

Notes for "The Monty Python Approach to Composing"
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• *Interactive 60-min. formal session, Colorado State Music Teachers Assoc. Annual Conference, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, 6/7/13*

Abstract:

Monty Python's famous mantra - "and now for something completely different" - can be a catalyst for the compositional process. Houle's comically inspired (yet serious) step-by-step approach can unleash latent sparks of creativity in students of all ages (and teachers!). Explore how Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* can also play a role as a "how to" primer.

Since improvisation is essentially composing at a very fast pace (and, conversely, composition can be thought of as slow-motion, "vetted" improvisation), this presentation will touch upon both.

• **Bach** preface to *Inventions and Sinfonias*: "Honest method, by which the amateurs of the keyboard – especially, however, those desirous of learning – are shown a clear way not only (1) to learn to play cleanly in two parts, but also, after further progress, (2) to handle three obligate parts correctly and well; and along with this not only **to obtain good inventions (ideas) but to develop the same well**; above all, however, to achieve a cantabile style in playing and at the same time **acquire a strong foretaste of composition.**"

A show of hands – how many of us take seriously Bach's prefatory words? How many of us have taken a stab at writing an *Invention*, had a student do so, or, at the very least, attempted to get "inventive" with an *Invention*? – e.g., #1 – authentic "passing tone" variants version – apply same idea of passing tone fills to #13 A Minor?:



From review by Susan Tomes of Kenneth Hamilton's book, [After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance](http://global.oup.com/academic/product/after-the-golden-age-9780195178265;jsessionid=05E522BC823AC6B12093BEAFB83C9A33?cc=us&lang=en&) (<http://global.oup.com/academic/product/after-the-golden-age-9780195178265;jsessionid=05E522BC823AC6B12093BEAFB83C9A33?cc=us&lang=en&>):

"If you had attended one of Liszt's piano recitals in the late 1830s, you might have been invited to place a scrap of paper into an urn with a suggestion for a tune you'd like to hear Liszt improvise upon. You might bump into the maestro himself as he mingled with the audience (wearing his famous Hungarian sabre). Liszt would pull out the scraps, choose a tune and give it the treatment. One night, someone had written: 'Is it better to marry or remain single?' Liszt read this aloud and then quipped: 'Whichever course one chooses, one is sure to regret it.'

Fast-forward to a recent all-Beethoven concert by a famous pianist of today. Before he comes out, a minion appears to warn the audience that they must not cough or make any noise during the performance, because this would destroy the artist's needle-sharp concentration. The artist himself then appears "with grim visage", and proceeds to perform as though dispensing holy writ.

Throughout the 'golden age' of Romantic piano-playing, it was not usual to perform whole sonatas as these were thought too severe. Improvisation was popular, as was the habit of "preluding", or making up musical links between items. Players might give themselves breaks while they chatted with friends in the audience. Most pianists were also composers, and routinely included their own pieces. Playing from memory was not required, and sometimes even frowned on."

Times have changed!

Pete Jutras (editor of Clavier Companion), 2011 NCKP Keynote speech ("The Future of Pedagogy") synopsis (from NCKP website - <http://colorinmypiano.com/2011/08/02/nckp-2011-keynote-the-future-of-pedagogy-by-pete-jutras/>):

Humans naturally desire to make music. All the cultures of the world show evidence of music making. Some cultures don't even have a word for "music making" because everybody is a music maker. For them, it would be like having a word for "breathing." Everybody does it! Our Western culture seems to have some kind of barrier. Our society thinks music requires genius and hours of practice, rather than that music is an art that we all can master!

This leads to the question: Does music mean something different to those who are at the top of the pyramid than to those at the bottom?

Consider the "Happy Birthday test." To many people, music making means being able to play familiar tunes in a variety of keys, with different harmonies and variations and embellishments. How many of us can do this? How many of us teach this skill to our students? We argue that we want to focus on classical standards, but Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven would have known how to totally kill Happy Birthday! :)

We often hear, "I used to play piano." It seems that at some point [people stop] being a music maker?! Dr. Jutras compared this statement to saying, "I was a renter," as if you can only play piano with a teacher. Why do we teach piano this way? We need to stop this and start teaching towards OWNERSHIP.

How do we teach towards ownership? We need to teach skills such as composition, improvisation, variation, harmonization, and literacy (learning to read and write with understanding). And encourage students to take ownership of the process by involving them in the process of interpretation and making other musical decisions.

Pete and I are kindred spirits. His way of thinking is what prompted the creation of the Festival for Creative Pianists (handout). Significantly, the prize category most heavily competed for is the special prize (higher \$ amount) in composition. Sadly, students have very few venues for getting recognized as composers. There are avenues wherein students can submit pieces, but few, if any, that encourage them to perform original pieces and get written and verbal feedback and prize incentives. Which is probably why this category is the most popular one in our festival.

- So when do we start teaching this "ownership" approach? Ideally, right from the beginning!

Discuss "What AM I" approach to reading. Bach taught EVERY clef!

Next best - "landmark" or "guide" notes - F, middle C and G only as points of reference.

Old: Empty Garbage Before Dad Flips (Bart Simpson: "Every Good Booger Does Flick" ☺)

How can this "learn by interval" approach tie in with composing?

One-line staff (Ringo's vocal range ☺)

HAVE TEACHERS WRITE THEIR OWN 1-LINE PIECES AND PLAY

Discuss 2-lines, 3-lines then skip to full staff

This approach compatible with ANY method book!

- Dennis Alexander recommends:

- [Piano Teacher's Guide to Creative Composition](#) by Carol Klose
- [Creative Composition Toolbox](#) (in 6 books) by Wynn-Anne Rossi

- Other recommended materials (on sale at CSMTA conference):

Flip books -- contact Christine J. Schumann PiacereMusicPress@gmail.com:

Flip for Improvisation--Pictures in Sound (in 3 books):

Level 1 (Beginner, Easy: Animal Games)

Level 2 (Intermediate: Theory Concepts & Technique Tricks)

Level 3 (Advanced: Scales, Modes, and Rhythm)

Flip for Rhythm

Ideal for teaching rhythm. Use it in your classroom or private lessons to enhance rhythmic skills or as an inspiration for rhythmic creativity. Progressive levels.

[Creative Pedagogy for Piano Teachers: Using Musical Games and Aural Techniques as a Dynamic Supplement for Piano Teaching](#) by Jeffrey Agrell &

Pass books around for viewing

- While books are going around, ask teachers – what are their ideas/catalysts for composing?

Nothing is more paralyzing, more conducive to "writer's block" than total freedom. Ironically, the more parameters (barriers), the more freedom. But how to decide those compositional parameters?

.....that's where I owe a debt to British comedy....

- **Monty Python:**

"and now for something completely different"

It's one thing to have a "signature" (good); quite another to have people go, "Oh-oh, he's written the same piece again – borrrrring!" (bad)

I admire Paul McCartney – even his failures are admirable, for they represent his unceasing quest to try new things. Stravinsky is another composer who avoided being stereotyped. Schoenberg also – for him, atonality was not a religion, just another avenue of composition worth exploring. Risk-taking is important for all creativity – the willingness to "fail" now and then (very difficult for perfectionist types who have to avoid "mistakes" at all costs – are we unwittingly teaching this way?). That willingness to try something different and push boundaries is one of the reasons for the success (generally) of Monty Python.

Here's the "now for something completely different" approach to composing:

For your next composition, write an "opposite" piece. Make a list of the general characteristics of your existing works (see below) and aim for "something completely different" – e.g.,:

Fast or slow?

Happy or sad character? Other?

Key -- Major or minor? Modes? Make up a key? (Bartok, one flat but it's Ab, not Bb) or non-traditional scale, with resultant chords from that scale (have teacher make up a scale slightly different from anything known)

Modes? Pentatonic scale?

Modulates a lot? a little?
 Duple or triple meter? (or 5/8, 7/8, 11/8, no meter, shifting meter, no bar lines at all?, etc.)
 Low, middle or high register?
 Legato or staccato?
 Loud or soft?
 Homophonic or polyphonic?
 Short vs. long piece?
 Melody in RH or LH?
 Use of repetition or not? Ostinato & pedal points (two kind of repetition)
 Sequences?
 Inversions?
 Hemiolas? (e.g., Brahms, Mozart G Major Sonata, Brubeck "It's a Raggy Waltz" – mischievous use at opening of tune)
 Retrograde backwards)?
 Variety in note values? Tend to favor one (e.g., quarter notes) more than any other? Go different!
 Are you aware of balance? BALANCE OF SIMPLICITIES WITH COMPLEXITIES IS CRUCIAL!
 Rhythmic/intervallic augmentation or diminution
 For piano? Different instrumentation?
 Vocal or instrumental – with or without words? Do words come first, or vice versa (no "right" way)
 "All My Loving" McCartney was poem, then set to music. "Yesterday" was melody first (in a dream); lyrics came later, with difficulty ("Scrambled Eggs")
 Level of difficulty – hard or easy?
 Polyrhythms – 2 against 3 most common, also 3 against 4, etc.
 Lyrical vs. percussive, virtuosic, etc.
 Have you tried following "blueprint" of an admired composer or specific piece? - e.g., Bach Prelude #1 – descending bass line, dominant, tonic & use of "plot twists" (e.g., deceptive cadences or – believe it or not – "blue" notes in Chopin and Bach) and both I & V pedal points (discuss function of pedal points). This brings up the importance of LISTENING to many types of music, with an "analytical" engaged ear. "Crack the code" on how great composers/musicians compose or improvise.
 Style – folk, classical, jazz, gospel, rag, etc.
 Form – ABA, AB, ABACADAE etc. (rondo), free fantasy, sonata, minuet (young composers should try, as Mozart did – they often try to get "deep" and complicated too soon, before they're ready). Are you aware of the need for contrast – not too little, not too much? Explore more in upcoming pieces? Do students always use white keys (or black keys) – O.K. now and then, but not always.
 Musical games – e.g., chance? John Cage not first by a long shot: Wikipedia -- Mozart *Musikalisches Würfelspiel* [KV Anh. 294d] (German for "musical dice game") was a system for using [dice](#) to randomly '[generate](#)' [music](#) from [precomposed](#) options. These 'games' were quite popular throughout Western Europe in the 18th century. Several different [games](#) were devised, some that did not require dice, but merely 'choosing a [random number](#).'
 Palindrome? (Haydn's [Symphony No. 47](#) in G is nicknamed "the Palindrome". The third movement, [minuet](#) and [trio](#) is a musical palindrome. The second half of the piece is the same as the first but backwards. Also found in Minuet and Trio 'al Rovescio [in reverse], 2nd movement of Sonata in A, Hob. XVI, No. 26.
 Question and Answer phrases? (Beethoven: "pleading and resisting") – rise & fall (Cowboy Karen)
 Motive, theme or melody as germ?
 Syncopation? (sometimes one key element can save a song – e.g., Harrison's "If I Needed Someone")
 Absolute music (not explicitly "about" anything) or program music* (depicts extra musical narrative).
 Chopin detested programmatic titles, vs. Schumann
 *Program music:
 Use of imagery fantastic catalyst: mention Arthur Johnson & Drea Wagner bravely taking suggestions from audience (posted on festival archive pps.) – e.g.:
 Space monsters from the planet Zork (mine ☺)
 Rush hour noises

Ambulance, fire truck, police sirens, etc.

Circus sounds – e.g., merry-go-round (inspired random tape loops pasted together in "For the Benefit of Mr. Kite")

Animals – monkey, rhino, cat, dog, etc.

Childlike plots – the evil fairy, surprising things in your life, Little Red Robin Hood and the Seven Dwarfs (humorous mash-ups), etc.

Scenes – forest, space, jungle, desert, etc.

Characters, moods & emotions – happy, sad, peaceful, restful, agitated, angry, roaring mad, Nervous Nellie, panic, jealousy, etc.

Bartok Mikrokosmos

*Wikipedia: 153 progressive [piano](#) pieces in six volumes written between 1926 and 1939. The individual pieces progress from very easy and simple beginner [études](#) to very difficult advanced technical displays, and are used in modern piano lessons and education. **In total, according to Bartók, the piece "appears as a synthesis of all the musical and technical problems which were treated and in some cases only partially solved in the previous piano works."****

***IS THIS INTRODUCTORY NOTE HINTING THAT THIS IS REALLY A COMPOSITION PRIMER?**

Have students make up melodies along lines of Bartok at every step of the way. Method can be used side by side with other more standard method books. Have teachers try this on stage piano.

I have a few extra copies of Arthur Johnson's handout from his presentation (www.pianofestival.org/archive/evt10.htm) to the festival in 2010; also can give some of you a copy of my notes from today (see me after).

Thanks so much – any questions?

More teaching resources:

Mozart's Musical Dice Game, KV Anh. 294d:

http://imslp.org/wiki/Musikalisches_W%C3%BCrfelspiel,_K.516f_%28Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus%29

Houle's "It's Easy to Improvise":

http://pianoadventures.com/newsletter/2004_pdf/PA4_pg3-4_Easy_Improvise.pdf

Houle online free download resources:

<http://www.pianofestival.org/prizes/prizeoriginal.htm#techres>

Houle's Piano Handbook (see especially p. 19):

http://www.coloradomesa.edu/music/documents/Piano_Handbook.pdf

Houle "blocking" methodology explained:

http://www.coloradomesa.edu/music/documents/Class_Piano_I-IV_Proficiency_Methodology.pdf

Brief History of and Raison D'être for the Festival for Creative Pianists

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Pianists from anywhere in the world up to the age of 19 who are looking for a different kind of competition experience are invited to participate in the Festival for Creative Pianists, a unique and highly innovative event held at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, Colorado. Complete information can be found at www.pianofestival.org.

The festival encourages students to showcase all kinds of skills and genres at the piano – classical music, original compositions, jazz, ragtime, popular music, underrepresented music by female composers, improvisations, etc. Students perform up to 15 minutes of solo, concerto or duet music (any style, of their choosing), after which three judges provide them with constructive written and verbal feedback in the form of a mini master class.

A least a dozen First Prizes of \$100 are offered for demonstrations of repertory excellence and various creative skills. Contingent on funding, a special prize recognizes the best original composition.

The genesis of this festival began over a decade ago when I began to question whether the typical piano competition was always the ideal framework to motivate, educate, and validate young students. In 2000, I was put in charge of a festival that awarded a First, Second and Third Prize. The judges had a tortuously difficult time deciding on the First and Second Prize winners; it was practically a tie. After the event, I tried to impress upon the Second Prize winner that his performance was truly spectacular. The student, looking glum and devastated, was unconvinced, especially since he had earned Second Prize in previous festivals. In his mind, he kept falling short of that all-important and singularly validating First Prize. "Will you be returning next year?" I asked. "No," he replied emphatically. His experiences with piano competitions obviously left a bitter scar, despite every effort to convince him that he was not a "loser," and that the difference between First and Second Prize is sometimes virtually meaningless.

For me, this was the last straw. I vowed to either abolish the festival or revamp it entirely. A vision for a new kind of competition began to take shape. It centered on three challenges:

- Could an event be focused more on fostering well-rounded musicianship and less on cutthroat competition between students?
- Could more than one First Prize be offered, for maximum motivation? (The winner-take-all approach works wonderfully for the 'winner,' but what about the vastly outnumbered 'losers?') Do we need a "second" prize, "third" prize, etc.?
- Could prizes recognize more than *one* kind of excellence? Could a festival validate more than just note-perfect, autonomic performances? Could we encourage creativity, originality, risk-taking and spontaneity as well?

With a two-page blueprint for just such an event in hand, I attended the 2000 World Piano Pedagogy Fall Conference in Las Vegas and enlisted the enthusiastic support of major piano manufacturers to help spearhead the First Annual Festival for Creative Pianists in 2001. By 2003, prizes had reached a total value of \$20,000; this included a piano, which was awarded to Joshua Archibald Seiffer, a gifted fledgling composer who went on to graduate from Stanford University with a degree in composition in the Spring of 2010.

In 2008, the festival found a new, permanent home at Mesa State College, which became Colorado Mesa University in 2011. Although we continue to offer many prizes, the main focus is on education and sharing in the joy of making and performing music. Participants are required to sit in on the adjudications of at least three other students. Above all, contestants are urged to develop and showcase their unique talents and perform with individuality, personality, exuberance, and spontaneity.

Judges are carefully chosen for their eclectic talents and ability to provide learned, positive feedback. We assure the participants that they are *all* winners because of their hard work, enthusiasm and eagerness to learn. The hundreds of video clips posted online provide an excellent snapshot of this novel event. Moreover, the festival's website offers a wealth of educational information (ranging from very accessible to scholarly) on how to improvise and embellish in classical and jazz styles, compose, or simply learn more about the greatest composers of traditional piano music repertory. Online applications are now being accepted; enrollment is open, but limited to 22 students.



The Festival for Creative Pianists

www.pianofestival.org (to be updated Aug. 2013)

- **Eligibility:**

Pianists up to age 19 from anywhere in the world.

- **Philosophy and unique educational mission:**

This festival is the only competition of its kind in the world, combining both classical and jazz/pop idioms in a constructive educational setting. Students compete for **standard repertory prizes** as well as for **novel prizes** that promote neglected but important creative skills and repertory - e.g., **original concerto cadenzas & classical embellishing/improvisation** (skills demonstrated by nearly all great composers yet all but forgotten today), **versatility** (needed to survive in today's competitive market), **lyricism** (usually overshadowed by "loud and fast" playing), **original compositions** (few venues exist for young serious composers), works by **female composers**, **tasteful arrangements/transcriptions** (often disallowed in other venues), etc.

We seek to foster diverse and well-rounded musicianship that goes beyond the mere "autonomic wizardry" featured in most other competitions. Above all, pianists are urged to develop and showcase their unique talents and perform with **individuality, personality, exuberance, originality** and **spontaneity**.

- **Judges/clinicians:**

World-class artist/teachers adjudicate students and provide constructive written and verbal feedback. Adjudicators are experts in both classical and jazz/pop styles as well as all forms of improvisation.

- **Participants & repertory:**

Up to 22 students; early applications now being accepted.

Students play **up to 15 minutes** of *any* repertory for one, two, or three pianos (solo, duet, 2-piano or 3-piano ensembles, or concerto repertory, including movements of pieces).

- **When & where:**

April 4 & 5, 2014 at Colorado Mesa University, Grand Junction, CO

- **Donations payable to "Colorado Mesa University Music Dept."**

IMPORTANT: Please write "piano festival" in the memo portion of checks:

Dr. Arthur Houle, Director,
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Wolfgang's unsuccessful brother
Wolfgang



By Darius Houle
age 10

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