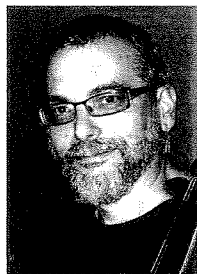


# Composition 101: Sound Experimentation and Invented Notation

Matt Turner, WMEA State Chair, Composition & Improvisation



People are often surprised to learn that I do not use traditional music elements such as melody, chords, key signatures, meter, form or the staff when introducing composition. Whether I

am working with college-aged students who are fluent in theory or elementary-aged students who are non-readers, my approach is similar – I focus on sound and invented notation and avoid traditional theory so that student composers may experiment with organizing sound without getting tangled in the “rules” often associated with tradition. The concepts that follow are designed to do just that and can be applied when composing pieces akin to traditional repertoire as well.

## Artwork as Score

Show some of your favorite paintings to your students and ask them to interpret the

artwork as a score. Then, ask them to perform the piece while observing the painting. I prefer to use abstract art – something by Jackson Pollack or Joan Mitchell works nicely. For example, Mitchell’s “Trees” or “Mooring” are vibrant and active. Obviously, paintings do not come with instructions for musicians, so I ask students to interpret as well as they can. (Here is where a bit of improvising occurs.) I like this exercise because it doesn’t require students to write anything on paper or use notation software (there’s plenty of time for this in the future) and gets them thinking about how they might translate the visual to the aural and vice versa.

## Compositional Toolbox

I ask students to go beyond their typical descriptions of music (melody, notes, rhythm) and think more outside the box to provide words such as “space,” “hot,” “green,” “whisper” and so on. Gradually, we begin to organize their terms into categories – pitch, intensity, duration and timbre. “Space” might fall under duration,

“hot” under timbre (or does it describe tempo?) and “whisper” under intensity. We begin to discuss dynamics, register, color, form, articulation, etc. I often fill an entire whiteboard with all of the terms and students take notes. The result is a compositional toolbox or cookbook list. Each student creates his or her own recipe using the ingredients from the list – would this ingredient “taste good” with these ingredients, or how long should I “bake” these ingredients, and so forth. The next step is to take these ingredients or tools and compose a brief piece using invented notation.

## Invented Notation

I ask students to select several of their favorite “tools” from the toolbox and think about how they might put those ideas together to create a piece. We won’t concern ourselves with creating a melody or putting the piece in  $\frac{3}{4}$  or composing in a particular style. Creating a piece (away from the instrument) using “whisper,” “green,” “chunks of space” and “contour,”

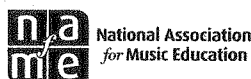
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## composition & improvisation

each student organizes his or her ideas using invented notation. Invented notation involves creating symbols or other representations so that the performer can successfully interpret the score and perform the piece. A triangle might represent a loud sound or a jagged line may signal a tremolo. Students are asked to create a simple legend to give the performers guidance. Some of my favorite invented notation compositions by students were 3D artworks using springs, carpet samples, and cut-up oatmeal boxes. With this exercise, non-readers can experience the joy of composing. Likewise, experienced musicians are challenged to move out of their comfort zones and think about how to put music together in a new way.

### Group Compositions

#### Card Piece

Students can compose in groups as well. In the Card Piece exercise, students draw abstract artworks on 8x11 sheets of paper.

The artworks are placed on a poster board and voila!, a composition is born. Each artwork can represent a different texture, melody or rhythm as well as be assigned to a section in the ensemble. A student conductor determines the duration and form of the piece depending on when he or she selects which artwork is performed in real-time. The piece could be strictly linear with each artwork representing a short section before moving on to another section. Or, the conductor could combine several artworks to create multiple textures.

#### Invisible Film

Ask students to choose a film genre. Let's work with a zombie theme for now. The students plot out the film into sections – Intro (life is good), Scene I (bad things start to happen), Scene II (realization that zombies are here), Scene III (escaping from zombies), Scene IV (fighting zombies), Scene V (zombies are conquered), Closing (life is good again). The students

discuss how the music will represent each section and compose the music for each section by experimenting with sounds or discussing what types of sounds they wish to use. Invented notation works well here, too. Keep it simple. It's the overall effect we're after. Perhaps the "life is good" section calls for a sustained dyad with a flute tremolo interspersed or the "fighting zombies" scene features a heavy eighth note ostinato. After each section is composed, the ensemble performs the entire invisible film.

With these five simple activities, your students will be exploring the joys of composition in no time at all!

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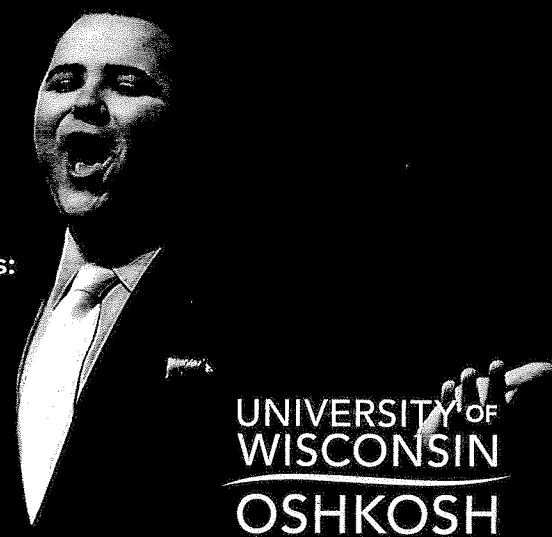
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