

How to Become a Better Songwriter!

by Glenn Christianson

When I'm writing to a group of songwriters and composers, I know I'm covering a wide range of experience. Some of you may just be starting out, trying to make that new melody fit your lyrics. Many of you are seasoned composers, arrangers and orchestrators. But no matter where you are on your musical journey, you want to grow and improve. Right? So how do you get your inspiration? **How do you expand beyond your present paradigm as a musician?**

The obvious starting point is to be well grounded in the "tools of the trade." Understanding theory, part-writing, vocal voice-leading, and orchestration are essential. In this day and age, a knowledge of a musical typesetting program like Finale is essential, too. I've met young composers who have never disciplined themselves with the "tools of the trade." They just want to "feel it" and make it happen. NEWS FLASH! That won't work. Suppose an author wants to write a book, but never learns the alphabet or the basics of grammar and plot development. You know what? He won't be writing a book very soon! **In whatever field you work, you need the basic tools. That takes time and discipline.** SORRY! No shortcut for that, friends!

But take it one step further. In the "old days" (whenever they were), the young composers learned from the older ones. When I was in college, I studied graduate composition from one of my all-time musical heroes, Dr. Dwight Gustafson. He was a consummate composer, arranger, orchestrator, director, and producer as well as a humble, spiritual man who lived his life by principle. In those days you couldn't copy your orchestra parts with a computer program. They had to be done by hand, one part at a time. Much of my learning came from copying Dr. Gustafson's scores and asking him questions. "What were you trying to accomplish in this section? Why are the strings bowing this way? How did you know this passage will create this emotion? Why did you go back to the original theme?" I asked the questions, then waited for the answers. What a wealth of learning that was!

So how do you keep growing and learning today? Do you go back to school for refresher courses in music theory? SUGGESTION: How about learning from the greatest composers in the world? Someone like John Williams. (Just the mention of his name brings a movie theme into your mind, doesn't it?) We love to listen to his music and say "WOW!" But how can you learn from him to be a better musician? Does he have a class in Music Composition 101? No. But you can **ask some questions that will help you to learn and grow on your own...** from John Williams or any other musician.

1. WHAT DID THE COMPOSER DO? When analyzing music, the first question is, “What did he do?” Did he write a march? A gospel song? A pop song? Something for easy-listening on the radio? Was it a movie soundtrack? If a movie soundtrack, what part of the movie? The romance scene? The high action sequences? The horror movie where you were scared out of your mind? Or the time when the aliens came from a parallel universe to destroy Earth? (Are you thinking of any film scores right now?) **The reason for writing music is a very important starting point. That gives context to the music.**

When I started writing music 40 years ago, I used to wait for the “inspiration” to hit...that “Ah-ha!” moment! I never knew when it would be, but when it hit, I started scribbling on whatever piece of paper I could find. So much for discipline, eh? A businessman friend of mine said I would get to the place I would go into the office in the morning, write music for the day, and come home at dinner time. I thought, “Where’s the inspiration in that?” Today, that’s exactly what I do. What’s the inspiration? A paycheck! But I’ve developed my “musical tools” so that I can do that. It’s a journey that takes many years...but it sure is fulfilling So my starting point is, “What am I doing?” That creates the purpose for my music.

2. HOW DID HE DO IT? Okay, time to dust off your old theory book! If you’re going to learn from the music you listen too, you need to have a grasp of music theory so you can analyze it. (Again...no shortcuts here!) **First, what style did he write in?** Baroque? Romantic? Post-romantic? 20th Century Classical? Jazz? Pop? Rock? Great composers pick a style (and most of them can write in any style), and then develop it.

Next, what type of harmony and chords is he using? Any neat stuff that grabs your attention? Is the melody predominant? In what instrument? Is there a counter-part? What about the bass pattern? (Yes, the bass part is a melody, too.) As you listen to the music, is there one thing that grabs your attention the most?

Next, what’s going on in the orchestra? A lot of movement? Sustained chords? Here’s a neat technique that I like in film movie. I call it a “push-pull” (my own term). A strong rhythmic section is going at the same time sustained strings or other instruments are playing. It creates two emotions at once. The rhythm gives the power and the energy, while the sustained instruments connect the dots and give it continuity. A favorite spot of mine is in the film score for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In the scene where the White Witch is killing Aslan, there are all sorts of exotic percussion instruments being used. But there are legato instruments playing in the background. That’s just one example of so much good stuff out there.

There’s a book that’s been out of print for years by the great Russian classical composer, Rimsky-Korsakov. (One of his best-known works is *Scheherazade*. He also wrote “The Flight of the Bumblebee.”) He’s one of the only great composers that I know of who wrote a book on orchestration. It’s called *Principles of Orchestration*. (You can see the chapter listings at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33900/33900-h/33900-h.htm>, If you can buy a printed copy of the book, it would be well worth your money to have it in your library.) It’s two volumes in one. The first volume includes practical applications of the orchestra including a wonderful chart that shows how the instruments sound in each octave. The second volume includes examples from his works applying his principles. I’ve referred to it for years in my own orchestrations.)

Going back to the composer that you're studying right now, are there any unique characteristics about that composer's music? Using John Williams again as my example, he usually alters one of the melody notes in his main theme to make it unique and memorable. Here's your quiz: Which notes did he alter in *Jurassic Park*? *ET*? *Indiana Jones*? Or the "Darth Vader" theme in *Star Wars*? (Okay...he altered more than one note in that one!) Not sure? Ok, go find them. He usually doesn't alter a bunch of notes. (Then they wouldn't be special.) But when one key note is altered, that's like a big cherry on top of a dish of ice cream!

Just a comment about synthesizers. (To date myself, the first synth I got 35 years ago didn't have a MIDI or a USB port! Okay, quit laughing!) The key to using a synth effectively is NOT having great sound samples. Or having the best computer with a great MIDI interface. You need to know how the real instruments would play, and then play the synth as much like that as possible. Pulling up a string patch and playing a few chords here and there will NOT sound like a string section. How would real strings play it? Would the low strings play differently than the high strings? If you were conducting an orchestra, what would you tell the violins to get the sound you want? If you're not familiar with the real, traditional instruments, then you have some research to do. You need to replicate them as much as you can on the synth to make it sound as real as possible. Also, be sure you know the real ranges of the instruments. Stay within that range when playing them, or they'll sound phony. (On our website, we have a bunch of recorded samples of trax done primarily with synth.)

Obviously, there are hundreds of "how to?" questions you can ask. I'm giving you just a few to whet your appetite. Here's your next homework assignment: **Create four or five theory questions about music that you will ask in the future.** Keep expanding that list, and it will become your ever-growing study guide. There's a wealth of information out there. Go get it!

3. HOW DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL? Music is about emotion. Let me repeat that. **MUSIC IS ABOUT EMOTION!** Every song makes you feel a certain way. Have you ever watched a movie without the music? Almost no emotion. So, put your "theory analysis hat" on again. What is it about that music that makes you feel the way you do? Is it the melody...or the chord progression...or the rhythm instruments? Maybe a high violin melody grabbed your heart. Or the dissonance and electronic instruments create that fear and unrest. You feel a certain way for a reason. A great musician once told me, **"I've been writing music my whole life, and I don't know why it affects people the way it does! But it does! And I know what tools to use to make it happen."**

Think of three different pieces of music right now...hopefully different styles. How do they make you feel? Why? Good work, friend. You're already growing!

4. HOW CAN YOU USE SOME OF HIS IDEAS IN YOUR MUSIC? You've just taken a leap forward in analyzing a musical piece by a great composer. He doesn't own the ideas...only the music he created. **Take those ideas and use them yourself!**

When I was a teenager, one of my favorite composers and arrangers was Ralph Carmichael. Ralph wrote and arranged brilliant orchestral music, both in the secular and religious world. I used to buy his orchestrations (with my own money), copy the parts onto a master score and see

how he wrote them. Then I stood in front of a mirror and “conducted” the orchestra (in my mind) as they played his music. (You’re laughing again!) Years later I saw him conduct a live 100-piece orchestra in a recording studio. Wow!

Another composer/arranger that I greatly admired was Harold DeCou. In addition to his orchestral and vocal works, he wrote beautiful piano solos and duets. I bought his books and learned all of his solos. When I got to a chord that was a “cool chord,” I analyzed it. What step of the scale was it built on? IV, V or VI. How did he alter it to make it neat? One of his chords I really liked had a lowered 9th and 5th. I think I used it in every arrangement I did for a while. Overkill? Yeah! But you get the point.

When I wanted to learn studio recording, I went and hung around at a major studio in L.A. called Whitney Recording Studio. I had used them once to do a small recording, but then I found out they did major recording for Disney Studios with big orchestras. I wanted to sit and watch the sessions, so I asked the engineer if I could. “On one condition!” he said. “You come, you sit, and you keep quiet! Any noise, and you’re out of here!” So, I came, I sat, and I kept quiet. And I watched, and I analyzed, and I took notes. And if a piece of music fell on the floor after the session, I grabbed it and learned some more. Those were thrilling learning experiences!

There’s plenty of resources out there, friends. Go find them!

5. WILL YOU LET OTHERS HELP YOU? Have you matured in your musical journey enough to let others critique your music? And will you take their advice? I don’t mean you should listen to every “Tom, Dick & Harry” with an opinion. But have a core of quality musicians that you know, trust and respect. Then learn from them.

When I started out as a musician, I was emotionally attached to everything I wrote. If someone criticized my music, I was offended. A good composer friend of mine looked at some of my early music and was making suggestions to improve it. It made me mad! Boy, was I dumb! I missed that opportunity to learn something. Today as a professional musician who writes for a big publishing company, I have at least two professional editors (including the head of the company) who read and edit everything I do. Does that bother me? Not at all! We’re all committed to excellence in the music we publish, and working together only makes it better. **None of us has arrived yet!**

When a baby is born, he needs nutrition to grow. He starts out with milk, then grows to soft foods, then finally a steak dinner with all the trimmings! But when he starts out, he can’t even feed himself. He must rely on others to feed him. **If he refuses to eat, he will eventually die!**

The same is true of you as a musician. Let people “spoon feed” you for a while when you are learning. Glean from their suggestions. If you don’t, you will die, musically. **Learn...and grow...and learn...and grow!** You get the picture!

6. WILL YOU HELP YOURSELF? Believe it or not, this is the hardest one. Learn to criticize your own music. Yes, that wonderful piece that you were so inspired to write! The one you think is perfect! The one you can't improve on! Yes, that's the one I'm talking about. **Become your own critic!**

Whenever I finish writing a new piece of music (I always call it my "first draft") I take off my "composer's hat" and put on my "editor's hat." Then I go after the music I've written with a red pen in hand. I ask myself the questions. Does that part sound right? Is it awkward to play on the piano? Can the instruments play what I wrote? Will the singers be able to follow the voice parts? When I'm done, the music looks like it's covered in blood. (Get it...the red pen?) But then I put my "composer's hat" back on and start fixing the music. I go through that process a couple of times before I ever send it off to the publishing company for their editing. **Self-discipline is the best kind of discipline, so learn to be hard on yourself.** You'll be surprised at the growth it brings!

In summary, let me emphasize the main point one more time. You gotta pay the dues! (Pardon the slang.) You have to put in the necessary time and energy to learn and grow, but if you do, you can achieve excellence as a musician. **Remember, every gift we have is from God! Use it to glorify Him!** I wish you the very best!

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