MUSIC COMPOSITION TOOLBOX

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Science Press

Cover photographs by Diana Blom – Henry Saxby's performance
of *Piano Burning* by Annea Lockwood (1968) in 2004.

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Introduction

Composing music is a rewarding, creative learning experience. For students it offers an unparalleled insight into the underlying workings of music, and develops musicianship. Performance-orientated students become more sophisticated interpreters through the process of composition. A musicology student who composes will quickly learn useful observational tools for analysing historical works. Above all, composition is a form of self-expression, and as such helps students' personal growth and self-esteem.

In designing this book, the authors kept returning to the same issue: teaching composition can be daunting. Composition is a living, breathing art form which adapts and grows as society changes. There is no definitive text from which to teach. The question for a music teacher and student composer therefore remains, 'Where do I start?' This book provides a solution.

Music Composition Toolbox offers modules, examples and exercises which introduce and illustrate a range of useful basic composition techniques. In this book the student will encounter suggestions covering pitch, rhythm, harmony, texture, timbre and organising material. It also deals with creativity and aims to provide initial inspiration.

The modules in *Music Composition Toolbox* are applicable to secondary or early tertiary students. The exercises in each module are designed to encourage students to work with targeted concepts, learning discrete compositional techniques which can later be used in combination. These features provide starting points every student needs to write their first compositions, develop their own compositional techniques, and perhaps in time, develop their own distinctive compositional voice.

The examples have a contemporary music focus, and demonstrate how techniques have been used by professional composers.

All modules in this book are designed to be covered in one or two lessons. The module order is flexible. For example, if a student requires guidance midway through writing a composition, browsing through *Music Composition Toolbox* will provide inspiration. Arranging the modules into a structured course is also possible. The appendices provide a reference function, covering everything from notation to score presentation.

Matthew Hindson   Damian Barbeler   Diana Blom

List of recordings on accompanying CD

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Acknowledgements

Guide to module content

Topic area	Modules
Tools for organising pitch and harmony	1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 18
Tools for organising rhythm	5, 8, 9, 17, 18, 19, 20
Tools for tone colour	6, Appendix 1
Tools for creating musical material	1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 21
Tools for organising material	12, 14, 15, Appendix 3
Reference areas	Appendix 1, 2, 3

Music Composition Toolbox cannot cover every compositional activity or topic. Further recommended areas of study beyond this volume include structuring an entire piece, breaking musical paradigms and clichés, effective use of register and instrumental timbre to create contrast, and organising pitch material vertically (harmonic considerations). At the time of writing, the NSW HSC Online website has some good online resources for some of these areas: http://hsc.csu.edu.au/music/composition/tips/

About the authors

Matthew Hindson is one of the most successful and distinctive composers of his generation. His music often displays influences of popular music styles within a classical music context. *The San Francisco Chronicle* recently said of his works: 'Hindson has amazing range. He could probably wring a concerto from the sound of a doorbell. His source material ranges from classical to Metallica to soothing melodic riffs that may have been extracted from an elevator. Best of all, it works.'

Matthew is a Senior Lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, prior to which he was a teacher of composition for eleven years at MLC School. Aside from music composition, Matthew's research interests include music for video games, particularly that written for the Nintendo Entertainment System. Matthew is the artistic director of the Aurora Festival, and his music is published by Faber Music.
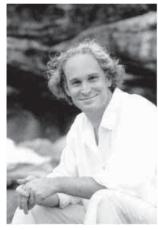
Photo: Christine Myers

Damian Barbeler studied composition from the Queensland Conservatorium of Music where he studied with Gerard Brophy. Additional studies have been undertaken with Richard Meale, Nigel Westlake, and Richard Gill. He is currently undertaking a Ph.D. in composition under Michael Smetanin at the University of Sydney, and his music is performed and broadcast nationally and internationally.

Education has always been a central part of Barbeler's professional career. He has tutored at university and secondary level. He has designed and conducted workshops in creativity, leadership and team building with national corporations including Arnott's Biscuits, the Commonwealth Bank, The Sydney Benevolent Society and the Queensland Catholic Education Department.

Barbeler's Master of Music thesis 'Experiential Learning in Composition' is demonstrative of his education philosophy. He believes by engaging the individual physically, mentally and emotionally deeper learning outcomes can be achieved, leading to greater engagement with the subject, and ultimately the broader 'love of learning.' Damian is currently composer in residence with MLC School Burwood, a position he has held since 1998.

Photo: Bridget Elliott

Diana Blom studied music at the University of Canterbury (NZ), the University of Sydney and the University of Michigan. Her compositions include chamber music for several combinations, two of which have been published by Orpheus Music. She has an interest in Australian writers and has set words of David Malouf, Helen Garner and Peter Goldsworthy to music. Diana has been composer-in-residence with Opera Australia for whom she was commissioned to write a children's opera, and many of her music theatre works have been performed in schools in Australian and Hong Kong.

Diana is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication Art at the University of Western Sydney. She plays harpsichord and piano and has had articles published in many music education journals. Diana is currently on the Board of the International Music Education Society.

Photo: Lynne Mathew

1 Modes

A common question when starting a piece is 'What notes will I use?' This is an important issue as your choice will have a profound effect on the end result.

For much of the past 400 years of Western music, pitch material was limited to notes in major and minor keys. In contemporary music, the possible choices have been expanded considerably. The use of **modes** or **pitch sets** is one method contemporary composers use to establish the broad pitch boundaries of a composition.

A **mode** is simply a **pattern of intervals that form a set of note-names**. A major or minor scale is itself a mode constructed of particular patterns of tones and semitones within an octave.

Church modes

One set of intervals form what are known as the **church modes**. These are created by cycling through the standard pattern of tones and semitones of the major scale. Dating back more than 1000 years, each mode has its own character. Here are the list of church modes, all starting on C. Play through these modes and listen to each mode's distinct character.

C Ionian (major)

C Dorian

C Phrygian

C Lydian

C Mixolydian

C Aeolian (natural minor)

C Locrian

(semitones are marked by the ⌣)

Composition Task 1.1	Church modes

1. Compose a melody of 4-8 bars in C major (i.e. C Ionian). Use each note name in your melody at least once.

2. Rewrite this melody three times using three of the church modes shown above (i.e. by changing the relevant accidentals). Play these melodies and compare their sound.

More modes

Many different modes, other than church modes, have been used across the ages throughout both Western and non-Western cultures, not just the church modes.
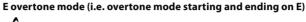
A mode can have any number of note-names within the octave. Most Western modes, such as the overtone mode given below, contain seven different note-names within an octave.

E overtone mode (i.e. overtone mode starting and ending on E)

Which famous TV theme song uses the overtone mode?

(Hint: Play the first, fourth and fifth degree of this mode in succession.)

Pentatonic modes, typically found in many Asian musical cultures, have five note-names per octave. Ross Edwards uses the following mode in the 'Andante II' movement of his *Five Little Pieces*.

C♯ pentatonic mode

Mark the intervals in the above example.

The **whole-tone mode** (used extensively by Debussy) uses six notes, each a tone apart.

F whole-tone mode

Some modes have more than seven note-names per octave. The **octatonic** mode was a favourite of French composer Olivier Messiaen. Australian composer Anne Boyd employs it in works including *Bali Moods II*. Notice how the arrangement of intervals is symmetrical.

E octatonic (semitone-tone pattern)

tone   tone   tone   tone

semitone   semitone   semitone   semitone

What are some of the types of chords you can create based on the tonic of this mode?

The **Scaleopia** website is an excellent source of information on a large range of modes from both Western and non-Western music. At the time of writing its address is:

http://www.geocities.com/scaleopia/

Creating your own mode

It is not necessary to memorise long lists of modes - you can make up your own. Contemporary composers often construct their own modes to suit the the atmosphere they want to create, and therefore give the piece a more individual sound world. For example, Australian composer Paul Stanhope created his own mode for most of the first movement of *Two Pieces for Solo Violin*, 'Dance for the White Spirits'. Stanhope's choice of intervals helps to give the movement its own character.

Example 1: Paul Stanhope, Dance for the White Spirits *(2001) for solo violin, bars 1–29. Used with permission of the composer.*

When creating your own mode, there is no set rule or pattern that must be followed. You are allowed to have **any interval** between consecutive notes. This does not mean that you shouldn't choose your pitches carefully. One approach is to sit at a keyboard or other instrument and improvise. Play with small sets of note-names and when you find a set you like, write these notes down. This is your new mode.

1. Think of a mood, atmosphere or image that you want to create with your music.

2. Using at a keyboard or other instrument, play one note. Write down this note-name on a piece of paper.

3. Add another note to the first. Play the two notes together. If this fits with the mood or image in Step 1, then write this note-name down.

4. Continue Step 3 until you have as many note-names as you want for your mode. Play different combinations of these note-names in different registers of the instrument to ensure you like your choice. Name this mode after yourself (e.g. 'the Rachel Mode').

5. Write a 20-second melodic fragment based upon this mode. You must use every note-name in your mode at least once. Other notes from outside your mode may be used occasionally for the purpose of ornamentation.
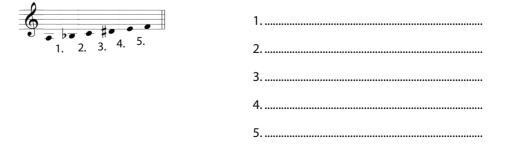
Extension: non-octavating modes

Most modes cover the span of an octave before repeating. Thus for example, in C Hungarian mode, the combination of intervals – semitone, augmented second, semitone, tone, semitone, augmented second, semitone – covers an entire octave before the pattern repeats.

C Hungarian mode

Span = one octave

Span = one octave

This need not necessarily be the case. In a **non-octavating mode**, the span of the intervallic cycle does not equal one octave. This means that different octaves of a non-octavating mode will have different note-names.

For example, list the intervals between consecutive notes in the following mode:

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

4. ....

5. ....

What is the total span of this mode (i.e. the interval between the first and last notes)?