

# Original Composition Dispelling Myths!

BY WYNN-ANNE ROSSI

There are too many lofty myths regarding original composition. It is true that Mozart wrote music (even a small concerto) before some of us could read. But you don't have to be a Mozart to compose music. When we start a 5-year-old with piano lessons, we don't expect that young pianist to mature into a Horowitz. We simply introduce the love of music, one tiny step at a time, surviving through years riddled with mistakes and ample poetic imagination.

Teaching original composition should follow the same path. I've been teaching composition for over 20 years. I've witnessed both masterful works of art and musical finger-paintings. Both are valuable. Recently, I completed a residency with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra teaching the art of composition to inner-city fifth-graders with no musical background. With a plan and plenty of patience, it can be done!

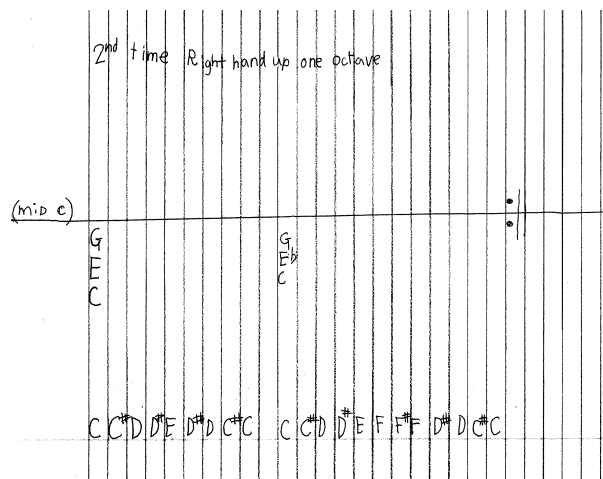
When I first began teaching composition, I made the mistake of working too hard. In a studio of 40+ students, I ended up composing 40+ compositions! It was exhausting. I not only had to do the work, I also had to convince the young composers (and myself) that the work was theirs. Through years of learning from my students, I discovered that students grow like wildflowers when they are given the confidence and permission to pursue their own unique sounds. There is no better avenue for learning basic theory, and self-esteem soars when students perform original works that express who they are, both as musicians and as personalities.

## Some Teaching Tricks

How do you begin? First and foremost, start early! Don't wait. With my own students, composition is introduced as early as the first lesson. I encourage the young novices to explore creature sounds on the piano. Rabbits, horses—even aliens—can be assigned. I take five minutes at the end of each lesson to improvise with the students, encouraging them to feel comfortable making new sounds. There are no mistakes.

The first problem teachers will encounter is how to offer a simple way to notate musical ideas. This is a detailed process, and not all students have the drive to create their own notation. Over the years, I designed my own system of notation that works quite nicely for the beginner. It's imperfect because it doesn't notate exact rhythms, but it works like a charm for the new learner. Rhythm memory is stronger than note memory, so most students remember their ideas if they have the notes alone.

Notation is done on basic lined paper, turned sideways. A line is drawn across the middle of the page which represents Middle C. Notes in higher octaves are written at the top of the paper, just as notes in lower octaves are written at the bottom. Reading is left to right, and notes that sound at the same time line up in the same column. If desired, faster notes can be linked together, similar to eighth notes. Longer notes can be indicated by a swoop line, similar to a tie. The advantage to this system is that it uses the entire piano and frees the student from a five-finger position.



As students advance, I switch to staff paper. The rough draft, however, has no measure lines, no note values, and no note stems, but it does pay careful attention to lining up the left- and right-hand notes.

I hold group sessions to assist students to prepare a final copy. I help them with rhythms and placing the measure lines. Though this may sound radical, perfect notation is irrelevant. The *process* is what's important. Details come with maturity.

## Two Mistakes

The most frequent mistakes young composers make? Too many ideas—or no ideas. “No ideas” is the easier of the problems to

solve. You need only one idea for a composition, and an idea can be as short as three notes. If necessary, the musical idea can be composed during the lesson. Then the student can experiment with different octaves, different positions, backwards, upside-down, alternating rhythms, and much more. In the beginning, my instruction sounds like a broken record, involving two words of advice—"repeats" and "patterns". These two gems provide the glue necessary for every original composition. Students love it when I point out that the audience is rather clueless. They need to hear something several times before they really get it.

Having too many ideas is far more complex. Students are afraid their compositions will appear too simple, and thus, sound boring. The result is disastrous. Narrowing 20 unrelated ideas down to two or three can be frustrating for both the teacher and the student. But it must be done. I use the example of an architect with too many types of building materials. Using tree limbs, bricks, hay bales, paint cans, milk cartons, and Plexiglas would be a challenge even for Frank Lloyd Wright. Choose one or two, and you have a nice start towards building a decent structure.

### Theory as a Tool

Teaching composition involves providing students with the proper tools. Scales, chord progressions, and arpeggios are effective building blocks. I created the *Get Ready Duet* series (FJH Music) for the purpose of teaching and improvising with these tools. While the teacher plays the secondo part, the student can play the skill as written, then repeat it, improvising with the notes that are introduced.

In *Piano Adventures*®, the Creative questions found at the bottom of the page provide an excellent source of ideas that lead to composition. Each piece has a Discovery question that reviews or reinforces a theory concept. In each unit, a Creative question nudges the student toward application of the new concept in a personal, creative way. These tips and exercises introduce fundamental tools of composition, such as imitation. In *Accelerated Piano Adventures*® Lesson Book 1, for example, students are

encouraged to make up several one-measure left-hand melodies and imitate them an octave higher with the right hand.

### Theme Recitals

Compositional themes are very popular with young composers. In my studio, every third recital is devoted to original material. Each has a theme to help direct the flow of inspiration. My most recent recital was broken into several themes by age group. The young girls chose "spirits of fantasy," the young boys "natural disasters." Teenagers decided to base their pieces on famous paintings.

I begin preparations for these recitals up to four months in advance. Students take two to three months to compose the pieces, then concentrate on recopying them and preparing to perform them. It's important to make a distinction between their role as composers and their role as performers. Both require equal attention.

### The Musical "Me"

Original composition is a journey of self-discovery, well worth the effort for both teachers and students. And there is a new series of books to assist you in the process! *Music by Me* (FJH Music), a composition workbook created by Kevin Olson and myself, is designed to stimulate self-expression through original composition with practical tips and a progressive, fun approach.

18 **Tool of the Trade** using a musical form unit 5

Form is the way a musical piece is organized.

When you create music, you have three choices.

1. You can take a musical idea and repeat it. This is called *repetition*. ★★
2. You can take a musical idea and vary it a little. This is called *variation*. ★✶
3. Or your musical idea can be followed by something totally different. This is called *contrast*. ★⊖

As a composer, you'll have to make decisions about repeating, varying, or contrasting your ideas.

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Counter to the myths, original composition is not a journey limited to young Mozarts. All children are creative. They deserve the opportunity to finger-paint their way into their own priceless musical identities. |||

Wynn-Anne Rossi is a composer, author, performer, and educator with over 40 publications through the FJH Music and Boston Music companies. Commissions include works sponsored by Minnesota Public Radio, American Composers Forum, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She is creative consultant for the new St. Paul Chamber Orchestra CONNECT outreach curriculum. Wynn-Anne also performs her own music in the Minnesota public schools through the Bravo Music Program and as an active SPCO cultural partner. Her first CD, *Take Me North*, is now available ([www.rossi-music.com](http://www.rossi-music.com)).

### Two-Hand Conversation

Moderately

1 on Name the position. \_\_\_\_

Make up a one-measure melody with your L.H. in C Position.  
Imitate the melody with your R.H. one octave higher. Try several of these.

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