

@COMPOSERADVICE

David Pocknee

Abstract: This article consists of a collection of some of the tweets published on the @composeradvice twitter feed (www.twitter.com/composeradvice) between May 2016 and January 2018. The feed was designed to give advice to composers of experimental music.

Attaching a contact microphone to something doesn't magically transform it into music.

Try developing tools as well as compositions; no-one could eat a pineapple without inventing the knife first.

Composition is a branch of computer science. It just doesn't know it yet.

At a concert, imagine the acoustic works are electronic and the electronic works are acoustic. Does this make them better or worse?

Learn to code: the AI generation of music is advancing rapidly and, by 10 years time, no-one without this skill will be a composer.

Don't write works for our cognitive limits now, write them for the humans of the future and their expanded cognition.

Compositional analogy: The algorithms used to model football in the FIFA series of video games are now more interesting than the sport itself.

We are all shaped by our environments, so why not create your ideal composing environment in virtual reality?

The future changes our relationship to the past: It's hard to hear Hindemith without thinking it sounds like bad algorithmic music.

You can spectrally analyse and re-orchestrate anything. Except good taste.

Experimental music: If you are not failing regularly, you are probably not doing it right.

Good experimental music is like a bank heist: high-risk, a huge chance of failure, but an enormous pay-off. Bad music is like a savings account.

The most interesting music rethinks the fundamental principles of what it is and can be. To do this takes time. So reject that commission.

Taking something good and making it good is easy.

Taking something bad and making it bad is easier.

Taking something good and making it bad is easier still.

But the REAL artistic challenge is taking something bad and making it good.

There is no bigger indication of the aesthetic poverty of a work than if it is described as being 'well crafted'.

Every composition is the answer to a question, but too many composers are throwing softball questions.

Many composers compose pieces like they're writing movies in a superhero franchise: all really similar, entertaining enough, but we're bored.

If you want to be original, tell a group of friends all of your ideas for works, then make the one they unanimously dislike.

Experimental Composers: If your newest work doesn't surprise you and everyone you know, you are not doing your job.

TRISTAN TZARA: Why are you and your friends going over ground we in dada covered in the 1920s?

BRION GYSIN: You didn't do it well enough.

Don't waste time doing what others do. When writing a piece, ask yourself: Could anybody else do this? Would anybody else want to do this?

Are you a fan of spin-off TV shows or movies? No? Then why would you base your work on an existing piece of music?

People like to talk about the 'good old days' of composition - but if you're going to fictionalize history, why not make it steampunk?

Early John Cage: 'All sounds are equal.'

Late John Cage: '...but some sounds are more equal than others.'

Sine waves are normally just a placeholder for a more sophisticated approach to sound.

Why make new sounds when you can create new ways of hearing existing sounds?

Compositional analogy: An interest in phonemes doesn't make you a good writer.

Consider: The sounds of nature are just muzak for animals.

Syntax is more interesting than sound.

You know a piece has bad form when you are not able to find a satisfactory answer to the question: 'why has this piece ended?'

If the only justification for a section of your piece is 'look at this other cool stuff I can do with these instruments', lose it. Kill your darlings.

Form is not causality. A simple musical form is: A saucepan filled with water is heated until all the water has evaporated. Form tells you what is likely to happen next, it doesn't explain why the pan is being heated.

If you have problems unifying 'form' and 'content', it's probably because you think of them as 'form' and 'content'.

'Form' is not simply putting material from the start of the piece at the end of the piece. - this is *It Was All A Dream* Form.

Avoid *Child's Story Form*: '. . .and then this happened. . .and then this happened. . .and then this happened. . .and then this happened. . .'

Consider Monty Python's *Four Yorkshiremen* sketch as a musical form.

Every piece should have its own death built in.

If there isn't a good reason for the way your piece ends, there probably isn't a good reason for it starting.

Motivate those around you by kidnapping random composers and cutting off a finger for each cliché you find in their latest work.

Don't be constrained by the limitations of being human: try designing a Wagnerian leitmotif system tailored for the memory of a goldfish.

Every morning ask yourself 'what is my current creative velocity?' Remember that velocity is a measure of the rate of change, not speed.

Why not swap pop science for fake science as your inspiration. Would homeopathic music sound like wandelweiser?

The sure-fire way to make a bad opera is by adapting anything that 'would make a great subject for an opera'.

Use Alvin Lucier's *modus operandi* ('Open an acoustics textbook. Find an idea. Make a piece.') on a textbook about a different subject.

Nothing says 'lack of imagination' quite like motivic development.

Consider employing a newspaper-style editor who will go through all your new scores with a red pen and make cuts where necessary.

If you are nervous about writing an orchestra piece, try and imagine the orchestra naked.

Fear is a good motivator, so, if you have a deadline approaching, why not try composing in a haunted house?

Before beginning to write your next piece, try making a list of pros and cons first.

If you are stuck creatively, why not change your perspective by having a near-death experience?

Write a piece based on the concept of gerrymandered orchestration.

We walk in a 2/4 rhythm. To understand other metres and rhythms, try changing the size and number of your legs.

People are more concerned by Wagner's anti-Semitism than by Gesualdo's murder. What's the worst thing your music would let you get away with?

Cage & Wolff's music and free-improvisation are often seen as politically anarchistic. But what would a Libertarian music sound like? The same?

'Free public transportation to concert venues is more accessible than major triads.' – Joan Arnau Pàmies

Is music the best medium in which to study political or social ideas? Or would you learn more playing *World of Warcraft*?

If the best thing you can expect from a large institution is belated inclusivity, maybe it's best to just let it burn.

The anecdote below is the only true work of political music:

'Schopenhauer scorned the ideas of universal emancipation that had begun to spread through Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. In political terms, he was a reactionary liberal, looking to the state only to protect his life and property. He viewed the revolutionary movements of his day with a mixture of horror and contempt, offering his opera glasses for use as a telescopic rifle sight to guardsmen firing on a crowd during the popular demonstrations of 1848.'¹

It's interesting how people who find pieces with long durations profound are normally those who have never had factory or office jobs.

When composing a piece, remember: length \neq depth

In between the extremes of slowness and speed, there is a special pacing of events that looks like dicking around. Avoid it.

As Feldman has taught us, experiencing mild *deja vu* for 70 minutes can be a good substitute for a profound aesthetic experience.

Remember, just because much bad Contemporary Music is just a stream of unrelated and unconnected nonsense, don't get fooled into thinking a piece is good just because it does the same thing for a long time.

Thinking that making your piece long and quiet makes it 'wandelweiser' is like thinking you're a chef because you have the right hat.

Forget the silly complexity/simplicity arguments: the only thing needed to legitimise a type of notation is someone playing it.

Start a movie-style 'Black List' of the best unperformed scores of this year.

¹ John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (London: Granta Books, 2002), p. 39

Too much material in your piece? Then set your score on fire. The parts you manage to save are the important bits.

Don't write titles that quote other people, write titles that other people want to quote.

Remember: open scores are only open if you believe that human beings have agency.

Claiming that John Cage was more philosopher than composer is a popular view amongst people who neither listen to Cage nor read philosophy.

Deleuze isn't the worst thing to happen to the Arts; the Arts are the worst thing to happen to Deleuze.

Consider that music is the intellectual runt of the artistic litter. We never had a Clement Greenberg or Rosalind Krauss . . .

Some composers use post-structuralist terminology in the same way a job advert might refer to a 'window cleaner' as a 'vision technician'.

No composer has ever used the word 'musical object' to refer to something that could not be described using existing musicological terminology.

To detect pretension, remember my 4S rule: is it Stupid Stuff Sounding Smart?

Philosophy gives metaphors for existence. If you use philosophy as a metaphor for your music, it becomes a metaphor of a metaphor, which is weak.

Listening to a composer talking about philosophy is like watching a dog that thinks it has learned to talk.

Every composition needs to address two key audience questions: 'Why is this happening? And why should I care?'

An easy alternative to amplification is moving closer to your audience.

Comedy is the subversion of expectation. If you laugh in an experimental music concert, you are an idiot: You should be expecting anything.

There is no need to have a 'professional' 'studio' recording of your work; a listener will always hear beyond a recording's limitations.

Never mistake the ignorance of your audience for doing something new.

Don't think that allowing an audience to walk around a venue makes your work more 'immersive'; people are more immersed seated in a cinema.

A composer bowing at the end of a performance is not primarily an opportunity for bathing in acclaim, but an action acknowledging culpability.

An audience is a mob waiting to happen.

Affect is for pharmacists.

You abuse chance when you try to use it as a cure for being indecisive.

Remember: If you give your performers choices, don't become upset if they then pick the ones you don't want them to.

Give every note the same level of thought, care and consideration as if you will have to have it tattooed onto your body.

Remember: there is no intellectually defensible position from which composition and improvisation can be considered two different activities.

The only true improvisation is being born. Everything after that is just the regurgitation of learned behaviours.

Be sceptical: If musical Romanticism honestly expressed a composer's emotional state, there was no boredom in the late 19th century.

Each compositional 'school' is the answer to a specific problem. The error in joining one is the presumption you only have one problem.

Complaining you can't hear the twelve-tone rows in a piece is like complaining you can't identify the reverb settings on Beyonce's vocals.

Nowhere does it say that the two possible performance practices for playing Experimental Music are 'constipated' or 'silly'.

Consider using serialism; if it can encompass a string quartet in a helicopter and a camel pooping planets, it can't be that restrictive.

Surrealism is based on the unconscious of the imperfect and the ill - I want art straight from the dreams of Christ himself.

If you don't create your own canon, someone else will do it for you.

There is a Roman god of self-criticism whose head faces backwards and eternally shakes in disapproval.