

The Art of Composition

By Ed Saindon

Many musicians view composing as a mysterious process that cannot be analyzed, practiced, and learned. However, like improvisation, specific musical elements and devices used in composition can be analyzed and studied. From Beethoven to Wayne Shorter to the Beatles, various styles of compositions all have common techniques and musical devices, regardless of the genre.

All of the great composers have their own identity in their compositions. I suggest listening to the great composers and analyzing what factors contribute to the overall sound and make those compositions identifiable to a specific composer. A few composers to check out would be Carlos Jobim for his brilliant Brazilian compositions, Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk for jazz composition, and classical composers like Brahms, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Be careful not to overlook the classical compositions, as many jazz players have been influenced by them. Pianist Brad Mehldau has been influenced by Brahms, and that comes across in many of his compositions. Many compositional devices in classical music, like retrograde and retrograde inversion, are valuable tools that can be used in jazz composition.

Guitarist Pat Metheny's first album, *Bright Size Life*, featured his original compositions. When that recording came out, it was so fresh not only due to the players (Metheny, Jaco Pastorius, and Bob Moses), but also for the exciting and new sound of the compositions. Pat said that he started composing to create new and different vehicles for his improvisations. He wanted to get away from the standard repertoire that everyone was playing and create his own progressions to improvise over. Composing allows musicians to be their own architects of music. It also allows their own voices to come out more clearly and definitively.

Some of my favorite jazz composers are Keith Jarrett, Wayne Shorter, Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Thelonious Monk, and Pat Metheny. Many of those composers wrote for the specific members in their band at the time. Ellington knew how trumpeter Cootie Williams would phrase the music and how alto sax player Johnny Hodges would play lead with a totally unique sound. Keith Jarrett wrote some of his most beautiful compositions for his European quartet, which featured Jan Garbarek on soprano and tenor sax.

Many important compositional elements

are inherent in simple folk songs, the blues, or classical pieces. Elements like melodic contour, melodic repetition, and melodic development can be found in an ethnic folk song as well as a composition by Mozart. As we have all heard many times before, good music is good music. There are only twelve notes, and those notes can create great music regardless of style.

With composition, the musician can create and elicit a variety of moods, feelings, and emotions from the listener. That is one of the most important gifts of writing music. Creating one's own composition is personally satisfying and allows composers to create their own musical landscapes that are fresh and not necessarily based upon the past. Many of the standard compositions of the 1920s through the 1940s (the standard body of repertoire called the Great American Songbook) were based upon a very typical and limited 32-bar structure with, usually, an AABA form. Although many of those songs from that era are compositional gems, they are limited in their structural format. I personally enjoy writing in the through-composed format of such artists as Wayne Shorter and Keith Jarrett.

One of the most important elements of composition is the use of melodic repetition. Composers like Ellington, Monk, Mozart, and Beethoven made the most of their melodic motives and phrases. There is a good deal of repetition and motivic development of simple melodic phrases in many of the classic compositions. A composition might start out with a simple two- or three-note motive that is the catalyst for an entire composition. However, it is important to know when not to overdo repetition and to know when to introduce new melodic material in order to keep the music fresh, unexpected, and interesting.

The process of composition can be practiced with a variety of musical elements and techniques. Start by making a few determinations, such as: Will the composition have a specific groove or a vague time feel? Will the composition be fast or slow? What kind of mood do you want to elicit from the listener—a sense of melancholy or joyousness? Will the harmony be static or active? Will the composition use three-note triads and/or dense seventh chords with tensions? What about modulations, metric changes, introductions, or interludes?

Try limiting yourself to specific parameters and create something within those parameters. For example, try writing a 21-measure composition using two major keys and only major

and minor triads. The list and possibilities are endless. How about writing a modal tune using a Phrygian mode as in the opening measures of the jazz classic "Nardis"?

The act of writing is different for many composers. Some composers wait to be inspired, while some composers can sit down and create something magical on the spot. Pianist Chick Corea is prolific and can sit down towards the very end of a deadline and create masterpieces. Many composers think of something inspirational, like an event, a place, or a person. All of these approaches are very personal, and there is not a right or a wrong way to go about it. The key is to begin the process and to get something down on paper or recorded. Beginning the process is the critical first step. After that, it's easy to make changes and edit.

I wrote "The Last Goodbye" as a tribute to legendary educator and big band leader Herb Pomeroy, who passed away. Herb was a great educator, trumpeter and person. I had the privilege of playing with Herb in a duo format for many years, and he was a tremendous influence on my musical development. Some of the elements worth noting in this composition are: through composed with melodic repetition, variety of chord structures from simple triad inversions to polychords, use of tension resolution in the melody, interlude (which is also used as a tag ending), variety of sections with varying lengths, and wide dynamic and melodic contour.

"The Last Goodbye" can be downloaded at www.edsaindon.com and the full track can be heard at www.myspace.com/edsaindon.

The track features Dave Liebman on soprano, Mark Walker on drums, David Clark on acoustic bass, and me on vibraphone. It is the lead track on the recently released recording *Depth of Emotion* from World Improvised Music.

Ed Saindon is a Professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston where he has been teaching since 1976. He is also active as a clinician. German publisher Advance Music recently released his book *Exploration in Rhythm, Volume 1, Rhythmic Phrasing in Improvisation*. For more information on his recordings, latest news, videos, and articles, visit www.edsaindon.com. PN

The Last Goodbye

Ed Saindon

Straight Feel ♩ = 120

1 B- G#-7b5,9

A/G B-

5 C/E B-/D A/C# A-/C E-6,9

9 Bbmaj7#5/A Bbmaj7/A F#/A# B- B-/A

13 G#-7b5 Gmaj7 F#7sus4 F#7 B-

17 F#7susalt F#7alt B- F#-/A

21 E-/G D/F# E/G# A F#/A#

25 B- B-/A G#-7b5 Gmaj7 F#7sus4 F#7 B-9,11

29

Interlude

34 B- G#-7b5

A/G B-

38