

Advice to Young Composers

An Essay by Gwyneth Walker
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The life of a composer can be exciting as well as discouraging, beautiful, disappointing, exhilarating and exhausting. It can be sociable as well as lonely, rewarding, frustrating, communicative and isolating. It is not an easy career or lifestyle.

*A few helpful qualities come to mind. **Patience** and **persistence** head the list. One needs **patience** to complete a work, especially a large-scale work. One cannot write everything in one sitting! And, **patience** is valuable in the process of career development. It is important to share one's music with performers (in a graceful way – sending the music to people who have requested it). But, if there is little response to your mailings, be **patient**. Performers often program repertoire years in advance. They may like your music, but do not yet have the opportunity to program it. Do not lose hope. You may be surprised that the very works which you felt would not have a future are those works which, after a few years, start garnering many performances.*

*Be **persistent**! Keep composing. Keep trying to get your music into the hands of performers. Keep trying to learn about the world of music. This is a lifelong commitment. Believe in yourself.*

*Be yourself. Write with your **own voice**. Write about your own experiences, your own values. Put all of yourself in your music. Your energy. Your love of life. Your sense of humor! All of you!*

Do not try to write like another composer. Your music should sound like “you.” This is the only sort of music which will truly communicate. It must come from your imagination, your mind, your heart. And, as different as your music may be from other composers, so, also, will be your musical career and experiences be unique to you. There is room for a variety of creative outlets.

***Experiment** in different genres. Explore many paths in the musical world (always with your own musical voice). Opportunities will come your way to write for various ensembles. Be open-minded and try these new ventures. Ultimately, you will learn which paths are right for you. But, youth is the time for experimentation.*

***Chart your own course**. Be true to yourself. Know who you are, and what you have to say. But, be ready to listen to others along the way. This is a balancing act between your own planning, and the input that comes from friends, colleagues, performers, audiences and critics. In other words, speak (compose) and also listen.*

Get as much **training** as you can. College. Conservatory. Graduate School. Developing your technique as a composer will not overwhelm your individual style. Rather, the training will give you the tools to express yourself well.

Learn about the **business** of music. There is more to the career of a composer than putting notes on the page. One needs some practical understanding of how to make a living by one's writing. The goal is for you to create the music from within yourself, and then to get this music into circulation far and wide. At some point, when you are ready, you might wish to speak with a Music Publisher for some guidelines on how to get your music into print.

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Let us focus on the **inner struggles** that young composers may be facing. These struggles may be the result of self-doubt, or a lack of support from family and community. Often, there are no role models. The young composer can feel quite isolated, even ridiculed. This is not uncommon.

The strength to overcome these obstacles may come from faith, friends and one's own determination to compose music. **Self-motivation** is a powerful force. [A writer must write!] Yet, being able to compose (or arrange) music for friends is a very supportive situation. The friends are asking for the music. They appreciate the music. There is external incentive for the composer to create the music.

Faith in an individual matter. For those who have a faith, the faith must be in some way a reason for writing. For, the spiritual energy is vital to creative energy.

This comes back to the advice of being true to oneself in one's music. One's entire personality, energy, friendships, family and faith, joined together, provide the supportive environment which nurtures a composer. This is a rigorous career. Even a composer with much support can (and often does) face self-doubt in the course of writing. There is the well-known "fear of the blank page." There can also be the "fear of the half-completed work!" Or, the "fear of the imminent deadline." The self-doubts and fears can become magnified when the composer is spending long hours in solitude. One often does battle with oneself in the process of creating anything.

Perhaps **courage** should be considered the foremost trait needed by a composer. Courage to create. Courage to put one's music out for public viewing/listening. Courage to speak the truth of one's thoughts and feelings. Courage to perhaps be misunderstood by the community at large.

This is why writing music for others is strengthening. For, although there may be difficult and frightening moments, the gratification of creating something of beauty, which is shared and valued, outweighs the negative aspects.

And, after a career has been formed and is flourishing, after the commissions and the ongoing collaborations are filling the daily life, there is still ONE GREAT JOY which surpasses all of the others – the joy of forming a single musical thought and putting it down on paper! This is why we compose music.

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Afterthoughts

Start composing at a young age. Write often. Put the notes on the page, rather than keeping them in your mind. Notating your music is a skill to be mastered as early on as possible.

Plan your works, rather than starting with the first note and moving forward from there. Develop the ability to stand back from your music and evaluate it. Chisel it as though you were creating a sculpture.

In addition to composing your own music, try arranging repertoire for your school or church ensembles. Working with these musicians can be a valuable way of developing your writing skills. And, learning to collaborate with performers is essential to a composer's career.

Do your best, honest work. And life will reward you.