want to go in, you’ll have to break something; there’s a certain limit you’ll have to exceed.’” These branches, then, represented opportunities for students to deconstruct old processes and transfigure them into a new approach.

Lastly, Cohen’s approach focused more on students gaining experience through trying a process either again or for the first time. In our final interview he said, “starting again is much better than hearing me lecture,” which neatly summed up his feelings about students learning by doing. This type of thinking also brought new meaning to the words “compositional practice.” This sentiment presented compositional practices as a path for students to improve compositional skills rather than the process that students used to compose. Of course, a compositional practice is both. However, it seemed that Cohen preferred for his students to gain experience by trying a new solution they developed after examining their old compositional process. He wanted them to

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<sup>214</sup> Nearly every student said that after working with Cohen, they placed more emphasis on revision in their own work and felt more motivation to go through revising processes. One student said that after working with Cohen they had developed a habit of going back and revising even if they felt as though they had exhausted their compositional options.

get their hands dirty and not only to learn not only how to compose, but to reveal how they could perpetually develop new processes for themselves.

### *Giving the Students Their Practice*

Cohen said that as a teacher, his North Star was to give students their practice. Of course, he helped students develop their practice through reflection as outlined above. But he also invested deeply into teaching methods which focused on introducing students to a wide variety of practices and which kept them from becoming entrenched in any single practice where they experienced success. Cohen didn't want to keep them away from success, but he expressed concern that a compositional method which yielded quick and rewarding results may cause students' practices to ossify and become inflexible. To avoid this, Cohen consistently encouraged his students to take risks and invest in practices that they weren't confident about. This also spoke to a level of resilience that Cohen's students may have built if he wanted them to specifically traverse processes in which they lacked confidence. The outcomes of these exercises would naturally leave students either pleasantly surprised or only somewhat disappointed because they had little faith in the process to begin with. Cohen didn't express this idea in so many words, but it follows that his approach would keep students from becoming emotionally compromised with their work.

By focusing on practice, Cohen also exhibited a strongly student-centered approach. He said, "I don't think we're teaching to put knowledge in people's brains. I think we're teaching to put practices in people's brains, practices with which they can retain knowledge if they keep the practice." This conception mirrors Paulo Freire's thinking by avoiding the banking model of

education in favor a personalized pedagogy which promotes self-actualization.<sup>215</sup> Cohen even approached the seminar portion of his class with activities which would allow him to better understand his individual students' interests and strengths and further urge them to work in practices beyond their experience. He said, "No matter where they are, I'll be nurturing their practice and trying to develop it further, but I'll also be trying to acquaint them with something outside their comfort zone so that their music doesn't end up defined by or reducible to the practice." By working in a pedagogy which promoted self-actualization, Cohen did not attempt to make his students experts in any one tradition of music, but rather to give them the tools to become experts in whichever practice they wanted to invest their time.

When Cohen said that he positioned himself as someone who was open in regard to whatever students turn in, he seemed to position himself in this way so that he would not necessarily force any particular practice or approach to a practice on his students. This further seemed to contribute to why he used the phrase "giving the student their practice." He knew that he merely acted as a steward of the student's practice, and not its ultimate practitioner. As he taught, he often asked open-ended questions or gave them a multiple-choice list of answers based on information that students had already indicated interested them. He intentionally focused lessons on his students' answers instead of supplying many answers himself, which may sound obvious, but Cohen did an especially good job of allowing students to supply answers on their own without giving them his own answer.<sup>216</sup> One of the most specific pieces of feedback he gave

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<sup>215</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 72.

Freire's banking model essentially explains education in terms of a teacher depositing knowledge into students' brains, creating a one-way transaction which is not necessarily ongoing, and which can dehumanize students.

<sup>216</sup> This approach mirrors Sam Reese's emphasis on teachers providing opportunities for inquiry rather than judging by strict criteria.

throughout our lessons was when he told a student that they may want to advance their understanding of rhythm as a potential solution for musical problems. He did not suggest that the student change particular rhythms, he instead told the student to think consciously about their use of rhythm in their next piece and to think about rhythms that the student already found interesting.<sup>217</sup> By naming problems rather than presenting solutions, Cohen provided his students ample opportunities to solve problems for themselves rather than relying on him for answers.<sup>218</sup>

After exposing the students to so many different practices, several of them had developed the ability to not only experiment with new ideas and reflect on what they found compelling among those ideas, but also to synthesize those ideas with their compositional practice. This synthesis seemed to specifically help students build practices which they enjoyed and to trace a path through their compositional practice to see how they had improved over time. These students seemed well-motivated by looking back to see progress and looking forward to envision new compositions and compositional practices. They likewise seemed as though instead of becoming entrenched in a particular compositional process, they had become invested in a meta-process of examining their musical impulses and intuitions and advancing their practice from composition to composition. Several students seemed not only content with their investment in this continual improvement, but excited about the changes that it could bring to their compositional process. That excitement seemed to be the very thing that Cohen chased as he taught. He said of his own experience as a student that he gained so much from his teachers' love

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<sup>217</sup> This once again shows a difference between a banking model and a problem-posing model of pedagogy. Here, rather than deposit solutions into the student's brain, Cohen posed and named a problem that the student seemed to have in their work.

<sup>218</sup> This in turn mirrors Betty Anne Younker's emphasis on developing student-directed approaches. Younker may argue that this approach could have gone further and pushed the student to name to them problems as well as present solutions.



for Chopin and other composers, but that what really benefited him as a student was actually *seeing* his teachers so excited which propelled him to a daily compositional practice; he found that excitement infectious. By putting students at the helm of their own compositional ships, by giving them tools to improve on their own, and by showing his own passion, Cohen generated that exhilaration in his students to help them return each day to their compositional practice.

## Discussion

Cohen often took his students' emotional states into account and truly tried to understand how they interacted both with him and his class. When we first began talking, he said that he didn't try to shepherd his students into interacting with the class on his terms; he understood that they had other classes, interests, and goals. As such, his approach never seemed dogmatic, and he maintained an air of humility when talking with his students. They seemed to respect the amount of work that he put into the class, and many commented on how much he obviously loved composition. One student said that they had heard before taking his class that Cohen was long-winded, which Cohen admitted himself, but the student went on to comment that it was precisely Cohen's ability to talk about composition for hours that excited them to compose themselves. Although it seems telling that in his lessons, Cohen lectured considerably less and put significant effort into understanding his students' points of view by constantly asking questions about students' processes and reflections .

Unlike with most other case studies, Cohen influenced his students rather overtly. Potentially *because* of his focus on musical processes as opposed to materials, he seemed relatively unconcerned about whether his students would attach too much meaning to his advice. By offering interesting assignments that were not what students originally wanted to do, Cohen could rest assured that if his students adopted parts of another practice into their own, it would be

because the student enjoyed that process or its results. Likewise, by consistently focusing students on their own practice and simultaneously fostering humility, Cohen gave students tools to improve themselves and their works while helping them become comfortable with the idea that they didn't have to be musical geniuses to enjoy the work that they did. All of these different teaching approaches worked in harmony to help students exert their agency not only over their own work but also over their own growth as Cohen provided them with different compositional tools and showed them his passion for composition.

## Goals

When I asked students what they would copy from Cohen's teaching, they seemed to focus on Cohen's flexible goal setting. One student commented on how excited they were to continue working on assignments that started from a basic idea like rolling dice but which ultimately had endless potential results. This student went on to discuss how much they enjoyed another assignment with an even broader impulse: using an ancient text to inform a composition. The sheer variety of possibilities seemed to excite this student, whereas another student seemed to more deeply appreciate that Cohen's assignments demonstrated how to use an entry point to pursue different paths through a compositional process. Even cultivating a practice, which Cohen listed both as his North Star for teaching composition and as one of his major goals, represented an open-ended and flexible goal. Cohen did not want to tell students how to cultivate their practice, he simply wanted them to cultivate a practice that made them happy, and which helped them to produce music that they could share.

Looking across all of Cohen's initial goals, the focus remained on developing "personal and collaborative practices" that led to "meaningful and distinctive musical experiences." This goal obviously echoed Cohen's North Star. But, having placed it fourth among his goals, Cohen

revealed the relationship that I established previously: the initial three goals functioned as a pipeline, channeling students toward his ultimate goal of establishing practices of music-making. The first goal gave students an entry point by helping them learn strategies and practice compositional processes. The following two goals then shored up potential deficiencies that students may have had, whether they lacked knowledge of certain practices or experience executing a compositional vision. Once the students understood what strategies and processes they enjoyed, once they could grasp onto other potential practices they could use to their advantage, and once they had used these processes to execute different compositional visions, they began to integrate processes into their practice on an as-needed basis, focusing on practices that they enjoyed.

Framed as a journey with a final destination, Cohen's goals became a series of milestones. The first goal was the trailhead, where young composers entered the path by learning different processes and practices but interacting with them in idiosyncratic ways. The students needed specific skills to reach the next two goals which they may have already had or needed to gain by practicing a bit more. The students could only reach the final destination once they had developed skills in all three areas. They didn't have to master these skills, but they needed some familiarity using, an understanding of how others used, and the experience of traveling through and between compositional processes in order to integrate these processes into their own practice and develop an overarching practice which held meaning for them.

## How Does Cohen Help Students Set and Achieve Goals?

All of Cohen's goals focused on compositional processes and practices and avoided commenting on the students' materials themselves except for how the processes led to various products. Additionally, when students tried to push the focus of their goals toward product-

orientation, Cohen pushed back. When one student said they wanted to write a set number of pieces for their capstone course, Cohen said that he wanted the student to think about themselves as an artist and to avoid trying to hit a specific quota of pieces. He went on to tell me later, “I’ll help [them] make sure that [they] jump through the right hoops because I want to provide [them] with that emotional security. But it’s your capstone; it’s about your creative voice... let’s think first about your goals.”<sup>219</sup> This moment revealed a basic answer to my research question: Cohen helped his students set and achieve goals based on what musics interested them and how they could create meaningful and distinct musical experiences in those veins of work. He helped students develop visions of what a final performance could be, acknowledged that those visions could change, and told students to work backwards from the vision to think about what they needed to get done in the meantime. Cohen had done such a wonderful job helping students set goals, that when I talked with the students they freely reflected on their goals and discussed new ones. One student talked about how they wanted to move away from needing a perfect start to their process. Another said that they wanted to start getting into more peculiar and less formulaic constructions of pieces. Yet another student wanted to be able to imagine the form of their piece more clearly before beginning notation.<sup>220</sup>

Tellingly, helping set long-term student goals and working backward to structure medium- and short-term goals resembled the goal structure for Cohen’s class. Likewise, this goal-setting method seemed to facilitate reflection as it afforded Cohen opportunities to ask how

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<sup>219</sup> Another student also commented that they enjoyed that Cohen gave them a scaffolding to approach their work from without forcing them to compose within a rubric.

<sup>220</sup> I find it interesting that these goals happen to mostly focus on processes of composition rather than achieving a certain musical effect, making these goals seem actionable and realistic. This happened to mirror Cohen’s kind of goal-setting which focused on practice.

students' work in the present related to work they had done and work they still wanted to do. This structure appeared to center the students and give them a sense of control over their work in a fascinating way. By asking students what their goals were, listening to them, talking with them about those goals, continually checking in, and helping students set and achieve intermediary goals, Cohen managed to keep students focused on what they were doing at the present moment while making them aware of how that would affect their path to reach long-term goals. These approaches revealed Cohen's excellent awareness of students' levels of motivation and emotional energy. And similarly, the way Cohen structured his goals in the syllabus meant that students gained new boosts of motivation as they reached different milestones in their educational journey. When we discussed students who struggled with the ambiguity of the class, Cohen talked about how he could address these students' relationships with the goals of the class even better. He talked about providing a baseline goal in assignments for these students initially saying, "Providing that baseline is the ultimate work that I can do to really be practice-oriented as a teacher." He went on to say,

If I'm serious about it, I'll do a little work to give a baseline that ensures that my least experienced, my least confident students start doing the work. That baseline is what's going to help the most emotionally compromised, the most unsure, and least experienced student to start writing a rhythm. It's the baseline that gives them that experience, so if I'm serious about my philosophy that should be my first job as a teacher.

In discussing how he could break down his larger goal structures into more fundamental units, creating baseline goals to help students begin their assignments, Cohen essentially reiterated the structure of the class again in miniature, setting up intermediary goals for even the short-term assignments. Additionally, Cohen pointed out a relationship between providing intermediary goals for students and promoting practice-oriented pedagogy. Essentially, Cohen helped students view not only compositions and compositional materials as being operated on by

multiple layer of time, but their compositional process as well. To revisit Cohen's metaphor, he described a landscape as being actively shaped through plate tectonics, volcanism, glaciation, and erosion, all at the same time and continuing under the gaze of whoever witnessed that landscape. When Cohen helped his students set compositional goals, he helped them see how a historical commonwealth of sound overlapped with the music which they grew up with as well as the music that they enjoyed at that time, all of which actively influenced and shaped the students' intuitions and processes. He urged them to think about how their music brought these different worlds into conversation with one another through their listening. He wanted them to consider how their listening affected their music in the past, how they wanted an audience to perceive their music in the future, and what they could do in this moment to help that future audience hear their music.

Cohen emphasized that students could set any goal that they would like, but that they should keep their ultimate vision flexible. He acknowledged how, as their practice changed, those changes might shift their goals as well. He wanted students to gain confidence in their practices to move past questions like "Can I...?" or "But what if I...?" and to start focusing on cultivating a practice rather than producing some particular standard with their work. And as students spent time in their practice, they gained confidence. The students began to orient themselves to the musical horizon and understand the possibilities they could pursue or even learn to pursue based on their experiences composing. Cohen helped his students not only imagine brighter musical futures and potentials, but to use those possibilities as new North Stars. He encouraged them to reflect on the intermediary steps they traveled through in the past and to think about how they conceived of pieces and made musical decisions. And ultimately, he supported them as they connected the insights they gained through imagining and reflecting to

the work that they could accomplish at that moment, so that they could build more engaging, self-sustaining, and *self-improving* practices for themselves.

## Chapter 8: Case Study 5 – Dr. Dylan

*“I did what we had talked about and took a motive from the melody and inverted it here at the beginning...”*

*“Yes, and that’s great.”*

*“So that’s why I have this longer introduction.”*

*The teacher paused for a moment, considering the student’s reasoning before responding. “Well, there are a handful of things that might keep the introduction from feeling integrated into the piece, its length in proportion to the rest of the piece is part of it, but it’s also at a different tempo and in a different key. So, I think ‘Maybe it’s an ABA form and it’s going to come back,’ but that doesn’t happen either. So, considering our compressed compositional schedule this semester, unless you’re really committed to these first 25 bars, I’m not sure that they’re helping you accomplish your goals for this piece.”*

### Analysis and Case Description

Early in our first interview, Dr. Dylan neatly summed up his general approach for helping students compose. He said, “Do the thing that is going to draw you into the piece more deeply and then do this other thing that is going to really help you with the process and be intentional with it.” Talking with Dylan and watching him teach at his liberal arts college in the northeast, I gathered the impression that he consistently conducted himself according to a set of principles applied broadly across multiple ideas, relationships, and aspects of his life. In the above comment, he referred specifically to how students should approach their listening assignments, but when I talked with him about his own experience learning composition, the path he described



mirrored this paradigm. He mentioned that his early teachers often gave him the benefit of the doubt because of their belief in him and that he had a lot of freedom at a time when he felt he needed a lot of structure. He implied that this freedom drew him to composition, but that when he graduated he felt that he lacked many important compositional skills. Paradoxically, in our final interview he said that if he could go back and do it again, he would prefer to start with four semesters of counterpoint to learn to compose. But, just after admitting this, he questioned himself, wondering aloud whether he would still be a composer if he had started with counterpoint.

Dylan's case study uniquely centered around a classroom setting rather than private lessons. However, each class primarily operated as a series of individual lessons, albeit in a more public setting. Interestingly, in the context of this class, he chose to assign a theme and variations for string quartet as the students' major project, giving them a mix of structure, in terms of their instrumentation and overall form, and freedom, by allowing them to compose however they liked in each variation.<sup>221</sup> He said his students needed to feel safe to do their best work, so it seemed that this particular cocktail of structure and freedom gave students a specific goal without telling them precisely how to get there. Moreover, he mentioned that in his experience teaching at this college, most students wilted under pressure. So, to help his students feel safe, Dylan not only provided a fairly robust curricular structure, but also consistently sought to understand his students' goals and to create an environment in which they all worked alongside and with one another to overcome musical challenges. And over the course of the two classes I observed, I

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<sup>221</sup> When I asked Dylan why he had chosen for his students to write theme and variations in particular, he indicated that he wanted students to focus on unity and variety as they wrote. He said, "[variation] is the miniature version of what composing is... It varies something and keeps it interesting."

was impressed by how successfully Dylan had created this community in which students gave and received specific feedback, supplied reasoning as to why they felt some shift in texture might help, and responded eagerly to constructive feedback.

## Dylan's Goals

Dylan's syllabus provided a comprehensive look at what he wanted his students to accomplish by the end of the course:

1. "Develop their ability to learn about the craft of composition by listening to recorded music and also by following written scores. This includes an awareness of the kinds of questions to ask when considering the compositional craftsmanship of a piece of music, and the ability to listen for the answers to those questions."
2. "Acquire familiarity with string quartet and theme-and-variations genres as developed from the baroque period to contemporary period, as well as with experimental/improvisatory/avant-garde traditions developed in the post-WWII period."
3. "Develop the ability to employ technical musical vocabulary to describe, discuss, and evaluate music in class discussion and in prose. "
4. "Complete the composition of an original work for string quartet that falls within the 'theme and variations' genre. In order to do so, students will develop their knowledge within the domains of compositional technique (such as working with parameters like pitch, as well as balancing a form) and practical compositional skills (such as idiomatic string writing, notation, and editing)."

Among these goals, two general categories emerge, one focused on composing and another focused on discussing composition. These categories are implied in the first two goals but embodied more clearly in the final two goals. The first type of goal, which focused on compositional craft, constituted the majority of the class's content and the work that students did at home by composing. By giving students assignments to turn in variation stubs or completed variations each week, the students practiced working with different parameters, taking different approaches, and thinking about the balance in the form of their work.

The second category both supplemented and reinforced the first, providing a discursive and theoretical approach to composition through Dylan's constant encouragement to say *why* a

student enjoyed something or in the way which he provided reasoning why one texture might seem more satisfying to the students. By consistently discussing and encouraging students to discuss composition, Dylan helped his students view music theory as highly relevant to their compositional practice. From this vantage point, students could think critically about the ways in which they constructed their music and how they could do so better in the future which seemingly engaged them more deeply not only in their own music but also in the other students' music. By having the tools to discuss one another's music, each individual's music not only improved, but by the time I arrived at the end of the semester, the students seemed to have developed a sense of community. Some of the students mentioned showing one another their music ahead of class, and many of them supplied constructive comments for each other far beyond a generic "I like that moment." Instead, students managed remarkable specificity in their comments, such as when one student commented on how another student could increase the energy of their climax by changing the rhythmic and textural profile.

The nature of the relationship between theory and practice in this class resulted in a unique praxis in Dylan's classroom. By discussing composition and thinking about why a composer made specific decisions, students developed their own reasoning for making compositional decisions. Likewise, by traveling, especially as a group, through a compositional process, students developed a stronger understanding of the outcomes that particular techniques could have in their music. Therefore, by both composing and actively discussing their compositions twice each week, students also developed their vocabulary for discussing compositional outcomes and in turn reinforced their ability to reach specific compositional outcomes in a virtuous cycle. Dylan most clearly targeted this praxis in his first two goals which focus neither on practice or theory specifically, but rather how students could use other practices

and theories to inform their language and compositional reasoning in their own work. Therefore, all of Dylan's goals supported one another to create a larger virtuous cycle in which students could continually practice and improve not only how they discussed composition, but also how they listened, understood their place at the most recent point in musical history, and of course, composed.

## Lesson Structures

When I visited Dylan, I observed two classes. In each class that I observed, Dylan gave looked at seven pieces by different students in the class, taking about 10-15 minutes with each and asking for input from other students. This meant that I saw more individual lessons in this case study than I observed in any other, and I had the chance to see two individual lessons with each student, one focused primarily on the content of the student's variation, and the other focused on the edits the student had made to that variation following the first lesson. In our initial interview, Dylan described his approach to these lessons, saying that he was constantly "looking for a hook to hang a two minute curriculum on." Essentially, as Dylan reacted to students' pieces, he consistently looked for broadly applicable ideas on which he could give a miniature lecture. This general philosophy seemed to guide Dylan's line of thought through every lesson, so the general shape that most lessons took was:

1. Listen to the student's piece
2. Ask other students for thoughts and opinions
3. Talk the original student through Dylan's perception of their piece
4. End with a larger teachable moment about an overall approach or a broadly applicable tool or effect

Typically, Dylan peppered in smaller teachable moments as well, commenting on a student's cadences or the way they built the character of a section. In several of these mini-lessons, Dylan

also asked the student about their approach to writing the variation and would discuss their approach using the same language as the student. Additionally, during several lessons, Dylan pointed out related literature if he felt the student would benefit from looking at pieces with goals similar to the student's work.

Dylan started most mini lessons by listening to the work of the student in question, although sometimes Dylan asked the student to discuss their approach before listening and in some cases gave feedback if he saw something that he needed to comment on before the lesson continued.<sup>222</sup> After the class listened to the student's work, Dylan asked if the other students had any comments they wanted to provide. During this portion of each lesson, Dylan consistently asked students to provide more specific feedback when they said they liked a particular section. And remarkably, each time Dylan asked for more specificity, the students cited textures, harmonies, and other parameters to explain why they felt a part of the piece did or didn't work.

If no students commented, or when students ran out of comments, Dylan began talking through the piece, discussing the textures of different sections as well as how students transitioned through cadences and between sections. As Dylan walked through his perception, he gave his students significant amounts of specific feedback. It didn't seem as though Dylan had a ratio of reinforcing to constructive feedback in mind, however, he often gave two reinforcing comments for every piece of constructive feedback he gave, and he typically ended with a positive comment. Moreover, constructive feedback often took more time to communicate, as Dylan spent time diving into teachable moments to help students understand why they might

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<sup>222</sup> These more immediate responses typically focused on notational issues or particularly impressive or difficult approaches

need to make a change. Dylan's constructive feedback also gave students an opportunity to demonstrate the resilience they had built in his class. During one lesson, Dylan told a student that he felt their piece would be stronger if they cut the first 25% or so. He provided reasons why the opening might feel disconnected from the rest of the piece, phrasing his critique as tackling the challenge *alongside* the student but ultimately argued that the student should remove that first quarter of the piece. When I asked the student about that moment later in our interview they said that they understood why Dylan gave them that feedback. And beyond just understanding why, the student seemed to understand Dylan's arguments about the proportions of the piece to the point that they wanted to apply Dylan's reasoning without using his suggestion to cut the opening and instead add onto the introduction and making it a more fully-fledged section.

This student's response to Dylan's feedback stuck out to me and seemed to result from some critical aspect of his approach. Several factors likely helped this student understand Dylan's perspective without taking a significant hit to their ego. The amount of praise that he gave seemed to be a part of it, but beyond that, by consistently sharing his reasoning for every piece of feedback he gave, Dylan led his students to understand that he didn't intend for them to take his feedback personally. Rather, he made it clear that his feedback arose out of some aspect of the *decisions* they made with their piece. This contributed to the feeling that students worked *with* Dylan to solve their compositional problems, creating a sense of trust which he stressed in our first interview. He said "[This workshop] will only work if [the students] really trust each other and the professor."

To return to the structure of the lesson, as Dylan talked through each student's piece, he eventually came to points which he wanted to emphasize. At these moments, he often went to the piano to play different versions of a transition or talked with the student about how they could

change the texture to achieve the effect it seemed they wanted. For some students, Dylan would make a quick comment about how adding sixths could make a texture feel thicker and improve the build to a climax. For other students, he would point out other pieces that used fadeouts to end, pointing students to listen to particular repertoire. But at the end of each mini lesson, Dylan gave a two-minute lecture about an important point of growth in the student's music. With one student, he talked about how a dominant pedal could bring the movement to a close, emphasizing his point with recommended listening, by demonstrating at the piano, and by talking the student through how and why they might include this pedal. During these moments, Dylan typically employed highly specific recommendations, pointing to particular phrases that could shift in harmony or pointing out where a student could move a key change to make an audience feel as though the change was warranted.<sup>223</sup>

Lastly, the teachable moments at the end of each mini lesson sometimes became overarching themes for the whole class. In both classes I observed, Dylan developed an overarching theme within the first four mini lessons which he revisited over the course of the entire class. In the first class, Dylan talked at length about cadences with one student before continuing to point out different ways that nearly every other student could elongate a cadence or play with listener expectations around a cadence. In the second class, Dylan focused on the overall shape of the students' theme and variations. More specifically, he led the class through a discussion on what might make a variation feel like a final variation. The students supplied several answers, to which Dylan typically responded "yes, and..." supplying more specific

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<sup>223</sup> As Dylan gave suggestions, he sometimes employed language like "If this were my piece..." to separate the students decisions from his feedback. Students noticed this, mentioning in interviews that they appreciated that Dylan respected their intentions for their own work and that he never scolded or penalized them for not taking his advice.

details about how a student could implement particular ideas into their work. These overarching themes allowed students to understand how one musical idea could manifest in several different contexts as the group looked over one another's music. As Dylan walked the entire group through a student's piece, he could constantly return to this central idea, giving feedback like:

That really sounds like a last variation. I mean, it does all these things, right? It's got all these signals of ending. It has an *accelerando*, everybody coming to the big dramatic peak, the pause, everyone playing together. It's like all the characters come together to speak in unison. It's got all these signals that you're at the end. Though, if it's the end of your entire piece, I still think you could extend this bar.

Throughout most of the lessons, Dylan attempted to equip the students with a wide array of tools which they could use in whichever way they wanted. However, by returning to these central ideas in each mini lesson, Dylan seemed to give his students several ways of looking at the same tool and helped them develop more dexterity and flexibility with foundational compositional principles.

## Key Teaching Methods

### *Heightening Student Choices*

One of the primary benefits of working with Dylan appeared to be how he took students' choices and heightened them. To accomplish this, as he examined a student's music, he first tried to understand what character, moment, or effect they had tried to achieve. Then he typically pointed to other aspects of the piece that seemed to indicate that the student wanted that effect before pointing out another way that the student could increase that effect by incorporating other parameters. For instance, during one lesson, Dylan said

This passage here is the most harmonically tension-filled passage of your piece because it has a diminished seventh chord, very unstable... I actually think that you may want to double time some of this, because when we're at a passage that's building that has a lot of tension, oftentimes we need to have that tension expressed in more than one musical parameter. Here, this is a passage that's tense, harmonically and dramatically; it has loud



dynamics. But what it's lacking is rhythmic activity. So, to me it feels like this is half as fast as it should be. And this is the dramatic peak of your entire variation because you have these chords!

Dylan went over to the piano and began to play some of the student's passages at twice the written speed, saying "Do you see how doubling the rhythm keeps the energy going so that you can land on this F sharp minor here?"

During another lesson, a student had written an *accelerando* which Dylan pointed to and asked, "Is this moment supposed to be really intense?" When the student confirmed that they wanted the *accelerando* to end in an intensified section, Dylan said "We probably want to precede this with *crescendos* and then maybe include a *tremolo*." Each of these examples revealed how Dylan attempted to understand his students' music. In the first example, Dylan pointed to aspects of the music like the harmony, the dynamics, and the position of the music in question relative to the climax to align himself with his student's goal to build dramatic energy. Then, Dylan telegraphed to the student that he understood what they wanted to accomplish by explaining their compositional goal back to them. Lastly, he gave actionable solutions to improve the student's music and even classified those solutions as activations of other parameters so that the student understood how they could use those solutions in their own way. In the second example, Dylan used similar methods, seeing a possibility that the student had not fully expressed their intent in the score and asking what character the student wanted before giving them solutions. In both cases, Dylan intentionally spoke to the student using language which emphasized that both he and the student wanted the same thing. In the second case, Dylan even went as far as to say "*We* probably want..."

In addition to aligning with the student and telegraphing that alignment, Dylan also told them to activate several parameters, especially dynamics, rhythm, and texture, to help them

achieve their compositional goals for those moments. To one student focused particularly on dissonance in their music, Dylan said “There's a lot of dissonance here and so in the musical domain of harmony, you've got a lot of tension... But rhythmically, there's not a lot of tension at all.” Just focusing on using these two parameters to achieve the same goal, Dylan continued, giving a specific potential solution. “So, it's as simple as adding an eighth note or a quarter note rest a couple of times and suddenly you would make it impossible for listeners to understand it, which creates good tension like in a monster movie. You've got monster movie sounds and harmony, what you need is just a little bit less predictability with the rhythms.” Dylan repeated this particular solution to add or subtract a beat or even a measure many times throughout the two classes I observed. It seemed as though Dylan wanted students to have this tool in their back pocket both to generate interest in different sections of their music as well as to add tension. And since many students wanted to write interesting and/or tense music, it seemed as though Dylan wanted nothing more than to help them learn how to accomplish those goals with this tool.

Dylan also typically discussed texture as a way to heighten students' choices. He repeatedly mentioned adding octaves or sixths on top of melodies and even ended one student's mini lesson with a short lecture about developing thicker textures with sixths. He pointed to a place in the music where the student had written a fortissimo and said, “When I see fortissimo, I'm thinking, how do you make this texture bigger?”<sup>224</sup> He continued on, complimenting the student, and saying that they had done well to use the cello in a lower register but that they could thicken the texture even further by dropping the cello down the octave and having the melody played across two instruments with one playing in sixths to create an even thicker texture.

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<sup>224</sup> This is another representation of Dylan providing the students with a composer's thought process.

Additionally, during a different lesson Dylan talked about how the student could shift the texture to add more to their call and response section.

Whenever you effectively create a call and response moment, that gives you an opportunity as a composer to create a call and response between voices in a different way. So, this would be a spot where, for example, in addition to having a call and response go low to high and viola, cello, violin, violin, this could be a spot where it could be pizzicato or arco. So, I'm not saying you need to, but when you effectively create a moment of call and response, that's an opportunity to expand the call and response into other musical parameters.

Dylan seemed to pay special attention to cadences as he helped students heighten their choices. He often talked about cadences as important moments of transition as well as points of articulation. For instance, when one student had shifted textures to transition between sections, Dylan pointed to the shift and said, "Just before that happens, I need a little more of a point of articulation." By framing the use of the cadence as a signal to the audience that a shift would occur, Dylan displayed a kind of deductive compositional reasoning which focused on preparing listeners for changes in the music. Similarly, in another lesson with a student who had written a pizzicato section, Dylan commented on the fact that the student had written pizzicato throughout before saying that whenever the student wanted to transition to a new section, they might consider how a brief moment of arco could act as a point of articulation, foreshadowing their transition.

As a final example regarding cadences, I have already touched on one lesson in which the student had created a long introduction which modulated to a distant key just before a cadence in order to transition between sections. Dylan addressed the modulation first, trying to help the student understand that they could use their modulation at the cadence (rather than in the middle of the phrase) to highlight the transition between sections. Following their discussion about the modulation, Dylan engaged the student in a new discussion about cutting the first 25 bars of the

variation. He went on in the same way that he had with other students' choices, first aligning with the student's goal of finishing the piece for the upcoming deadline, while encouraging them to make the piece more unified. But critically in that moment, he asked the student to discuss why they made that decision by earnestly saying "I don't know what [those measures] are doing for you." Where in other lessons, Dylan seemed to confidently understand what students wanted to accomplish, in this lesson, without that confidence, he wanted to give the student an opportunity to provide their reasoning for their long introduction.

By providing an opportunity for his student to talk about why they made a decision and what they hoped to accomplish, Dylan communicated that he wanted to help students achieve their goals. Whether they wanted to unify the character of a piece or create a smooth transition, he wanted his students to have tools and techniques at their disposal to achieve those small, medium, and large compositional goals. In a later conversation, Dylan said that he ultimately wanted students to be able to "manipulate musical materials and make them do what you want." By discussing with students what they wanted to accomplish and giving them techniques to not only accomplish those goals, but to heighten them, Dylan guided students through a process of manifesting their musical visions in reality.

Dylan also heightened students' choices by streamlining their process as much as possible. Paradoxically, by narrowing the field of possible choices, Dylan helped his students focus on areas where they could create the most impact with the least amount of work. To that end, he often simplified questions so his students could more easily make decisions; after they had written a first phrase, he would simply ask "Are you going to repeat that material, vary it, or write something completely new?"

Dylan used the above question to streamline students' compositional problem-solving, giving them methods to create unity, generate interest, or both.<sup>225</sup> Dylan likewise presented a set of options for how students might continue into their next variation based on different compositional process: "We talked about how you can follow the chord progression [of your theme], like in jazz, or you can vary the melody like in early jazz in the twenties when it was all improvised on the melody, or you can throw it all out the window and discover little motives like twentieth century [styles]." Therefore, Dylan streamlined his students' compositional processes by giving them multiple options or questions which they might ask themselves. These processes essentially gave students two types of compositional reasoning similar to deductive and inductive reasoning. When students began with the compositional process, they operated with more inductive approaches, testing out processes and finding what worked. Alternatively, when they began conceiving of their piece by thinking about a character or an adjective, they operated with more deductive approaches, trying to move from a general character to specific musical ideas.<sup>226</sup>

Dylan also seemed concerned with efficiency as he gave feedback. During one class, he framed his feedback in terms of taking a student's piece "from 92% awesome to 100% awesome." He didn't typically comment on students' materials, but mentioned whether the

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<sup>225</sup> This question helped students think both about the small scale when they considered what to write after their fourth measure, and about the larger scale when they thought about what variation they should write next: should it have a similar character or a different one?

<sup>226</sup> One student talked about their process in similar terms to inductive and deductive approaches. When I asked them to describe their compositional process, they mentioned taking melodic ideas and setting them against different harmonies, taking on an inductive approach. This student also mentioned that when they reached a moment which they knew was important to them, they thought about how to get a specific effect, thinking deductively and essentially codeswitching when they encountered specific compositional situations. Furthermore, this also explained why they would use one kind of reasoning to accomplish different compositional goals, like maintaining interest or unity. As a final note, if a teacher wants their students to engage deeply in a compositional process which results in music that the student enjoys, they may want to have their students practice inductive and deductive compositional practices separately so that student become fluent in both approaches before trying to synthesize the two.

students should repeat a phrase to create unity or change it to generate interest. This both played into a recurring comment about recycling and repurposing material, and also helped students consider how making small changes to the form of their piece could make it more cohesive and/or interesting. These small shifts to create unity or generate interest seemed targeted to make their pieces “8%” better.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, recycling was one of the primary methods which Dylan encouraged so that students could direct their energy where it would be most useful. He encouraged them to recycle materials as often as they could and emphasized that almost any material could serve a purpose somewhere in their music.<sup>228</sup>

Dylan’s curricular structure also reinforced this streamlining by using a final performance to motivate students. That performance, with an ensemble and form that *Dylan* chose, helped him again narrow his students’ focus. Because of the ensemble that he chose for his students, they only needed to learn instrumental techniques for one family of instruments. They didn’t need to think about how to organize their piece because they were writing a theme and variations. This tight focus on a single genre and form kept students working, maintaining their momentum as they composed throughout the semester.<sup>229</sup> This concentration might have also contributed to the feeling that students needed to keep composing, which some of them characterized as a “sink or swim” approach. Dylan confirmed this approach saying, “I really like throwing students into a project with almost no preparation, but then being very intentional about

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<sup>227</sup> The actual percentage here is irrelevant. Dylan was simultaneously trying to convey that the students were already doing a good job and that they could still improve some areas.

<sup>228</sup> He went as far as to say, “You have to learn how to write boring music because right after the climax in your piece, you have to write something boring.” Moreover, by emphasizing that any material could prove useful, Dylan managed to tell students to make significant cuts or additions without that feedback affecting their egos.

<sup>229</sup> This focus also elided neatly with Dylan’s sentiments that young composers learned better by fixing their mistakes in the next piece. He said, “I think it’s more important to keep writing than to stop and perfect sometimes... If you’ve done the work to get a piece completed, performed, and recorded, I think as a young composer... whatever you did wrong, fix it in the next piece.”

what they learned about the process from the project.”<sup>230</sup> Essentially, by choosing instrumentation and form for his students, structuring the class without downtime, and continually giving intentional constructive feedback, he constantly supplied achievable short-term goals which served the longer-term goals of the course.

Lastly, Dylan commented that he also used theme and variations “because it’s modular. If a student only writes two variations, that can be it. Whereas if you were writing a sonata form, and you just didn’t get to your recapitulation... your piece is not done.” The modularity of their variations allowed students to think about how they could organize their music to heighten the compositional choices they made within each variation.<sup>231</sup> For instance, a quiet variation might seem even quieter if it followed a loud variation.<sup>232</sup> Additionally, organizing variations after composing them promoted flexibility both emotionally, when Dylan recommended that students cut parts of their pieces, and compositionally, when he asked them to consider which of their variations sounded the most final.<sup>233</sup> By starting with chunks as large as variations and encouraging students to experiment with the order, Dylan helped them learn how to reinforce the compositional choices they made within each variation by thinking critically about their organization.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Two students mentioned during interviews that the fast-paced structure of the class and the nature of Dylan’s feedback was a source of motivation for them.

<sup>231</sup> Moreover, in considering how students combined their variations into a fully-fledged theme and variations Dylan encouraged them to think about how to make an archipelago out of the chain of islands they had composed, highlighting the paradox of creating something unified by creating small units of difference.

<sup>232</sup> Dylan said during one lesson “Putting two variations that are similar in character together has one effect, but so does putting variations together that have very different characters.”

<sup>233</sup> Dylan also led a discussion about what made a variation sound final where the students supplied various qualities of final variations.

<sup>234</sup> This idea may seem small but encouraging students to think critically about the order of different sections by starting with a modular form like theme and variations may help them think more flexibly about their beginnings, middles, and ends later in their compositional career which should encourage more creative thinking about the order in which sections, phrases, and ideas occur.

### *Building a Compositional Practice around Discussion*

When Dylan encouraged his students to give more specific feedback, he pushed them to develop tools to discuss composition. In so doing, he reinforced the idea that they should strive to reach deeper levels of thought and understanding regarding composition, and one of the major tools that he used to achieve this was the listening journal. During most of the weeks of the semester, Dylan assigned specific pieces for students to listen and then respond to so that they could comb through cultural touchstones and extract tools to use as part of their compositional reasoning. He guided the students' responses by providing a set of questions that students answered for each piece in a one-page response. He asked the students to first talk about the piece generally, discussing the parts that they did and didn't like. Then he asked, "What are you going to borrow or steal from this composition for your own piece?"<sup>235</sup>

A couple of students, however, felt as though the journals should target and focus on particular techniques from the various pieces they listened to.<sup>236</sup> But, as useful as specific questions may have seemed to these students, asking them to discuss particular techniques would have limited their learning as they likely would have focused solely on the techniques which Dylan found useful. Dylan instead asked open-ended questions so that students could discover a wider variety of techniques which interested them, investing them more deeply in the process of

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<sup>235</sup> This approach seemed to allow students to focus on the piece more generally at first, discussing the music more vaguely before diving into specific techniques which interested them. Dylan's wording here, "what are you *going to* borrow or steal..." was particularly active, and some students seemed to have keyed off of that imperative wording. One student even joked with me that they hadn't listened to music solely to enjoy it in three months and that instead they had focused on what they could copy from other composers.

<sup>236</sup> One student felt that Dylan's questions should vary between pieces because other students could reuse answers in their responses. This didn't seem to worry Dylan. In fact, he said that he wanted to honor his students' commitment to his class while also pushing them to realize how difficult composition can be. And although students could potentially reuse answers, by honoring students' commitment, Dylan put the onus on them to work on their craft through these assignments. Students seemed to appreciate this freedom and responsibility which aligned more with Freire's problem-posing pedagogy.



combing through repertoire and extracting valuable tools from it. Furthermore, encouraging students to understand canonical composers' reasoning mirrored how Dylan tried to understand his students' compositional reasoning. One student commented that he didn't try to shape their work in any way and that he tried to see and preserve each student's intent as much as possible.<sup>237</sup>

But Dylan wanted his students to understand and use these methods to serve their own compositional process: combing through scores, extracting valuable tools, trying to understand why past composers made specific decisions, and understanding and preserving intent. In class, he asked them to comment on one another's pieces and to therefore analyze each other's works. He expressed the value of looking at one another's work when he highlighted good choices that students had made or provided solutions to issues in a student's work, reinforcing that the students could find useful tools in any musical source. He often gave these pieces of feedback with an air of gratitude that the student had provided a piece of music which gave him the chance to talk about something important. He would say something like, "I'm glad you did this, because now nine people learned about this topic instead of just one."

Thinking of the above comment in terms of archeology, by expressing that students could understand something new by looking at any piece, Dylan seemed to say that every fossil his students found was an opportunity to learn. Some fossils were complete and provided positive examples of how to progress through a composition. Other fossils were incomplete and showed how processes might atrophy or how environmental pressures could lead to dead-ends. In one

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<sup>237</sup> This comment seemed to stem from Dylan's open-ended feedback, which another student also commented on and said that they would copy if they were teaching students.

lesson, Dylan pointed out a place where a student had created a pattern and said “The moment the listener knows what’s going to happen next, that’s when you’ve got them. That’s when you can throw a curveball, that’s when you pause and do something different.” His students may not have fully understood the first time he mentioned a student’s pattern, commenting on a student’s continued use of pizzicato throughout an entire variation: a partial fossil. But he showed them several partial fossils until one student set up and broke a pattern, which he praised: a complete fossil. By the time he had mentioned several examples, some only presenting patterns, some presenting and breaking them, the students began to more fully understand how they could use patterns to play with listener expectations. By helping students talk through why and how to use these techniques, he helped them develop compositional and conversational tools they could use to approach music in the future.<sup>238</sup>

### *Focusing on Why*

Dylan’s distinct focus on *why* students perceived a sound a certain way or *why* they made a compositional decision was such a large part of his teaching that I knew even during transcription it would become a theme. As he continually asked his students to dig a layer deeper, he again seemed like an archeologist combing through their work and trying to understand their process. Even as he walked through his perception, he often pointed out how one aspect of a student’s piece set up another aspect, cascading into the overall effect of the student’s music. Through this archeological metaphor, Dylan’s descriptions of musical chains of

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<sup>238</sup> As an additional benefit, one student commented that after having participated in the class, they had gone back and looked at music they previously wrote. They said that through Dylan’s consistent feedback on their music and the listening they had done through the music journals, they felt motivated to return to their old music and discover its shortcomings. They went on to say that they had noticed that every piece they listened to and enjoyed had a heavy development section and that in the past their transitions had given them trouble, which they hadn’t realized until taking the class.

events resembled descriptions of different chains of evolution, and he wanted his students to cultivate the ability to describe music in the same way.

I have already mentioned how, as Dylan heightened student choices, he often pointed to other parts of a student's piece to begin conversations about what it seemed the student intended with their music. By continually discussing his own response to the students' various compositional choices, Dylan consistently revealed cause-and-effect relationships to students, pointing out how tense rhythms and dynamics may build tension that works against the resolution of a tonic harmony. By first discussing these cause-and-effect relationships, and then encouraging students to talk about causes and effects in their responses to other student works, Dylan helped his students understand how their musical choices impacted their final composition. *This* is the particular practice which seemed to create a virtuous cycle between students' ability to discuss composition and their ability to compose. By discussing the effects of different causes not only in canonical works, but also in one another's works, students could assess the effectiveness of different compositional strategies and then employ those strategies in their own work. Over time, the students began to understand why a composer might make one compositional decision over another and could begin to heighten choices on their own to achieve specific musical effects.

For instance, at several moments throughout my observations, Dylan discussed when students should repeat ideas or move onto something new, but each time, Dylan gave specific reasons for why the student may want to choose one option over another. He would say, "Complicated music deserves to be heard twice. The richer your initial idea, the more times you can repeat it without anybody noticing." In these moments, Dylan often provided criteria for making a certain decision, more specifically tying his reasoning to a compositional decision-

making process. Similarly, at another point, Dylan advised a student, explaining “Because you've got a lot of things that are the same, you have to work extra hard to add some variety. That's why I'm suggesting ‘change the instrument,’ ‘change the register.’” He not only gave a student a general reason why they should add variety, but further explained why he gave the specific feedback of changing instruments or registers, especially because the student seemed invested in the pitches and rhythms they had written. By explaining both the reason why a student might make a decision and the reason why he gave specific feedback, Dylan distanced the student from their initial decision and tackled the problem alongside the student. This seemed to allow Dylan to give even seemingly harsh critique without damaging students’ egos.

Returning to the moment in which he told a student to cut 25% of their piece, Dylan explained why the introduction felt disjointed from the rest of the piece, attempting to inform the student’s decision-making process. He didn’t try to make the decision for the student and even said that if the student remained committed to the introduction, that they should keep it. And again, because Dylan gave such specific feedback, he essentially helped the student understand how they might change the introduction if they decided to keep it. Furthermore, by focusing on why the student made those decisions and clearly communicating why he gave specific feedback, Dylan honored that student’s commitment to their piece while helping them no matter which decision they made.

When I asked the student about their ultimate decision, they said that they felt like they could justify the beginning section with a significant amount of editing which they planned on doing. They also clarified that they understood where Dylan's feedback came from, likely because Dylan supplied his reasoning for giving that feedback. When I asked how the student felt about that type of constructive feedback, they indicated that it could be upsetting to hear, but

that mostly they felt motivated to edit their work to justify it. This student's response presented a complex look at feedback. On the one hand, having to justify the existence of some of the student's material seems potentially problematic. Composers who work intuitively might not have reasoning for why their music travels in a certain direction. However, other composers may feel the need to justify each compositional decision. Both approaches are valid, but Dylan's focus on a system of reasoning may push students toward compositional processes that focus on reasoning and justification. Yet, in another light, Dylan's feedback motivated this student to dive into the editing process wholeheartedly, which not every young composer is so eager to do.

Beyond specific feedback, one student mentioned that Dylan had talked with the class about how they needed to develop the ability to criticize their own work more effectively than he could. Once again, Dylan stepped back and explained why, saying that the students would not always have him around to help them build up their work. Again, focusing on the reason why students needed to build up their critical capacities seemed to have motivated some students to develop robust compositional processes with checks and balances so that they could improve their critical listening with their own pieces.

This concerted focus on why likewise applied to the overall course structure. As Dylan set deadlines for students to turn in their work, he constantly pointed back to the date of the final performance. He again reasoned aloud that students needed to have their pieces in first draft that week so that Dylan could proofread them the following week before they all submitted their final drafts. By always having a reason, with medium-scale assignments due at the end of the semester, students seemed to trust Dylan. Moreover, by also discussing large-scale capabilities that students would develop over their entire compositional career, and small-scale compositional decisions that they discussed each class, Dylan's students had little reason to

worry about their development as composers. Additionally, by explaining his own reasoning for making specific decisions, Dylan communicated that he saw the difference between him and his students as a difference of degree, not a difference of kind. In our final interview, he stated this explicitly, further explaining that he was in the same boat as his students: “We're all just trying to do this crazy thing which is to go from a blank page to an actual new piece of music.” This sentiment and its egalitarian implications contributed even further to the feeling that Dylan did not try to control his students’ choices or pieces, but that he attempted to help them accomplish their own goals by informing their decision-making processes.

### *Hands-off Structure or Using a Performance to Build a Practice*

During our first interview, Dylan characterized his approach, saying, “My overall teaching approach is to create an encouraging, comfortable environment where students can blossom.”<sup>239</sup> He accomplished this primarily by structuring his class around a final performance, which students built toward throughout the class. However, much of his teaching approach centered around creating fertile environments. For instance, when he decided students would use theme and variations as their form, he intentionally put them in fertile musical ground where they could blossom without his continual attention. By asking students to choose a melody which they already knew, such as “Greensleeves” or “Holding Out for a Hero,” he “[relieved] the perceived pressure to come up with something strikingly original.” By encouraging students to base their composition on music that they already knew and liked, Dylan hid the moment when students began coming up with compositional material. In one fell swoop, he sidestepped the barrier of

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<sup>239</sup> Dylan mentioned that he used this approach specifically in the context of his liberal arts college. He clarified that if he worked at Harvard, his approach would look different, perhaps focusing more on challenging students who work best under pressure.

the blank page, without having to mention the potential issue to his students, and asked them to choose music that interested them, analyze it, and use it as a musical input to begin composing.<sup>240</sup>

Additionally, the theme and variations form allowed students the opportunity to write in several styles, letting them blossom in myriad ways. Because students traveled in so many different directions individually and as a group, Dylan focused his feedback on tools which would apply broadly across all of his students. For instance, each student's piece had cadences, so in the first class I observed, he focused primarily on how to structure cadences. For similar reasons, in the second class I observed, he focused on creating finality. And beyond just making his own suggestions regarding finality, Dylan employed a heuristic approach. He asked his class "What are some techniques we could use to make our last variation sound not just like the end of the variation, but the end of the whole piece. Can we brainstorm that?"

He also created a sustainable learning environment when he asked his students to brainstorm as a group. As he pushed them to brainstorm, he encouraged *them* to drive the conversation, demonstrating that they could support one another through their diversity. Having these group conversations put students in touch with more ideas than what students might think of on their own. And while Dylan still moderated these conversations, encouraging specificity, he mostly *maintained* the ecosystem rather than jumping in and providing all of the answers. He had an end goal in mind, but he wanted the students to choose their own path. In our first interview, he said, "The biggest learning outcome is that they have the experience of

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<sup>240</sup> The students still came up with plenty of original music, of course. With the example of *Greensleeves*, the student still developed an introductory melody and in so doing needed to understand the melody of *Greensleeves* well enough to, per Dylan's suggestion, compose something similar yet distinct.

[composing]. Along the way is where it's heuristic; [that's] where they're going to learn a little bit about their own working process.”<sup>241</sup>

One student described Dylan’s hands-off teaching as a “sink or swim” approach, which I think was *nearly* correct. Although Dylan used a fast-paced structure for this course, he also designed his curriculum so that students would have a hard time failing if they put in the effort because he felt that if students put in the effort, then by extension, that effort would show in the quality of their music. So, he put students in situations where they would struggle but grow because of that struggle, making for more resilient composers. Dylan managed to keep his students in these situations by constantly challenging them with assignments that seemed daunting but doable.<sup>242</sup> From my vantage point, it seemed as though the students *felt* they lacked tools which they, in fact, had. And even if they didn’t have the tools, it appeared that either Dylan or the situations he put them in, gave them the methods and motivation to find and develop tools for themselves. So, even in situations where students felt underprepared, they always seemed to have enough time and understanding to develop tools which helped them traverse the compositional process.

Other students noticed and appreciated Dylan’s relatively hands-off approach. One student said that they liked that he mixed concrete and vague instructions so that they always had

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<sup>241</sup> Later he provided more nuance, saying part of his “approach [was] heuristic; to try to have [the students] do most of the learning and trying not to pre-digest material for them... A lot of professors here... will pre-digest so the students have a better place to start from, and I do that with a lot of other classes. But I don't do that with composition because I think it's so personal that they have to discover their own method heuristically.”

<sup>242</sup> The students corroborated this idea, mentioning that they felt like Dylan threw them into the deep end but indicating that they found a way to swim, potentially pointing to some factor of which the students lacked awareness. And tellingly, one student said that throwing students into the deep end was a technique which they would emulate from Dylan if they were teaching composition.



an idea of how to approach editing their piece without him telling them precisely what to do.<sup>243</sup> I thought this perfectly encapsulated his approach which typically began with a significant amount of structure that fell away once students no longer needed it. At the beginning of the course, his curriculum was highly structured, focusing on instrument ranges and bowing techniques. But as the class continued, he let students blossom a little as he began introducing variation technique. In an early assignment, he limited what the students needed to worry about by giving them a theme (a Paganini caprice) and a smaller instrumentation (solo violin). Next, he assigned them to take the same theme and write it for string quartet, again, supporting the students by keeping some materials the same, but challenging them to think about differences between soloistic and ensemble writing. Then, as students began choosing their own themes, he assigned them to write just the first four bars of a variation which he called a variation stub. This time the instrumentation stayed the same, but the students practiced with their own material.<sup>244</sup> And by the end of the semester, after the students had built up their confidence with the structures in place, Dylan removed those structures, allowing students to work with much more open-ended outcomes.

These types of hands-off structures seemed to complement Dylan's reason-based approach, giving students the *why* portion of the feedback without a specific *what* to do. And in a more profound way, the structure of giving a *why* or *how* without a *what*, mirrored the theme and variations form the class focused on. Dylan gave students the *how* of the form by assigning

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<sup>243</sup> They presented the example that he often gave feedback that repeated four bar phrases are boring and that the student should change one phrase every so often by making it longer or shorter.

<sup>244</sup> Additionally, by working on three stubs, students practiced getting past the blank page three times, once again allowing them to make more decisions on their own without having to make larger formal decisions. They could decide to use these stubs to start their fully-fledged variations if they wanted to.

theme and variations, without telling them *what* theme they should use or in *what* ways they should vary the theme, all of which contributed to the feeling that Dylan understood how much structure his students needed.

Dylan's understanding of how to structure classes for his students seemed to stem from his experience as a college student. He mentioned that his mentors gave him a lot of freedom at an age where he felt like he needed the structure, prompting him to say "I would switch the order, if I could do it all again. But I wonder, if I'd switched the order and I did four semesters of counterpoint training, I wonder if I'd still be a composer." This internal conflict seemed to deeply influence Dylan's curriculum and cause him to provide some of the structured approach he didn't have as a student *and also* to encourage students to choose their own themes and pursue a larger mostly open-ended project. He valued student agency and wanted students to develop the ability to solve problems for themselves. But to build this kind of independent thinking, Dylan wanted his students to grapple with compositional problems as he encouraged them to try first and analyze second so that they could discover for themselves why techniques did or didn't work.

To temper Dylan's comment about going back and changing the order of his own education, he reflected, "Maybe tackling these big projects when I didn't have a lot of skills, all I had was confidence, was a way to keep me invested in the process and wanting to be a composer." For him, the challenge of a big compositional project apparently helped him maintain his motivation, judging by the fact that he structured his class around a performance at the end of the semester. Whenever one of his students seemed to wander off the path, he used this structure to ground them and help them understand why they needed to have their first variation done on a certain date. Using this structure, he consistently pointed to the date of the

final performance as a reason why students needed to accomplish certain tasks right now, keeping them motivated to work on short- and medium-term goals.

As a final note, this key teaching method focused on class structures rather than a mode of communication or feedback, which made using a performance to build a practice unique among the methods I have listed throughout this dissertation. It did not appear often in my observations, except for when Dylan pointed to the final due date and said that the students needed to finalize their variations this week so that they could proofread next week. This gave students concrete touchpoints for why they needed to accomplish a task rather than more arbitrary grades or social standing, promoting intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation as students moved toward their final product. One student mentioned that they felt this structure motivated them to consistently repurpose and reuse material rather than scrapping it because of the compressed schedule. Dylan also commented that the tight schedule also kept students thinking about their work rather than their egos. “They have so much they have to do in such a short span of time. I think they all know they're thrown into this and that there's no time to think ‘Oh, maybe I'm a bad composer...’ There just isn't time because everyone has to write so quickly.”

Again, Dylan said that he developed this class structure for the students at *this college*. He communicated he wanted these students to understand a compositional process and to have a positive experience travelling through it. However, using a performance to build a practice represents one of many pressure valves that a teacher could use to structure a class. Dylan applied the pressure of the performance with his students but didn't force them to find their own performers. He also encouraged them to use a form which they could easily shift around if they needed to drop a particular variation that didn't work. To me, Dylan's continued use of this

performance not just as pressure, but specifically as *motivating* pressure, revealed the importance of his ability to point to the calendar and say, “This is the date when you get to share your musical thoughts with the world.”

## Discussion

Overall, Dylan’s teaching methods seemed highly complementary. By focusing on why, Dylan always aligned himself with students’ overarching goals. Through the use of rationale, he developed a strong sense of trust with his students. And as he heightened student choices, he not only aligned with overarching goals but also short-term compositional goals and encouraged students to think beyond basic compositional tools to consider a broader and more diverse range of parameters, especially texture. Aligning with students’ goals on different time frames, Dylan structured his class so that students remained motivated to work in the short-term so that they could achieve long-term goals.

Dylan’s goal-orientation was a meeting of trust and pedagogy. In the ways that he responded, Dylan consistently built up trust without attempting to prove that students should listen to his feedback. His responses seemed removed from his ego, most likely for the same reason that Dylan said that his feedback didn’t hurt his students’ egos: there simply wasn’t time for any of them to anguish over others’ perceptions of their ability as composers. Dylan hurried through seven miniature lessons per class, and his mode of communication didn’t rely on his students perceiving him as some sort of almighty composer. Rather, he presented his feedback in such a way that students didn’t have to trust him because he presented his reasoning as evidence. Naturally, by presenting his reasoning over a long enough period of time, the students came to trust him, and likely viewed him as a good composer, but paradoxically, he managed to build up this level of student trust by entirely sidestepping issues of attempting to build trust.

He said at one point during our second interview “You have to keep them on your side. I think of it as ‘it’s all of us against this challenge,’ because, as a teacher, the moment it’s me against you, that is not a good place to be.” This quote in particular highlighted to me that Dylan may not have even *needed* his students trust. Their trust was well-deserved and certainly useful to maintain a positive working relationship, but ultimately, he aligned himself with his students and provided reasoning as to why they might make a certain decision over another. Therefore, the students didn’t need to trust him because he showed them both how he arrived at the answer and how that answer could help them achieve their goals. After he showed the students his reasoning and how it could benefit them, whether the students trusted Dylan didn’t matter because he had helped them either way.

## Goals

Dylan’s goal orientation was an interesting challenge to my hypothesis that teachers tend to focus on process-oriented goals. Throughout our interviews and from the syllabus, Dylan listed several goals for his students. However, the main goal that the students interacted with as a part of this class was product-oriented: write a theme and variations for string quartet and have it performed at the end of the semester. Along the way, of course, students interacted with myriad processes, tried new and different techniques, and learned both how to compose and how to communicate about composing. So, most of the skills that students gained throughout their journey were process-oriented. Therefore, Dylan used a close-ended and product-oriented goal to help students work toward open-ended and process-oriented goals. Even goals which Dylan mentioned in passing, such as when he asked hypothetically: “What do you want to teach a

composer how to do? Manipulate musical materials and make them do what you want,” point toward a process-orientation.<sup>245</sup>

Returning to the goals from Dylan’s syllabus, listed at the beginning of this chapter, the first three focused on processes in which Dylan wanted his students to improve their mastery. Those processes focused on building a listening practice focused on craftsmanship, acquiring familiarity with string quartets and theme and variations, and developing the ability to discuss composition and compositional problems intelligently. Of these goals, acquiring familiarity with string quartets and theme and variations represented the most close-ended or product-oriented. However, even this goal fell between product- and process-orientation as it had a relatively defined endpoint which would take longer than a single semester to reach. Dylan’s fourth goal on the other hand, clearly aligned with the idea of using a product-oriented goal to compel students to build mastery toward process-oriented skills.

By listing the final goal as “Complete the composition of an original work for string quartet that falls within the ‘theme and variations’ genre,” Dylan presented an unambiguously product-oriented goal of which he could expect to see evidence when students turned in their final assignment. This not only set the fourth goal apart from the others, but also cast the goal to acquire familiarity with string quartets and theme and variations in a more process-oriented light because Dylan didn’t “test” that students acquired that familiarity in the same way that he made sure they had a piece performed. Instead, he expected students to acquire knowledge of the genres over time and to continually use that knowledge to inform their composition as part of a

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<sup>245</sup> Dylan later provided nuance to this question by saying that teachers have a better chance of teaching students to think in terms of what they can do with the musical materials they have as opposed to trying to develop a brilliant melody.

broader process resulting in this final product. By continuing the fourth goal, “In order to do so, students will develop their knowledge within the domains of composition technique and practical composition skills,” Dylan further reified the relationship between product- and process-oriented goals as a part of his class, more overtly pointing toward the use of a large product-oriented goal to support the development of process-oriented skills and vice versa.

In my initial analysis of Dylan’s goals, I pointed out that the two streams of Dylan’s goals, one focused on theory and the other on practice, complemented and converged with one another into a praxis. In the greater context of his teaching, however, they also complemented one another in terms of motivation, forming a cycle of motivation. The larger project motivated students to think about how they could achieve a final product, generating motivation to set goals from week to week in which students developed and tested new compositional processes. In turn, these smaller goals engaged them in smaller compositional projects which they put together to create a new whole. By completing the smaller variations, students gained motivation which propelled them from week to week, eventually resulting in a fully-formed composition.

## How Does Dylan Help Students Set and Achieve Goals?

In addition to challenging my hypothesis, Dylan’s goal orientation also interacted interestingly with my research question. Dylan helped students set and achieve goals both despite and because he chose goals for them. By using a close-ended and product-oriented goal to motivate students and encouraging them to try different processes along the way, Dylan structured his class so that students could effectively achieve nearly any medium- or short-term goal they wanted. The great strength of Dylan’s goal structure was that it provided students with a concrete entry point but a flexible final goal. His students had several compositional processes at their disposal and musical inputs, in the form of a theme, that they could then expand upon,

but Dylan neither told the students what they should use for their theme, nor pushed them to write their variations in particular styles. During our first interview, Dylan even said “The important thing to me is that they work in a language that they know well and that is authentic to them. All I determine is the instrumentation and the process of theme and variation.”<sup>246</sup>

Dylan *did* give the students more structured inputs in the form of constraints from time to time. He mentioned that he sometimes had students roll dice to determine the character of a variation or which instrument would have the melody.<sup>247</sup> He said that these constraints typically pushed students out of their comfort zones, both spurring them toward creativity and once again giving them an entry point into a variation. Students enjoyed having starting points, as well. One student said that they liked that Dylan didn’t tell them what to write but gave them practices to structure their pieces. They went on to say that they liked that his feedback was open-ended enough for the students to figure out what *they* wanted to do, but with concrete moments for students to fix. When I asked them what they would emulate from Dylan’s teaching, they mentioned this kind of feedback in particular.<sup>248</sup>

Generally, students seemed to take on Dylan’s overarching goal structure, but developed smaller goal structures for themselves. When I asked one student about their goals, they said that they had been using the course goals for themselves, but also indicated that they had focused on understanding harmony because they played a melodic instrument. This student demonstrated the same type of product-oriented goals designed to support process-oriented goals as Dylan did.

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<sup>246</sup> And I think it’s worth noting that as a process, theme and variations is quite general. Variation could mean varying almost any aspect of the composition within the context of that short section.

<sup>247</sup> Teachers could also use dice to determine meter, key, mode, texture, or any number of parameters.

<sup>248</sup> Another student similarly said that they enjoyed that Dylan let them write whatever they heard rather than adhering to a specific set of rules.



They wanted to complete their theme and variations in alignment with the class goals, but along the way, they self-assessed and began developing new goals to improve their compositional process and to challenge themselves. They also communicated a long-term goal that they would like to be able to say something with their music beyond communicating a simple character, once again mirroring Dylan's goal structures.

Beyond simply setting these larger and loftier goals, Dylan also set specific, smaller, and process-oriented goals with his students during class. When he set these smaller goals, Dylan typically responded to something within the student's music such as their phrase structures or choices with pitch. When he noticed that a student had not explored one parameter to the same extent they had explored others, he typically encouraged them to think about that parameter more throughout their work. For one student, he said "I think that's the most important thing for you compositionally: that you monkey around with the phrase structure a bit." And again, the overall goal of writing a theme and variations for string quartet afforded the student the opportunity to keep working on their phrase structures so that they could try to reach this process-oriented goal, especially when Dylan supplied a possible tool the student could use to achieve that goal, such as adding or subtracting a beat or a bar.

Ultimately, by giving students a larger framework in which they could develop smaller goals for themselves, identifying deficiencies which might make particularly fruitful goals, and trying to understand and align with students' interests, Dylan put himself in a position to encourage students to develop goals both with and without his help. Therefore, students had support for many kinds of goals, some of which they chose for themselves, and invested more in, and some of which Dylan chose for them, pushing them to try something new. In his curricular framework, he helped students understand how to achieve longer-term goals in short-term bursts.

And in class, he consistently provided students with compositional tools to meet those goals, building a level of trust that made students feel safe enough to take risks, try a wide variety of ideas, and become more independent. All of this work resulted in varied and diverse pieces, an understanding of several different processes, and the beginnings of a compositional practice which helped students envision their work on the page and then execute that vision.

## Chapter 9: Coda

### Observations

As any work that takes place over the course of multiple years should, writing this dissertation has changed me. I was, and am still, overwhelmed by the generosity of the above five teachers and 21 students, each of whom welcomed me into an intimate space where they share their music. Furthermore, seeing the relationships and trust that these studios formed warmed my heart. I initially entered into this research thinking I would need to protect students' anonymity from their teachers, and I could not have been farther off base. Although I prepared for students to be critical of their teachers, every student I interviewed gave glowing reviews.

Moreover, by engaging in qualitative research, my view of composition lessons changed. I had not really considered what represented value in a composition lesson, and now understand that the primary resource teachers and students have to give one another is time: inside and outside the classroom. Thinking about composition lessons in this way has modified the way I think about teachers' and students' roles. Yes, students should compose outside of their lessons to bring work in, but really they need to spend time *thinking* about their work, whether their piece or their practice. Likewise, teachers are obliged to spend time outside of their lessons reflecting on how they respond to student works and their practice of teaching if they mean to make good use of the time that they have with their students. And that reflection should include a critical examination of what goals we *actually* support in our teaching as well as what goals we want to support and the how we can shift our methods to bring those two ideas into parity.

I am loathe to posit new theories about different stages of the compositional process or the young composer. Even discussing composer personality types, as Carbon has, seems somewhat trite. Perhaps even as soon as in the ten minutes following the publication of this

document, any theory will be seen as a crude stepping stone to some more accurate theory.

Engaging in qualitative research has distanced me from the necessity to propose a new theory, but I will say a few things about what I observed during my time working with these five teachers and their 21 students, what I observed, and the tendencies of these teaching approaches.

## Teachers' Goals

Looking across teachers' goals, every teacher in this study included a goal about listening to music, especially focusing on modern music and its particularities. Every teacher seemed to include this goal, although Wainwright focused on listening the most, integrating it into the compositional process in such a way that students seemed excited to go and discover new music. This goal likewise seemed to cover a basic necessity of consuming the kind of medium in which the students planned on producing. Likewise, almost every teacher included a goal about taking critique or understanding how to discuss composition. The teachers likely designed these goals to help students continue to improve and to generally be able to communicate with the student by setting an expectation for conversation and critique. Additionally, many of these goals supported students as they continued past the classroom and into life as composers without teachers. Dylan most clearly focused his students on taking critique and speaking intelligently about music by consistently asking them to be specific in their responses to others' works.

Most, but not all, of the teachers included specific tasks they wanted their students to complete as part of their goals. Spektor's goals, notably, were almost entirely product-oriented, but designed to teach students something about improvising, electronics, different instruments, and larger ensembles as a means to show the student how music translated into different performance media. Similarly, Buckley wanted students to write a work longer than five minutes so that they would have to grapple with how to extend an initial idea into a longer format. And

Dylan's curricular structure set up a product-oriented goal in which students could attempt several different compositional processes. Again most, but not all, of the teachers included some goal about developing a compositional process. Cohen, focused almost entirely on compositional processes, putting his students in touch with several different processes that would inform their personal process. But further, Cohen hoped to compel his students to a daily habit of music-making through which they could discover new ideas and improve on their own. Similar to the goals focused on taking critique, process-oriented goals seem to have set the students up to continue improving compositionally after they had finished their time studying with their teachers.

Lastly, both Buckley and Wainwright included goals specifically tied to working with performers, although Spektor spent a lot of time discussing communicating with performers. Buckley and Wainwright, however, seemed particularly keen to help students get in touch with performers but to remain hands-off as well as to push students to become independent and create musical opportunities for themselves. Just as with process-oriented, metacognitive, and discussion-based goals, encouraging students to work with performers independently appeared to set students up for success after they finished studying with their teachers.

Teachers' goals overall seemed to point toward process-oriented goals. Even when they were actually product-oriented, they still appeared to encourage students toward different practices, such as with Dylan's or with Spektor's when taken as a whole. The teachers generally seemed to care only somewhat about what students produced through their various compositional processes, instead opting to tell students to fix it in the next piece, which more than one teacher mentioned. And while some teachers pressed students to polish their pieces, even this practice seemed to telegraph to students that they should become familiar with the process of returning to

a piece and editing it to a high level of polish. Even in these moments, teachers did not seem fixated on their students' works, but rather their ability to edit and refine. Furthermore, to include goals which were not about composition at all seemed to point again toward a process-oriented approach. By which I mean that learning to take critique or talk about composition does not itself help students improve compositionally but understanding and applying critique or having conversation about composition at a high level certainly do. Encouraging students to develop these metacognitive skills certainly indicated that some of these teachers were interested in developing students who could not only write music, but travel through a compositional process with ease and to modify that compositional process to suit their needs.

## Teacher/Student Goal Alignment

One of the central ideas I outlined in this dissertation was the alignment between teachers' and students' goals. I already examined teachers' goals, so I can now look at students' goals and compare the two. When I asked students about their goals, nearly every school had at least one student who mentioned a specific compositional skill they wanted to acquire. These ranged from learning to compose for specific ensembles to learning to write B sections. These goals were the most widespread, especially in Cohen's studio, where the students *only* listed specific skills as their compositional goals. Cohen's studio contrasted Spektor's, where students didn't list any specific skills they wanted to acquire.

Students who listed acquiring compositional skills as their goal seemed to come into their composition studios and classrooms with particular ideas about what they needed to work on themselves. In terms of alignment, it seemed as though students could achieve these goals through at least one of their teacher's goals. Therefore, teachers' goals did not target these skills, but were typically robust enough to account for students who wanted to target a particular skill.

The only exception to this pattern was one of Dylan's students who said that they wanted to reach a level of skill in their composition where they could communicate a perspective through their music. Dylan's course goals did not specifically account for this student's goal. However, in our conversations, Dylan did say that he wanted his students to be able to "manipulate musical materials and make them do what [the student wants]." Dylan articulated this goal during our interviews as something he strove for in his teaching, but this goal wasn't included in his course syllabus.

The next most common kind of goal was to generate pieces of music. Students often mentioned this goal in relationship with maximizing their opportunities. This goal was also typically general. In fact, I created a second category of goal for students who expressed that they wanted to work on a specific kind of composition, which was less widespread. These two categories were most common in Buckley, Spektor, and Wainwright's studios, which were the studios where students consistently took private lessons. As an extension, these three studios also served the most students focused on composition as a major. Not all of the students who listed these goals were composition majors, but Buckley, Spektor, and Wainwright designed their studios for composition majors.

While many students were concerned with productivity, most if not all composition teachers aim to help their students produce better music in some way. But more specifically, students with productivity-oriented goals neatly aligned with Spektor's goals to produce a variety of works. They also aligned with Buckley's emphasis on experiencing the compositional process from conception to post-premiere edits. As for Wainwright's goals, the only one which related to productivity was making interesting music. While on the surface level, making interesting music seems like a product-oriented goal, Wainwright's intended this goal to focus on making

*interesting* music, not writing lots of music. Instead, one of Wainwright's unspoken goals aligns more neatly with this type of student goal. Throughout his lessons he took the stance that students should take advantage of every opportunity available to them. This disposition seems to align better with this type of goal because of their shared ethos: not that composers should simply produce interesting music, but that they should tailor their writing and their music to the opportunity at hand.

The third most common type of goal was to better understand composition. This goal was particularly vague, although it described the sentiment of the students who listed it; these students seemed driven to learn everything they could. So, although this was not a particularly useful goal, it did seem to signify something about the student. Only Buckley and Dylan's students listed this kind of goal, and naturally, these students' goals were easily fulfilled by the goals both teachers listed. Notably, however, Dylan's goals used similar language when he wrote in his syllabus "Develop [students'] ability to learn about the craft of composition..."

Three students across three different cases listed the goal of expressing themselves with more clarity. I have already described this goal at length because it was one of Wainwright's goals. It should therefore come as no surprise that one of Wainwright's students listed this goal, as well as one of Buckley's and one of Dylan's. Naturally these goals perfectly aligned with Wainwright's goal. However, with Buckley and Dylan, these goals only obliquely aligned. For Dylan, by developing a practice around discussing compositions, students would likely begin to make connections between what they intended to express and what they actually expressed, helping them achieve clarity. With Buckley, students would likely eventually understand how to express themselves with clarity as they achieved his goals, but none of Buckley goals or methods specifically targeted clarity.



The final two types of goals were to finish degrees or secure jobs. These are both career-level goals, and again only students in Buckley, Spektor, and Wainwright’s studios listed them. Only older students listed goals related to finishing their degree or getting a job. Buckley specifically targeted these goals as he encouraged students to write longer pieces. In fact, in our conversation about his goal of writing a piece longer than five minutes, Buckley said that he specifically encouraged students who wanted to go on to graduate school to write a longer piece so that they would have it in their portfolio. Spektor’s goals that focus on composing for a wide range of media were similarly intended to prepare students to finish their degree and enter into their careers as composers. Wainwright’s goals more obliquely align with finishing degrees and securing jobs. Many of his goals would facilitate these aims, but none specifically targeted it. However, completing coursework including composition lessons still implicitly helped students finish their degrees and therefore secure jobs.

## Teachers’ Key Methods

After examining the 22 key methods that I presented, I noticed some patterns among them. The first pattern I noticed was that nearly every teacher had a key method which outlined the kinds of relationships that they had with their students. The methods that fit into this category were “Relating with Students,” “Pushing Students to Decide,” “Guiding Students through a Workflow,” and “Heightening Student Choices.” To classify these relationships, I organized them along a spectrum from most egalitarian to most hierarchical, visualized in figure 9.1.

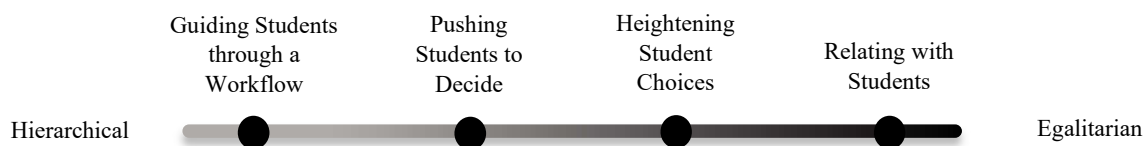


Figure 9.1 – Spectrum of Teacher-Student Relationships Based on Key Methods

Wainwright had the most hierarchical approach to his students as he guided them through a workflow. His students seemed to take comfort in this approach, so as I chose the name of this method, I was particular about the verb. Wainwright guided his students similar to how a trail guide might. He wanted them to understand various traps they could fall into in their compositional process. And because he took charge in his lessons, displaying a profound understanding of repertoire, his students respected him deeply and did not take his advice for granted. Furthermore, that respect and trust seemed to comfort students as Wainwright gave honest feedback, keeping the students from taking his feedback personally. They seemed to understand that he always had good intentions for their work and trust that he was steering them in the right directions. And as with Dylan and Spektor, that trust seemed to stem from his function-based feedback and relevant piece recommendations.

Spektor's method of pushing students to decide was less hierarchical than Wainwright's method. She often applied pressure similarly to when Buckley asked students to improvise, but she did so more regularly in the lessons I observed. Both in our conversations and in her lessons, she encouraged her students to get *something* down on the page which they could change their mind about later. I should note that she respected whatever decisions students made, keeping her somewhat egalitarian. But she also urged her students to engage with the compositional process in a certain ways, pushing them to ask questions, to be critical, and to make decisions. And again, as Spektor acted on behalf of the students' performers, exhibiting her knowledge about the ensembles the students were writing for, she demonstrated to her students why they should trust her.

Dylan often interacted with his students as though they were on the same level. He said as much in our final interview: "I think [between my students and I] it's a difference of degree,

not kind.” Additionally, my characterization of his teaching centered around how he continually served his students and consistently met their needs. Especially as he heightened their choices, he looked at what they wanted to accomplish and gave them tools to achieve their goals. In so doing, he more clearly expressed that he and his students were not at the same level, but that they operated in similar spaces. By providing tools, he set himself as the clear authority, but by continually giving those tools to students, he leveled the playing field. And as with Wainwright and Spektor, because he consistently proved his usefulness to his students, they trusted him as an authority on composition.

Similar to Dylan, Buckley also tended to interact with students as though they were on the same level. When students had questions about their process, Buckley typically related with his students by describing his own process. He often put himself on their level by improvising and composing alongside them. He even regularly said, “we’re all just trying to figure out the next note, so we all share that.” I am not suggesting that Buckley was entirely egalitarian; he still made a point to push students out of their comfort zones and to stretch them, but most often he related with his students and focused on shared experiences.

Another pattern I saw included methods which centered students in the practice of learning composition. Again, nearly every teacher exhibited this type of method, and all of these methods center students. However, some of these methods still used the teacher as a catalyst to encourage further thought and exploration. I have visualized this in figure 9.2. Beginning with

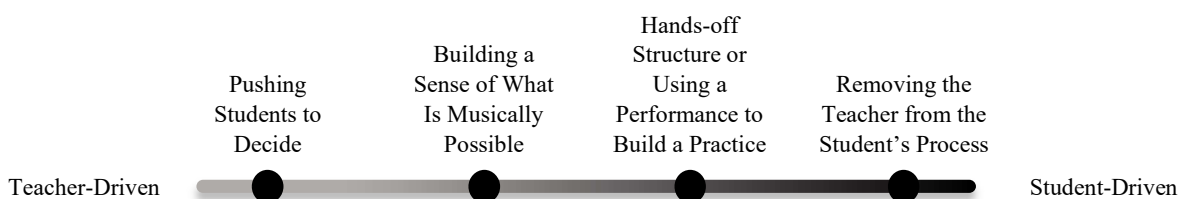


Figure 9.2 – Spectrum of Student-Centric Key Methods

the most teacher-driven method, Spektor centered her students in lessons by pushing them to make decisions. In so doing, she frequently enabled them to continue traveling through the process, reminding them that they could refine their decisions later. Again, she always respected whatever decision the students made, but by urging students to make a decision, she did insert herself into her students' processes. So, although this method is student-centered, students could still become reliant on her if she did not also teach them how to push themselves.

Cohen encouraged his students to build a sense of what is musically possible as he continually encouraged them to examine their assumptions. In so doing, he was often, although not always, the catalyst of his students' inner explorations. He encouraged them to explore various musical cultures and during multiple lessons encouraged them to examine and reflect on repertoire to inform their own music. So, although he typically gave them the tools to challenge their own assumptions, he also encouraged them to use those tools for themselves and demonstrated how students could continue using those tools when they were no longer studying with him.

Similar to Cohen, Dylan provided his students with a structure centered on a performance. However, Dylan differed from Cohen by providing this structure over the course of an entire term. By making one final performance the ultimate goal of the course and allowing students to reach that goal in multifarious ways, he made his course deeply student-centered with smaller amounts of teacher input. Additionally, once students had used the structure one time, after the students completed the course, they could use it repeatedly to generate more pieces for various ensembles.

Buckley centered students by removing himself from his students' processes, intentionally encouraging them to seek out other collaborators as they built their compositional

practices. Buckley not only wanted his students to understand a variety of tools, similar to Cohen and Dylan, but wanted his students to operate in different workshops. He actively encouraged students to develop materials and tools by working with their improvisation ensembles or rotating between different teachers. He acknowledged his role as a catalyst in students' compositional practices, especially as he encouraged them to recycle materials, but he lessened that role by pushing them to work with other musicians beyond him. In so doing, he both pushed them toward a diversity of thought and focused them on their learning not only in his classroom but beyond it.

The third pattern I noticed among the key methods was a pattern of feedback-focused methods. Interestingly, not every teacher displayed a key method of feedback; although every teacher gave feedback in some form, for some teachers, feedback did not seem to be the point of the lesson. Cohen specifically did not comment much on his students' works. Based on the range of feedback from Buckley's descriptive feedback to Spektor's prescriptive reconciliations, a spectrum of descriptive to prescriptive feedback, visualized in figure 9.3 will help classify these methods.

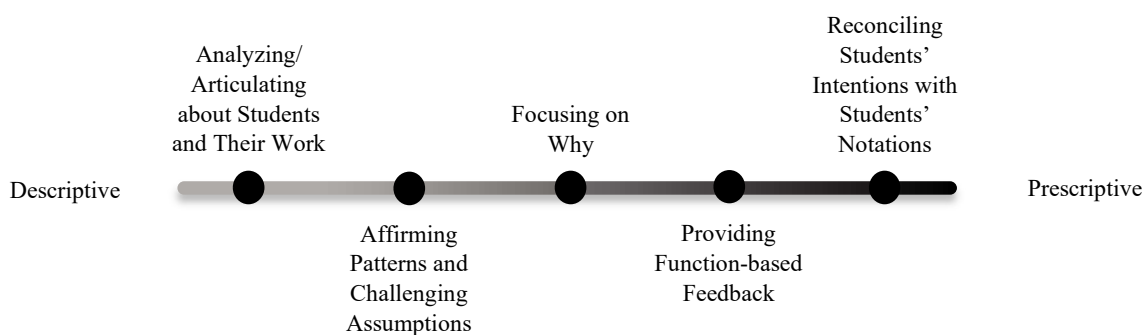


Figure 9.3 – Spectrum of Feedback Methods

As Buckley analyzed and articulated about students and their work, he provided them with significant amounts of feedback. However, unlike many of the other teachers, his feedback primarily focused on what students should consider as they continued forward or specifically

addressed student questions. He did not typically tell students what specific changes they should make to a piece, choosing instead to affirm their approaches. For example, rather than tell a student all of the different ways they could use a diatonic second as a central idea, he improvised on diatonic seconds briefly and then encouraged the student to use diatonic seconds as a prompt for their upcoming rehearsal with their improvisation group. This represented some prescription on the process, but remained focused on how the student could more fully realize a compositional process they had already set into motion.

Spektor's methods appear at two points on this spectrum, and I will analyze them separately. Affirming patterns and challenging assumptions represented one of the primary ways in which Spektor gave feedback. As she did so, she noticed and affirmed the patterns that students used, but encouraged them to create larger patterns in their work. In so doing, she gave both descriptive feedback, focusing on the pattern already in the student's work, and prescriptive feedback, guiding them to critically examine how they could create more complex patterns. This transition from descriptive to prescriptive will continue with the next teachers. But as a final note, as she used this method of feedback, similar to Buckley, Spektor often described the student's music and then provided a method to modify the piece without providing a specific change that the student should make.

Dylan and Wainwright's methods were similar in that they both described what occurred in a piece but tried to understand how it came to be and how it further affected the piece as a whole. Both teachers likewise helped students think about what musical effects they would like to achieve and gave them more specific advice on how to achieve those effects. In the ways that they helped students enact change on their music, both teachers tended towards prescription. They differed in that Dylan's focus on why often came up discursively *with* students whereas

Wainwright typically outlined his function-based feedback *to* students, choosing to engage them in discussion more during brainstorming.

Even though Spektor's method of affirming patterns and challenging assumptions was relatively descriptive, her reconciling of student intentions and notations represented the most prescriptive method of feedback. Notably, notation is often, although not always, a skill included underneath the umbrella of composition and which seems to have more fixed cultural norms. Therefore, some teachers may feel more comfortable prescribing notational changes as opposed to compositional changes. But additionally, Spektor attempted to understand what students wanted and help them communicate that through the score. Therefore, Spektor's notational prescriptions facilitated the realization of her students' intents and contributed to a student-centered approach. This falls into the same pattern as the other methods within this section, which all involved a) developing an understanding of the student's intent and b) helping the student realize that intent to a greater degree.

The fourth pattern of methods focused on transmitting particular compositional processes to students. For instance, Buckley explicitly passed on his tradition of recycling material by helping students build constructively. He even mentioned his economic use of materials in his own music, and subsequent encouragement for students to do the same, representing one way in which his aesthetic crept into his teaching. He also implicitly passed this compositional method on through his lesson structure which focused on analyzing music, and then articulating that analysis as the student continued composing.

Similarly, Wainwright explicitly encouraged students to include listening as a significant part of their process. And his students latched onto this idea. It was obvious as I observed that these students based their processes on this practice of examining repertoire, excerpting ideas

that they enjoyed, and using them in their music. He overtly encouraged his students to use this process through a listening journal. Additionally, although he did not want to produce students who all wrote like he did, his students used similar processes to achieve various results. More implicitly, Wainwright used this repertoire-based process to encourage students to brainstorm and iterate on ideas not only from other composers but themselves as well. Brainstorming and iterating was a more subtle process which Wainwright transmitted to his students, but he encouraged students to brainstorm as he modeled the behavior with them during lessons and as he urged them to spend specific amounts of time with their materials outside of their lessons.

Additionally, brainstorming affected students' processes over time. Beyond consciously exploring their materials through brainstorming, Wainwright used brainstorming to encourage them to pursue what they enjoyed. In one lesson he told a student "Spend a full hour coming up with different possible harmonies, over time, you'll start to find a style that works for you and what kind of harmonies you really like." So, as students brainstormed and determined what they did and didn't like, their process would change. In fact, although Wainwright asked his students to iterate on their ideas and brainstorm multiple solutions, when I asked if he did the same, he said that he iterated less at this point in his career because he had a strong sense of what he wanted to achieve through his music. His students, on the other hand, were only beginning to understand what they liked in the music that they listened to. Therefore, he seemed to want students to consciously explore musical materials to choose what they like best and to further iterate on those ideas, continually refining how they approached writing music.

Cohen intentionally compelled his students to new compositional processes. One of the primary goals he listed in his syllabus was to "Establish personal and collaborative practices of music-making that lead to meaningful and distinctive musical experiences." However, he was



less focused on a single aesthetic tradition than the other teachers who used these kinds of methods. Instead, he focused on philosophical traditions like skepticism and pragmatism. And he compelled students toward these traditions by encouraging them to reflect on their materials and their processes. In focusing on reflection, Cohen encouraged his students to think critically. He told them to examine their prior compositional process and to identify what they enjoyed about that process or what they felt worked well. Then he tasked them with building a new process with those ideas in mind. The emphasis on the process caused this approach to differ from Wainwright's which focused on materials. However, both teachers encouraged students to pursue ideas which they enjoyed. In Cohen's case, that enjoyment may have been more embodied or experienced as part of a flow state. Wainwright and Dylan, on the contrary, seemed to want students to focus on the experience of listening, and as a potential extension, the listener's experience.

Lastly, Dylan encouraged his students to build a reason- and discussion-based approach to their process. He initially did this through his syllabus, with goals like students will "Develop the ability to employ technical musical vocabulary to describe, discuss, and *evaluate* music..." [Emphasis added.] And he continued supporting these processes through the conversation he facilitated in class as well as the ways in which he gave feedback. By continually giving his own reasoning for why a moment did or didn't work in a student's piece and asking students for their reasoning about certain decisions, Dylan reinforced these reason-based approaches to the compositional process. Similar to Wainwright, Dylan supported this approach with a listening journal, in which students would again supply reasoning for how they felt about particular pieces of music and excerpted ideas which they enjoyed to use in their own music. This approach echoed Wainwright's with one key difference. The conversations which Dylan led occurred in

classroom settings, making them a bit more egalitarian and overtly detaching Dylan from student's processes as students understood that they could have these discussion with anyone, not just with him. Wainwright, on the other hand, encouraged students to engage with performers to have these discussions, but otherwise held these conversations one-on-one. In this case, Dylan's approach represented a two-pronged approach to how students might modify their process, both through listening and through discussion. Wainwright, on the other hand, focused primarily on listening.

The final pattern of methods and the one that appeared the least often focused on methods which created a certain disposition among students. Only Spektor and Cohen used methods that fostered specific traits among students which mostly focused on or around skepticism and critical thinking. Spektor fostered a focus on being skeptical and in the moment as she helped students maintain a middle path. As she did so, she taught her students to be skeptical of any strong feelings in either direction about their music in order to try to maintain a flow state in their compositional practice. Similarly, when she encouraged students to affirm patterns and challenge assumptions, she reinforced this critical mindset and encouraged students to look beyond their first thought. And from the students that I interacted with, it seemed clear that through these methods, Spektor instilled in her students the values of both skepticism and being present in the compositional process.

Echoing Spektor's approach, as Cohen encouraged reflection, he asked students to go beyond their first impulses and to more deeply understand their intuitions as they consciously examined their materials and processes. To reinforce this contemplation, he encouraged students to explore inner and outer musical cultures and to critically think about how those cultures interacted with or expressed themselves through the students' musics. This skepticism and

critical thought, especially focused on synthesizing practices across cultures, promoted humility in the students. Cohen discussed fostering this humility overtly by discussing John Cage's approaches to composition which somewhat re-examined the composer's role in composition. And by the time that I visited, Cohen's students seemed to have developed a healthy understanding that concerted and repeated compositional practice made good composers, not flashes in the pan.

## Taking on Teachers' Ideologies

When I interviewed students, I found that they often took on the most subtle and the most overt aspects of their teacher's ideologies on composition in both obvious and unexpected ways. In Wainwright's case, the students seemed to have actually begun using his lesson structure as a compositional process, which was rather extraordinary. I'm not sure that many teachers think about how they will structure a composition lesson to help students develop compositional processes. More likely, many teachers structure their lessons to mirror their own compositional processes, thereby passing on their compositional processes in subtle but profound ways.<sup>249</sup> Either possibility presents a fascinating medium through which teachers can communicate a compositional process, potentially without relying on language, which they think may benefit their students. Thinking critically about communicating in this new medium could unlock an entirely new method for teaching composition.

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<sup>249</sup> Using a developmental method may cause students to generate primarily through variation, whereas using a questioning method may help students critique their own work. Likewise, looking at model composers may consistently push students to use a canon of great works as the basis of their own endeavors, putting them in conversation with other composers.

## Four Languages of Composition

As for the observations themselves, when teachers and students discussed composition, they seemed to discuss it using four different levels of language. The first, from which all of the others flow, was the student's personal musical language. Students typically made idiosyncratic decisions about the styles of music they wrote. In every lesson observation, teachers talked with students at least a little about the choices which the students had made. This language seemed most relevant to the students, especially the younger students, and represented the language in which most students actively operated because many of them made decisions based on a desire for a particular compositional character or from finding sounds that they enjoyed. This language was the most product-oriented and formed the foundation for every other language. Wainwright and Dylan focused the most on this language as teachers. Wainwright would make comments like "if you want something that's akin to *The Lark Ascending's* sound world, staying within a diatonic or pentatonic collection is fine." By using different pieces of repertoire as a kind of mentor text, Wainwright helped students brainstorm and think about how to achieve particular musical effects. Dylan did the same encouraging students to think about how to increase the efficacy of particular moments by activating more parameters. Meanwhile, Spektor and Cohen avoided this language, typically only commenting on students' musical decisions to say whether they thought a particular moment worked or didn't work especially well.

If the personal musical language focused on idiosyncratic and impulse-based decision-making, the next level out, the processual language, focused on a broader spectrum of decision-

making.<sup>250</sup> When teachers and students operated in this language, they concerned themselves with *how* students made decisions, especially in their personal musical language. Often early classes seemed to focus mostly on developing this language through methods like supplying students with compositional tools. Additionally, in the majority of the lessons I observed, teachers used this language to communicate with their students about composition. For instance, Buckley said during a lesson “I’m curious to ask you a question about how you’ve been organizing your thinking as you work on [manuscript] paper. It’s an interesting thing when you work in a software program... When you start a new file, the software program doesn’t exactly leave your imaginative path wide open and asks you to make some decisions right away...”

This processual mode of communication was less personal for the students because this language applied more broadly across styles of music and therefore benefited more students, making it the most actionable language for the teachers I observed. This language also affected students’ musical languages without directly commenting or casting judgment on them, allowing teachers to occupy a role in which they could influence students’ musical languages without their pieces sounding as though the teacher had written them. Because of how lessons were often structured, as students began to develop fluency in a processual language, they often took on their teacher’s “accent,” developing fluency in this language in ways which mirrored their teachers’ approaches, sometimes modifying the teacher’s approach to fit their needs.

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<sup>250</sup> To describe the personal musical language as idiosyncratic and impulse-based, I do not mean to imply that students *only* made decisions based on impulse, but rather that the personal musical language tended to involve the most immediately available decision-making processes. Sometimes those processes included conscious thought and exhausting several options, but the student did not make a conscious decision to exhaust several options, it just happened to be the first decision-making process that they reached for whenever they needed to make a decision. Therefore, at this level of language there was no discussion about the process of arriving at a decision; the student took the path in front of them as the only realistic option.

For instance, Buckley's students talked about how useful they found composing on manuscript paper as opposed to a notation program and how much freedom it gave them. The students also seemed to think through Buckley's lesson structure as a compositional process, analyzing what they had, articulating those ideas, and developing them to generate more material. Spektor's students questioned so much; it seemed a part of their DNA. Spektor's penchant for consistently questioning why or how students made a decision seemed to subconsciously encourage them to regularly critique their decision-making processes. Wainwright's students tended to look at canonical works at the start of their compositional process to give it a jumpstart by finding works, techniques, or effects to inform their music. Cohen's students took on his flexible goal setting, mirroring his assignment structures by setting goals to traverse specific processes or write particular pieces and giving themselves the emotional space to finish in their own time or to let their vision shift slightly. Dylan's students likewise fully engaged with the idea of setting process-oriented goals as a part of larger product-oriented goals, setting many goals for themselves and reinforcing areas of their own compositional ability that they found lacking.

As a final note on the processual language, I said initially that this language concerned how students made decisions, *especially in their personal language* because students were often still discovering their personal musical languages. So, teachers and students used this processual language to discuss how students made decisions which built their personal musical languages. I do not intend to say that the processual language focused only on students' personal languages, often teachers encouraged students to try new processes to infuse both their processual language and personal musical language with new ideas. As they discussed these new processes and

students developed multiple processes which they could draw on, they naturally built the next level of language.

The next level was a meta-processual language, what I call a critical language, which usually only concerned older students. As the older students moved from piece to piece, they understood their personal musical language, their processual language, and other processual languages better and began to ask how they could refine their overall compositional process. Refining the process took time, but students often built this critical language by diversifying their compositional practices and observing how that diversification changed their processual and personal musical languages. For example, as he read through a student's reflection with them, Cohen commented "One of the things that I want you to notice about your own reflection is that while your interventions shaped some aspects of the work and made a difference to you, there were other aspects that you didn't intervene against." Cohen's comment not only helped the student think about this compositional process, but reinforced the idea that they should critically examine the biases of various compositional processes. Young students simply could not interact with this level of language because they had not yet experienced a single compositional process many times or a wide variety of compositional processes. However, it seemed important for students to develop this language early in their practice to avoid the potential roadblock of becoming bored or over-infatuated with a single compositional process. When teachers talked about building a critical language, they often mentioned that students should try new ideas and not simply accept methods of composing that have worked for them. This level of language also approached universalism because of its necessity to create variety in the experience of the musical process, and therefore seemed the least personal to students.

Spektor and Cohen focused on these languages the most among the teachers I observed. Spektor may have displayed this language so much because I observed her work with older students, but even her youngest student used multiple kinds of notation to continually compose their piece across multiple drafts, allowing multiple processes to result in a final composition. That particular description sounds very similar to Cohen's approach of looking at how multiple layers of time affect a landscape as it exists in the current moment, as well. But beyond that particular metaphor, Cohen's approach focused so intently on compositional processes that his weekly assignments essentially put students in touch with a new process every other week. This gave his students the breadth of knowledge with the processual language to allow them to think across and critically combine multiple processes, keeping an eye out for what would most benefit them personally.

The final level I observed was a professional language, which concerned the interaction of the above languages and how they affected the identity of the composer. Relatively few moments in my observations revealed this language. In fact, only Buckley, Cohen, and potentially Spektor seemed to use this language at all, and even then, they used it very little. However, as the languages thus far have progressed, they both abstracted and increased in time span. So, reflecting on a language which exists on a span of time longer than parts of a composer's career led me to think of the career as a whole. Likewise, reflecting on abstractions of the critical process led me to think of how these processes overlap to create a sense of identity and personality.

Beyond developing a longer and more abstract language, Buckley, serendipitously, happened to discuss this language almost immediately in his anecdote about Olly Wilson. Buckley said that Wilson asked him whether he was the kind of composer who sat and wrote or



the kind of composer who went out and sold themselves. His anecdote did not fall into any of the above languages; it neither concerned itself with changes between particular compositions nor directly affected the process of composition. Rather, Wilson seemed to have described a way in which Buckley should think about and approach how his ego interacted with the choices he made about his compositional process. Furthermore, Wilson encouraged Buckley to think about how his decisions as a composer affected his entire career, especially those decisions which did not concern his process, like how he approached performers. Wilson essentially told him that in order to develop a professional language and to develop his identity as a composer, Buckley would have to interact with performers, to speak with them professionally and to understand how his musical, processual, and critical languages would inform those interactions.<sup>251</sup> In pushing students to work with performers, many of the teachers in these case studies attempted to help their students build professional languages, but Buckley, Cohen, and Spektor focused on these relationships the most. However, even in these cases, developing a professional language seemed like an oblique goal which teachers would help their students build without naming.

Across all of the teachers, the *processual* language seemed central to each teacher's approach, although it wasn't every teacher's main focus. Instead of focusing particularly on the musical materials, which from an outside perspective may seem to be the primary information that a composition teacher transmits, most of the teachers I observed focused on the decision-making process. Even the teachers who focused particularly on students' personal musical languages still spent significant amounts of class time talking about why a student made a certain

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<sup>251</sup> Buckley mentioned during one interview that, as part of their juries, he asked his students how long it took them to compose something and what their process entailed so that the students could more productively communicate that process with their potential performers.

decision or why another composer might make one decision over another. Furthermore, discussion using the processual language seemed to strike a balance between relevance to the final outcome of the students' efforts, their compositions, while still applying to more than just the composition at hand and ultimately helping them become better composers.

## Reflection

If the four languages of composition represent the ways in which students and teachers communicate about composition as well as four languages in which composers can develop fluency as they gain experience, then reflection is how composers gain that experience.<sup>252</sup> Reflection, as a process, allowed teachers to shift a student's attention from that student's personal language to a processual language, from a processual language to a critical language, and so on. Composers seem to need to develop fluency with all four languages, but fluency in the processual language seems to breed fluency in both the personal musical language and the critical musical language. So to help students improve, teachers should encourage them to reflect and should take great pain to not reflect on the student's behalf, or else the student will not learn how to improve on their own and begin to rely on their teacher.

By encouraging reflection, teachers move away from Freire's banking model of education and toward his problem-posing pedagogy.<sup>253</sup> This shift mirrors Younker's description of a shift from a teacher-directed approach to a student-directed approach. By encouraging students to provide feedback on their own work, essentially reflecting, Younker argues that

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<sup>252</sup> There is an argument to be made that students are already incredibly fluent in their personal musical language, but if this is the case, then to continue with the language analogy, students seem to be fluent without understanding the grammar or syntax of the language. They can write in their language clearly, but if a teacher asked them to change something, their ability to write might collapse entirely, whether because they don't understand how to write without pitch or because they are only motivated when they pursue a project in one particular way.

<sup>253</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970.

teachers can help students empower themselves to frame and solve composition problems for themselves. Likewise, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that if teachers simply deposit information in students, then students cannot truly grow beyond the information they receive. These students essentially become dehumanized blank canvases for teachers to write upon. However, if teachers engage students in dialogue, once again encouraging them to reflect, students begin to develop on their own, uncovering principles of composition which may seem more relevant to the student. These dialogues may further demonstrate to students that they have the ability to develop through dialogue generally, not just with the teacher. Freire writes

...The problem-posing educator constantly reforms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* [common belief or popular opinion] is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*.<sup>254</sup>

The above quote highlights how students can reach new heights beyond cultural norms or associations if teachers engage them in dialogue: not simply lecturing students by providing feedback but asking students which aspects of a work they engaged with and encouraging students to unpack why they enjoyed those moments. Freire's ideas resemble Fred Frith's pedagogy for music improvisation, as well. Frith pushed students to learn improvisation by removing himself from situations in which students *could* rely on him. For one class, he told students that he was leaving for three weeks and that when he returned, the class would have a

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<sup>254</sup> Freire, 80-81.

*Doxa* and *logos* seem related to the idea of a personal and a processual language, with *doxa* being an unconsidered approach to creation and *logos* being a more reasoned or critical approach. I may not agree with the idea of "true knowledge" superseding common belief, but I agree with Frith that there is value in composers coming to recognize new ideas which feel true to them.

Frith, "Teaching Improvisation. Not Teaching Improvisation," 15.

concert. Focusing specifically on the idea of “true knowledge,” Frith also encouraged his students to discover musical principles that felt true to them.

By engaging with students and taking them seriously, teachers can pose problems and engage with students in dialogues which can help them grow exponentially and independently from their teachers. By pushing students to not only solve problems for themselves, provide their own feedback, and search for their own truths, but to reflect on their solutions, feedback, and truths, teachers may be able to help students become fluent in multiple languages of composition and further become independent learners, capable of improving on their own.

## Improvisation

Most of the teachers that I worked alongside to produce these case studies held strong beliefs about improvisation.<sup>255</sup> Buckley strongly encouraged his students to improvise and seemed to hold the belief that improvisation cut through analysis in ways which could benefit young composers. He even asked for students to improvise in the context of lessons. Wainwright on the other hand cautioned students about improvising, pointing out that improvising on particular instruments could seriously bias the student toward certain kinds of figures. When one student mentioned improvising, Wainwright told them whatever they improvised would absolutely need editing. I don't believe that Buckley would disagree with Wainwright's particular concerns. However, Buckley's willingness to use improvisation to alleviate certain kinds of pressure seemed to take student perspectives into account and generate more sustainable practices. Encouraging students to play their own music and to become invested in it seemed to benefit students, although it also has a chance of overly-investing students in their own internal

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<sup>255</sup> Dylan did not mention having his students improvise at all.

worlds, which Wainwright wanted to avoid. Instead, he wanted students to understand the musical world that they were entering into.

Spektor and Cohen held similar opinions in that they wanted their students to have experiences as improvisers and using improvisation. But neither of these teachers seemed to push students to compose. Rather Spektor wanted students to have the experience so that they could communicate with performers who primarily improvised. Cohen, on the other hand valued improvisation as a sustainable practice through which students could generate and develop music. In fact, Cohen's thoughts on improvisation seemed remarkably similar to Buckley's except that Buckley seemed to take them a step farther. Cohen had a student improvise on specific timing decisions as they played through a piece, using the practice to refine the student's materials. But Cohen never mentioned asking students to generate or realize material through improvisation.

## Teachers in Conversation

As a final observation, one aspect of this research that I found interesting was the different ways in which the teachers I worked with engaged in conversation with me. At one point in my second interview with Cohen, he remarked that by using language to describe his teaching approach, he had to refine and crystallize a lot of his thoughts about teaching into language. He said, "it's interesting to me that talking with you about teaching made me develop this larger set of monologues about philosophy of art." I am fascinated by the ways in which this comment resembles the approaches of some of the teachers I worked with throughout this process. By discussing their teaching process, they refined it over time, which conceptually rhymed with ideas of encouraging students to talk through their compositional process to refine it.

I want to emphasize that teachers can have these conversations with anyone interested in compositional pedagogy. I was prepared with specific questions about teaching composition, but given these questions, any teacher could begin refining their approach on their own.<sup>256</sup> The important aspect of these conversations was not that teachers had these conversations with *me*, but rather *that teachers had these conversations*. It was more critical that teachers discussed their approaches rather than who they discussed them with. But for the teachers who participated in this study, these discussions seemed to be a hidden benefit. By discussing their approaches, these teachers often reflected on their experiences as both teachers and students, sometimes coming to realizations about their own approaches which reflected or transgressed their mentors' approaches, or which came into tension with other aspects of their teaching methods.

Buckley at one point described his relationship with one of his teachers, saying that during lessons with that teacher, he had struggled because they often had similar compositional approaches. As he reflected back on that time, he described himself as pigheaded but also as someone who struggled to generate material. He even seemed upset given how he had behaved during lessons compared with the wonderful relationship that blossomed between him and his mentor after Buckley stopped taking lessons from them. But there was a moment during our second interview where I asked him what he would have done, had he been in his teacher's shoes, for a student who approached lessons the way that Buckley had. He considered for a moment before thoughtfully responding,

I would remove that particular piece from context, and I would do a writing exercise. I would take them out of their funk or over-analyzing... I would say 'let's get out a piece of music and some crayons and draw some' ... I would take them out of their interest and

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<sup>256</sup> These questions can once again be found in Appendix E.

try to free them so that they gain some confidence and think to themselves ‘Oh yeah, I can even make music when I don’t think about it too much.’

I was transfixed. The sheer difference in approach between Buckley and his mentor represented a massive leap ahead in teaching prowess in regards to teachers’ abilities to relate to their students. And it now seems important to me to acknowledge the differences in how teachers developed relationships with their mentors versus how they nurture relationships with their students.

As we worked together, many of my interlocutors expressed gratitude at my focus on their teaching approaches and the conversation that developed out of that focus. Cohen implied that he hadn’t explained his teaching to others before, which struck and still strikes me as odd, but which seems to be the norm in the field of composition. To that end, I hope that the conversations I had with these five teachers and their students can begin to change the way composition teachers interact with one another. I hope that these conversations generate more conversations and create a broader community of teachers who more closely examine their own practices and the practices of others to generate even more conversation, setting off a chain reaction that could change the nature of how we teach music. The idea may sound grandiose, but our students deserve our best efforts, and we will only reach our full potential as a community.

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## **Appendix A – List of Final 45 Schools to Construct List of Mentors**

Berklee College of Music

Boston University

California State University Long Beach

California State University Northridge

Cleveland Institute for Music

Columbia College Chicago

Cornell University

DePaul University

Juilliard

Lawrence University Conservatory of Music

Manhattan School of Music

Mannes College - The New School

Michigan State

NYU Steinhardt

Oberlin Conservatory

Ohio State University

Peabody Institute (Johns Hopkins) University

Rice University Shepherd School of Music

Rider University

San Francisco Conservatory

Shenandoah University Conservatory of Music

Southern Methodist University

St Olaf College

Stanford University

Trinity University

Truman State University

University at Buffalo  
University of Cincinnati-Main Campus  
University of Georgia  
University of Miami Frost  
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor  
University of Missouri-Kansas City  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
University of North Carolina Charlotte  
University of North Carolina Greensboro  
University of North Dakota  
University of Northern Iowa  
University of Texas Austin  
University of Washington Seattle  
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee  
USC Thornton School of Music  
Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music  
Western Michigan University  
Wheaton College  
Wichita State University

## **Appendix B – Recruitment Emails**

### **Email for Teachers**

Dear [teacher's name],

Hello! My name is Joseph Vasinda, and I'm a PhD. candidate at UC Davis working on my dissertation which focuses on how we teach music composition.

I'm researching six or so teachers and their students to develop a better understanding of how teachers set goals with their students and help their students reach those goals, whether those goals are writing a particular kind of piece, working on part of the compositional process, or to work on timbral, rhythmic, or contrapuntal writing. My hope is to document the different goals and methods of several different teachers to help composition teachers, as well as general music educators and prospective music teachers get a better understanding of different methods for teaching composition from some experienced teachers.

The time commitment is fairly small. Outside of lesson observations, there would be one main interview lasting about an hour or an hour and a half which would focus on your experience with your mentor and how that informs your teaching as well as the skills that you want students to have and how you help them develop those skills. If there were any questions that came up during observations or student interviews, we could set up a follow-up interview that would last about half an hour. The rest of my time would be spent either observing one-on-one composition lessons or interviewing students.

I am also hoping to observe and record audio from some private lessons, with you and your students' permission, to see teaching philosophies and methods in action as well as to see how teachers adjust their teaching styles from student to student. I won't be sharing the recordings as part of my research; they are just to help me remember each lesson. I think that

general and prospective music teachers could benefit immensely from seeing some of these methods in action, and I would love for your input to be a part of this research which I hope can support those teachers.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the study, I would love to work with you!

Sincerely,  
Joseph Vasinda

## Email for Students

Dear [student's name],

Hello! My name is Joseph Vasinda, and I'm a PhD. candidate at UC Davis working on my dissertation which focuses on how we teach music composition.

I reached out to your teacher to participate in my research where I'm looking at six or so teachers and their students to develop a better understanding of how teachers set goals with their students and help their students reach those goals whether those goals are writing a particular kind of piece, working on part of the compositional process, or to work on timbral, rhythmic, or contrapuntal writing. I'm hoping to document the different goals and methods of several different teachers to help composition teachers, as well as general music educators and prospective music teachers get a better understanding different methods for teaching composition from some experienced teachers.

The time commitment is not big at all. Outside of lesson observations, there would be a single interview about half an hour long where I would ask you questions about your goals as a

composer, how you and your teacher talk about those goals, and how your teacher helps you to achieve your goals. The rest of my time will be spent either observing one-on-one composition lessons or interviewing your teacher.

I am also hoping to observe and record audio from some private lessons, with you and your students' permission, to see teaching philosophies and methods in action as well as to see how teachers adjust their teaching styles from student to student. I won't be sharing the recordings as part of my research; they are just to help me remember each lesson. I think that general and prospective music teachers could benefit immensely from seeing some of these methods in action, and I would love for your input and feedback on those methods to be a part of this research which I hope can support these teachers.

To be clear, your decision to participate is entirely up to you, I will not be telling your teacher who is or is not participating in order to maintain your confidentiality! You can also opt out at any point or redact anything that you tell me if you don't want it to be a part of the research, but everything I write will be anonymous. Please let me know if you have any questions about the study, I would love to work with you!

Sincerely,  
Joseph Vasinda

# **Appendix C – Consent Forms**

## **Consent Form for Teachers**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study! My name is Joseph Vasinda, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in composition at the University of California, Davis. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation project, entitled “Going for the Goals: How Teachers and Students Set and Meet Goals in Music Composition.”

The purpose of this study is to document how teachers and students set goals in music composition to compile a variety of ways for general music educators and prospective music teachers who are interested in teaching music composition.

If you agree to participate in this research, I would like to conduct a maximum of two interviews with you, and to observe some of your regularly scheduled one-on-one composition lessons. You will be asked questions about your experience with your mentor and teaching techniques. I anticipate that it will take about one hour to complete the first interview, if there is anything that needs clarification and you agree, we may have a follow-up interview which will last about 30 minutes. The interviews and observations will be audiotaped and transcribed, but your name will not be included on the file name or in the transcription.

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. I hope that the research will contribute to the body of research on goal setting and teaching in the context of music composition education. Another potential benefit for the teachers participating in the study is a potentially more honest understanding of how they are meeting their students’ needs from an outsider’s perspective. Finally, this study is intended to expose composition teachers to a variety of teaching methods and ways of understanding how experienced teachers help their students construct goals in order to help an increasingly diverse set of students make music.

According to the Ethics Review Board of UC Davis, the risks of this research are minimal. If you find some of my questions inappropriate, uncomfortable, or irrelevant, you are free to ignore them. Additionally, you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

### **Confidentiality**

The information you provide will be used exclusively for the project described above. However, as with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk. To minimize this risk, after each session of interviews or observations, I will move all of the audio recordings from my phone or laptop to a private cloud-based folder separate from my personal folders. Any work I do transcribing interviews or reviewing notes on observations may need to be done on my computer, and if it is, once I am done transcribing or reviewing, I will return all of the files back to the folder and delete them from my laptop or phone. As I meet with each teacher or student, I will give them a code, and as I transcribe, I will only use this code to identify them. There will be no identifiers in the data, only a code which will identify the research associate’s role, either teacher or student, and will help me identify which student-teacher observations correspond with which student interviews. Your responses to the interview questions will not include information that identifies you. This identifiable information will be handled as confidentially as possible.



However, individuals from UC Davis who oversee research may access your data during audits or other monitoring activities.

My dissertation committee and some individuals from UC Davis who oversee research may access this data during audits or other monitoring activities. Following university protocol, At the end of the study, I will remove my committee's access to the data and keep the data for five years, at which point it will be deleted.

### **Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

### **Rights**

*Participation in research is completely voluntary.* You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and you can stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate, or answer any question, or stop participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the investigator at 214 674 2993 or [jmvasinda@ucdavis.edu](mailto:jmvasinda@ucdavis.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the University of California Davis, Institutional Review Board at 916 703 9158 or [HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu](mailto:HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu).

**If you agree to take part in the research and allow the interview to be recorded, please print and sign your name and place the date below, and I will e-mail a copy to you.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Associate Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Associate Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# Consent Form for Students

## Introduction and Purpose

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study! My name is Joseph Vasinda, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in composition at the University of California, Davis. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation project, entitled “Going for the Goals: How Teachers and Students Set and Meet Goals in Music Composition.”

The purpose of this study is to document how teachers and students set goals in music composition to compile a variety of ways for general music educators and prospective music teachers who are interested in teaching music composition.

If you agree to participate in this research, I would like to conduct one interview with you, and to observe one of your regularly scheduled one-on-one composition lessons. You will be asked questions about your experience with your teacher, your goals as a composer, and how your teacher helps you achieve those goals. I anticipate that it will take about 30 minutes to complete our interview. The interview and observation will be audiotaped and transcribed, but your name will not be included on the file name or in the transcription.

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. I hope that the research will contribute to the body of research on goal setting and teaching in the context of music composition education. Another potential benefit for the teachers participating in the study is a potentially more honest understanding of how they are meeting their students’ needs from an outsider’s perspective. Finally, this study is intended to expose composition teachers to a variety of teaching methods and ways of understanding how experienced teachers help their students construct goals in order to help an increasingly diverse set of students make music.

According to the Ethics Review Board of UC Davis, the risks of this research are minimal. If you find some of my questions inappropriate, uncomfortable, or irrelevant, you are free to ignore them. Additionally, you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

## Confidentiality

The information you provide will be used exclusively for the project described above. However, as with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk. To minimize this risk, after each session of interviews or observations, I will move all of the audio recordings from my phone or laptop to a private cloud-based folder separate from my personal folders. Any work I do transcribing interviews or reviewing notes on observations may need to be done on my computer, and if it is, once I am done transcribing or reviewing, I will return all of the files back to the folder and delete them from my laptop or phone. As I meet with each teacher or student, I will give them a code, and as I transcribe, I will only use this code to identify them. There will be no identifiers in the data, only a code which will identify the research associate’s role, either teacher or student, and will help me identify which student-teacher observations correspond with which student interviews. Your responses to the interview questions will not include information that identifies you. This identifiable information will be handled as confidentially as possible. However, individuals from UC Davis who oversee research may access your data during audits or other monitoring activities.

My dissertation committee and some individuals from UC Davis who oversee research may access this data during audits or other monitoring activities. Following university protocol, At the end of the study, I will remove my committee's access to the data and keep the data for five years, at which point it will be deleted.

**Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

**Rights**

**Participation in research is completely voluntary.** You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and you can stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate, or answer any question, or stop participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the investigator at (214) 674-2993 or [jmvasinda@ucdavis.edu](mailto:jmvasinda@ucdavis.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the University of California Davis, Institutional Review Board at (916) 703-9158 or [HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu](mailto:HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu).

**If you agree to take part in the research and allow the interview to be recorded, please print and sign your name and place the date below, and I will e-mail a copy to you.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Associate Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Associate Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D – Potential On-site Data Collection Schedule

<b>Time</b>	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>
9:00 a.m.	Teacher Interview		
10:00 a.m.		Observation 3	
11:00 a.m.			Follow-up Teacher Interview
12:00 p.m.	Observation 1		
1:00 p.m.	Observation 2	Student 3 Interview	
2:00 p.m.	Student 1 Interview		
3:00 p.m.	Student 2 Interview		

## **Appendix E – Interview Questions**

### **Questions for Teachers**

#### **How would you describe your learning experience with your mentor?**

How does that experience inform your own teaching?

How do you feel your time with your mentor helped you think about your music in a certain way?

What teaching methods did your mentor use that you use with your students because of your experience learning with those methods?

What teaching methods did your mentor use that you do not use with your students because of your experience learning with those methods?

How would you describe your teaching methods?

In what ways are your methods similar to your mentor's?

In what ways are your methods different from your mentor's?

#### **What skills do you want your students to have when they leave your program?**

What are your perceptions about student preparation coming into one-on-one lessons? Do you want students to have an understanding of some particular type of music theory before taking lessons?

How do you navigate the territory between the skills that you think a young composer should have and the goals that your students set for themselves?

#### **How do you help them reach the skills that you want them to have?**

**What specific methods or exercises do you use to help them reach the skills that you want them to have?**

How do you help them reach their goals?

How do you know if they have those skills or the ability to reach their goals when they are about to graduate?

#### **In your first lesson with a student, what activities do you do or what questions do you ask?**

How do your teaching methods differ between group and individual lessons?

How does your focus on the skills you want students to have when they leave your class change between group and individual lessons?

How does your focus on the students' desires or goals change between group and individual lessons?

**What patterns of teaching or giving feedback do you use across multiple students?**

## Questions for Students

**What are your goals as a composer?**

Are there any ensembles you want to write for or jobs that you want to have as a composer?

If the composer mentions a terminal degree as their goal:

What do you want to do with that degree?

How do you and your teacher communicate about those goals?

**How would you describe your experience with your composition teacher?**

How else does your experience with your teacher influence your composing process?

Do you feel like lessons with your teacher help you think about music in a certain way?

What are some teaching methods your teacher uses that you feel help you advance towards your goal?

**If you were going to teach a student, what methods that your teacher uses would you want to use to help that student learn to compose?**

## **Appendix F – Advice for Student Composers**

### **Advice for Young Composers**

The moments which affected me the most as a composer were when I first understood how vast Wainwright’s understanding of several different repertoires was. Not only did Wainwright understand and know so many kinds of music, but they also managed to apply them to so many different pieces. That concrete applications of different musics were eye-opening to me, as someone who is not typically a fan of composing “in the style of” specific composers. Wainwright recontextualized this idea for me as a way to solve musical problems based on the cultural achievements of past composers: an approach which Schoenberg would have loved.

One moment which I think nuanced this idea in a productive way was when Wainwright said, “All the things that you try out in this section,” referencing the different iterations that the student might try, “you might just settle on one thing for each part of the section, but they are all things that you could later apply. Let’s say you decide, ‘no, I really like just these [figures] in viola and cello,’ but you can still come back to this idea later in the piece. You could say, ‘well maybe then I’ll do something with the octaves or with the parallels expanding to something other than fifths,’ whatever you end up exploring.” Iterating with the express intent of discarding a lot of those iterations might feel wasteful to some composers, although I hope they understand the value of trying the same idea in multiple ways. But by incorporating different iterations at different places within the piece, the composer can present related ideas that have slightly different idiosyncrasies from one another. This way, the process of iteration might feel less wasteful, if it felt wasteful at all.

After my time working with Wainwright and their students, I was highly focused on listening to my own music and understanding whether my cadences built or released tension

successively. I thought about the function of given moments more and thought about them in ways which related to tradition more than I had in the past. As I was finishing a piece I had been working on, I went through and listened to the cadence points and ranked how I felt each cadence built or relaxed the tension of the overall piece and adjusted some moments increase or decrease the tension as I felt was appropriate. This approach helped me to think about the moments of my piece and how they might be perceived through a particular lens, which helped me edit to clarify my musical expressions.

When discussing rules- or system-based approaches to composition, Wainwright said, “your system should reflect your intent as a composer, not just with respect to harmony, but with respect to other aspects of the piece.” I have been meditating on this quote in particular since my time observing Wainwright. There is a mixture of personal reflection and outward expression presented in this quote which I find irresistible. Firstly, the student composer must understand their intent as a composer, and secondly they have to understand how to express that intent through musical content: not just the notes themselves, but the systems which may help the composer, or perhaps the performer, choose the notes. The teacher goes on to say “For example, if you want to experiment with groups of trichords, that has ramifications, not just for the harmonic language of the piece, but also for its melodic language and singability, right? And even how playable it is on guitar, and then, if you start doing chords in the double bass, that too.” So, in some ways, Wainwright meant that the systems should interconnect and affect the whole of the piece, not just one portion. Yet at the same time, choosing to work with trichords seems to be something that this student composer deeply valued and seems somehow more profoundly tied to their intent.



To further consider approaching composition systematically, during one lesson Wainwright said, “thinking linearly is fine, but thinking in terms of going left to right as a composer and not really thinking about the larger structure is potentially problematic. I would be sure to have a sense of where you're going and what's going to happen, and also be flexible and change those plans if you find that that is not going to work out” This quote both heightens and tempers Wainwright’s approach to systems of composition. On one hand, they are encouraging their students to think systematically, and on the other they encourage their students to be flexible. Ultimately, I believe the message that Wainwright is communicating is to have a sense of what is happening within the student’s work and why, and to allow for shifts in those answers as needed.

Wainwright also put the process of iterating and brainstorming into a different context for me. I’ve known that iterating is an important process but setting a certain amount of time to iterate or thinking about iterating in terms of setting particular musical experiments are much more approachable methods for iterating than intentionally exhaustive contrapuntal exercises. Iterating also happens to be a phenomenal process for developing musical preferences and learning to edit in smaller chunks.

Not because of any one moment with Wainwright, but through my analysis and other circumstances in my compositional life at the time of writing this, I see the value in having a positive emotional relationship with the compositional process. Like with exercise, there may be some days when the most important compositional goal is simply to enjoy composing. Having a strained or negative relationship can only decrease the amount of time someone spends composing, so conversely, having a positive relationship with composing, or fostering feelings of comfort during the compositional process seems an important practice to maintain.

Something which Wainwright brought up multiple times was the idea that the beginning of a piece could be anything, but that what the composer did with the material at the beginning was a different compositional process, almost. Essentially, there were several times when a student had brought in some starting material, and Wainwright mentioned that it was a good start but that how the student presented and modified and contrasted the opening material would make a big difference in terms of the quality of the piece. Some composers might present this as thinking of craft less in terms of generating ideas and more in terms of developing those ideas. Essentially, a composer can generate a lot of interesting germinal material, but what matters more is what the composer does with it. This idea appears to be in the same vein of thinking as other teachers who use goals such as composing longer pieces of five minutes, seven minutes, or longer. I've heard some composers say that 15 minutes is where a composer must more deeply consider how their material is constructed. This may present a good problem for young composers to grapple with: how do you maintain interest in the same material over extended periods of time?

## Appendix G – How Do I Use These Teachers’ Methods?

This appendix contains a variety of potential applications of some of the methods described above, including some which come from lesson structures or goals as opposed to the key methods of the teachers.

### Buckley’s Methods

#### *How do I Analyze Students and Their Work?*

In my experience, teachers need to be able to pick out ideas that are central or at least interesting within a student’s piece, however, it is potentially more important that students can pick these ideas out themselves. If the teacher is the only person in the lesson ever pointing out when an idea is interesting, there is a danger that the student could begin to rely on the teacher for their guidance. So, although it may be more important to guide students by recognizing particularly exciting ideas when they are just beginning composition lessons, as the students gain experience, it becomes more critical that the student can take on that task. This may help students develop the key compositional skill of analyzing their music to determine which are worth developing, and beyond that, analyzing the compositional process to identify their proficiencies and deficiencies.<sup>257</sup> Some students may struggle to generate material and may need help developing and then cultivating tools to start composing, whereas others may find it difficult to edit.

To build up a student’s analytical capabilities, the teacher can urge the student to ask themselves questions such as “Is this the most important thing going on in this part of my

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<sup>257</sup> Students who only improvise may find themselves relying on the same methods to compose again and again, and the same goes for any compositional process. Students who can only compose using chance or outside data sets may be similarly constrained.

piece?” or “Is this the idea I want to work with here?” For beginning students, asking these questions while listening to new pieces represents a good way to start analyzing music. If the teacher already understands what kinds of music interest the student, then they can recommend pieces in similar styles which will hopefully interest the student and excite them to practice analysis. Buckley’s focus on the student’s listening practice and maintenance of a listening journal came in handy as a guide for students to begin their general analytical practice. In Buckley’s studio, he asked students to answer questions as they listened:

- Upon what central idea(s)/theme(s) does the piece/movement seem based?<sup>258</sup>
- What/where are the three most compelling passages/moments in this piece?
- What makes the passages you’ve chosen so compelling to you?
- How are these passages related to the central idea you identified in the first question (above)?
- Outline a “map” of the piece/movement’s form, using letters to indicate discrete sections.
- And, of course, the fundamental questions: Do you like/dislike this piece/movement; why?

Buckley also mentioned that with some students, simply discussing how to listen to unfamiliar music may be necessary, however the questions above can serve as an initial listening guide.<sup>259</sup>

When a student is working with a particular idea or motive, prompting them to try it in various contexts and asking them to analyze how it functions in each context can stimulate creative thinking. During one lesson, Buckley showed a student different variations of the same diatonic half step gesture by playing at the piano. He started with E-F and moved to G, then repeated E-F and moved to F#, then E-F-D. Buckley asked the student how the momentum

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<sup>258</sup> Buckley asked students to specify measure numbers.

<sup>259</sup> Teachers could also consider this as a listening guide for their students’ works if they are struggling to analyze their students’ pieces.

changed when the final note was lower rather than higher and what the student might expect to hear as a result of that change. Buckley then changed the figure to F-E to point out the importance of subverting assumptions throughout the process of trying different contexts. Buckley encouraged students to ask, “What happens when I take this idea and shake it up completely?” For a young composer, analyzing their own music and noticing what makes it unique could help them develop a greater understanding of the nature of their materials. This may allow them to not only conceive of their initial material more clearly, but also to think about contexts which might contrast or challenge that nature in interesting ways.

Some teachers may be concerned with their ability to analyze pieces. This may stem from a belief that a modern composition could include *anything*. And while this is true in a certain sense, student composers and by extension their composition teachers must still develop a sense of what they believe does or does not belong in a piece. Buckley talked with one student about building this skill:

“One of the ways I personally found helpful to [build objectivity] was by conducting my own work. Because when you get up there as a conductor, you’re using different ears, and you need to make this thing work, the composer be damned. If you’ve got to make some changes, you’re going to make some changes because that doubling sounds like garbage, or that’s way out of balance. That was the best way for me to be very objective and to slash through measures and say, ‘Ugh, this takes too long,’ or ‘This doesn’t take long enough.’ Then I go back and give it to myself as the composer and try to fix it.”

Younger composers may still have a difficult time developing this objective instinct, especially if they have few opportunities to conduct or even hear their own music. However, working with performers, not just as a conductor, and receiving feedback from many different sources may also help students develop critical muscles. Building this objective instinct involved Buckley’s goals of working with performers, dealing with rehearsals, and learning to take critique. However, many of Buckley’s methods for building objectivity also imply that the student should

spend time thinking about other music to analyze their work more objectively. These two elements, receiving diverse feedback and separating the student's ego from the piece, both seem to build this objectivity.<sup>260</sup>

Teachers who encourage their students to analyze their music may also be concerned about over-analysis. Buckley mentioned that

[over-analysis] can be a problem for advanced masters students, and for doctoral students when they feel that they have to justify every single thing they do because they've taken these analysis classes... And you hear people give these comments, and it's a great compliment, but I think it's dangerous for young composers to hear when somebody says 'This piece was perfect, every note is there for a reason...' A young composer hears that, and they think they're supposed to have a reason for every note. That's deadly.

Buckley was quite sensitive to potential over-analysis and mentioned that during his time studying with Mario Davidovsky, over-analysis became a problem for him when his ideas for how to develop a composition overlapped with his teacher's. Buckley said that when their ideas overlapped, he grew frustrated and began to question the value of studying with a teacher whose ideas were so similar. His frustration would cause him to over-think his musical decisions, keeping him from generating material, and continuing a cycle in which Buckley would only bring in a few measures at a time for Davidovsky and Davidovsky would once again provide different developmental options which coincided with Buckley's. When I asked Buckley how he would have broken that cycle, his response revealed a keen understanding of how a student's emotional state affects their compositional process.

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<sup>260</sup> Feedback could be diverse in a number of ways, from different people, from people in different scenarios (rehearsals and lessons), from people with different perspectives (conductors, composers, and performers), and depending on the pressures of the situation (public with an audience, public for a studio of peers, and private). To separate the student's ego from the piece, often time plays an important role, however the teacher may consider pushing the student to re-purpose other music by using a theme and variations, which may allow the student to somewhat distance themselves from their variations because the theme is not their own.

### *How Do I Articulate about Students and Their Work?*

If a teacher wanted to encourage their students to articulate their thoughts, or wanted to better articulate their own thoughts, they should consider asking secondary questions to promote deeper thinking about their students' initial analyses. By asking an initial question, Buckley encouraged students to analyze, which the students found helpful, but with continued questions, he urged students to move past what was happening on the surface to think more about how an idea worked or why the student made a particular decision. These deeper analyses pushed students to consider their compositional practices and how they worked or why they chose a particular compositional approach. These secondary questions may also help students internalize more questioning and critical perspectives with their own music, allowing them to reflect on their practices more readily and recognize moments where their materials and practices need reconciling.

To engage students to articulate, teachers should listen for any comments a student makes about their work or process and ask them to explain their comments more deeply. One student mentioned that they had been thinking about a masterclass they participated in, and Buckley simply asked what the highlight was. If a student does not present an opportunity for the teacher to ask a secondary question, they could alternatively ask the student to describe the character of a particular moment in their music and ask secondary questions about the student's answer. Buckley asked students to describe the character of their musical materials, forcing them to reconsider what their initial intent was and to reconcile that intent with what was on the page.

Teachers should, however, caution their students against substituting the description of a musical idea for the musical idea itself. Some students may develop a habit of using descriptions *prescriptively*. If a student consistently thinks about what they want their music to become

instead of what their music already is, it may distort their analysis of their music. And while it is certainly okay for students to have a particular mood in mind when they set out writing music, they should recognize when they are not achieving their musical goals and keep an open mind about shifting their initial idea to fit their current analysis of their music.

Another of Buckley's most powerful tools was metaphor, which helped some students conceive of their music in new and useful ways. Buckley commented that dramatic metaphors allowed him to speak about the student's music no matter what their aesthetic interests. Some teachers may have a hard time creating useful metaphors at first; creating applicable metaphors is a skill. However, Buckley's metaphors typically centered around other art forms. Buckley described the process of writing a poem, frequently drew on dramatic ideas, and discussed some études by Picasso with one student. By drawing on other art forms, Buckley created metaphors which were analogous to the compositional process. When we talked about how to help students extend a piece of music, he said, "Let's think about the difference between a short essay and a longer essay and the differences in depth. The difference isn't restating things, just putting repeat bars there... It's furthering the investigation, going somewhere you haven't yet gone, taking it a little bit further and exploring the drama in a different way."<sup>261</sup> Different art forms may be useful at different times, as well. Drawing on language arts to explore length is potentially more useful than drawing on painting. On the other hand, painting as a metaphor can be more useful than language arts for composers exploring the technique of iterating on the same idea repeatedly over the course of multiple projects.

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<sup>261</sup> This clearly relates closely to Buckley's goal of expanding the student's work to five or seven minutes.



The dramatic metaphors which Buckley employed certainly apply to many scenarios in many different types of music. However, some students or teachers may feel as though these metaphors don't apply universally to music. Additionally, over-using metaphors may lead students to think of music only programmatically without also seeing the value in thinking abstractly about music. From my perspective, a balanced approach is necessary to help students write different kinds of music: balanced between metaphorical and literal feedback, between different art forms, and between metaphorical feedback on the music and metaphorical feedback on the process.

### *How Do I Develop Students and Their Music?*

Developing students and helping students develop their work involves placing students or ideas in multiple different contexts and analyzing what happens. When it comes to musical materials, teachers should encourage students to try out new ideas even if the students don't believe they will work at first.<sup>262</sup> And when it comes to processes, teachers should put students in a variety of composing and learning contexts and adjust their approach based on the student's emotional responses. But whenever the teacher sees a student struggling with a particular part of the process, they should encourage the student to try and re-try that portion of the process repeatedly. For instance, if students are struggling to generate initial material, the teacher should put them in situations where they start with a blank page and develop musical materials in a focused amount of time. By putting time pressure on his students and encouraging them to improvise, Buckley helped his students regularly generate new ideas. Furthermore, by giving them something particular to focus on, he often lowered barriers to getting started.

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<sup>262</sup> In some cases, the ideas might not work out, but learning why an idea didn't work could help a young composer in the future to either challenge or reimagine their findings.

Some teachers may be concerned with making composition too difficult on their students by presenting only complex prompts. For this reason, analyzing the student is paramount to providing educational prompts or compositional problems. Students should not perceive composition as something which is only difficult or only easy. By presenting the student with different levels of compositional problems in their lesson, a teacher can maintain the student's feeling of mastery over composition in such a way that they constantly feel that they have room to grow and that they want to continue growing. Teachers can accomplish this by analyzing how their students tend to solve musical problems and asking questions which are easy or hard to solve with the student's typical solutions. For instance, if students typically generate interest with pitch, a teacher could ask them how they would generate interest in a measure if the pitches stayed the same throughout.

Similarly, different parts of the compositional process might push the student in or out of their comfort zone. If the student is introverted, they may not feel comfortable working with performers or speaking up in a rehearsal, which are both skills that Buckley argued are vital for composers. At moments where students might feel self-conscious about their work, Buckley reassured them, acknowledging that especially leading up to a performance, there may be experiments left in the piece that the student isn't certain will work. Buckley remained consistent in telling students that the premiere was not the end of their piece's life. By encouraging students to continue editing after the premiere, Buckley reassured students that they could simply take out the experiments that did not work after the premiere. However, these moments of uncertainty reveal the importance of urging the student to go through the compositional process as many times as possible. It's a basic idea, but by encouraging students to experience the compositional process repeatedly, a teacher puts their students in situations where they must problem solve and

develop solutions. Additionally, students can evaluate, with some guidance from the teacher, how their ideas do or don't work. This concept goes hand in hand with consistently spurring students to experiment beyond what they think might work.

When it comes to the musical material, as teachers help develop their students' works, the students will present several opportunities for the teacher to supply creative ideas. This may be helpful for a student if the new idea will put them out of their comfort zone, give them insight into further musical developments, or encourage the student to try a new idea. However, in other cases, the teacher's ideas might work wonderfully in the context of the piece but rob the student of their chance to think of a creative solution or worse, contribute to a dependence on the teacher for ideas and solutions. In cases where the student is struggling to think of a solution, the teacher should place the student in a situation where they are forced to come up with a few different solutions. Buckley most often did this through improvisation. This issue also came up in the context of Buckley's experiences as a student when his teacher repeatedly recommended solutions which Buckley was already planning to implement. When Buckley's solutions were the same as his teacher's, he became frustrated and had difficulty generating more material. Therefore, teachers should most often provide compositional solutions which intentionally push the student out of their current mode of thinking, or which the student will be able to surpass. In other words, teachers should present options intentionally designed to put the student outside their comfort zone, either by presenting options that are deeply within the comfort zone or that are far out of it. Otherwise, teachers should put students in *situations* which encourage students to operate outside of their comfort zone such as developing solutions with a particular prompt and/or in a focused timeframe.

## Spektor's Methods

### *How Do I Reconcile Student Intentions with Student Notations?*

Reconciling a student's intention with their notation is a particularly good approach for teachers who are concerned about over-influencing their student, especially if the teacher and the student have only recently begun working together, and teachers who want to separate students' compositions from their notation. To reconcile student intent and notation, teachers should primarily seek to ascertain the student's intent. Spektor often took a humble approach to understanding student intent and began each lesson with a series of questions in an attempt to both understand the student's musical ideas more thoroughly and to help build a student's critical lens. Many of the questions which Spektor employed were "why" questions, which she always asked sincerely. By presenting these questions without pretense, Spektor telegraphed to her students that she primarily sought to understand their work while also examining and potentially reconsidering students' assumptions. By adopting a humble disposition and asking questions sincerely, teachers may negate any feeling that a lesson is contest of wills between the student and teacher. Instead, the student may begin to see lessons as a struggle between different parts of the student, with the teacher playing referee.<sup>263</sup>

Furthermore, by simply asking questions, teachers can postpone their feedback and better judge the level of intentionality of any aspect of the student's work. And by asking questions and actively listening to student responses, teachers can develop a stronger understanding of moments in the music where the student feels insecure. In becoming aware of student insecurities, Spektor became aware of where she should act as an enabler, encouraging students

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<sup>263</sup> One student recounted that they had felt a clash of wills with other teachers, but with Spektor, they felt as though she brought the student's internal conflicts to the fore and helped mediate those conflicts.

to try something new, and where she should act as a devil's advocate, encouraging students to probe their basic assumptions more critically.

To develop these questions, teachers can wait for students to provide a basic assertion and ask why the student believes that some aspect is necessary or irrelevant. In one lesson, a student told Spektor that they felt a particular line would undermine the unity of their piece, to which Spektor responded, "Why does the piece need to be unified?" By sincerely engaging with the student's assumption and asking why they felt it must be true, Spektor complicated the student's point of view and helped them consider other options, providing an opportunity for the student to meditate on their assumption. This question also reveals why sincerity is important. If Spektor had been anything but sincere, this question would instead have come off as snarky and would have closed the student off to this different point of view.

Another excellent question from Spektor, summarized by a student was: "This is what it looks like you want. Is that intentional?" By examining the student's intentions, this question can give students immediate feedback that their notation is clear or unclear while avoiding commenting on the quality of the work itself. Spektor also paired this feedback with actionable suggestions on how to adjust the notation to help the performers produce the music the student hoped to hear. However, over-inflating the importance of providing reasoning for each musical decision may cause students to over-analyze their work to the point of becoming unproductive. Furthermore, as teachers help students build up this questioning disposition or critical lens, they may help proud students become humble about their music as easily as they make confident students timid. Playing devil's advocate can cause students to seriously re-think their work, consistently turning the successes of an easily pleased or overconfident student into more work could either humble them or turn them off of composition. Thinking about both critique and how

young artists interact with critique reminded me of the U.S. philosopher, Stanley Cavell. He wrote, “The terms in which [artists] have learned to accept criticism will come to dictate the terms in which they will look for success.”<sup>264</sup> If Cavell is correct, this quote has larger ramifications beyond how we approach critique as teachers. However, focusing on how teachers give feedback, Cavell implies that students who receive little to no criticism may view nearly everything they write as a success. Therefore, to tell such a student that a success was actually imperfect might either humble them or turn them away from composition depending on how the teacher approaches the conversation.

On the other hand, recontextualizing “failures” as successes presents a potential balm for student timidity.<sup>265</sup> By discussing failures with students, teachers afford themselves the opportunity to understand their students’ perspectives and to help them redirect or recontextualize their work to develop new ideas which work better for students. To encourage this type of discussion, Spektor told her students not to use their eraser if they could avoid it and encouraged them to keep all of their music, even if they did not like it. By further explaining to students that some of their best learning may come from looking at what they view as a failure, teachers can help students see the value in discussing music which might cause them to feel shame. Acknowledging students’ feelings and inviting them to show obsolete drafts of their music may help them to bend their failures to work for their benefit either in the long-term by understanding why the student did or did not enjoy their work, or even in the context of the piece, using an old draft as an early variation or to inform a new draft.

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<sup>264</sup> Stanley Cavell, in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 192.

<sup>265</sup> Spektor also mentioned using improvisation as a method to help the students get into a flow state making music.

Lastly, teachers should use Spektor's gesture exercise to empower students to think about the relationship between their intent and their notation more clearly. A good mantra, paraphrased from one of Spektor's students as they condensed her approach, was: "Make sure everything on the page is what you intended and make sure that everything you intended is on the page." This exercise reveals relationships between a student's perception of their music and their notation at a fine level of detail and emphasizes looking over the notation can influence the student's compositional choices. By forefronting the positive feedback loop between musical ideas and notation, teachers can present notation as a generative part of the composition process as opposed to a chore to accomplish at the end of composition.

However, by emphasizing notated composition, teachers may implicitly telegraph a rejection of more ambiguously notated music. This may cause students to over-value compositional processes which focus on logic, patterns, and long hours of hard work which potentially devalue intuitive or immediate writing processes. Put another way, students may feel they only compose productively when they spend hours developing small details, which can become problematic when students have less time to devote to composing or when they feel locked into particular approaches to composing. For students feeling locked into or becoming disenchanted with a detail-oriented approach, turning their critical lens away from their music and onto their process may come in handy. However, the skepticism and humility that come with that critical lens may, in turn, lead once again to timidity. Cavell discusses threading this emotional needle, writing "The artist's survival depends upon his constantly eluding, and

constantly assembling, his critical powers.”<sup>266</sup> Therefore, in the context of composition lessons, this critical lens needs tempering.

### *How Do I Push Students to Decide?*

For teachers who want to help their students gain confidence and assert their tastes more, pushing students to make decisions with their pieces and processes may help. However, to help students make decisions, teachers must put students in contexts where those decisions matter which means that students must work with performers who take students seriously, and vice versa. Additionally, some students may need to feel as though they put something at stake with their decisions. If students feel as though their decisions ultimately won't matter, they may lose motivation. So, for regular public performances of student works, teachers should closely consider the performers that students write for. Performers of such proficiency that they are recognized at a global level, may take first year composition students less seriously, however, the stakes for writing for such an ensemble are high because of their virtuosity and global acclaim. Conversely, budding professional ensembles may have the time to understand a student's piece more thoroughly, but the stakes of writing for young professionals may be less because while these are professional ensembles, they lack the larger platforms of well-established ensembles. Lastly, student performers may have the most time to devote to a young composer's piece, but the performance will have relatively low stakes, especially if the young composer could call off the performance at any time.

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<sup>266</sup> Cavell, 192. Additionally, here Cavell is talking about artists in a modernist landscape, where they are “brought to most intimately rely on the critic, if only the critic in themselves” because they are “Unmoored from tradition, from taste, from audience, from their own past achievement...”



When students know their decisions matter, they become appropriately concerned about those decisions. At this point, many teachers push students to write what the student wants to hear. Some students may feel that they lack creative impulses. Spektor mentioned improvisation as a method to help student's creative impulses flow freely, and improvisation certainly pushes students to make decisions without over-examining. Some teachers have students borrow ideas that the student enjoys and develop variations on those ideas. This method may help students over time but takes a more subtle approach to developing creative impulses by putting students in positions to explain their opinions. Counterpoint exercises function similarly; putting students through counterpoint exercises and asking for their thoughts on the melodies they write may help them to develop an understanding of their likes and dislikes.<sup>267</sup>

Improvisation, variation, and counterpoint share an approach for developing creative impulses; they all focus the student on low-stakes tasks that in many cases can be solved by ear or with pre-determined formulas. Developing music with pre-determined formulas does not necessarily sound highly creative, but critically creates a comfortable space for the student to generate material that they can then refine in creative ways. And as they generate multiple iterations of material, create variations from new pieces, or improvise with different musicians, they can begin to trust their creative impulses, especially if someone discusses with them why they are drawn toward or away from particular ideas. The key aspect of these approaches then is that they help the student generate material that the student can then comment on or refine.

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<sup>267</sup> Counterpoint helps students write melodies and common practice harmonies but thinking back to Spektor's exercises harmony exercise in which students created 10 different triads that had no name already (for example, not major or diminished chords), teachers may be able to use these types of exercises to help students develop opinions on several different parameters. The commonality between these ideas seems to be that the student tries multiple versions, considers what they like best, and describes why.

Teachers may reach a turning point at this stage because although talking through an opinion with a teacher may help some students to solidify their opinions, other students may become overly critical of their decisions upon being asked and become disenchanted with their work instead. Teachers should carefully consider how they approach asking students to explain their reasoning. Asking “Why  $x$ , why not  $y$  or  $z$ ?” may serve as a reminder that other possibilities exist for students, whereas asking “What’s your reasoning for choosing  $x$ ?” may reinforce the idea that students always need a reason for why they used a particular sonority, and may further lower self-esteem for students who didn’t have a particular reason. These two questions may reach similar answers for some students but can leave others with lingering doubt. Therefore, although these questions likely provide insight into the student’s point of view in most situations, teachers can also influence students’ relationships with decision-making based on how they ask.

When Spektor asked questions about reasoning, she not only asked without pretense, she also rarely gave her own opinion. For teachers who want students to build musical taste, encouraging students to express their taste in the context of lessons is important, and given the dynamic between a student and teacher, or rather a novice and an expert, when the expert gives an opinion, novices may feel forced to agree. So, although teachers should show that it is okay to have opinions, they should emphasize their student’s opinions and help them examine those opinions. When teachers give their opinions, they should not seek to override student opinions, but to show that it is normal for the student to have and express opinions that differ from their teacher’s.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> To extend Spektor’s wine analogy, I have recently come into contact with wine experts who dislike the idea of providing tasting notes of wine because they feel that each person’s palate is different, and so to say that a wine tastes like cherries either causes tasters to conform to the expert’s opinion or to feel bad that they cannot taste what the expert tastes.

When students know their decisions matter and have a basic understanding of what they want to accomplish, the next step is to make a creative or notational decision which typically means recording the decision somewhere. Students don't *need* to record their decisions on paper, they could decide in their head, but to communicate that they had previously determined a musical outcome, having that decision written down helps. To paraphrase Spektor, if you have something written down, you can always look at it and then change it. If you don't have anything, if you don't produce it, you can't change it.

Encouraging students to bring in failures was a useful way for Spektor to evaluate her students' decisions. Even if the student ultimately didn't like those decisions, putting notes on the page and talking about how they did or didn't fulfill what the student wanted to accomplish can help students develop strategies to circumvent similar issues in the future. It also telegraphed to students that they didn't have to enjoy what they wrote to bring it in and discuss it, so they were never disincentivized to write ideas down. Therefore, using any of the generative methods outlined above, pushing students to get every idea down on the page, and encouraging an attitude that embraces failures can give teachers a vantage point to discuss student decisions, how to refine them, and ultimately how to reach musical decisions that those students enjoy. Furthermore, by having these discussions between teachers and students, students can begin to internalize these dialogues and build confidence in their opinions, their music, and their compositional processes.

### *How Do I Affirm Patterns and Challenge Assumptions?*

One of the primary ways in which Spektor affirmed patterns and challenged assumptions was to help students check, test, and refine their work through meaningful checklists. For Spektor, these checklists established tasks that both helped students feel motivated and helped

Spektor remember where to check in with the student each week. The tasks themselves were of different difficulties, some taking only seconds to complete and others requiring in depth thinking about a new topic. One student indicated that these different levels of difficulty allowed them to match their level of motivation with tasks they wanted to work on compositionally. So, when helping students develop checklists, teachers should provide tasks of different difficulties to keep students motivated and invested in their work. Additionally, by mixing checking, testing, and refining tasks, which are not typically similar levels of difficulty, teachers can help students work on a variety of skills which they can use to approach their composition when they have the appropriate level of motivation. Likewise, even encouraging students with small tasks may lead them to complete more difficult tasks; checking notation may engage a student enough that they begin testing their opinions of different ideas. So, teachers should keep in mind how their suggestions interact with one another, and especially help students choose tasks that will keep them in a flow state as they compose. Lastly, teachers could easily begin to treat the checklist as a list of assignments for the student to complete. When it comes to working on their own compositions, Spektor's students seemed most motivated when they controlled what they pursued, and Spektor kept an open mind about student progress and interest.

Checking was most often represented by simple tasks: giving students simple typos to fix or empowering them to ask themselves questions and check their opinions. However, some checking tasks took more time. When a teacher asks their student to identify why they dislike a certain section, the student might provide a straightforward answer, but also may take time to process or even need to test the possibilities. Additionally, in order to check their music, students may need to build objectivity, which with Spektor meant students took time away from their

composition. So, checking was often low-effort and simple for students to approach but still required some time.

Testing requires teachers to enable students when they present options that they can't decide between and see possibilities in students' music. To test ideas, students often need a benchmark to test against. Teachers could present options against which students can test their ideas, however providing particularly exciting ideas may make it difficult for students to think of something which interests them even more. Instead of presenting exciting ideas, teachers should provide basic suggestions such as when Spektor pointed out that a student could build a texture up one voice at a time instead of all of the voices entering simultaneously. This basic suggestion allowed the student to compare their homophonic approach to a more polyphonic approach, and to learn for themselves whether they might enjoy something even more polyphonic. By providing only basic suggestions, teachers can push students to test out simple suggestions and become excited as they manipulate their materials themselves.

Picking areas to test may prove difficult for less experienced teachers. However, most parameters yield new areas for students to test: even testing subtle changes to harmony or rhythm could produce interesting results for students. Spektor often looked for parameters students had not considered like contour, vibrato, or texture. She also made suggestions based on what a performer might expect to see, such as with the contour of an extended technique or vibrato for singers. Continuing with the above example of the student exploring texture, they implied that they felt locked into the process which ultimately yielded their homophonic texture, which Spektor picked up on and made recommendations for approaches which would help the student shift their perspective. When she suggested manipulating the texture, she essentially recommended that the student try a different process which could not yield the same texture and

was therefore at odds with the style the student had implied they felt locked into. Therefore, by listening to students and suggesting antithetical approaches and processes, teachers can present suggestions for testing which may drastically change the student's approach to their piece.

Testing can lead to refining, but testing focuses on comparing two ideas, whereas when Spektor's students refined their work, they often generated entirely new versions of their work using their original ideas. As such, to encourage students to refine their work, teachers could suggest testing changes in the compositional process which may create drastically different results. Likewise, teachers could recommend refining students' music by reiterating their material into a different medium, which could take a number of forms. Teachers could have students literally re-write their work; copying represents the most basic form of this process and may present relatively few new ideas. Encouraging students to compose a piece again from memory, on the other hand, may reveal to the student and the teacher the ideas which the student found most salient or perhaps spent the most time exploring. Encouraging students to take the work from one kind of notation to another may help students more clearly consider particular parameters. Additionally, students might benefit from expressing the same music in a DAW, in shortscore for piano, or for an entirely different instrumentation.<sup>269</sup> During one interview, Spektor mentioned that one of her teachers asked her to compose an orchestra piece for solo guitar and mentioned how she found the idea incredible and absurd. These exercises can help students and teachers understand what aspects of the music are important to the student and

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<sup>269</sup> This particular task would also likely bring up questions about the subtle differences in writing for different instruments.

orient the student to focus on those ideas.<sup>270</sup> By taking the student's ideas into a different dimension, they can learn what aspects about those ideas appeal to them, ultimately helping them to check their intentions and how they represent those intentions as well.

Checking, testing, and refining all encourage the student to take a critical lens of their own music, but by incorporating ways in which the students can progress and build upon their ideas, these processes also affirm the student's choices. These three processes therefore help students maintain a middle path where they look at what they have done and understand why it does and/or doesn't appeal to them, enabling them to generate more material based on that understanding. By criticizing old material but building on top of it, this approach allows students to practice humility toward their approaches while also developing confidence that they are headed in the right direction.

## Wainwright's Methods

### *How Do I Curate Repertoire for Students?*

If a teacher wants to begin presenting influential pieces with their students, they should consider a few concepts, including recommending pieces at the beginning of a project to jumpstart and direct the compositional process. By presenting pieces which were concretely tied to the students' interests, Wainwright motivated students, excited them, and helped them think about what musical materials they may want to include in their piece. In Wainwright's lessons, this appeared especially effective when Wainwright asked, "what if...?" questions, such as

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<sup>270</sup> Additionally, these exercises may reveal patterns in the types of parameters that students typically use to solve musical problems, whether they rely on pitch or timbre to maintain their own interest in their music. These patterns certainly would not be revealed through a single composition and would still be opaque when viewed across multiple different compositions, but by exploring the same composition in multiple ways, teachers and students can gain a better understanding of which parameters students rely on.

“What if you used Abrahamsen’s texture with a different set of instruments, or in a different range?” or directly asked how a student might apply what they learned from the influential piece to their own work.

Another concept a teacher should consider is the student’s current listening practice. Depending on the context of the student’s work up to that point, a teacher may want to recommend classical or romantic pieces to ground the students’ work in a historical perspective. Alternatively, a teacher may recommend twentieth and twenty-first century pieces to push students towards more modern styles or concerns.<sup>271</sup>

On the other hand, when Wainwright already understood the student’s stylistic goals, he often presented pieces which were similar to the student’s style, sometimes taking a musical idea to the extreme. If a teacher wants to diversify their students’ approaches to writing music, then it may be beneficial to stretch the student’s ear by recommending pieces that are stylistically similar, but which are singularly focused on a particular aspect of or take an oblique approach to the style. Especially when the recommended piece took wildly different approaches, Wainwright put his students in positions where they *had* to be creative in order to incorporate ideas from the influential piece into their own work.

The last concept concerns generating discussions in lessons based on influential pieces. If a student didn’t express an opinion on or interest in an influential piece, Wainwright prompted them to do so by asking if there were moments that the student particularly liked or didn’t like. The ensuing discussion always produced ideas that the students seemed excited to explore.

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<sup>271</sup> Of course, referring to many different styles including renaissance, medieval, art song, folk song, lute song, etc. and their construction can encourage the student to look at many different musics and incorporate myriad ideas into their work.



Taking the discussion one step further and asking the student how they could incorporate something from the influential piece into their own music also prompted the student to think creatively and generate new ideas and solutions.<sup>272</sup>

Some teachers may be skeptical of this approach because they feel that their students don't listen to the pieces of music that they recommend. But I should note that in this case study, I had evidence that the students were in fact listening to the pieces recommended by Wainwright, perhaps because of how overtly Wainwright's pieces tied to the students' work. To other teachers, presenting influential pieces may seem intimidating if they don't have the same level of experience with repertoire as Wainwright does. Other teachers still may worry about influencing students to write in a particular style. These two problems may be related. Teachers who have more limited knowledge of repertoire may have specialized into a particular genre of music that they themselves find interesting at the expense of other musics, in effect pushing their students toward a particular style.<sup>273</sup> I agree with Wainwright's position that for composers, and especially for composition teachers, it is important to have a strong understanding of what different composers have tried in addition to an understanding of how they succeeded or failed at what they tried. However, teachers should be critical of their listening practices and think about the effects those practices have on their teaching and by extension their students. A student's under-reliance on listening may negatively affect their ability to speak in a particular musical

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<sup>272</sup> These solutions do not have to be limited to musical solutions and could be related to the use of different compositional approaches and how the student is incorporating several approaches into one piece.

<sup>273</sup> This relates to the idea that the structure of the teacher's listening influences their writing practice. By affecting the teacher's writing practice, it also likely affects their teaching practice and therefore their student's compositional process. This represents another concern for the teacher's listening practice, which may be unexamined, and how that practice can ultimately affect the student and their approach to composition.

language, but an over-reliance could potentially push them to outsource their creativity to influential composers.

For teachers that are concerned about having too direct an influence on their student's writing, what some teachers call "putting the teacher's fingerprints on the student's piece," exposing students to new pieces provides a way for teachers to approach compositional problems and give multiple solutions so that students have many opportunities to think creatively while considering a broader culture of musical influences. Teachers will, of course, still recommend pieces from their own experience, and by extension through their own lens. Therefore, recommending a wide variety of pieces should still be the goal. Otherwise, students may begin to perceive an implicit message that only pieces in the styles that their teacher recommends are worth writing, which could potentially distort the young composer's stylistic interests and bend them toward the teacher's interests, for better or worse.

### *How Do I Provide Function-Based Feedback?*

If a teacher wants to begin providing function-based feedback, they should consider using if/then statements to neutralize feedback. When Wainwright presented feedback with if/then statements it appeared to alleviate concerns that the feedback was too harsh or would overinflate the student's ego.<sup>274</sup> By saying "if you wrote it this way, then this would be the outcome," Wainwright drew direct lines of cause and effect between the what the student wrote and what a listener might perceive. And to extend this concept, when Wainwright phrased their if/then statement as a question, "if you wrote it this way, then what would the outcome be?" They

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<sup>274</sup> This may be because the feedback feels more objective when voiced as an if/then. Additionally, The decision making process may similarly feel more controllable than changes to musical materials.

prompted the student to audiate, imagine, think creatively, and give themselves feedback on potential changes to their music.

Another concept a teacher should consider is using function-based feedback as an opportunity to align themselves with their students. When there was a moment of misalignment between the ways the teacher and student perceived the student's work, Wainwright said he would ask the student to analyze their work. By giving feedback on the student's analysis and how the student approached a musical moment, teacher's may provide more actionable feedback for the student because of the amount of control a student has over their musical material as opposed to the mediated control they have over the audience's experience.<sup>275</sup> This type of analysis often, but not always, referenced groups of ideas such as main themes, secondary themes, transitions, introductions, and sections in which the students resolved or created tension. Using these phrases, some of which students could understand inherently, provided a common language in which Wainwright could speak with his students plainly before diving into the specifics of the musical material. This entire process primarily took the form of a trio of questions which may be useful for teachers to pose to their students: "What is currently going on in the piece and how does it function?" "What is the desired function and how does it work?" and "How can the student reconcile what they have with what they want?"

The question "What is currently going on in the piece and how does it function?" appeared in different ways. Wainwright sometimes talked about what a particular moment sounded like, describing it first in terms of its function, "This sounds like a transition," before

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<sup>275</sup> The mediation of the audience's experience is, once again, primarily through the performer's interpretation, but of course each listener has their own tastes and preferences.

saying *why* it sounds like transitional material “because it is different from the material in the first theme, and in four measures we arrive at a place of stability.” Then Wainwright would go on to ask, “is this moment supposed to be transitional?” Clarifying to make sure that their assessment was correct before diving into potential ways to make the section sound more transitional. Of course, the student might instead indicate that a moment is transitional, at which point the teacher could ask once again “is this moment supposed to be transitional?” to clarify before assessing: “I don’t hear this moment as transitional because it is still strongly rooted in the tonic and sounds like a new melodic idea to me.” Alternatively, the teacher could simply ask the student “What is the function of this section within the piece?” From which point, depending on the student’s answer, the teacher could clarify and assess. With an answer to the first question “What is currently going on in the piece and how does it function?” the teacher and student can move to the next question.

Both halves of the question “What is the desired function and how does it work?” are critical at this stage. In one of Wainwright’s lessons, he supplied a definition for a function, “transitional material tends to be more vague, so you avoid a strong tonic, present several contrapuntal lines which flow from one place to another, or use some kind of harmony that is unstable.” Alternatively, a teacher could ask their student “What do you think makes a section sound transitional?” And together, following the student’s lead, the pair could brainstorm ways of meeting the student’s definition; “If a transition sounds unstable, how could we bring some instability to this section?”<sup>276</sup> Lastly, the teacher and the student could look at pieces with similar functions and develop a definition heuristically.<sup>277</sup> From this analysis, the teacher can empower a

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<sup>276</sup> This is an example of an if/then question.

<sup>277</sup> This is a method that Maud Hickey employs in her teaching, which she discusses in *Music Outside the Lines*.

student to develop their own definitions based off external material, “How does Vaughn Williams construct his transitions in *The Lark Ascending*?”<sup>278</sup>

The final question is perhaps the simplest and most daunting: “How can the student reconcile what they have with what they want?” At this point, a teacher and student can come up with a compositional map that shows the student several paths forward and which the student can brainstorm and iterate on. Given the definition “transitional material tends to be more vague, so you avoid a strong tonic, present several contrapuntal lines which flow from one place to another, or use some kind of harmony that is unstable,” a teacher could suggest, “choose one of your current lines, and use it as a cantus firmus to write out contrapuntal lines for this transition.” Alternatively, a teacher might suggest “keep one of your melodic lines but choose new chords underneath it which focus on moving away from the harmonic ideas you presented in the previous section.” A teacher could even present it as a challenge: “How long could you make this transition without using the tonic note or chord from the previous section and without generating a new tonic note or chord?” What is important to this part of the process is that the student tries several different ideas and critically listens to choose the ideas which they feel best fulfill the desired function.<sup>279280</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> And through empowering the student, the teacher can equip their students with the tools to continue to educate themselves after their time in lessons is over

<sup>279</sup> This process is also iterative, if the student still doesn't feel completely satisfied with their new section or new line, they can ask themselves this series of questions again and develop a new material based on the new answers.

<sup>280</sup> This is a series of examples related to transitions, but in many places above, the word “transition” is replaceable with “moments of tension” or “primary themes,” additionally, this technique could work when applied to more horizontal material such as a single line which lasts throughout an entire piece while other lines change function around it. What is important, is that this entire process focuses on clarifying what the student wants to express. The takeaway should be that together, the teacher and the student can assess what is happening, assess what they want to have happen, and close the gap between the two.

These concepts could extend to the function of the compositional process on the musical materials. Examining compositional processes through these three questions yields new perspectives. “What is currently going on in the process and how does it function?” The student may be writing a section that they want to feel free and lively compared to the music around it. Their attempts at writing melodies over a series of chord changes have not given the section a feeling of freedom and instead encourage the student to think about particular chord structures and harmonic choices. “What is the desired function and how does it work?” If the student wants their music to feel free, they may want to employ improvisation instead, which, given certain circumstances like improvising on specific instruments that the student does or doesn’t understand well, could produce a quality of freedom. “How can the student reconcile what they have with what they want?” The student could use the harmonic structures that they already have and improvise a melody on top of their harmonies to generate material. After improvising the line several times, they can choose one which best fits their needs.<sup>281</sup>

Some approaches may be more useful at different stages of writing a piece of music. Improvising could be more useful to generate initial material and counterpoint could be more useful to develop material. And how students evaluate or utilize their processes may change over time as well; in the editing phase, it may become less important to understand why a decision was made and more important to make sure the material works as an overall unit. In this light, Wainwright’s focus on why a student makes particular decisions and how they arrive at those

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<sup>281</sup> Additionally, the student could use multiple of the lines at different places throughout their piece, or begin the process again, improvising new chordal structures underneath their new melodic lines.

decisions becomes an important metacognitive skill for students to develop if those students want to accurately express their musical intent.

Some students and composers may resist the idea that music needs to have some sort of internal functions. Many of my research associates agreed that at a base level composers work with tension and release, but this aesthetic may not be universal. If a teacher wanted to incorporate function-based feedback into their teaching, they should be aware that they may receive some pushback from their students, and that some students may not understand exactly what a teacher means when they say a section sounds “transitional.” It may also be tempting to simply label sections of the student’s music without much explanation, “here it seems as though you are trying to create tension, but it isn’t working.” Using function-based language vaguely could negatively influence student motivation. It may shut some students down and make them feel misunderstood if they are not thinking in terms of a given function, or confuse them because they are not thinking about using a particular function. The teacher should instead ask “how did you construct this moment and what do you want it to do?” With this question, the teacher can start a discussion in which they align themselves with the student, separate the music from the decision-making process, help the student reconcile their compositional intent with the actual musical outcome of what they have written, give feedback on the compositional process, and begin other conversations to help students find concrete ways of solving problems by adjusting the decision-making process.

Additionally, I mentioned that open-ended questions allow students to frame compositional problems for themselves and to consider the functions of their music independently from their teacher. However, although open-ended questions provide good opportunities for students to be creative and for the teacher to assess the student’s intent and

whether the student is expressing themselves clearly, how the teacher handles these moments is critical. It can be seriously tempting for the teacher to provide interesting answers for their student. But, allowing students to come up with their own answers is likely more satisfying for the student in addition to being better for them in the long-term. If the teacher were to continually answer questions that they themselves posed, the student may develop a learned incompetence in developing their own ideas or may find difficulty answering these kinds of questions when they are no longer working with their teacher.

### *How Do I Iterate and Brainstorm with Students?*

Two concepts which teachers should consider when incorporating iterating and brainstorming include brainstorming-alongside and brainstorming prompts. Both of these methods provided “next steps” for the student, promoted creative thinking, and motivated students to get back into the compositional process following their lesson. Brainstorming-alongside involved Wainwright presenting potential options that students may want to consider. These options were frequently simple or vague, ostensibly so that students still had room to think creatively. For brainstorming prompts, however, Wainwright seemed to specifically target his questions to push students to think creatively. A standard question format might be “what would be the change in sound if you...”<sup>282</sup> For example, “What would be the change in sound if you improvised on this material?” “What would be the change in sound if you used an F major chord instead of a D major chord?” or “What would be the change in sound if you took the same notes and played them in a different octave or paired them with a new instrument?”<sup>283</sup> However, when

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<sup>282</sup> These are types of questions are clearly related to if/then questions, but in these moments, Wainwright was also focused on pointing out moments of with significant musical potential.

<sup>283</sup> Some teachers may employ exhaustive versions of the above questions. Nadia Boulanger was known for wringing every possible variation out of the student’s musical material and pushing students to try many different options certainly has its merits..



Wainwright provided prompts, options that excited students and/or aligned with their goals worked best.<sup>284</sup> These prompts often sounded like miniature experiments which the student could sketch and present to their performers. Even as a third party, I was not immune to the excitement and allure of conducting some of the experiments Wainwright suggested.

The amount of iterating and brainstorming that a composer does may change significantly throughout their career. In one interview, Wainwright and I discussed how much iteration was a part of his compositional process as opposed to his students' processes. Wainwright said, "I'm not sure I [iterate] in as systematic a manner as I do in a lesson because I have my own stronger sense of what I do and do not want at a given time," which really opened my eyes as to how Wainwright observed young composers develop. From this point of view, it appears as though iterating and brainstorming are key learning methods for student composers to develop a sense of their preferences for their music, connecting brainstorming to understanding student preferences, and negotiating to curating. From this point of view, iterating is an important practice not just to increase the quality of the piece that the student is currently working on, but also to increase the student's efficiency in picking musical options. If this is true, then iterating is critical for young composers, but may become less important as the students grow older.<sup>285</sup> Some students may gain more from the social brainstorming-alongside and some students may find the process of experimenting with different combinations of instruments highly rewarding. As such,

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<sup>284</sup> By prompting the students in ways which excite them or align with their goals, the teacher provides chances for students to frame problems, aligning with Younker's research.

<sup>285</sup> As a student develops, it may also be important to think about what kinds of iterating will feel fruitful to a young composer. To many young composers, re-writing the same idea with a single note changed may not be attractive, but for other students, it may really excite them to hear how a small change can affect an entire phrase.

brainstorming is an activity which is well-suited to fit unique needs when a teacher takes their student's interests into account.

When incorporating brainstorming into lessons, teachers may want to carefully consider how much of the brainstorming they themselves do and how much the student does. It is tempting as the teacher to present exciting and creative ideas. Especially as a composer, it feels good to present unique and attractive answers to compositional questions. However, as with other practices, always presenting compelling answers or experiments may hamstring students who may begin to rely on their teacher for interesting answers to musical problems. In other words, well-meaning teachers could begin to brainstorm on behalf of their students without considering how the student could also exercise their creative muscles.

Additionally, brainstorming and iterating should be ongoing processes as opposed to processes which end when the student finds the first answer that they like. Teachers should consistently push their students to consider how the products of iteration and brainstorming affect the rest of the student's music, and to compare several results of the iterating process as opposed to only one or two. By encouraging students to brainstorm with questions like "given your opening material, what are a few different ways that you might progress formally into a new section?" Wainwright managed to circumvent this issue. Specifically, by using the phrasing "what are a few different ways you could..." Wainwright may have primed students to think of multiple ideas instead of closing off options beyond their initial idea.

## Cohen's Methods

### *How Do I Build a Student's Sense of What Is Musically Possible?*

For teachers who want their students to build a sense of what is possible in their music, simply asking students to list possibilities may represent the best path for students to begin

understanding the wide variety of options at their fingertips. By providing a short-term compositional goal and asking students to list all of the ways they could reach that goal, teachers can not only push students to think beyond their initial impulses but also see what parameters or compositional approaches students reach for first even as they more consciously think through options and move beyond impulses or use them in new ways. In one lesson, Cohen did this by inventing a hypothetical issue: “What if a couple of the pitch relations didn't seem fulfilling to you and you couldn't fix it with an octave displacement or with a dynamic change like a hairpin?”<sup>286</sup> Once teachers have a strong understanding of the tools their students might initially reach for, they can anticipate student responses and encourage more creative thinking, as Cohen did with the above question. Teachers should consistently show their students that the horizon of musical possibilities extends beyond what the student can currently see and remind the student that they themselves can journey beyond that horizon with *and* without their teacher's help.

Teachers can also ask students how their intuitions manifest in their compositions so students can begin to identify their own biases and assumptions. Some students may not know where the rules they impose on their compositions end and their intuitions begin.<sup>287</sup> So, for students who use systems or rules to generate material, asking questions about areas of ambiguity may benefit them. For instance, if a student has a system for pitch, asking them how they include a lack of pitch, or a change of octave may provide new possibilities. Moreover, by

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<sup>286</sup> Cohen's hypothetical questions pushed students to sometimes think about how to circumnavigate problems that they might experience and other times to think about how they could use the same musical information they had in their current work in different ways. These questions then not only helped students think about how they could achieve similar results with different practices, but also encouraged them to think about reusing and/or recycling material to achieve different results, leading to a more robust understanding of how their interpretation of their music influenced their continuing composition.

<sup>287</sup> Alternatively, by trying to clearly define the boundaries between a student's system of compositional rules for a piece and their intuitions, students and teachers can work together to point out assumptions that students make about music in general.

asking students how they could control a parameter obliquely, such as by focusing on pitch relationships rather than individual pitches, teachers help students bypass compositional practices on which their students might rely. By encouraging students to approach parameters obliquely, teachers can complicate rigid thinking about any given parameter and begin to undermine assumptions students make about how specific parameters operate by helping them develop an understanding of different ways in which the same parameter can function.

Beyond pointing out the border between student assumptions and conscious thought, teachers should encourage their students to consider how their physical materials, including instruments and forms of notation, might affect and limit their compositional practice and in turn how that practice influences their music. For instance, a compositional practice based in piano improvisation will yield wildly different results from a similar practice based in drum improvisation. Furthermore, teachers can encourage students to consider how improvising will yield different results from beginning with notation. In either circumstance, teachers should encourage students to not rely on any one practice and to experiment with multiple approaches to similar projects, diversifying the ways in which young composers approach music and helping them protect themselves from stagnating compositional processes and styles.

Enabling students to experiment may also yield an understanding of a wider range of possibilities by itself. To encourage students to experiment, teachers and students can set short-term compositional challenges of various difficulties such as “Write a phrase that lands on *do* but sounds unfinished,” or longer-term challenges like “Write a piece organized by relationships between articulations.” By setting paradoxical challenges or challenges that focus on unconventional relationships, students may begin to understand a wider range of possibilities and incorporate new techniques into their practice. Again, this approach may further benefit students

if they focus on techniques that work against or come from beyond their typical compositional practice. If students typically use articulation to generate excitement in their piece, the student may want to try using only one type of articulation and instead generate interest using instrumentation. Similarly, if students become accustomed to working in a European art music tradition, introducing them to Afro-Cuban jazz musicians and assigning a jazz chart for the students may show them new ways of approaching composition, potentially changing their relationship with their tradition and infusing their practice with new life.

As students begin to experiment with different practices and styles, they can also experiment with difference in the context of similar practices and styles. They can begin confronting difference by bringing unity to contrasting materials through experiments like “Write a phrase that starts legato but ends staccato,” before moving on to wider gulfs of difference such as “Write a piece that focuses on the relationship between two different compositional styles that you enjoy.”<sup>288</sup> This framework, which Cohen discussed during our interviews, would evaluate a young composer’s abilities by looking at their ability to create belonging between disparate materials. At its best, this lens of looking at young composers would likely not seek to define them, but to match them with compositional activities which suit their focus and abilities before once again encouraging them to stretch themselves and try to incorporate more difference in their work. For instance, by focusing on maintaining similarities and creating relatively small differences, working in a theme and variations form might help younger students begin to think about relationships between similarities and differences.

Working with sonata form, on the other hand, may help more experienced students think about

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<sup>288</sup> Alternatively, “Write a piece that focuses on the relationship between two different compositional styles, one that you enjoy, and one you do not.”

multi-dimensional differences between theme areas. Laske's "Taxonomy of Compositional Tasks" supports this approach.<sup>289</sup> Although Laske did not focus primarily on difference, difference was included in his taxonomy, and he argued that younger composers should begin by working on tasks with relatively little difference and work toward tasks which would feature wider gulfs of difference. Teachers who want to think about developing a series of stepping stones in terms of confronting difference should consider the kinds of difference that their assignments encourage and further consider how those kinds of difference suit their students' levels of experience.

Beyond confronting bias through the styles and methods that students use to write, teachers can also encourage students to think about how they can use similar processes to achieve different ends by assigning exercises in which students write pieces back to back which use the same inputs and kinds of processes, but whose final compositions differ maximally from one another. These maximally different pieces can allow students to explore wildly different outcomes that begin with similar inputs, cementing an understanding of how they can achieve multiple kinds of possibilities by emphasizing or changing focus in their compositional processes. And as students develop an understanding of how to work not only in different styles and achieve different results, but also work in the same style using different forms to achieve different results, and finally to work in the same style, using the same form, and even the same inputs and processes and still achieve vastly different results. By drilling down into more and more similar compositional approaches while still attempting to create significantly different

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<sup>289</sup> Laske, 128.

pieces, students can develop a more robust understanding of their influence over their compositions and how even minute changes can affect their work.

Teachers who want help their students to build a sense of what is musically possible may also want to assign tasks which provide particular starting points, but which don't prescribe particular results.<sup>290</sup> For example, many of Cohen's assignments encouraged students to use a particular process but allowed or encouraged students to think about how they might start with different sets of data or apply the process in myriad ways. One such assignment had students use a text to inform their compositions, encouraging them to think about new ways they could use a text rather than simply as lyrics. In another assignment, Cohen asked students to use dice to determine some parameters. Rather than encouraging students to achieve some particular compositional output, Cohen supplied a handful of parameters, encouraged students to use other parameters if they wished, and did not discuss with students how to set ranges for their numbers or how to specifically organize their data. Lastly, Cohen also used an assignment in which students chose something non-musical as an impulse to generate musical information. This assignment had perhaps the broadest range of possibilities for the students, and likewise helped students understand how their interpretation of data musical or otherwise affected their music.<sup>291</sup>

As a whole, these assignments have a key similarity which may help students develop an understanding of the many possibilities available to them. Namely, each exercise has a relatively simple and student-focused starting point and pushes the student to convert non-musical

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<sup>290</sup> One student mentioned Cohen's flexibility in accepting a wide range of compositional results as something they appreciated about Cohen's teaching. They said that they enjoyed that he seemed to support them whether they used his suggestions directly or if they used his suggestions as a springboard to new ideas.

<sup>291</sup> As a basic form of this exercise, teachers could have students musically depict a natural phenomenon and then discuss the different choices students could have made or how they could depict the same idea in multiple ways.

information into musical information. By pushing students to convert non-musical information into musical information, they become a lens through which information passes. As they understand their role as a lens, interpreting information, they can begin to understand how their interpretation shapes the music that they write, empowering them to understand how they can emphasize some aspects of their interpretation to manifest their musical intent more clearly in their compositions.

However, although the ambiguity in the above assignments may help promote a student's understanding of various compositional possibilities, that same ambiguity may hinder students who lack confidence in themselves. These students may struggle as they attempt to understand what their teachers want them to learn from each assignment. To meet these students' needs, teachers can develop baseline goals, as Cohen suggested, which may help ensure that students meet minimum learning goals, giving them the emotional space to pursue goals beyond the minimum by assuring them that they have completed the basic task. Alternatively, teachers could develop loose rubrics alongside their students, as Amabile suggested, creating ways for teachers to assess their students that both the teacher and the student decide on mutually.<sup>292</sup> Lastly, teachers can help their students understand assignments by working on the assignment themselves in front of their students, similar to Deemer's pedagogical method of composing in front of his students.<sup>293</sup> On the other hand, while students have different needs, flexibility and creativity seem closely linked. Therefore, students may need to develop some flexibility, and

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<sup>292</sup> This approach may help students function at a higher level in creative disciplines. Amabile.

<sup>293</sup> Cohen also used this approach but highlighted multiple different compositional processes with which he wanted his students to develop fluency.



working on assignments with ambiguous instructions or outcomes may help them develop that flexibility and further understand what possibilities await them as they sit down to write.

### *How Do I Help Students Reflect?*

Teachers who want students to develop more metacognitive skills should include reflection as part of their composition lessons and courses. By engaging students in reflection, setting realistic deadlines for reflections, actively listening, and including reflections as part of lessons, teachers can help students develop both the ability to self-examine and a critical understanding of their own practices. Cohen's students not only had the facility to self-examine but also readily reflected on their practices even in interviews with me. To arrive at this point, Cohen used reflection as a part of his curriculum which composition teachers could easily incorporate into their own lesson or course structures. Formalizing reflection in a syllabus this way could potentially ingrain regular reflection in students, however some students could view reflections as busy work if they become too regular. Likewise, if students reflect every single week, they may spend more time thinking about their process rather than engaging in it.

Cohen talked about how reflection had overtaken actual writing for some of his language arts colleagues, which Cohen felt could impoverish students and/or cause them to overthink their practice. He said that over-reflecting might help some students might achieve wonderful insights into their process, but that those *insights* could become the goal of the composition rather than the music itself. He said that for some of his students, the thoughtfulness of their process became an investment that they couldn't let go of and which kept them from revising their music. Therefore, instead of reflecting repeatedly on a single project, Cohen encouraged students to experiment with many processes and reflect on their results with each. So, teachers who want to

encourage reflection may benefit from encouraging students to reflect at set points throughout their compositional process or perhaps following the completion of a piece.

Good reflections often begin with good questions, many of which echo how a teacher can help students build a sense of what is musically possible. For instance, asking students how or why they made a decision can lead to deeper reflections, especially if the teacher focuses the student on a particular moment or process. “What does the ending mean to you? What did you want to achieve and how did you try to do that?” Likewise, asking students to clarify areas of ambiguity can help students recognize when they operate on assumptions. “I noticed that when you randomly assigned pitches, you only assigned a pitch class and not an octave, how did you choose octaves for each pitch class?”

As with building a sense of what is musically possible, the teacher should not become the source of reflective questions, however the teacher should develop a keen sense of where students let impulses and intuitions take over their compositional process. By modelling good reflective questions, discussing how impulse and intuition can help students make compositional decisions, and creating spaces for students to openly reflect, teachers can help their students begin to reflect on their practices and those practices to suit their goals. Additionally, by interacting with students and taking their reflections seriously, teachers can provide feedback both on the student’s compositional process and their reflective process, helping the student to build up their critical prowess. Furthermore, taking cues from Cohen’s advice on fostering humility, teachers should not attempt to demonstrate *their* ability to reflect on the student’s process but rather guide the student to deeper reflections. By reflecting on behalf of the student, which many of my teachers have done on my behalf, teachers model reflection but do not engage

the student in the process or teach the student how to critically reflect. Teachers should not aim to demonstrate their creative abilities or their critical prowess, but rather foster their students'.<sup>294</sup>

If teachers find themselves struggling to model reflection without overtaking the students' reflections, they may want to focus the students on fundamental questions regarding short-term compositional goals and how students can reach those goals. Simply asking students to soul search and think about what they like about their music *may* help focus and motivate them to pursue their compositional goals, but actively pursuing short-term goals may engage more action-oriented students. For instance, teachers could give an assignment in which the student writes a phrase going from point A to point B in the most interesting way possible.<sup>295</sup> By examining how students get from point A to B and encouraging the student to reflect on what they found interesting, the teacher and the student can gain insight into the student's interests. Approaching the problem from the other direction, teachers could assign for their students to write a short composition in which they focus less on enjoying the resulting music and more on the compositional process, encouraging students to compose in a way which keeps them engaged for an hour or two to complete the entire composition. By focusing on enjoying the process, and encouraging the student to make connections between what processes they used at points in the music which they particularly enjoyed, teachers and students once again gain insight into how to

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<sup>294</sup> As a further consideration, because reflection can remove students from the compositional process, teachers should consider *when* they reflect on behalf of their student and when they encourage their student to reflect. Reflecting on behalf of the student may maintain a student's flow in their compositional process, however it does not help the student learn to reflect. On the other hand, having the student reflect teaches to critically examine their work but removes them from their workflow. Therefore, teachers should reflect for and alongside students in addition to encouraging students to reflect on their own through prompting and an acknowledgment of the prompting: "Notice what question I just asked: what did you enjoy and how did you enjoy it?" The most profitable teaching method likely combines these ways to reflect to help students progress, both keeping the student composing, occasionally pulling them out of their compositional process to examine it critically.

<sup>295</sup> The actual choice of points A and B doesn't matter; teachers should focus on what students the student does when tasked to do something interesting.

sustainably generate music which the student finds interesting. More broadly speaking, to help students learn to reflect, teachers should ask students to lead reflection, identifying positive moments in the compositional processes or the resulting composition and attempting to identify what music a good process led to or what process led to a good moment in the music. To begin, teachers might lead with questions like “What moments do you love in this piece that you have written and how did you write that music?” or “What music did you most enjoy writing and why?” By forefronting the student’s opinions, teachers can avoid providing their reflections so that students develop their own critical capacities.

Looking back at what the student enjoyed can also help them extend what they have accomplished in a recent work into a new compositional project as well. The power of reflection comes from the fact that it can apply to past, present, and future pieces as well as generate productive conversation between students and teachers. Cohen used reflections as pivot points to orient a student to think about how to apply what they learned in their current work to a new piece. “If you were to start a new piece now, what are your favorite works that you might try to model the rhythm and phrasing from?” Reflection can, therefore, not only help students think about the relative success of their compositions, but also help excite them to dive into new projects based on what they already find interesting. This process can potentially take students from feeling a sense of disappointment with their failed musical experiments to feeling excited to try similar ideas in a new piece, as I saw happen in multiple lessons. Therefore, by reflecting, students not only developed critical thinking skills, but also maintained their motivation as Cohen helped them turn failures into successes and dead-ends into busy streets.

### *How Do I Give the Students Their Practice?*

Cohen primarily gave students their practice by giving them tools to examine that practice and modify it to become more engaging and rewarding. Teachers who share Cohen's focus on student interests should work *with* students to cultivate practices which focus on those interests and use them as a starting point in developing a robust practice. Developing a deep understanding of students' interests can take place over several assignments designed specifically to allow students to choose their own path. However, these assignments should also include some structures which encourage students to explore how their interests interact with a broad range of practices. To present assignments that focus on ideas or genres that interest students but encourage them to interact with a new practice, teachers might consider how they would explore the musical possibilities of interactions between different genres and practices. For instance, if a student is interested in jazz, encouraging them to use dice to determine particular parameters could help them think about which parameters affect their music. The teacher might point out that many students would use dice to determine pitches in a melody and encourage the student to think beyond that basic idea to consider parameters more personal to jazz such as using chance operations to inform modal areas or harmonic extensions. Bringing the student's interests into contact with new practices should not only bring about new possibilities, but also and encourage students to reflect on what aspects of the music that they love matter most to them. Furthermore, students may begin to see patterns in how they express the music they love through the lenses of different practices, allowing them to access a fuller understanding of their interests.

Cohen said during one interview that he encouraged students to take risks by giving them assignments that weren't what the student originally wanted to do. Teachers who work with

young students especially should strive to give students assignments that engage them without feeling highly personal. By giving students assignments that aren't precisely what they want to do compositionally, teachers can keep any composition from becoming too personal at which point a student's ego could become wrapped up in the piece. If a student becomes too invested in a composition, and the piece fails in their eyes, the student may begin to feel as though they aren't a good composer. Similarly, if the piece succeeds, the student might become entrenched in a process that rewards but stifles them. To put it positively, teachers should craft assignments that excite students in unexpected ways. These assignments should remove the students from their normal practice and compel them to write using other practices in which they would not write. This is what Cohen meant when he said that he encouraged risk-taking by giving assignments that they weren't what students wanted to do. By crafting assignments that remove students from their normal practice, teachers can create an emotional space for students in which they can succeed or fail without it affecting their ego. This can help students understand a wider variety of processes more quickly and synthesize their own approach through their interaction with other practices without intermingling the student's ego and their practice.

Of course, eventually students will have to compose in their idiosyncratic practice, and they will have to learn how to separate their ego from that practice. Remaining divorced from the student's idiosyncratic practice, and their agency in choosing their own projects, for too long might result in a different kind of dependency wherein the student doesn't know how to begin a piece without getting an assignment to do so. To support the students as they explore the relationship between their ego and their compositional work, teachers should consider their students' egoic needs as they improve compositionally. However, at the beginning of their education, when students have just begun constructing their compositional practice, developing

that practice without concerning students' egos may help them develop some humility or perhaps push that problem down the road to be solved when the student has a stronger grasp of the practices they enjoy.

Cohen's reflections not only helped students think through how they could improve the piece they showed to him, but to also consider what they would take forward into their next piece. Teachers who want students that can build their own compositional prompts from the works that those students have recently finished should not only encourage their students to reflect but should ask their students how they could apply those reflections to their next piece. Teachers could even more concretely ask not only how the student *could* apply those lessons, but how they *will* apply those lessons to their very next composition. Between experimentation and reflection, students should already have a basic set of tools to improve on their own. However, continued conversation about how the student improves and a conscious naming of different aspects of the student's practice may help them supplement their embodied understanding of their practice by also attempting to understand it through language.

Teachers may help students think more consciously about how they control the evolution of their practice over time by simply discussing it after students have made a handful of significant advances in their compositional processes. Metaphors may help students to think about how their process has shifted from piece to piece and to tie musical outcomes to the choices that they made in their practices.<sup>296</sup> Teachers can further key students into different parts of the compositional process by talking about how the student conceived the piece, whether they relied on impulse as they began improvising, or if they thought through just one or many

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<sup>296</sup> Alternatively, metaphors about cartography, autopsy, gardening, or acrobatics may help students.

solutions as they notated improvised ideas. These conversations may also encourage students to think about revising if they compose based on assumptions or consistently and impulsively used pitch as a means to vary their ideas. By talking about how students' pieces move from their initial conception to a final performance, teachers can validate painful transitions and help students work through their perfectionism. Additionally, these conversation can put students in position to identify for themselves where in the compositional process they most often operate on assumption or leave out possibilities which they would enjoy because they instead went with a first intuition to solve a problem.

Conversations about cultivating a practice should focus on the student synthesizing ideas which they enjoy. Encouraging students to graft concepts they enjoy into their practice should become a self-sustaining virtuous cycle. At this point, the teacher can help their student prune away old ideas or assumptions which no longer help the student or graft on new practices which the student might *become* interested in or which might stretch them. Cohen's responses about some of his students indicated that students and teachers might find the pruning process painful. However, to help students stay in the zone of proximal development, Cohen said that he needed to challenge students by encouraging them to take painful or scary leaps of faith. When he pointed students in new directions he wanted to convey that "to go further in this direction that you seem to want to go, you'll have to break something; there's a certain limit you'll have to exceed or at least contemplate exceeding." Teachers can help students make these leaps by understanding and validating the emotional undertaking involved. Giving students interesting assignments that they don't want to do could help teachers show their students how to break boundaries or push the envelope. Additionally, some teachers may want to take a gentler approach, creating safe spaces where students feel comfortable making mistakes. However,



teachers who become too gentle and allow too much space will cease to challenge their students. Therefore, teachers must keep a firm hand and push students to take risks with the knowledge that they have a safety net.

Lastly, engaging students in a compositional practice, while similar to instrumental practice, should be approached from a different angle, as Greg Simon argued. Cohen emphasized to his students that they were engaging in a practice and that they needed to spend time each day working on that practice. However, in our interviews, engaging in the practice daily seemed to come to Cohen secondarily. Students are used to hearing that they should practice or compose each day, and while some teachers have the opinion that if the student doesn't feel called to this daily practice they will disengage on their own, other teachers find ways to encourage students to remain in the practice.

Cohen's teachers compelled him to practice through their excitement about Chopin and other great composers. Consequently, Cohen's daily practice came secondarily from an excitement to see composition the way his teachers did. Therefore, teachers who want to compel their students to participate in a daily practice should search for ways to excite their students and compel them to a daily practice without ever saying "You should write for thirty minutes every day." Instead, teachers should talk about practices which they love and should show real excitement when students reach milestones or show their own excitement. Not every new or old idea needs to be a revelation to a teacher, but showing students that their ideas matter can make a difference in the way they approach their music. Likewise, talking with students about how they can bring their favorite non-musical ideas into their music through the imagery of a soccer player or the structures of modern architecture can also contribute to a continued investment in composition. Ultimately, by showing students how their interests might interact with new

practices, meeting them at their level of excitement, engaging with them on topics that interest them, and discussing how to bring those topics into the world of music, teachers can help their students cultivate a new practice for themselves.

## Dylan's Methods

### *How Do I Heighten Student Choices?*

Heightening student choices offers a more consensual method to give students feedback. Because teachers focus on helping their students achieve their compositional goals in this approach, it cannot function without taking into account the student's intent. To begin, teachers should evaluate the student's music. Teachers could evaluate the piece silently, but if they evaluate it out loud, such as when Dylan walked students through his perception of their piece, students have the opportunity to correct anything that didn't translate well or which the teacher misunderstood. This should most likely take the form of a basic analysis. "I see you want this section to start loud and intense based on what you said and the extreme register, but that you want it to become gentler throughout because your rhythms begin to slow down, and you reduce the number of instruments." This analysis may sound like an active listening exercise in which the teacher simply repeats back to the student what they see, but this type of analysis can align the teacher and the student so that the teacher can provide feedback on the areas which the student signals are the most relevant for them. However, teachers could also simply ask students which sections the student cares about most and how they have attempted to accomplish their compositional goals in those sections.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Additionally, by asking students which sections are most important to them, the teacher can ask why other sections feel less important to the student and address why the student chooses to write music that isn't interesting to them.

Teachers may need to additionally point to places in the music which are less relevant to the student but potentially relevant to the listener. In Dylan's case, these were most often transitions in which the student traveled from idea to idea without considering too deeply what material came in between. Helping students maintain interest as they travel from idea to idea represents a larger-scale goal that students might accomplish over the course of many pieces, but one on which the teacher and student can still align.

After aligning with the student's goals, teachers must also help students activate other parameters of the music to achieve those goals. Dylan most often focused on texture, potentially because on a compressed schedule, texture acted as a parameter made of parameters, essentially giving Dylan the chance to comment on pitch, rhythm, and instrumentation constantly. Additionally, if teachers focus on texture, they help students begin to understand how pitch, rhythm, and instrumentation all come together as a whole. Once the teacher and student have aligned on the student's goals, the teacher simply needs to look at how the student already accomplishes that goal in their music and help them travel the extra mile. However, my constant refrain returns: when teachers help students understand how to activate additional parameters, the teacher should not become the source of creative solutions but rather guide the student to develop their own creative solutions.

Teachers who want to help heighten their students' choices should also think about which parameters they most often discuss with their students. Discussing rhythm repeatedly may help students develop a robust understanding of their compositional options regarding rhythm but may impoverish students when they need to solve harmonic problems. Furthermore, listing parameters that students should use to heighten their choices might lead students to stop thinking beyond these parameters or cause them to consistently use every parameter to heighten their

choices. This may lead to rigidity in the ways which students approach their compositional processes and discourage creative uses of the parameters. In other words, if students always use fast rhythms to signal intense music, they may never grapple with questions like “How can I make a slow moment sound intense?” By encouraging students to operate outside their typical solutions, however, teachers can propel students toward deeper understandings of parameters that they might not otherwise use.

### *How Do I Focus on Why?*

Many teachers may already focus on why great composers of the past made certain decisions. Some of those teachers may even try to communicate those composer’s decision-making processes to their students. However, teachers who want to make a serious effort of putting their students in touch with Debussy or Beethoven’s decision-making processes should consider using listening journals to supplement their discussions about composition. By working with listening journals, Dylan’s students developed an understanding of which techniques and effects interested them enough to pursue in their own music. Other teachers may take this a step further by including both some close- and/or open-ended questions about each piece. In deciding what kinds of questions to include, teachers should consider that more tailored and close-ended questions could help students consider specific techniques and give them a straightforward entry point into specific pieces. Whereas open-ended questions like “What techniques or textures are you going to steal or borrow from this composition?” would emphasize students’ freedom to choose techniques or textures which they find more appealing. Moreover, choosing features which most interest them may motivate students while also encouraging them to think for themselves and to independently seek out new ideas through their listening.

Listening journals can also begin conversations about cause-and-effect relationships in a relatively low-stakes environment. By encouraging students to think about why composers made decisions and what they hoped to achieve with certain techniques, textures, or other parameters, teachers can help students build up their musical decision-making skills. If students begin with listening journals, they can keep records for themselves of techniques which they enjoy and furthermore, they don't need to concern themselves with the perception of others. In classroom settings on the other hand, the larger number of students may make some students uncomfortable sharing their opinions but could result in a richer web of information and techniques if teachers intentionally include each student in the conversation. Either way, teachers should encourage their students to provide specific details about their opinions. Dylan asked two different questions in his listening journals so that students would respond with different levels of specificity. He first asked the student to generally assess how the work made them feel and what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy. Then he asked what techniques the student would steal to encourage them to be specific as they discussed which techniques they enjoyed. These two questions helped students more deeply understand not only what music they enjoyed, but also how they might begin to write those ideas into their own music. Therefore, teachers should ask questions that focus students on different levels of specificity to begin drawing connections between general outcomes they perceive as listeners: "I liked this moment," and specific inputs they develop as composers: "The reason I like this moment is because of the way the harmony shifts under a held melodic note."

In addition to listening journals and in-class discussions, Dylan constantly modelled responses which provided reasoning. So, just as teachers should encourage their students to not only state *that* they like something but also *why* they like it, teachers should explain not only

*what* they perceive in a student's music but also *how* they arrived at that perception. For instance, instead of saying "This moment seems intense," teachers should say "This moment sounds intense *because* of the extreme registers, the fortissimo dynamic and the dissonant and closely-spaced harmonies." Or, when using more affective language: "This moment sounds serene because you used a consonant harmony that aligns with the spacing of the harmonic series in addition to several lines which each move slowly without interrupting one another."

Providing musical reasoning through language may help students make connections between how their compositions affect listeners and better inform their compositional processes. A reliance on language, however, may lead students to constantly justify their music. Some teachers may not view these justifications as bad, but teachers who value intuitive approaches may want to encourage a mixture of both language- and reason-based approaches as well as strictly music- and intuition-based approaches. This might include using improvisation as a tool to work out or explore musical thoughts in the moment. For these exercises, teachers could instead set intentions such as, "During this improvisation, let's explore what signals could mark the ends of phrases together."

Following both intuition- and reason-based approaches, through which students make decisions, teachers should also discuss the decision-making process with their students. During this time, teachers may want to point out whether the student used their intuition or reasoning to make decisions and urge the student to try other methods in the future to encourage flexibility. Additionally, teachers can lead conversations or encourage students to lead conversations which explore why a student made particular decisions. These conversations would abstract students' focus on *why* to think not only about their material but also how they chose that material and the relationship between the material and the choice.

Abstracting one level further, teachers may also want to discuss with their students why they have specific deadlines or why they want students to learn a particular skill. For Dylan's students, his transparency both motivated them to come in each week with a completed variation and built trust. Focusing on motivation, Dylan also kept students writing by putting them on a challenging but manageable schedule. Additionally, by continually pointing out to students that they needed to edit by Tuesday so that he could proofread on Wednesday so that the students could submit by Friday, Dylan created goal structures with medium- and long-term goals. And in these structures, Dylan always communicated to the students why they needed to reach the next portion of the compositional process, again building trust. By the time I visited at the end of the semester, the students seemed to trust Dylan implicitly. He had communicated why he set particular goals or gave particular feedback so often that when he spoke on the performers' behalf, the students trusted him. Even when giving intense critique, students understood that he had a good reason.<sup>298</sup> Furthermore, students gained an implicit understanding of how to structure small- and medium-term goals to help them meet long-term goals. Therefore, if teachers want to gain their students' trust, transparency about goal setting and decision-making regarding the learning process can help. Furthermore, by gaining student trust, teachers put themselves in position to better maintain student motivation and help students learn how to set long-term goals and reach them.

### *How Do I Use a Performance to Build a Practice?*

This particular method seems indispensable. Concrete performances with steady medium-term deadlines seemed to motivate Dylan's students to constantly compose without needing daily

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<sup>298</sup> Two students mentioned this kind of reason-backed trust during their interviews multiple times, making this approach seem highly valuable.

reminders to compose. However, the concrete performance date by itself may not provide enough structure for students to build healthy practices. Having a performance provides a goal, but no path to achieve it. By providing an instrumentation, a particular ensemble, and/or a style, teachers begin to give students entry points into a compositional process. However, many students will still need support to reach the final performance. Those moments of needed support afford teachers opportunities to help students explore different compositional practices and can influence internal structures within the larger goal. If a student struggles to generate any music, encouraging them to write use theme and variations for their form could hide the moment when they begin generating material if they work with an extant theme. If a student struggles with editing, encouraging them to cut anything which doesn't engage them may help the student understand how to apply filters of quality to their work.

No matter what practices the students use, teachers should check in regularly with the student not only about their music, but also about how the student feels they are handling long-term projects to understand what kind of structure the student needs. Dylan communicated that he wished he had more structure at a formative period of his life. He said that after he had finished his PhD., he felt as though he struggled to write counterpoint because he hadn't been made to write contrapuntal music often enough. But he also commented that had he gotten his PhD. ten years later, that he would have been happy to work on projects by himself. Therefore, teachers should not only assess whether students need additional structure, but also check in with students and about their perceived self-efficacy as composers.

If teachers do not check in with their students to ensure that they have a wide breadth of compositional techniques at their disposal, they run the risk of allowing, and possibly encouraging, students to rely on the same tools and techniques repeatedly. If students constantly



rely on the same techniques, their approach could ossify or worse, the students could burn out. Essentially, if teachers only provide the date of the performance and only check in with students about their compositional materials, the student may continually approach composing with a singular mindset: to get to the double barline. They may have a more nuanced understanding of how they get to the end of their piece after each project; they might wait for a melody to strike them, harmonize that melody, and improvise related melodies until they have enough material to call their work a piece. But if that student's teacher never talks to them about different approaches, the student might never understand how approaching their work in terms of its texture could infuse their melodies with new life. Therefore, teachers cannot act only as editors, but must propel students to new approaches by not only providing the motivation of a concrete and long-term project resulting in a performance, but also regular check-ins which challenge students as well as their approaches. Otherwise, students may graduate with bachelor's or even potentially doctorate degrees without understanding critical skills that they might have discovered if their teachers had pushed them to compose in varied ways.

## **Part II: *Psalms and Meditations* for flexible ensemble**

The loss of self in something larger is part of many religious experiences, and something I continually find myself more deeply drawn to, both for my own religious reasons and for the profound joy it seems to involve or maybe even necessitate. My dissertation piece is a collection of quasi-spiritual movements which focus on varying levels of improvisation. Because of the focus on improvisation, the instrumentation will be for a flexible ensemble of at least four voices/instruments, however some movements will call specifically for soloists. I have been improvising for several years, and in that time I have come to find a certain quietude in the act of improvisation. In these moments, I am often focused, not on the precise sounds that I am making, but some other aspect of what I am doing: the physical motion of a gesture, the physical sensation of sound making, focusing on the breath, or even a certain character or emotion. I think of these approaches as oblique to the actual musical material, sometimes creating a unified sonic world without using sounds that may be perceived as “going together.” These moments have changed my reasons for writing music. The experience of losing a sense of self while playing music is unlike other experiences. Therefore, with this piece, I aim to write music that helps others experience this loss of self or an involvement with something larger.

Each movement will give the players something to focus on that is related to the music, but just beyond it, just out of sight, or arrived at from an oblique angle. The simplest movement will be just a few short sentences of text which guide the player to meditate on their own sounds, which will require the most improvisation. The most complex movement will be a fully realized score, still for flexible instrumentation, but with only small moments of improvisation.

The movements will be in order, as follows:

I. Epiphany

II. Apocrypha I

III. Litany

IV. Apocrypha II

V. Liturgy

VI. Apocrypha III

VII. Revelations

My goals for this piece of music are to:

- A) Create moments of flow for the performers within each movement
- B) Connect all of the movements without relying on returning musical motifs or harmonies
- C) Portray an array of tones and humors
- D) Use spontaneous or through-composed forms as opposed to classical forms
- E) Consider and involve timbral orchestration despite the flexible instrumentation
- F) Construct a piece that is enjoyable on the first listen, but has the depth to reward multiple listens
- G) Write a piece that I would enjoy if I heard it at a concert