

A Comprehensive-Immersive Approach to Beginning Composition Instruction: Report from the University of North Texas

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A. Introduction:

As we consider the current state of music composition at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have an opportunity to reconsider the models of composition pedagogy used during the end of the previous century. The wealth of musical styles and genres available to the young composer and life in a postmodern society necessitate such a reflection and call for new models of teaching composition in the university setting.

The following is an overview of the introductory composition curriculum first implemented at the University of North Texas College of Music in the fall of 1999, which was further developed and refined over the subsequent years. Although substantive program changes were made at both the graduate and undergraduate level during this period, the most sweeping changes—and the focus of this discussion—occurred in the undergraduate program in composition studies, particularly the first two years of study. This Comprehensive-Immersive approach to beginning composition instruction yielded positive results from its very inception, though the long-term results have become increasingly apparent in recent years.

B. Initial Considerations:

It must first be understood that composition is an inherently comprehensive activity, encompassing a broader range of experience than any other discipline within music. Among those areas are:

1. **Performance:** It is as a performer that all musicians—including composers—begin their musical journey. Competency as a performer is often a key determinant in the ultimate success of a composer.
2. **Improvisation:** As an extension of performance, improvisation should be an important part of every performer's experience. In reality, however, a familiarity with improvisation varies widely among performers, from next to nothing in the typical classically-trained musician (whose cadenzas—originally intended as spontaneous elaborations of musical material within the “composed” work—are now printed in the music, and slavishly reproduced by the performer) to performers in jazz and popular idioms, the majority of whose music is spontaneously composed.
3. **Conducting:** Many composers will find themselves drawn to conducting at one point or another during their careers, whether out of interest or necessity. The ability to convey one's intentions directly to a group of musicians by leading, while not absolutely essential, is certainly an enriching and potentially beneficial experience for the composer.
4. **Music Theory:** music theory is so inextricably linked to musical composition that many laypersons—and even experienced musicians—often confuse the two. One of the main tenets of the Comprehensive-Immersive approach to composition study is the understanding that, while a solid grounding in traditional theory (harmony, counterpoint, form and analysis) is a crucial component of the composer's training, it need not—indeed, should not!—be the first step in that training. In fact,

while learning the “rules” of common-practice theory is considered important for any composer, such an early exposure to what may be perceived as a dogmatic, pedantic approach to music theory can have a deleterious effect on the development of the young composer.

5. **Music literature:** an understanding of music literature and its context within music history is critically important, and typically begins with the repertoire for the student’s own instrument/voice. From there, an exploration of literature should broaden to encompass a wide variety of genres. This contextualization need not be confined to the western canon, but should branch out to other idioms as well, including jazz, popular music, and world music (the latter of which is, of course, not bound to a particular “literature” in the western sense of the word).

6. **Orchestration:** An understanding of all instruments and voice types is a necessary component of the young composer’s training. In addition to studying instrumentation and orchestration in the classroom, first-hand experience through a variety of “methods” courses is invaluable.

7. **Notation:** Conveying the sounds you have conceived to a second party (performer), for transmission to a third party (audience) is a critical component of the professional composer’s work. As music itself is in a continuous state of flux, so must the notation adapt to these changes; it is imperative that the young composer becomes facile with not only the basics of standard musical notation, but with notational innovations as well.

8. **Technology:** This issue has become much less of a problem for young composers now than in the past, since they will have had exposure to technology since their earliest conscious memories. However, while there may no longer be a practical hurdle to overcome, there often still exists a conceptual barrier, since most young students will have had very little (if any) contact with more experimental applications of technology. Those who have encountered music technology may be familiar with notational software (e.g., Finale, Sibelius) or studio mixing programs (e.g., Garage Band, Pro Tools, Digital Performer), but almost none of them will have encountered software used for sound synthesis (e.g., Sound Hack, Sound Designer) or interactive media (e.g., Max/MSP, pd).

To supplement the traditional theory curriculum offered in most music schools, exposure to a variety of contemporary musical styles and techniques is critical to the understanding and application of compositional resources at the beginning of the 21st century. Such familiarity with these materials provides a context for the prospective composer’s work. Additionally, an understanding and awareness of other art forms (literature, visual arts, dance, film), as well as cultural, social, and historical trends, is an important component of a Comprehensive-Immersive approach to composition studies.

So, with all of this in mind, the following questions are raised:

1. Where does the instructor begin with the novice composer?
2. How does one effectively integrate the above areas without overwhelming the student?

It is in addressing these questions that the *immersive* aspect of this approach is critical.

C. Context for Program Changes

In order to better understand the context in which these program changes were implemented, it is important to provide some background on the University of North Texas, and specifically the College of Music:

The University of North Texas is a public state university and is considered a “student-centered emerging research institution,” with an enrollment of approximately 33,000 students (85% undergraduate, 15% graduate). The College of Music at UNT is the largest accredited music program

in the United States with approximately 1700 students (65% undergraduate, 35% graduate), offering Bachelor of Music degrees in a variety of majors, as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music. There is an average of 60 composition majors each year (60% undergraduate, 40% graduate), though the program also serves several Bachelor of Arts students, Master of Arts students (with a concentration in composition), and other graduate music majors who are approved to declare composition as a related field.

Such a large program in a state institution presents a number of advantages and disadvantages, among the former being abundant performance opportunities (from electronic media to full orchestra) and a large, diverse faculty offering a wide range of both general and specialized courses. One of the primary disadvantages of such a program is the potentially low teacher-student ratio and the resulting lack of interaction between faculty and students (although in the case of UNT, the institution's history as a teacher's college seems to alleviate this problem somewhat) and the issues associated with the "open enrollment" policies of a state institution. These factors were taken into consideration when, in 1999, the composition faculty at UNT initiated a number of important structural changes in the composition program, encompassing both the graduate and undergraduate curricula, but directed toward the latter in particular. In addition to implementing more stringent evaluation procedures at regular intervals throughout the program, it was necessary to immediately resolve two curricular concerns:

1. The **Contemporary Music** course, a requirement for all composition majors, was traditionally taught during the fourth year of the curriculum. The structure and placement of this course presented several problems:

- a. The repertoire and techniques covered in this course—which should form an important foundation for the composer's studies—were presented too late in the curriculum for students to apply to their own compositional work.
- b. It was necessary to devote an inordinate amount of time to reviewing early 20th-century repertoire during this course, as this material was not adequately covered in the accompanying theory and history curriculum. As a result, there was relatively little time for an in-depth consideration of more recent styles, techniques, and philosophies.
- c. By the fourth year of study, music students will have had sufficient exposure to common-practice music (through the theory and history curriculum), to the point where they may have developed a bias against other modes of expression. Such conditioning is particularly problematic for composition majors, who should be open to a wide range of approaches to musical creation. Offering a contemporary music course late in the curriculum requires the instructor to overcome any attitudinal obstacles that result from this constant diet of common practice music, which has heretofore been presented as "the norm."

2. The original **Beginning Composition** course was also problematic in its structure and content:

- a. The course was originally a loosely organized seminar, consisting primarily of general discussions of various compositional matters with almost no discussion of repertoire.
- b. The class met only one hour per week, providing relatively little interaction between faculty and students; as a result there was insufficient assessment of the students' potential on the part of the faculty mentor.
- c. The course was offered only to students who declared composition as their majors following approval of a composition portfolio: this structure disenfranchised prospective composers who did not fit within a prescribed paradigm, as well as those students interested in studying composition but without any prerequisite compositional experience.

The solution to the aforementioned curricular problems lies in the courses themselves. The content of the original Contemporary Music course was thus distributed over two semesters and formed the basis of the redesigned Beginning Composition course, which underwent the following changes:

1. Rather than meeting only one hour per week, the new Beginning Composition class *adopted a three-part course structure*, which allowed for a more thorough pedagogical approach¹:

- a. **Lecture:** In this component of the course, the instructor presents basic concepts, analyzes literature demonstrating those concepts, and lays out a contextual basis for the composers and works under consideration.
- b. **Laboratory:** This component of the course is taught by a graduate teaching fellow and focuses on the practical application of material presented in the lectures. This lab structure also allows the composition faculty to mentor the teaching fellows due to the close working relationship between the two.
- c. **Departmental:** This component of the course—which coincides with the weekly meeting of the entire composition department— includes guest lectures, faculty presentations, roundtable discussions, and performances pertaining to contemporary music. New students are integrated into the larger community of composers through these departmental meetings.

2. *The composition portfolio requirement was eliminated* as a tool for evaluating prospective undergraduate composition majors.² This may seem like a radical decision, given that a composition portfolio is one of the key tools for evaluating prospective composition majors at nearly every other institution; however, after years of evaluating portfolios at the freshman level, there seemed to be relatively little correlation between the quality of a prospective (undergraduate) composition major's portfolio and his/her ultimate success in the program. This may be attributed to a number of factors:

- a. Most high school age students have simply not been trained as composers to the same degree and level that they have as performers. Considering that their sole musical experiences prior to college are most likely *not* from trained composers, but from performers (e.g., through instrumental/voice lessons) or music educators (e.g., the band director, choir director, and/or orchestra director), any “compositional” experiences they might have obtained from these sources are most likely specious at best.
- b. The expectation of a portfolio requirement upon entering college disenfranchises those students who have never previously attempted to compose but are nonetheless interested in exploring musical composition as an avenue of study.
- c. For those students who have had the opportunity to study music theory prior to attending college, there is often an even a greater attitudinal hurdle to overcome, in that such training is frequently left in the hands of less-than-adequately-trained individuals, who often reinforce the notion of a musical “norm.” This is also where students first confuse the terms “theory” and “composition,” mistakenly believing their theory projects to be the latter—and thus any “portfolio” would most likely consist of pedantic theory exercises.

¹ From an administrative standpoint, this change in the course structure required an analogous change in the credit hours generated by this course. In order to maintain the same credit hour requirements for the composition degree, sophomore lessons were reduced from one hour to thirty minutes per week and a weekly seminar was added to supplement the lessons; as a result, the credit hours for the sophomore lessons were reduced from 3.0 hours per semester to 2.0 hours per semester, the extra credit hours being applied toward the Beginning Composition course (which was increased from 1.0 to 2.0 hours per semester).

² It must be noted here that portfolios are still required at the University of North Texas for all graduate composition applicants (including those applying to declare a minor field in composition) as well as undergraduate students transferring from another institution.

- d. Given the wide variety of performance experiences available to pre-college age students—piano lessons, school ensembles (both “classical” and “jazz”), rock bands, folk groups—not to mention the wide ranging venues for musical consumption (films, CDs, iPods, video games, live concerts, etc.), how can one expect to evaluate a novice composer’s portfolio with any uniform set of criteria?

As an example of this last point, let’s take two very different cases: the first student has taken piano lessons since the age of four, has been thoroughly exposed to Classical and Romantic piano repertoire but has little interest in recent music (including popular idioms), has no improvisational experience but is an excellent sight reader, and has never performed in a school ensemble. The second student learned to play guitar by ear in grade school, is familiar with a variety of recent musical idioms but almost none of the “classical” repertoire, does not read music well but is a very good improviser, and has played in garage bands as well as the high school jazz band. While most entering composition students will have experiences somewhere between these two extremes, these two hypothetical students are certainly plausible cases—and they beg the question: how does a composition portfolio adequately reflect the compositional potential of such disparate applicants?

D. Beginning Composition: Further Considerations

One of the primary functions of the Beginning Composition course within the Comprehensive-Immersive approach is building a uniform foundation for all composition students—including such hypothetical cases described above and everybody in between—providing each with the opportunity to “fill in the gaps” of his/her unique creative musical experiences. By the end of the first year of study, these students will be well on their way to building their portfolios—expressing both their individuality as composers and their broader understanding of the musical world. Thus, any decisions on their part to adopt or reject a particular approach to composition will be made from an informed perspective rather than out of ignorance.

The following issues were taken into consideration when restructuring the Beginning Composition curriculum:

1. In addition to prospective composition majors, the Beginning Composition course is required of all undergraduate theory and jazz arranging majors as well—and provides these students with compositional experiences outside of those within their respective degree programs. Prospective composition majors also benefit from the diverse perspectives of these non-composition majors.
2. The course is open to any qualified student interested in studying composition—not just those who plan to become composition majors. As a result, a larger number of students have been given the opportunity for an intensive compositional experience than was previously possible.
3. The course assignments are varied and comprehensive, and consist of the following:
 - a. Six guided **composition projects** per semester, plus a **final composition project**, which allows the student to more freely apply techniques studied during the course of the semester.
 - b. Weekly **score study** and **listening assignments**: three or four works are assigned each week, demonstrating compositional techniques discussed in class and which are applied to their composition projects.
 - c. **Source readings** by composers discussed in class: these are often advanced (graduate level) and challenging to many of the students; but even a general understanding of the content of these readings is important, as students can glean important perspectives that reinforce the

class discussions and projects—and many students will likely return to these materials in their later studies.

- d. **Journal entries**, allowing students to analyze, criticize, and synthesize listening and reading assignments by writing narrative evaluations of each.
- e. **Concert reviews** (two per semester) of contemporary music events, which allow students to apply what they have learned in the course to new and unfamiliar pieces in live performance settings.

The carefully prescribed composition project guidelines and an integrated course structure help guide the students toward developing good working habits, critical thinking skills, and technical facility. Because of the intensive nature and degree of the assignments detailed above, there is no final examination for the course; students are assessed on their understanding and application of materials studied in class through evaluation of the journals and composition projects. However, students who continue as composition majors beyond the first year must take a Freshman Barrier Examination, a 45-minute oral examination that includes score and listening identification, discussion of terminology and techniques, and an aural examination that covers the material from the Beginning Composition courses.³

E. Goals for the Comprehensive-Immersive Composition Model

By the end of the first year of composition studies, the student is expected to achieve the following goals:

1. Acceptance of a broader definition of the term “music” through exposure to contemporary musical idioms. This is more difficult in some cases than in others, and depends upon the degree of conditioning on the part of the student prior to taking the course. I have found that students who have had experience with more progressive popular musical idioms (rock, hip hop, drum and bass, electronica, etc.) are far more receptive to experimental techniques within “art music” than those whose experience is limited to classical music or jazz.
2. Learning what to listen for in a piece of music, within the appropriate cultural, historical, theoretical, and aesthetic contexts: it is important for students to understand that musical appreciation is relative rather than absolute.
3. Development of critical thinking skills and the ability to assess “quality” in a wide variety of music: this is a difficult skill for students to attain, since they must essentially learn a new “language” in order to make any qualitative assessments.
4. Recognition and application of various melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and structural materials.
5. The ability to create short but cohesive and effective musical compositions, drawing upon a wide range of techniques and stylistic approaches.

It is not difficult to argue that achieving such goals is beneficial not only to future composition students, but to any music student. However, until a Comprehensive-Immersive approach to composition is adopted into the general music curriculum, it remains an optional course of study to all but the prospective composition major.

³ Detailed information (syllabi, reading/listening lists, projects, etc.) for the Beginning Composition courses at the University of North Texas may be found on the course website: <http://www.courses.unt.edu/jklein/1180-3080>.

F. Results

Since instituting the changes detailed above at the University of North Texas, the Beginning Composition course enrollment has increased 300%—due in large part to allowing a broader range of students the opportunity to study composition by allowing non-composition majors to enroll in the course. In spite of this increased enrollment, there has actually been a net *decrease* in students graduating with a Bachelor of Music degree in composition. This is due to in part to a greater selectivity within a larger pool of students—but also because only the most serious students are up to the demands of such a rigorous course of study within the Comprehensive-Immersive approach. This resulting increase in the quality of students has been manifested in an overall improvement in the quality of senior composition recitals and in the higher acceptance rates to competitive graduate composition programs in recent years. Although little quantifiable evidence exists, personal anecdotes from former students also suggests a higher appreciation for contemporary modes of musical expression—thus, one of the most far-reaching and significant benefits of a Comprehensive-Immersive approach to Beginning Composition Studies is the cultivation of better, more well-informed audiences for future generations of composers.

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