

On Teaching Composition:  
Similarities, Differences, and Aesthetics of Teaching Music and Prose  
Kirk O’Riordan

[www.kirkoriordan.com](http://www.kirkoriordan.com)

©Copyright 2008 by Kirk O’Riordan. All rights reserved.

**Kirk O’Riordan**

Bucknell University  
Susquehanna University

On Teaching Composition:  
Similarities, Differences, and  
Aesthetics of Teaching Music and Prose

During the fall semester of 2006 I found myself in the unique position of teaching courses in both music composition (18<sup>th</sup>-Century Counterpoint) and introductory college writing. My background and experiences as a musician and as a musical pedagogue prepared me well for the Counterpoint class (I had taught that course before), but I was about to teach the composition of scholarly prose for the first time, and to say I was a bit apprehensive is somewhat of an understatement. My undergraduate training at Indiana University had included some 35 credit hours of English courses, many of which were oriented towards writing, and I wrote many papers in the coursework for my three master’s degrees. My doctorate, of course, required a great deal of research and writing, which was carefully and pointedly edited by my advisor. I had always enjoyed the

process, and had developed, as far as I could tell, a sound understanding of that process. Additionally, I was in fact hired to teach the course: at least two people had determined I was qualified to teach this course, so therefore I must actually be qualified to teach this course.

This was, however, only moderately reassuring. I still needed to develop a guiding aesthetic for the course: a system of priorities and goals; an approach to writing that could serve as a path for my students to follow even after the class; a way to give shape and purpose for the assignments; and, perhaps most importantly for the students, a method by which I could evaluate the students' work. I needed to decide on a text or texts. As the course is called "Writing and Thinking," I needed to work the "Thinking" aspect into the course design. And, as it turned out, I had less than two weeks to make these crucial decisions.

Naturally, I immediately sought the counsel of people who had taught this before. Dr. Susan Bowers (chair of the English Department at Susquehanna University and one of the two people who had determined that I was indeed qualified to teach this course) provided me with sample syllabi, recommendations for texts, and the goals and priorities of the department. In addition, she served as a sounding board for ideas that I was developing, and provided the perspective of experience on my thoughts for the course. This was all very helpful, but I was still a long way from making the course my own.

At some point in the process I decided (remembered?) that my previous teaching experiences could guide me as well. It was while ruminating on this that I began to notice similarities between the composition of music and the composition of prose. As this list of similarities grew and developed my aesthetic for the course came into focus, and I could begin to create meaningful assignments which would reinforce both the departmental

goals and my own for the students. I could teach them an overall approach to the process as well as the mechanics of executing that process.

Perhaps at this point a discussion of my musical aesthetics might serve as a starting point for explaining these similarities. As a composer of concert music, I have come to believe very strongly in several ideals that govern my decisions in the course of creating a piece of music. The first of these ideals is that technique lives to serve the idea, and not vice versa. Ultimately, the performer and listener must be moved by what they hear or play: there must be an emotional response generated by the sounds. There certainly can be an intellectual or scientific response as well which may develop into debates about meaning, motivation, or interpretation, but there must first be something the composer wishes to express from his or her soul that must be transmitted through the performers to the audience. That message must be clear enough for the performers to identify it, and articulated well enough in the score for them to be able to execute it. Compositional technique, then, is defined for my purposes as the ability to clearly articulate this message in musical sounds. This definition sublimates the system of composition to the idea that generates that system: in other words, a given compositional technique should be employed when (and only when!) it is the best possible way to express the idea.

This means that composers of music should have as many different techniques and experiences with music as possible. Arbitrarily limiting oneself to the serial technique, for example, prevents one from using tonal and/or aleatoric resources when those resources might be more efficient vehicles for the message. One must instead know as many techniques as possible and know as much music as possible so that when an idea presents itself, one can express that idea in the most articulate and precise way.

For a writer of prose, this “idea” begins with the thesis, but also includes the purpose for the paper: what is the function or goal of the paper, and to whom does the

paper apply? In answering these questions, the author makes decisions about style, language, content, word choice, tone (the “technique” of writing), all of which should serve the idea. A good paper must have a purpose, and its topic must be of sufficient scope to allow study but not so broad that it exceeds the boundaries of that intended purpose. The mechanical elements of writing, such as grammar, style, vocabulary, et al, allow the purpose and thesis to be understood by the reader. The use of technical or vernacular language helps direct the paper toward the intended audience. As with the composer, the author must develop control over each of the aforementioned techniques so that they can use them to execute the decisions they have made: the “answers” to the questions of “why?” and, “for whom?.”

The second musical ideal is to achieve a balance between complexity and simplicity. Music that is too simple does not hold the interest of listeners even during its performance let alone over repeated hearings. Music that is too complex requires more effort to metabolize, and often the listener loses interest in providing the necessary energy: the reward for that work is simply not evident. Works that create a balance between complexity and simplicity are often those which maintain a place in “the canon” of “great” works: these are pieces we return to again and again because the challenges are continually balanced by the rewards. As one’s ability to handle challenges increases, one’s definition of “great” music evolves. Some music becomes with repeated hearings too simple to maintain interest, and the listener moves on to other composers, other genres, other techniques.

The composer, then, must make his or her first decision when beginning a new piece: for whom is this piece intended? Answering this question provides the framework for achieving the balance, and the process of finding that answer forces the composer to decide which elements of the composition will be challenging, and which will be

rewarding. No music which is all-challenging or all-rewarding can be truly satisfying. If a composer chooses a complex, angular melody, he or she would be well-served to balance that with a simple form; if the form is complex, the melodies might be simple. If the rhythmic or metrical structure is complex, the pitch contours of the melody could be simple.

One of the difficulties of serial music is that the highly organized systems which regulate pitch and rhythm are not readily perceivable by the average listener. Indeed, the total number of human beings who can distinguish a prime form from a retrograde-inversion form on the first or second hearing is probably in the dozens. While the logic of the system is profound, the system is wholly incapable of digestion by the average concert-goer. To rely only on the logic to provide intellectual interest, especially when the means to understanding that logic—the score—is not available to the audience violates both of the aforementioned ideals—and even if the score were available, many in the audience would not have sufficient expertise to make use of that resource. In other words; the system cannot be the message itself: it must be balanced by some element the listener has access to, which, in most cases, is the emotional message.

Achieving this balance in writing scholarly prose involves knowing precisely who the intended reader is. While this is addressed to some extent in the first ideal, a thorough knowledge of the intended reader allows the writer to choose how much technical language is used without definition; to decide how complex sentence structures might be; to craft subtle or not-so-subtle allusions or metaphors; or to create complex or simple forms. Just as a serial piece may frustrate and isolate the layman, so will a paper which uses more undefined jargon than is comfortable for the reader. Clearly, if the author wants to achieve a specific purpose, controlling the amount of complexity is an important aspect of success.

The final compositional ideal is that the architecture of the piece must be clear. The form of the piece may be simple, such as the strophic form used in Brahms's famous *Lullaby*, or it may be complex, such as Bartok's golden mean-proportioned arch forms, but it cannot ramble or go off on tangents without returning from whence it came at some point in the piece. Rambling obscures the message, for both performer and listener, and leaves both feeling unsatisfied. In the Classical Period, composers used clear and simple forms as a matter of course for their compositions. Binary and Ternary forms, Rondo forms, and even the evolving Sonata form were as well-known to the listener as they were to the composer, and were understood by both composer and listener to be one method by which rationality, order, and reason could govern musical expression.

Writers have borrowed the Ternary form by structuring a paper with an introduction, body, and conclusion. This is especially true when the conclusion section is treated as a recapitulation of the opening ideas (the thesis). This is a simple and functional form for the writer, but it is by no means the only possibility. Through-composed forms in music begin with an initial idea that continually develops, but contain no readily identifiable sections or direct repetitions of melody. This can be a useful form for the writer, especially one who may be attempting to convince the reader of his or her premise.

Like the Classical composer, the writer, especially the young writer, may benefit from choosing the form of a paper before actually beginning the writing process. This will save time: knowing where one is going ahead of time prevents aimless wandering, and allows the writer to work on sections out of order, rather than beginning with the first sentence and progressing chronologically until the final sentence. In addition, it allows the writer to keep his or her material organized, which prevents unnecessary redundancy.

Ultimately, these ideals help guide the composer toward an understanding of his or her audience. If one chooses to compose in a serial language, one must be aware that the audience (i.e. those who will be able to metabolize the music in one hearing) for that music will be rather limited. A composer choosing to compose in a minimalist style may initially receive a strong favorable reaction, but may not challenge the listeners enough to hold interest over repeated hearings. The composer must be absolutely sure of his or her intended audience, so that the techniques employed to serve his or her idea can be as effective as possible.

As I mentioned earlier, control of “the system” allows the composer/author to choose exactly how to convey the important information. As with music, technique and idea—expression—are taught both separately and simultaneously: in the abstract (music theory classes, or grammar, vocabulary, or similar lessons) and in the concrete (the composition of original musical or prose work). My tasks in developing the course would then be to 1) grow the students’ technical abilities by improving grammar, vocabulary, style, and form with both abstract and real exercises; and 2) improve the students’ ability to understand any given topic through research by teaching them how to undertake that process.

From the beginning I understood that writing, like music, is a skill which can be developed. While it is true that each requires some innate ability for mastery, it is also true that with hard work, and a great deal of practice, anyone can improve his or her abilities. Musicians (composers included) practice and take private lessons with master teachers who (should) provide direct, honest advice. Writing students would also need feedback and the opportunity to revise before grades were assigned, so that they could actually apply my comments to their writing. This would mean more work for me, but each student has a unique set of qualities and flaws, and it is often more efficient to address

the particulars of a student's flaws directly with that student, using examples from that student's work.

In addition, I found from writing assignments I had given in other courses that most students had not read enough scholarship to have a firm grasp of the style. Young musicians experience a similar phenomenon when learning how to play Bach or Mozart: they must learn performance practice by listening to and imitating the style as demonstrated by their teacher and by great artists on recordings or in concert. Musicians need to listen to a tremendous amount of music: it is, after all, our literature, and just as it is unacceptable for a musician to not know the great works of music literature, it is unacceptable for a writer to not know great writers and great writings. It would therefore be necessary for my writing students to read as much scholarship as they possibly could, with the hope that the issues of style would become apparent.

With all of these ideas more clearly articulated in my mind, my decisions about how to execute these ideas in this course solidified. I am now in my fourth semester of teaching this course, and have felt (for the most part) successful in accomplishing my goals for the students.

## **ENGL-100 Writing and Thinking**

An introduction to college writing, reading and discourse. Active discussion among students and instructors in sections limited to 18 participants. Seminars typically focus on a current social problem or a topic of particular interest to the instructor. Each semester all seminar students read one common text by an author who visits campus during the term. Not for credit in the major.

The course is usually taken by first- or second-semester students, and is considered to be part of the core curriculum: it is required for all degrees. Consequently, the students represent a wide variety of interests, majors, and ability levels.

For my sections I chose to use only two textbooks: Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* and Anthony Westin's *A Rulebook for Arguments*. The reading list was expanded by the third semester to eight full-length articles from almost every discipline, including art history, popular culture, literature, and science. These articles provided ample material for analysis of the mechanics of the articles: who is the intended audience, how specific is the language, what is the form, etc.

## Assignments: Journals

- J1:** What do you expect to achieve in this course? What does the University expect from you in this course? How do those two sets of expectations coincide?
- J2:** Choose a current political or social issue. Summarize and discuss both sides of the debate surrounding that issue. Decide which side you agree with, and explain why.
- J3:** Compose your essay in the form of a (long) letter to the editor. Explain the need for action, and propose a viable solution to the problem.
- J4:** Edit your J3 letter so that is no longer than one page. Re-write as necessary.
- J5:** Prepare a rebuttal to your J4 letter. Limit this letter to no more than two pages.
- J6:** Review your first Journal. Did you achieve what you set out to accomplish? How were you successful? What would you still like to improve?

I give four categories of assignments each semester. The first category is intentionally mis-named Journals. The Journals are, in actuality, short essays of three to five pages in length on topics I assign. Six Journals are written each semester, most of them toward the first half of the semester, before the term paper dominates the students' collective attention. The purpose of these essays is threefold: 1) to provide a short format for the students to learn to get intelligent thoughts on paper; 2) to introduce the students to basic research techniques, allowing them to see all sides of an issue and then form a cogent position on that issue based on evidence; and 3) to provide material for in-class coaching and Workshop discussions. These Journals are peer-edited in class. Though difficult in many ways for the students, work shopping the students' work does allow the other students to practice editing and revision skills. Work chosen for the Workshop sessions is submitted to the other students anonymously, and the student whose work is being discussed is not obligated to identify him or herself.

The first five journals are submitted twice: the second submission, which occurs after revision based on my comments and in-class work shopping, is graded. The sixth Journal, which is composed near the end of the term, is graded after the first submission. Journals 1 and 6 are for personal reflection, and are meant to give the student a personal stake in what they are to get from the course. Journals 2-5 represent the "issues" phase of the assignments. In these essays, the students are required to explore issues of their choosing in a comprehensive way.

## Assignments: Free Writing

**FW1:** Concert Music: György Ligeti: *Atmosphères* (1961)

**FW2:** Two paintings by Wassily Kandinsky. Students are asked to interpret and compare/contrast the two canvases.

**FW3:** Poem: Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Après-midi d'une faune* (in English)

**FW4:** an excerpt from James Joyce, *Ulysses*

The second category of assignments is Free Writing exercises. There are four of these, each composed primarily during class time to an artistic stimulus I provided. The artistic stimuli I used were works of abstract art from four genres: concert music, painting, poetry, and literature. The students were asked to 1) react to the art by writing their emotional responses to it and describing, in as much detail as possible, why they had that reaction; and 2) interpret the art, and attempt an explanation of what the artist wished to express.

## Assignments: FW2



Wassily Kandinsky: *Composition VIII* 1923 (140 Kb);  
Oil on canvas, 140 x 201 cm (55 1/8 x 79 1/8 in);  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Wassily Kandinsky: *Yellow, Red, Blue* (1925).  
Oil and Canvas, 127x200cm;  
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



The primary goal of the Free Writing exercises is to force the students to get their initial, instinctive reactions on paper without allowing the need to revise to paralyze that process. They are not graded on quantity of response in these exercises; rather, they are expected to make an intelligent observation and articulate it within the allotted time. I have found that students in both writing and music composition have suffered from what one might term the “Masterpiece Complex,” which makes a student feel as if he or she must produce a timeless, perfect work of art on his or her first attempt. This is paralyzing, and results in stifled creativity, procrastination, and ultimately, frustration. Removing the ability to edit on the spot gives the student freedom, and teaches them to trust their instincts, at least for the first draft.

## **Assignments: Technical Exercises**

- 1: Grammar**
- 2: Vocabulary**
- 3: Editing**
- 4: Library Skills (Research Techniques)**
- 5: Formal Debates**

The third category of assignments consists of abstract technical exercises in grammar, vocabulary, editing, and library skills. This category also includes three formal debates which are usually scheduled on class days preceding holidays or mid-term breaks. These debates have proven to be the most enjoyable exercises for the students, and in some ways, the most challenging.

## **Selected Debate Topics**

**Should the United States adopt Universal Healthcare? (Fall 2007)**

**Should Marijuana be legalized? (Fall 2007)**

**Should Capital Punishment remain legal? (Fall 2007, Spring 2008)**

**Is Euthanasia Murder? (Spring 2008)**

**Should North Korea be allowed to develop nuclear weapons? (Fall 2006)**

**Global Warming: Fact or Myth (Fall 2006, Spring 2007)**

The first step in the debate cycle is to select the topic. I solicit possibilities from the students, and help them refine the issue into an “either-or” type of question which supports the pro-con format. After a list of seven or eight possible topics has been compiled, the class chooses the topic by secret ballot. Once the topic is selected, the 18 students are then randomly divided into three teams, one which argues the “pro” side, one which argues the “con” side, and a neutral team which presents difficult questions to the pro and con teams. The teams remain consistent throughout the semester, and each team performs each function once. This procedure all but guarantees that some members of the team will be arguing a position that is contrary to their own.

The next class session is held in the library, where the members of the teams work together to research their collective position. I meet with each team privately, and help them develop their arguments. The actual debate begins with the opening statements from the “pro” and “con” teams, the order of which is chosen by coin toss. Following this, the question team begins the interrogation of the opposing sides, and this often leads to a spirited, informed discussion of the issue. As moderator, I attempt to control the tempo of the debate by moving through the question team members and not letting the discussion

bog down. I provide little in the way of additional questions, preferring instead to let the students dictate where the exercise goes.

## **Assignments: Term Paper**

### **I. Paper**

- A. Mechanics**
- B. Content**

### **II. Presentation**

### **III. Paper Components**

- A. Topic Proposal**
- B. Preliminary Bibliography**
- C. Detailed Outline**
- D. Two Drafts**

The final category is the term paper. This is the largest percentage of the students' grade, and is broken into three major sections: the paper itself (due at the final exam period, and graded separately on mechanics and content); the presentation (the paper is presented as if it were at a conference); and the components of the paper's construction, which include a topic proposal, preliminary bibliography, a detailed outline, and two drafts. Topics are selected by the students and must be approved by me.

## Selected Term Paper Topics

I Will Kill It: President Andrew Jackson's Opposition to the Second Bank of the United States (Fall 2007)

The Ideology of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Fall 2007)

"So may I introduce to you the act you've known for all these years, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." How Sgt. Pepper Reflected the Times and the Spirit of 1967 (Fall 2007)

The Differences in Media Coverage of the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars (Fall 2007)

Sin and Retribution as Portrayed in *The Divine Comedy* and *Crime and Punishment* (Spring 2007)

Is America Ready for an African-American President: Assessing the Candidacy of Senator Barack Obama (Spring 2007)

The Evolution of African Music and Culture into American Jazz (Spring 2007)<sup>[1]</sup>

Musical Pedagogy (Spring 2007)

Body Image: The Negative Effect Media has on Adolescents (Fall 2006)

On the Physics of Time Travel (Fall 2006)

The Dark Side of Disney: Sexism and Racism in Disney Films (Fall 2006)

<sup>[1]</sup> This paper was published in a student-run journal, *The Stance*, in May, 2007. Works selected for publication are reviewed by students, and the process is competitive.

The process of writing the paper is begun before the mid-term break, and is divided into components which help to prevent the student from completing the entire project in the days before it is due. Each component is a separate grade, and is progressively more demanding, with each new component building upon the last until the paper is completed.

The presentations are held during the last three class days, including the final exam period. Each student has a maximum of fifteen minutes to present his or her work, inclusive of questions. Visual aids such as posters, Power Point presentations, and hand-outs, are encouraged but not required if they do not lend themselves well to the topic.

## Conclusions

**Learn the style**

**Emulate the style**

**Know the subject**

**Develop the technique**

**Formulate Ideas**

**Use the technique, knowledge, and passion to articulate the idea**

It is my hope that these exercises convey a set of priorities, techniques, and aesthetics to the student that he or she can use as a starting point for developing his or her own set of priorities, techniques, and aesthetics. It is also my hope that my course inspires in the student a passion for scholarship, for staying informed about current events and the important issues of the day, and for becoming productive and intelligent citizens after graduation.

Each assignment, then, is intended to add one component of technique. The first step is to acquaint the student with the style, which is accomplished by assigning many scholarly articles and discussing with the students the various mechanical issues of the papers. The students are then asked to begin to imitate the style in their journal assignments. This is comparable to the composer studying scores and listening to recordings in order to learn the repertory and the compositional techniques of other composers. Work shopping student writing is reminiscent of master classes, in which the student is given a lesson in public. The grammar, vocabulary, and editing exercises are similar to scales and etudes; the debates and presentation, performances; the final paper, the recital.

Additionally, the revision process of the Journals (as well as the final paper) help the student understand that the process of writing is fluid: the finished essay, like the musical composition, is the result of careful planning, knowledge of and passion for the subject, and perpetual editing and revision. While the Free Writing exercises help to force the initial ideas onto paper (which then, in theory, could be revised), the Journals teach that the initial ideas are not the final product. The masterpiece is not, then, the result of pure inspiration nor is it the result of pure technique, but a hybrid of idea and skill in which both compliment each other.

Just as the composer can be recognized for possessing good technique by having consistently demonstrated the ability to have good ideas and to articulate them clearly, so to can the writer. The good paper is closely matched to its intended audience with regard to language, style, vocabulary, and content, creating a balance between complexity and simplicity. So is the great musical composition.

While some of the mechanics of the course have evolved to (hopefully) become more efficient, I have found that the philosophies that guided the conception of the course, have been, at least for me, proven successful. And while I will admit that the students have at times felt overworked, most students have enjoyed the course—especially the debates—and have improved because of it.

I believe that using my knowledge of teaching music, and specifically music composition, as a template for teaching introductory scholarly writing was a good decision for me. I have found the experience profoundly rewarding, and now, after three and a half semesters, I am beginning to be comfortable with this course. I am grateful to those who have given me this opportunity to expand my pedagogical range, to improve my own writing skills, and to, through the process of preparing for this course, reaffirm my musical ideals.