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# Creating and Performing a Composition for Tuba and Piano

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Creating and Performing a Composition for Tuba and Piano

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Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

> Arts & Humanities Honors Program William O. Douglas Honors College Central Washington University

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Accepted by:

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Date

#### Abstract

In this creative thesis, I compose and perform a six movement art composition for tuba and piano. The reason for this performance and composition is two-fold. First, I am able to express myself in a way that other methods do not allow. Second, I reinforce important skills that will be vital in my future teaching career. To create the composition, I use various compositional methods, but I mainly adjust the composition by listening to it using piano and online compositional software. Preparing the composition for performance requires that I practice for multiple hours and find an accompanist who will perform with me. In the following thesis, I will also include an analysis of pedagogical techniques in the realm of music education. This analysis includes validation of music composition as an effective teaching technique as well as a higher form of self-expression in the field of music education.

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#### Introduction

The purpose of focusing on composition in the field of music education is to enhance my experience as an expressive musician. This way, I further increase my musicianship and gain a better understanding of various musical concepts and how to properly express emotion through composition and performance. Through this experience, I am more prepared to help students learn the relationship between composition, performance, and expression. This project establishes the expressive qualities of composition, the performance process, and the educational process resulting from the final product. The focus of the educational portion of the paper will be on the Kindergarten grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This final product will be a reflection of what I want not only from myself, but from my future students as well. The way in which composition adds to a well-rounded music education is vital to the main idea of this paper.

#### **Literature Review**

To better the overall result of the final composition in addition to how composition is reflected in music education, I examined articles based on education, composition, and expression based on the two parts of the project: the composition process and/or the educational benefits of composition.

The article "Music, Language, and Composition" by Adorno and Gillespie (1993), summarizes the beauty and difficulties music composers encounter in arts. The authors suggest the relationship of music and language is one that will always be associated. This is one of the difficulties that I have faced while composing; trying to speak through music in an expressively coherent way is a daunting task. However, by understanding that music is a language that can be used and manipulated to the author's purpose, it makes the task a little less difficult. Additionally, in terms of pedagogy, the idea of music being similar to learning a language presents many parallels for teaching practices. For example, when we learn a language, we do not only learn how to read, we must also learn to write coherent words, sentences, and paragraphs. This suggests that music, like language, should not only be read, but must also be composed to fully understand what music is.

Edmund Campion has a clear understanding of what composition means in education and as an art form. Campion wrote the article, "Fitting Music Composition Studies for the 21st-Century American University" (2012), which discusses music composition in universities across the United States. Campion analyzes music composition in various aspects of the American upper-education system. While the analysis of upper-education compositional methods is not the focus of this paper, the ideas presented about composition are very relevant. There is a poetic description of how music composition functions: "that which is, that which has been, that which will be, are all dependent on that which is" (pg. 280). This is the abstract understanding of composition that Campion gives. It is true that the abstract ideas are the passion which drives the art. In the final paragraphs, Campion gives advice about the relationship between teacher and student in composition. He mentions that the teacher is a traffic hub, pointing students on where to potentially go, not necessarily what to do. These descriptions are informative and helpful to teaching composition.

Goycoolea, Levy, and Ramirez analyze whether this abstract perception of art is clear to all audiences in their article, "Central Auditory Processing: Are the Emotional Perceptions of those Listening to Classical Music Inherent in the Composition or Acquired by the Listeners?" (2013). In the article, the authors discuss the auditory process of music and its perception by others. The authors question if one needs a background in classical music in order to understand the emotions conveyed. From their central question, which was focused on if all listeners perceived the same emotions regardless of musical understanding, they discovered that anyone can detect emotions portrayed in a composition. Reading this study led me to conclude that I should not limit myself to one particular audience since anyone can feel the intended emotions in music.

Instead of analyzing audience emotion, "Sound is not enough" (2012) by Gwiazda showcases the processes that composers undergo to better understand emotional perception through music to ultimately become better musicians. The story that he describes of himself is the process that I hope to practice daily. Gwiazda will not settle for anything less than excellence in his sampling and spatial compositions. If he does not like a particular sample, he will find a new one which fits his overall hierarchy of composition. Each experience leads to self-reflection and improvement. This article focuses on the electronic aspect of composition, but the ideas presented are easily transferred to my project. One of the main frameworks that Gwiazda works by is a sound framework. This depicts how the individual relates to the environment of a composition through sound. The provided structure of composition is basic, yet offers a different aspect as to what the composer should be aiming for in relation to the audience and the environment. Thinking about composition in these terms has assisted my overall compositional directionality.

Once composition is understood, we must look further into how that translates into the music curricula. In "Music Composition in the High School Curriculum: A Multiple Case Study" (2015), Elizabeth Menard provides an empirical analysis about how music composition affects understanding of music in two different high schools. One high school had no previous compositional instruction, and the other school had a program which offered composition in the curriculum. In the school which already had composed music, students were not greatly affected

by the composition project since they had already been doing similar activities. However, they do mention that composing music presents music in a different way that makes them want to learn more about music. The students who were new to music composition achieved highly and even provided opportunities for those who were not the top performers to excel. Composition has a place in every curriculum because it provides an extra avenue for students to reinforce their understanding while also creating a tangible artistic and emotional result.

The creativity that students can get from creating music is endless, and Timothy Njoora exemplifies that in his article, "Music and Meaning: Some Reflections through Personal Compositions" (2010). In this article, Timothy Njoora reflects on creativity in music composition. The discussions are based on how a person creates meaning in a composition. Njoora suggests that there are inherent cultural underpinnings behind meaning-making. The context of when and why the piece was written is a large aspect of these cultural underpinnings; the way in which a piece is written can often be clues to historical context. Njoora suggests that traditional songs can carry hidden historical facts. In terms of how creativity coincides with composition, Njoora draws upon the findings of other researchers to reveal a five-step process: preparation, incubation, intimation, illumination, and verification. The general idea behind this process is that an emerging consciousness-fueled idea drives the creativity of a composition. By studying these ideas, I more effectively analyzed the meanings and creative aspect behind my composition.

"Moon Music: A Composition of Art and Science in Dialogue" (2010) by Edvin Ostergaard is another article discussing creativity in composition; however, Ostergaard additionally describes his processes in his composition to achieve that creativity. Ostergaard reflects the two differing parts of the moon through his composition through different methods.

For example, he physically altered the way in which the piece was performed; by having three choir arrangements place around the audience, it provides a unique timbre. Ostergaard reveals that his compositional method is primarily done through the use of self-reflection. He goes on to suggest that this process is both a process and a product. Because of this concept, I have been able to accurately reflect what ideas I want to portray in the composition.

Knowing how composers write music is important, but "How Composers Approach Teaching Composition: Strategies for Music Teachers" (2013) by Randles and Sullivan delves further into the pedagogical processes that composers have used in public schools. The authors discuss how to begin, assist and successfully complete a composition lesson with students. They suggest never giving them only one prompt; instead, they suggest giving many different ideas to spark student creativity. Additionally, it is better to push students' creativity by adding in previously learned concepts like syncopation, crescendi, variated harmony, and any other concepts students may have previously learned. Throughout the article, the Randles and Sullivan offer guidelines for teaching composition, but above all they reiterate that one must first do before they can teach.

Similarly to the previous article, Richard Willgoss wrote "Creativity in Contemporary Art Music Composition" (2011) which helps put into perspective the frameworks by which creativity can be manipulated pedagogically. He provides a framework for contemporary art music. In this framework, compositions are made through both concrete and ineffable concepts. This paradox activates the optimal creativity in compositions. Through this concept, original ideas are formulated and expanded upon. This contradiction that Willgoss presents accurately reflects a key component to emotional music that I try to utilize to my advantage in the composition. For example, by providing ironic effects such as aligning a chromatic show-tune piano theme on top of an atonal tuba melody generates unique emotions. This category of unique writing is something that I strive for while also having my own style.

Finally, the article, "Teaching and Learning Music Composition in Primary School Settings" by Sætre (2011), discusses teaching composition in primary schools, which shows that any and all ages can create music when given the correct parameters. The focus of the article is on the creativity that students foster through music composition. This concept of a higher level of creativity best exemplifies why I am composing; without composition, students miss out on an invaluable aspect of music education. Some of the key aspects that Sætre focuses on are collaboration, communication, and control—all aspects of music that composition capitalizes on.

These articles all discuss the central ideas of composition techniques and how they apply to the educational process. There are many different concepts of what exactly these ideas consist of, all of which are relevant. Parts of each of these articles fueled the notions behind my compositional process as well as my pedagogical ideas for composition.

#### Methods

For the composition of my project, I am primarily writing and listening. By writing down ideas, then performing them on tuba or piano, I am able to react and adjust to the sounds that I hear to optimize the amount of emotion that I want from a particular section. Emotional perceptions depend on compositional techniques (Ostergaard, 2010). One technique is the use of different voicings or ranges for each instrument, also known as orchestration. Orchestration is when a composer decides to use a certain instrument in place of another one to evoke a particular feeling (Ostergaard, 2010). A range is how high or low an instrument plays. For example, for a section that I want to be perceived as evil, I may write the tuba in a lower range with longer

notes. This allows the listener to hear the low rumbling of a deep-sounding instrument, thus implying an evil undertone. I also manipulate emotional perception based on modality. Modality is a series of pitch intervals used to construct a scale. The quality of sound is often perceived as much happier and brighter in a major mode than as a minor mode. Likewise, there are seven modes I could have potentially employed to engage listeners based on the original Greek music scales. Finally, to evoke emotion and tell a story, I use different chord progressions. Similar to the way in which sentences align with paragraphs which align with chapters, chord progressions achieve the same sense of story-telling. With a diatonic chord progression, the listener often feels stability due to there always being a "home note", also known as the tonic. This is the note that most pieces end on, creating a sense of finality. However, if the chord progression is atonal, or without a tonic, the listener could become unsettled because of the lack of stability—there is no "home note" for listeners to latch onto.

Once the piece was finished, the practicing process immediately began. Much of what practicing consists of is isolating each expressive phrase and ensuring that they each make sense in context. One way to ensure the quality of each phrase is to imagine a particular portion of the piece being sung in a musical and asking how the performer would shape the phrase. For example, the singer could increase in loudness to create intensity, but if that feels unnatural, then the singer might get quieter to show introspection. This part is subjective, but it can lead to many different interpretations of the same piece, which is one of the many reasons why music is inherently diverse. During the practicing portion of this project, I needed to find a pianist to accompany me. Thankfully, a pianist is provided for many recitals, and I was able to get in contact immediately. The pianist and I then practiced the entire piece together to match our

expressive phrases in a cohesive performance. I worked with the Central Washington University Music Department to reserve a space for rehearsal and the final performance.

#### The Composition

The title of the piece is "Across the Countryside." It was named this because it is a reflection of the many road trips that my family and I used to take together. Many of these road trips were taken when I was younger, so my imagination was left to wander as we drove across the United States. To depict this, I composed six movements, each with their own depiction of a part of the trip.

Throughout the six movements of the piece there is a theme that is relatively simple. A look at Figure 1 will show what that theme is. In the first movement, entitled "Departure," this theme is presented as seen in Figure 1. This provides a base for which the audience can refer to as the piece goes on. The first movement depicts a feeling of uncertainty while also yearning for what may be in the near future. Much of the piece is in the minor mode, depicting a feeling of slight sadness for leaving home, but still leaving room for development as the trip goes on.



Fig.1: The theme is presented here in the notes: B, D, and E. While seemingly short, it can be expanded upon while providing the listener a reminder of what the theme is and how it is being changed.

"The Gorge" is the title of the next movement which has significant meaning for the piece. During road trips, we almost always left our home state through the beautiful and scenic Columbia River Gorge in Oregon—its river and high clifftops created an atmosphere of excitement and wonder. Because of that, this movement is much more happy and upbeat as my young mind imagined the possibilities of water-skiing on the river and hang-gliding from the clifftops. The theme is altered in a chromatic and syncopated fashion as seen in Figure 2—the notes were now in half-steps occasionally and the beat is offset. Additionally, the mode is mainly major, showing an uplifted spirit in my younger self. This varied theme allows the listener to remember back to what was originally presented while comparing it to how it sounds now. The contrast in these two ideas will allow the listener to notice and understand the different moods.



Fig.2: The theme is represented in the same notes: B, D, and E; however, there is an added half-step between D and E. Additionally, the rhythm is syncopated and shown where the arrows are. The dots indicate a shorter note style.

After we pass the gorge, there are a slew of many different types of sceneries, but the most memorable is how my family and I would stop in Yellowstone National Park or even the Grand Canyon. There, the cliffs amazed me: how could the earth break like that? With this in mind, I composed the third movement, titled "Riding the Cliffside." This is an exciting movement that starts off fast and depicts the simultaneous feelings of intensity from the cliffs, and the beauty of the scenery. In this movement, the theme alters in a way that is different from the previous movement. In Figure 3, we see that the sequential notes all have the same interval structure as the main theme, but instead of repeating in the same pitch, it keeps going up. This represents the height of the cliff while also creating tension in the build-up. There are a few false-climaxes in this movement, making the listener unsure of when the piece comes to a peak. The deprivation of a climax makes it so that the listener experiences the actual climax in an even more dramatic fashion. This driving theme continues until the build-up reaches a climax where the piece then goes into a smooth section where the beautiful landscape where the nature-filled scene can be imagined.



Fig.3: The theme is initially seen in the notes: B, D, and E; however, instead of repeating the notes, the theme keeps getting higher, creating more tension. This is not a direct variation, but rather an expansion of thematic material.

The fourth movement depicts what happens on the road when the sun begins to set and the wonders of the night come out. The title for this movement, "Dancing through Dusk," reveals more about how the imagination reacted to the moving scenery as it flew by with little to no light shining on the earth. At times, the lightning bugs flew about, flickering to my amazement, and at other times there were moments of uncertainty because of the lack of vision. These feelings can be heard in this movement in the different sections. The main theme is presented in a slow melody, yet the feeling is similar to a slow waltz due to the new time signature, as seen in Figure 4. This variation of the theme is farther from the theme presented in the first movement which shows how much farther away the piece is getting from its original home. The ending of this movement.



Fig. 4: The theme begins with the initial interval, but instead of continuing the main theme, the melody continues on. This deception creates a mysterious feeling, showing that it is now night and that we are far from the original theme, representing home.

The second to last movement is titled "Lost". This movement stems from the times during the trip when there was little to no idea where we were or where we were going. The uncertainty and tension that was created filled the younger version of me with terrible feelings. Because of this, the fifth movement is entirely atonal, meaning that there is no home note or stability. The chords in the piano part are almost all augmented, which is a type of chord that creates an uncertain and questioning feeling. The tuba has many contrasting dynamics and unstable rhythmic patterns. The piano and tuba combined depict a scenario where tensions are high and no one is sure where to go next. The initial theme is unrepresented in this movement we are as far away from feeling at home as possible.

Finally, the last movement, "Return", is the glorious return home. The movement starts out with a mini-fugue, mimicking melodies before bringing back the melody from the beginning. Finally, the tuba enters in with the initial theme in a celebrated fashion. This movement depicts the amount of appreciation that is had upon returning to a familiar home—the feeling is magnificent, as if all the travelling has made home feel even more welcoming. The piece ends on a high note, with the piano and tuba increasing in volume until the final resolution occurs, signifying the end of the piece.

#### Pedagogy

The main purpose for undergoing a compositional project as a music education major is for the pedagogical benefits of being able to utilize composition as a teaching tool. However, before being able to use a concept in the classroom to its full effectiveness, the educator must know how the concept it best implemented; "[o]ne must first do before one can teach. It is therefore the belief of the authors that educators who are serious about teaching composition first learn to compose themselves" (Randles & Sullivan, 2013, pg. 57). When it comes to pedagogy, there is often a metaphor comparing teaching with a toolbox. In this metaphor, the teacher knows what all the tools are named, what they can do, and how to use them properly. The goal of the teacher then is to have their student reach the teacher's level of understanding at some point. However, if the teacher does not have an understanding, the teacher cannot properly educate their students on the task at hand. Therefore, this project is ultimately a professional development project based on pedagogical and creative underpinnings.

Current pedagogical practices of music education are primarily focused on the rehearsal aspect of music. The process that usually occurs is as follows: the students receive a piece of music composed by someone who they have little to no knowledge of, the teacher rehearses the group to sound as close to the composer's original intention as possible, then the group performs the piece in front of an audience. Observing Figure 5, the aforementioned process in conjunction with an effective teacher will reach the "evaluating" learning domain at most. The students are taking the concepts that they have learned throughout the previous lessons and are synthesizing these lessons to evaluate how the composer wanted the piece to sound. This means that the "creating" section of the Bloom's taxonomy is never reached.

When composition is introduced in the correct sequence, students are required to use the same synthesizing process, but instead of stopping at the evaluating learning domain, students reach the creation learning domain by creating a piece of music that is entirely new. This allows students to show what they understand, simultaneously reaching the apex of Bloom's taxonomy and creating a significant work that they can be proud of. From the aforementioned discussion of Menard's case study on composition in the music curriculum, not only do students get to experience music in a new way in creating music rather than performing already made music, but it also allows other types of learners to excel (2015). Not every type of learner will excel through constant performance, which is what most music curricula focus on. By looking at the same material in a new light, the teacher can help students achieve in music when they might not have otherwise.

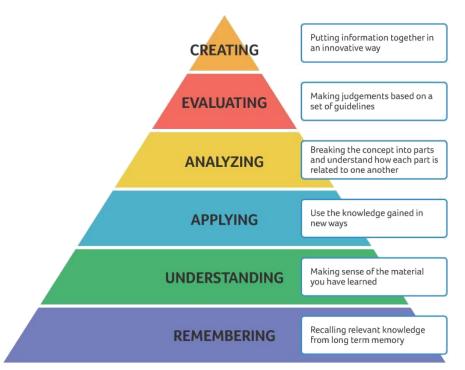


Fig.5: Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains is a primary indicator of a student's level of critical thought. It is used in many public and private schools to show what levels the students are critically thinking. The hierarchy depicts the processes in order from easiest thinking (remembering) to most intensive thinking (creating).

The question arises: why don't most music curricula focus on composition? There are multiple aspects to consider when answering such a question. Much of the problem lies in the previous quote discussing how one must do before they can teach. Teaching can be a vicious cycle—if an aspiring teacher only uses pedagogical tools that they learned from their teachers, they will be limiting their ideas primarily to those of their predecessors. What this implies is that most music teachers have never had experience in composing music; therefore it is out of their pedagogical comfort. Instead of learning how to write music and then teach it to their students, most teachers resort to what they know best: rehearsal. This is why it is best to become as well-rounded in the content area as possible when becoming a specialized teacher. When it comes to student learning and giving every type of learner an equal opportunity to succeed, composition is an invaluable teaching tool that is too useful to ignore.

#### Conclusion

It is surreal to get to perform and listen to the final product. Many times throughout the process of writing, I was disenfranchised with the limited amount of playback software available built into composition programs; however, now that the piece is finished, I am able to listen to the piece with an actual tuba and piano rather than an electronic playback.

Most artists who discuss their work will almost never be happy with the final result of their finished product. In this same sense, I have seen in what ways I could have composed differently and how I might have done given more time. One of the main issues I have with the piece is how short all of the movements are. Listening back to the entire piece now, I can hear spots in each movement where the idea that was presented could have been expanded upon for even greater variety and drama. Additionally, I tried to find as many musical expression markings that would fit the style that I intended, but there were some expressions that I had in mind that were not able to be expressed on paper. However, under the time constraints presented, the maximum amount of effort was poured into this labor of love and nostalgia, and I am proud of the finished work.

While I have not finished my recital which is where the piece will be premiered, the recent practice sessions with my piano accompanist have been reassuring for the final performance. Since I have created the piece, I know exactly how I want the piece to sound; therefore I can play with absolute certainty that the piece's intentions will be fulfilled. With that being said, there are some technical spots that have been presenting issues. These issues will easily be worked out with a few more hours of practice, but it is slightly ironic to think that the piece I composed is almost too difficult for me in certain sections.

The outcome of the entire project has been arduous, yet rewarding. The culmination of my performing abilities alongside my knowledge of music has presented itself in this composition. The amount of opportunity musically and professionally that this composition has given me is astounding. I have been able to perform this piece at a conference, a symposium on undergraduate research/creative expression, and I will be performing it at my final tuba recital. Being able to undergo such a daunting project has allowed me to understand what goes into the hard work of many of the composers that I listen to on a daily basis. While I do not have intentions of continuing composing as a professional career by any means, it is still invaluable to understand what work is put into a composition—providing this view to future students will help them see how amazing it is as well.

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## **Image Sources**

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# Across the Countryside

Joel Ragona

















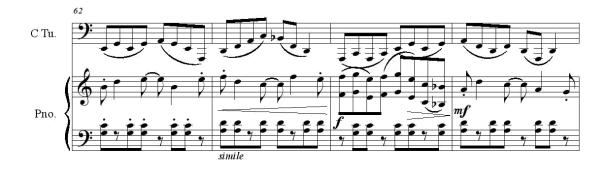








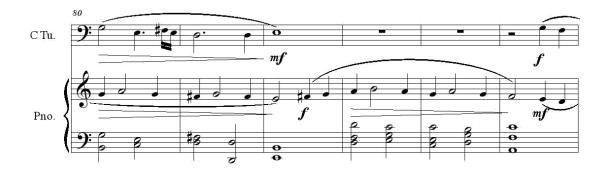


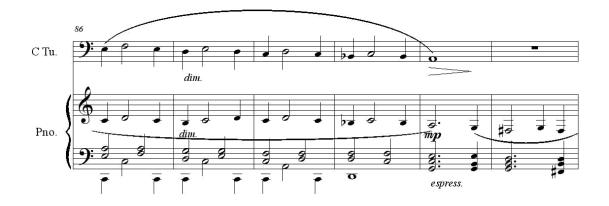








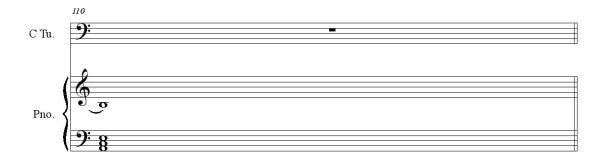












# III. Riding the Cliffside













