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3rd Edition

Music Composition

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logistics of sampling

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world of music streaming
and placement services

Launch into new technologies
to share your creations

Scott Jarrett
Holly Day

Music Composition

for
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3rd Edition

by Scott Jarrett and Holly Day

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Music Composition For Dummies® , 3rd Edition

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Introduction

Welcome to *Music Composition For Dummies*, 3rd Edition!

Are you the type of person who walks around all day with a maddening melody in your head that makes you stop whatever you're doing so that you can pay it full attention?

Do you often find yourself tapping out rhythmic passages from these melodies on your desk at work or scribbling down song lyrics on scraps of paper?

Is music sometimes more of a slave driver to you than a muse?

If you said yes to any of those questions, all we can say is this: We're here to help.

About This Book

Music Composition For Dummies, 3rd Edition, contains everything you need to know to get started

- » Picking out the perfect rhythm and tempo for your composition
- » Matching keys and chord progressions to the moods that you want to convey
- » Working within the confines of musical form without confining your creativity
- » Forcing yourself to sit down and come up with musical ideas, even when your mind is drawing a complete blank
- » Doing exercises related to each chapter's material

In this book, we discuss the basics of composition, from writing natural-sounding chord progressions and cadences, to composing atonal music, to making yourself a demo recording and getting it in the hands of the right people. If we really tried to do any one thing here, it's demystify the process of composing music and writing songs.

There are few things more satisfying than plucking a melody from inside your head and nurturing it into a full-fledged song, or even an orchestral piece. This book can hopefully make that process a whole lot easier for you.

Music Composition for Dummies, 3rd Edition, is organized into seven parts; the first five focus on a particular aspect of music. Part 6, the Part of Tens, contains information about some of the fun aspects of composition that may have little or nothing to do with actually playing music. And Part 7 contains some helpful appendixes. Throughout the book, you can find short interviews with musicians, profiles of important composers, and summaries of music genres worthy of further study.

Because each chapter is as self-contained as possible, you don't have to read every single chapter to understand what the next one is talking about — but if you want to, of course, read the book cover to cover! To find the information that you need, use the Table of Contents as a reference point, or you can just flip through the Index at the back of the book.

Foolish Assumptions

We wrote this book for many types of budding composers: the classical music student who never learned how to improvise, the backup musician who wants to start taking the lead and writing material, and the seasoned musician who wants to start writing music in genres outside their comfort zone.

You're probably at least familiar with playing a musical instrument. Perhaps you were trained on piano and now want to strike out on your own and start composing your own music. Maybe you're a self-taught rock guitarist who wants to understand how to compose in other genres. Or perhaps you're just a person who has had this maddening tune dancing around in your head, and you want to figure out how to turn it into a real song.

We do assume that you have at least the rudiments of music theory knowledge. We expect you to know how to read music at least at a basic level, what chords are, how many beats a whole rest gets in 3/4 time — stuff like that. (Unfortunately, we don't have enough room in this book to teach you music theory, too.)

If you're an absolute newcomer to music, we recommend you first go out and get yourself a copy of the latest edition of *Music Theory For Dummies*, by Michael Pilhofer and Holly Day (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), to give yourself a good grounding in the language of music. Then come back here.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are handy little graphic images that point out specific sorts of information. You'll find the following icons in this book, conveniently located along the left margins.



REMEMBER

When we make a point or offer some information that we feel you should keep with you forever, we toss in this icon.



TIP

This icon indicates good advice and information that can help you understand key concepts.



WARNING

When we discuss something that you may find problematic or confusing, we use this icon.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon flags information that's, well, technical — and you can go ahead and skip it if you want to.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the information and guidance about music composition that we provide in this book, you can get access to even more online at Dummies.com. Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet for handy info regarding the Circle of Fifths, chord progressions, and more. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for "Music Composition For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

If you're just starting out as a composer, then go ahead and plow into Part 1.

If you're already familiar with the basics of rhythm and want to start writing melodies, then head for Part 2.

If you've already got a hot melody but want to know how to turn it into a more full-fledged composition, Part 3 covers the basics of matching melodies to harmonies.

Part 4 can help you decide what instruments you want to use in your composition, or to whom you might want to sell that composition.

It's important to relax and have fun with this — listening to, playing, and writing music are some of the most enjoyable experiences you'll ever have. *Music Composition For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, may have been written by teachers, but we promise that no clock-watching music instructors will show up at your door to check on how fast you're plowing through this book. Composing music is a magical, mysterious, wonderful thing. Yet it's also based on surprisingly simple principles. In Western music, there are only twelve pitches in each of eight octaves on the piano, but think of just how different one piece of music can be from another.



REMEMBER

Limits can actually be freeing: Just like with poetry or prose, the more comfortable you are working inside a specific form, the greater your ability to successfully express yourself within that form becomes.

1

Basics and Rhythm

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out how to train yourself to start thinking like a composer and what exactly a composer is.

Discover the tools that composers use to create their masterpieces, whether at home or on the road.

Explore what mediums you can use to write out your compositions, and the pros and cons of various software platforms.

Find out how to use rhythm to create specific moods in your compositions and how to make your music more interesting by using rhythmic variations.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Finding freedom in restraint
- » Joining the ranks of those who create something from nothing
- » Getting to know a few rules of composition
- » Identifying things to remember when you get started

Chapter **1**

Thinking Like a Composer

Music is the one art form that's entirely defined by time. After a piece of music is performed — technically, when the last of its echoes fade — it's gone. Each piece of music is literally sandwiched in silence, or external noise, and if your listeners aren't paying attention, they're going to miss it.

Your job, of course, is to make them pay attention.

In this chapter, we introduce you to the concept of musical form, how being a good listener will make you a good composer, and how the rules of composition are there to serve you, not constrain you, in your journey as a composer.

Structuring Freedom

Music can be considered the sculpting of time. You can think of your three minutes — or half hour, or 36 hours — as a block waiting to be chiseled into a specific shape that tells a story or conveys an emotion. You just have to figure out which carving technique(s) work best to get your particular idea across to your audience.

This is where form comes in. *Forms* are the specific ways of composing all kinds of music: pop, classical, blues, jazz, country, and even atonal and serial. If you know in what form you want to compose your song, part of the groundwork for your composition is already done for you.



REMEMBER

And don't fret about form constraining or limiting you. Does the net limit you in tennis? No, it gives both players a structure around which to play the game. In music, a form does the same thing: Your listener knows more or less what to expect, and you know more or less what to give them. The rest — the uniqueness of your contribution — is up to you. Also, there's nothing wrong with combining forms to make new ones. You may have heard of jazz/rock fusion, pop punk, country blues, and so on. In fact, you may even find yourself combining forms without thinking about it.

After you choose a main form, you may want to pick the key you want to write your piece in. Knowing how the different keys and modes lend themselves to specific moods is a great help in trying to get a specific emotion across in your music. And how do you know about keys and moods? By listening to music written by other people, of course. You've already internalized a lot of musical mood information, probably without even realizing it. (See Chapter 4 for more information.)

You may have a melody already bumping around in your head that needs harmonic accompaniment. You can either plug that melodic line into your chosen form or start adding some chordal accompaniment and see where it goes on its own. Sometimes, the choice of chords can act as the choice of moods.

There's no real preordained order in which you should begin composing music. The end result is all that matters. And if you end up with a piece of music that you're even partially satisfied with, you're on the right track.



REMEMBER

You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Much of the work in composing music has already been done for you by others. Instead, make your wheel different, more interesting, more unique, and truer to what's inside you than any of the other wheels out there.

Composing as an Extension of Listening

As a music teacher, Johann Sebastian Bach (like other great composers of his day) trained his students to be not just impressive little robotic pianists, but to be improvisers and composers. Music professors today don't often teach

composition or improvisation. Back in Bach's day (the 18th century), learning how to read scores and perform other people's music was not a separate or independent skill from learning about the creation of music itself. The music of the masters was presented to students as something to improvise on — and possibly even to improve on.

This practical musicality was a comprehensive craft that involved thinking creatively and realizing it in sound. Music meant more than merely following instructions. The rote repetition of other people's music, including Bach's own, was used as example and was not the end itself. Students were encouraged to alter scores by adding notes, reducing the time value of notes, dropping notes, and changing or adding ornamentation, dynamics, and so on. A person couldn't even get into Bach's teaching studio without first showing some rudimentary improvisation and composition ability.

If you're a classically trained music student who hasn't had a lot of opportunities to spread your wings and write your own pieces of music, this book can help you find your own voice, both by drawing from what you already know after all those years of rote memorization and mining your own feelings about how music should sound.

Using Rules as Inspiration

If you didn't know better, you might think that music was something that could start on any note, go wherever it wanted to, and just stop whenever the performer felt like getting up to get a glass of iced tea. Although it's true that many of us have been to musical performances that actually do follow that — *ahem* — style of composition, for the most part, those performances are confusing and annoyingly self-indulgent, and feel a little pointless. The only people who can pull off a spontaneous jam well are those who know music enough to stack chords and notes next to one another so that they make sense to listeners. And because music is inherently a form of communication, as a composer and performer, you want to connect with your listeners.



REMEMBER

You really need to know the rules before you can break them.

Knowing about song forms, how to meld harmonic lines into a real melody, and how to end a song on a perfect cadence can inspire you to see what you can come up with on your own — especially when you know the rules and structures behind your favorite songs. There's no describing the power of the light bulb that goes off in your head when you suddenly *know* how to put a 12-bar blues progression

together and build a really good song out of it. The first time you make music with your friends and find that you have the confidence to present your own ideas is thrilling.

We want the reader of this book to end up putting their copy down on a regular basis because they just can't resist the urge to try out a new musical technique!

Following Your Music Instincts

Like with any creative activity, composing music requires that you trust yourself. An understanding of music theory and a lot of playing skill can be a good starting point, but what an idea means to you — how it makes you feel and what you ultimately say with it — can be the only real criterion of its validity.



REMEMBER

As you're reading this book, keep the ideas in the following sections in mind.

Identifying your options

After you have an idea for a song or a piece of instrumental music, figure out how you can best work it, using methods for (re)harmonization, melodic and rhythmic development, counterparts, variations, and other compositional techniques. A good composer never stops learning and can never have too many tools in their musical toolbox. Get comfortable with as many compositional styles and techniques as possible and try to get an intuitive grasp on how and when to apply them.

With practice, this information can become second nature — as easy to summon and use in your compositions as it is for an electrician to pull a screwdriver or wrench out of their toolbox. A firm, intuitive grasp on music theory and basic composition and arranging techniques can take you further than you can imagine.

Knowing the rules

Every musical form has a set of rules, and as a composer, get familiar with all of them. Rock, folk, classical, and even experimental genres have specific rules that define them, and knowing those rules is sometimes half the work. Are rules made to be broken? Sure, sometimes. But they're also made to be hard-earned guidelines that many, many people before you had to figure out by trial and error. Use their wisdom for all it's worth — don't unthinkingly discard it.

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI (1567–1643)

If we had to name one person who was the missing link between the music of the Renaissance (14th–16th century) and the Baroque (17th–18th century) periods, we'd name Claudio Monteverdi. (Well, which we just did.) Monteverdi brought an unparalleled level of sophistication and respect to vocal music, turning it from something only peasants and priests could enjoy into full-blown opera performances designed to entertain the ruling and intellectual elite.

Even as a child, Monteverdi was musically precocious. His first publication of sheet music was issued by a prominent Venetian publishing house when he was only 15. By the time he was 20, a variety of his works had gone to print. His first book of five-voice madrigals succeeded in establishing his reputation outside of his provincial hometown and helped him find work in the court of the Duke Gonzaga of Mantua.

Monteverdi became known as a leading advocate of the then-radical approach to harmony and text expression. In 1613, Monteverdi was appointed *maestro di cappella* (music director) at St. Mark's Basilica, Venice. There, Monteverdi was active in reorganizing and improving vocal music, specifically *a cappella* (singing without instrument accompaniment), as well as writing music for voices. He was also in huge demand outside of the Roman Catholic Church for his operas and made a decent living from opera commissions.

Monteverdi can be justly considered one of the most influential figures in the evolution of modern music. His opera *Orfeo* was the first to reveal the potential of the genre, while his follow-up, *Arianna*, may be responsible for the survival of opera into the 18th century and beyond. Monteverdi's final opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, is his greatest masterpiece and arguably the finest opera of the 17th century. Monteverdi was also one of the first composers to utilize the techniques of *tremolo* (a wavering effect in musical tone) and *pizzicato* (plucking the strings) on stringed instruments.

Picking up more instruments

Each instrument has its own beautiful, specific sound. Sometimes, becoming halfway fluent on a new instrument can completely change the way you want to put music together. It can also expand your appreciation for those other musicians who will (we hope) put your music into action.

Putting a piece of music aside

The compositions that cause you persistent, frustrating problems are probably the ones that you need to put away for a later date. Often (but not always), the best ideas for compositions are the ones that come together naturally, easily, and

quickly. If you're struggling with a piece of music, sometimes the best thing you can do is put it away for the day, or even longer, and come back to it later with a fresh perspective.

Getting something from nothing

A great idea is a gift and can't be produced at will. However, a lot of great composers can do just fine without divine intervention. If you look at many of Johann Sebastian Bach's compositions, for example, you can see that many sections are directly technique-inspired, built around very basic melodic lines and musical ideas.

If you can't come up with a brilliant start from thin air, try to start with a random one by taking a pen and writing down a series of random notes. Fill a whole music sheet with random dots and see whether you came up with anything interesting. Yes, we're serious. Or pick up a guitar and play random chords until something sounds interesting. Or fiddle around on a keyboard until something makes your ears perk up. Countless classic pieces of music have begun with little more than these simple techniques.

After you have a bit of a tune that you want to explore, you can use rules to help you. It may sound corny, but it's true: The biggest oak tree began as a tiny acorn. This book can show you how to fill out the melodic line that you just created, as well as build a harmonic accompaniment.

Trusting your own taste

If you like it, someone else will, too. Composing music is about self-expression, and if you write a piece of music that sounds wonderful to you, then by all means, go with your gut. As beautiful and unique as all members of the human race are, there are more similarities between us than differences.

On the other hand, even if what you've written doesn't follow any set of rules, and even if most people who hear it hate it, *if you love it, it's worth keeping*. Eventually, you'll find other people who will truly get it, and you'll be happy that you saved that one odd bit of music that everyone else thought was unlistenable.