Getting Inside the Mind of the Composer

by Carl Ashley

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Have you ever stopped to think about why composers compose? Many, if not most, of the great composers agree that composition cannot really be taught. Stravinsky once said, "A composer is or isn't; he cannot learn to acquire the gift that makes him one… The composer will know that he is one if composition creates exact appetites in him, and if in satisfying them he is aware of their exact limits. Similarly, he will know he is not one if he has only a desire to compose or [a] wish to express himself in music."[1]

It is the performer's responsibility to strive to recreate the composer's intent. Composition is a form of artistic expression, just as performance is. If we do not fully understand the composer's thoughts, we cannot fully understand his or her creation. One contemporary arranger once noted that she could only write down about ten percent of what was in her head. Because of this, some people claim that approaching a work from the perspective of the composer is impossible, since we can only have limited knowledge of the instrumentation, acoustics, or traditions of performance. In addition, our audience may come from a different background and culture, and not relying on the composer's view gives the performer freedom. On the other hand, how can the music be truly appreciated unless it is performed as intended?

So, how do we best discover a composer's intent? The short answer is that it depends upon the composer. Roger Sessions said, having discovered the composer's intentions as best he can, he [the performer] must then apply himself to the task of reproducing them with the utmost conviction.[2] Brahms, on the other hand, is reported to have said, "Do it how you like, but make it beautiful."[3] Beethoven is known for holding firm to the finished form of his compositions. Duruflé constantly reworked his scores, even after publication.

A composer's mode of composition is also worthy of consideration. Tchaikovsky needed to have a grand piano in his bedroom to write opera, while Honegger did not claim to play the piano. His music was composed mentally. In order to get inside the mind of the composer, I believe one must strive to answer the following questions:

To what degree does the composer want you to interpret the music his or her way as opposed to your way?

Some composers (maybe most) see the realization of the score as a collaborative effort between composer and performer. Still others will insist on their way being the absolute correct manner in which to perform a work.

What can you learn about the composer's life?

What were his or her life experiences up to the time of composition? What was his or her musical training up to that point? For example, you would likely not want to approach Mozart's first opera written at age twelve in the same way

as you would *Die Zauberflöte*, written the year of his death.

What can you learn about the period in which the composer lived? How did this affect the composer's writing?

Was there war or rampant disease, etc.? What were the politics of the time? Literature of the time? philosophical and religious influences?

Did the composer write anything about the work?

Did anyone else, such as a critic or reviewer, write anything about the work? How reliable are their thoughts?

Why did the composer choose a particular key, the tempo, the form, genre, instrumentation, text, forms of expression and dynamics, phrasing, articulation, particular intervals, rhythmic values, and types of word-painting?

The choice of key could be the result of instrument range accommodation or fingerings. Perhaps the composer was trying to make some kind of emotional statement with a sharp key, traditionally sounding "brighter," or a flat key, traditionally sounding "darker" or "warmer."

Incidentally, taking this assumption to its logical conclusion, what kind of emotional statement does the key of F♯ make compared to G♭? It is important to note that Schumann said, "We can agree…that any feeling may be expressed in any key."[4] Key choice could also have a theological interpretation. E♭ major, for example, with its three flats, has been used as a symbol of the Trinity.

The tempo at which a work is performed may well be affected by a number of factors. It is well known that Brahms experimented with different tempos in his *Ein deutsches Requiem.* Remember also to be careful not to assume that a tempo marking in a printed score is from the composer. One great example of that is found in "Nel cor più non mi sento." One edition of this Italian song indicates that the dotted quarter note should be performed 56 to 63. Since Paisiello died the year after the metronome was patented, it is a safe bet to assume that the marking is not that of the composer. Some scholars argue that time signatures imply certain tempo indications, especially in Bach's time. Mahler said "A tempo is correct when everything can still be heard."[5]

Regarding genre, you should return to the work's historical context. Was the composer experimenting or ahead of his or her time? Were different groups of instruments used to represent certain themes or ideas? Is there any symbolism in the instrumentation? A trio may also be symbolic of the Trinity, for example.

Never ignore the text. Purcell wrote, musick [is] the exaltation of poetry.[6] Monteverdi declared, "Let the word be master of the melody, not its slave."[7]

What didn't the composer write down? Why not?

Is the omission of crescendos and decrescendos, for example, due to the fact that the work was composed before these markings were invented? Does that necessarily mean that crescendos and decrescendos were not performed?

What were the performance practices of the time?

Be sure to do your homework here. Do not assume that what you know or have been taught is correct. New information is being uncovered constantly. What about vibrato, for example? Was it just an ornament?

On the printed page, what is actually the work of the composer rather an editor?

Bad editing is found everywhere, unfortunately. Signs of bad editing may include the use of modern clefs, barlines when none existed, dynamic markings, tempo markings, alternate texts, deleted sections, note corrections, simplifications of the music, and key changes.

Know that there are often many editions of one work, and many contain mistakes unknown to an editor. When possible, look for an edition that lists all the sources, strives for accuracy of the composer's intent regarding notation, dynamics, instrumentation, and even ornamentation. Find the original manuscript if possible. CT

NOTES

[1] Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Faber and Faber, 2011), n.p.

[2] Josiah Flag, ed., *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings* (Northeastern, 1997), 331.

[3] Leonard Van Camp, *A Practical Guide for Performing, Teaching, and Singing the Brahms* Requiem (Alfred Music, 2002), 100.

[4] Josiah Flag, ed., *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings*, 92.

[5] Ibid., 191.

[6] Ibid., 23.

[7] Kurt Pahlen, *Music of the World: A History* (Crown Publishers, 1949), 108.