

# Teaching Composition Facing The Power of the Respondent

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## Preface

The initial interest in the subject of this paper came from conversations with students of composition about the desirable situation for continuing to be composers when we would no longer be students. We wanted to compose. However, the degree toward which we were working was preparing us to take faculty positions in theory-composition departments: we were to become teachers.

Noticing this fact caused us some unease, for our received images of what it means to be a teacher (though occasionally contradicted by particular teachers) clashed with both our received and developing images of what it means to be a composer.

In this paper I present the outline of an alternative view, which requires reformulation of the received images of both teacher and composer. In the exploratory tinkering with received images, I became intrigued by the possibility that the teaching situation offers to a composer something which can't be found elsewhere. The teaching situation allows speculation about the idea that a composer need not assume helplessness in the face of the dynamics of reception. If such speculation is taken seriously, then experiments in the composition of the conditions of reception become necessary. Though other existing forums for this experimentation ought not to be dismissed, one can distinguish those forums by their constraints. Some of the constraints peculiar to the teaching situation, for instance the regularity of meetings and thus the potential for follow-up, offer distinct possibilities for a beneficial tampering with the dynamics of reception. In the paper, I refer most often to that aspect of the dynamics of reception which goes by the name: The Power of the Respondent.

The disjunctness of the writing style results mainly from choices guided by several negative criteria: to avoid truism; to avoid the tone of giving advice (while retaining the option of imperative syntax); to avoid the impression of a single line of argument where the subject appears to call for several intersecting consistencies or lines of argument. The style also reflects positive attempts to have the writing illustrate some of the ideas put forward: the emphasis on formulation; the preference for suggestiveness over exhaustiveness; the interest in pieces which make a production of eliciting from their respondents an awareness of the possibility of composed interpretation, composed response.

If one approaches this paper looking for practical suggestions for teaching composition, a few can be found; the overall aim, however, is to construct images of teaching and composition which could orient or provoke one to invent answers to the how-to questions.

# The Power of the Respondent

The respondent to a statement, coming after the statement, determines how the statement is spoken about, determines in which context the statement is placed, and thus what it meant. To the extent that every statement makes an appeal to the respondent to give the statement a social life, to show changes attributable to the statement—to that extent statements submit to the power of the respondent.

A respondent has the power to declare an utterance to be a response.

If you say “it is”, then it’s as good as is; in the social world, the validity of the assertion is of no consequence. What is crucial is the fact that you say it is.

The often-heard complaint that a person “always has to have the last word” is a commonplace acknowledgment of the respondent’s power. The respondent always has the last word.

A respondent is a respondent to a statement only when showing traces in the respondent’s language which would not have been left but for that statement—so says a respondent.

The respondent has the power to determine how the respondent’s listeners label, describe, conceive, remember, judge—the responded-to. That the respondent’s listeners could themselves subsequently become respondents and so have the power to contest the labeling, description, conception, memory, and verdict determined by the first respondent does not diminish the power of that response while it holds sway.

What makes the ability of a respondent to determine the social life of the responded-to a power is the prevalence of misrepresentation, falsification, slander of various sorts, and dismissal.

The power of the respondent is frequently amalgamated with other sources of power: the power of position, the power of authority, the power in numbers, the power of technical reproducibility.

## In the Face of

It is easy to learn to recognize the power of the respondent, difficult to learn how to behave facing it.

“The power of the respondent must be recognized, moderated, and if necessary, temporarily suspended. Not the response, but its falsification of the responded to, must be noted and rejected. Again, any violent manifestation of the respondent’s power must be boldly testified to by an alert witness.”

(Brün, My Words and Where I Want Them, 99)

I speak of the power of the respondent when I want someone to ‘bear witness’ to a speaker’s exercise of power to dismiss. Learning about composition, learning to compose, learning to be a composer, learning to desire a social role for composition would include learning how the composer’s composition is dismissed, how the composer is dismissed, how dismissal takes place, and learning to become a witness (loudly!) to dismissals.

“... Some have described a composition they would have preferred to make ... some have simply mapped onto the given work, words drawn from bags of accumulated ‘music language’, learned who knows where, and regarded as a kind of general-purpose tote bag whose words, (so it seems), can be pulled out without notice, and applied to any given;—(the given, not being able to talk back, so-to-speak, therefore, de facto, allows the pollution to continue)...”

(Gaburo, LA)

I can tell the difference between a tangent, a change of subject which has the effect of erasing the previous subject, and a leap of thought which transforms the subject under discussion.

The composer’s imaginary respondent is partly constructed by the composer and partly collected from observations of people, texts, behaviors (choice of the pool in which one would like to make a splash, in which one wishes to be celebrated and admired, but wants also to upset, to confound, to cause controversy, to have opponents and partisans).

The composer’s image of the respondent: not only in terms of that to which the composer responds, but also in terms of the play of predicting how the addressee will respond.

“A hybrid medium [gesture] limits the field of response with the consistency of its constraints. The composer chooses to preserve one set of borrowed characteristics instead of another. The significance of the choice is a function of the chosen set’s power to limit the interpretations available to the respondent. If a change of the set of borrowed characteristics would elicit a change of interpretation, the gesture has the power required to limit the field of response. ... Gesture limits the interpretations available to a respondent.”

(Sullivan The Performance of Gesture, 29)

A composition’s limiting of the availability of interpretations requires a respondent who acts as a witness speaking up for the composition against its falsification.

“In discourse or in a composed work, gestures are made in anticipation of response. Unless the addressee gathers something that requires interpretation, the gesture will not function. An addressee has to gather something that requires interpretation before [the addressee] can become a respondent.”

(Sullivan, 29)

If a speaker, having the power of response by sheer dint of following an event with an utterance, is to be called the respondent, then it is up to the respondent to feel addressed, to become the addressee.

## Audience

“We discovered that what induces even more resentment than taking music seriously is taking talking about music seriously . . . Music is talked about before it is listened to, while it’s listened to, and instead of being listened to. And who does this talking about the music which determines what is the little bit that’s recorded, the tiny bit that is published, and, therefore, what can be heard, and therefore what is listened to, and therefore what is learned and eventually, therefore, what is composed? Well, this talking is done mainly by a group of past and present masters of the detached normative, the dangling evaluative, those who have created an epistemological situation which is usually satisfied by a self-comforting tautology: ‘If I don’t understand it, it’s not worth understanding; therefore I understand everything worth understanding.’”

(Babbit, Words about Music, 174–5)

“A reminder: as described earlier, a listener brings to music an image which he has created of it, this image consisting of wishes and desires for what he wants music to be, articulated in the language available to him, and he will react to what he hears within the context of those wishes. For him, the music will appear as a kind of ‘candidate’ for the fulfillment of those wishes and desires, and its suitability for that candidacy will determine the listener’s response to the music. Thus the capabilities of the listener’s language will interview what he is perceiving, and act as a measuring standard to the perceived.”

(Brün, “The Political Significance of Composition”)

“Language cannot change itself. It will continue to interrogate any acoustical event which comes its way in the terms it has learned from past music. The presence of new music, then, not only confronts what music has been, it also confronts present-day language and its capabilities. (We could say that the music ‘perturbs’ the language.)”

(Parenti, “Self-Reference and the Language about New Music, 42)

“If the respondent neglects to search for an address [address], or assumes that the composition has no intended address when it does not articulate its address the way compositions did in the past, then the composition will be falsified by the respondent.”

(Sullivan, 40)

The composition’s gesture limits the field of non-falsifying response; or puts obstacles in the path of a respondent to speak uncontested by other respondents. Otherwise the description, verdict, interpretation—the response—remains undisturbed.

Notice the difference between having the power of the respondent and being aware of the power of the respondent.

## Performer

The performer acts as a respondent to the composer’s score on the basis of an image of the composer: the not-quite-competent composer,

who produces writing which doesn't fit the instrument,  
which is unreasonably difficult to play on the instrument,  
which is impossible to play on the instrument,  
which damages the instrument,  
which hurts or the strains the player,  
which is not fun to play . . .

“Those who have seen how orchestra players, who perform only reluctantly an advanced modern work under a conductor unsympathetic to and intellectually suspicious of modern music, change their attitude the moment they realize that another conductor knows the score and handles it with the same precision as a traditional one, and that it has meaning in his hands, know where the opportunity lies for an uncompromising composer in motion pictures. Masterful handling of resources carries a certain weight of its own, even when it is directed against every idea tolerated by the industry. Orchestra players are in spite of everything most sensitive to it, and their confidence spreads, under certain circumstances, to everyone concerned with the production of the picture.”

(Eisler and Adorno, Composing for the Film 126)

. . . versus an image of the composer who is not innocent,  
who wants the manifest level of difficulty  
or:  
who wants to estrange music from the conventions of fitting with the instrument,  
who wants to change the current status of what is considered possible,  
who wants to entice those interpreters who will bring about the necessary changes in order to perform the composer's work, and create a music which could become fun to play.

## Composer

Composition as Reply: “Brahms is lost on you because you don't know that to which he responds.” Another framing of the problem of reference: not to know the quotations only, but know the sense of the composer's response. “You can't understand Berio and Boulez if you don't know Schönberg and Webern; and you can't understand Schönberg and Webern if you don't know Wagner and Brahms”—and so on. “Where do you start?”

Composers make reference not only to what precedes them but also to that which is contemporaneous with them. Thus it is more difficult to understand the composers of 200 years ago than it is to understand new music.

Dialectics of response: being able to appoint one's teachers; being able to respond to one's contemporaries, current trends, and that which is held to be true—but having only one's contemporaries, only the current trends, and only that which is held to be true, to respond to.

## Student

A respondent to a composer makes a contribution only if the respondent succeeds not merely in challenging the composer to defend the composer's preferences, but in offering a new defense of the composer's preferences.

Transformations of the adage 'We learn from our mistakes':

We declare our deeds to be mistakes in order not to learn from them.

We learn to declare our deeds mistakes in order to justify our repeating them.

We declare our deeds mistakes and do not realize that "success in an undesirable social system is social failure".

We declare our deeds mistakes, vacillating in the decision where to draw the line between consequences of our choices and consequences of our respondent's choices.

We declare our deeds mistakes before the correctness of our deeds has emerged.

To the category of unintended message might correspond a category of "unintended teaching", such that someone might say "I learned this from you" about something the teacher never intended to teach. To be able to tell you what you taught: this is within the power of the respondent.

## Teacher

"A 'difficult' student tries to make a new start and is quiet and obedient. His teacher responds to this behavior by saying, 'You're off to a good start this year,' and so informs the student that a bad start was expected of him. The student becomes angry and defiant. A supposedly dull student gives a correct answer in class and is praised excessively. He is embarrassed and becomes withdrawn."

(Kohl, The Open Classroom, 19)

Kohl focuses on the expectations which are the criteria for the teacher's choice of response. The teacher's response, "You're off to a good start this year", declares an expectation whether the teacher holds that expectation or not. From what field of alternatives could a response be chosen?

One kind of power: to be able to deliver someone from something to which that person would otherwise be helplessly delivered; not necessarily able to 'control' or coerce, but able to rescue.

"Power is a problem for all of us. The development of open, democratic modes of existence is essentially the problem of abandoning the authoritarian use of power and of providing workable alternatives. That is a problem that must be faced by all individuals and institutions that presume to teach."

(Kohl, 16)

A teacher offers a new image of the composer's respondent. The teacher manifests this image through the teacher's (composed) performance.



## Yielding

Out of desperation, having faced the power of the respondent in the concert hall, the commercial world, the “public sphere”, the composer turns to teaching. When teaching, the composer still faces the power of the respondent, but in a new context. In this context, a composer can ask listeners (students, respondents) to yield some of their power as respondents to a composition: the composer can ask them to imagine that the composition responds to them.

HB ... No I don't think so. I think the only question of the power of the respondent is whether the person who has that power, namely the respondent, is knowing, conscious of what he's doing, of his power or not. So the consciousness of that power ... enormous ... Only then if you have a consciousness of the power can you follow the next instruction namely—what is the word? to ...

ME Yield.

HB ... yield some of that power to the composition, either to the composition you have heard or the composition you are in the process of writing in the hope that you can turn it into the respondent with all the power. This is what you are saying, that's what I understand. However, if it is not up to a respondent whether to have that power, then all that one can ask of respondents is that they change their way of exercising that power. Then the invitation to respondents would be that they—with their power as respondents—grant the power of respondent to a composition.

JG That's what I asked: what is the power ...

HB The power is afterwards, afterwards.

LO That's what I was getting at, I think. I'm not sure. How much ... How is someone aware that they are coming after something? A lot of times you may not even know that you are coming after something, and only after coming after something, having seen something happen, you realize that you came in the middle of something, that you determined the direction of something.

HB It is a tragedy.

LO Yeah.

HB Yeah, there's nothing you can do except consciousness and administration of that power. You cannot measure it, you cannot decide anything about it except be aware of the power. When you use the word “power”, please be aware that there is nothing to substitute for that term. Power is that which you can't budge. Otherwise it's not power.

‘Yielding’? Conferring, conceding, abdicating, abrogating ... sharing ?

Three notions of sharing:

1. When that which is offered is given up to the receiver (donation);
2. When part of that which is offered is given up and part is kept (parceling out);
3. When that which is offered is still retained by the one who makes the offer (sharing with).

These notions can be applied to time as well as to things.

The teacher, having the power of position within an institution, the power of knowledge, and the power of the respondent to boot, will be frustrated in the attempt to give up these powers by the necessity of giving up position, knowledge, and response (as if that were possible!). Since a teacher cannot get rid of these powers (at least the last two) and remain a teacher, “power sharing” in the teaching situation refers to the notion of “sharing with”, where that which is offered is still retained by the one who makes the offer.

So it is with the respondent who might wish to “yield power to a composition”. The respondent who attempts not to falsify the composition, volunteers to be vulnerable to a composition’s input.

Good teacher: good respondent—i.e., the proposal put forward by the student’s network of connections is taken by the teacher and tied in (preferably with many filaments) with the teacher’s network of connections. The friction generated by the two networks intersecting in the shared proposition is teaching.

From this experience the student might learn to take this structure from the student- teacher relationship and apply it by analogy to the piece-listener relationship. In the analogy, the piece would have to be so interrogated that the answers of the piece can be taken by the listener and given the form of a proposed network of connections. The listener could probe the piece’s network of connections for moments of friction with the listener’s network of connections.

... so having fled the audience and become a teacher, the composer finds another audience: the students. In that new context, facing the students, the composer discovers that there are certain things that can be asked of them that cannot be asked, so far, in the concert hall.

# Images of Teacher and of Composer

## Two Incompatibilities

Many composers who teach, grumble about having to teach. Though the particular grumbings express dissatisfaction with the working conditions which “take time away from composing”, the grumbings also express dissatisfaction with having to teach. This stress could mean “I would enjoy teaching if I didn’t have to teach”. What is usually meant, however, is: “I wouldn’t teach if I didn’t have to.” This last statement, the underlying enduring grumble, can be understood to point to at least one of the two incompatibilities: 1) between the composer’s concept of teaching and the composer’s concept of ‘I’; 2) between the composer’s concept of teaching and the composer’s concept of composition. The second incompatibility, between teaching and composition, and more specifically the incompatibility between teaching composition and composing, raises my curiosity: to investigate whether a concept of teaching and a concept of composition can be so formulated that teaching—contrary to the grumble and yet no consolation—might be considered indispensable for composition.

Not teaching, but the argument for teaching has to change; then teaching will change as a consequence.

Ambivalent attitudes toward teaching composition reflect two clashing images of the composer: independent, feisty rugged individualist and socially responsive contributor to a discourse, participant in debate. The rugged individualist doesn’t need to be taught and fears followers; the participant in debate finds school to be almost the only, though insufficient, public forum available.

The teacher (at least as currently conceived) assumes that a description of what is and has been provides instruction for what is to be. The composer asserts that a description of what is and has been shows what is to be no longer.

The teacher (at least as currently conceived) and the composer conflict in their treatments of standards: for a teacher, standards are to uphold, hand down, judge by; for a composer, a standard is to challenge, to make moot.

For a composer to consider composed teaching indispensable, this composer would have to cherish an image of social consequences of compositions, either in terms of a goal, statement, protest desired by the composer to ‘come across’ to addressees, or in terms of a level of (public?) discourse which would detect, describe, admire and criticize the particular contribution of a composition: the discourse of a community of thinking people who are eager for change, who welcome the new.

So long as society maintains a profit-oriented culture industry, it will remain inimical to composition (composition is inimical to it) and this situation requires of the composer the generation of an enclave, letting composition guide the generation of its social context, against the social context it was born into. Teaching in the educational system is at best a band-aid attempting to supply something which is missing from the society at large: intelligent, caringly critical discussion of the work one wants to contribute.

Obedience, also inimical to composition, is tacitly demanded by current teaching situations. The composer who proposes to teach composition thus stands between the teaching situation and the desire to compose. The composition teacher’s desire to teach composers, and to teach composition, calls for ideas which undermine the implicit demand for obedience in the teaching situation. Since the problem appears as a dilemma it requires composition to approach a solution.

## Arguments Against?

“It has often been said that composition cannot be taught, and though this statement, like many generalizations, is too sweeping, it contains a good deal of truth.”

(Jacob The Composer and his Art, 1)

“For all practical purposes you can learn all there is to be learned from someone in the space of six months, and even that would be slow: sometimes a week is enough.”

(Boulez, Conversations with Deliège)

Since the composer’s activity is to make music which has not been before, the composer can be taught, at most, what has been music before, but not what music is to be next, for deciding what is to be music next is the activity of the composer.

“Deliberately self-taught [vs. ‘accidentally self-taught’] . . . that is, those who have the strength of will to have done with models that existed before them.”

(Boulez, 36)

“This does not mean that the study of the theory of composition is superfluous or even harmful. At all times composers—even the great masters—learned through study to express their musical thoughts more pointedly, fluently, and clearly. In order to fulfill its role properly, the teaching of composition must keep two points in view. By abstracting general principles from the works of the great masters, it enables the average musical person with no special gift for composition to ‘compose’ music, i.e. to put it together. This happens every day in musical academies, where the students write fugues, canons, rondos and so on. But there is one thing which the most conscientious pursuit of the study of composition cannot do—that is, replace inspiration, through which alone music becomes the immediate creative expression of thoughts.”

(Rufer, Composing with Twelve Tones, 3)

A teacher who would teach composition can think that the student composer may come up with the ideas, and then may learn from the teacher how to realize, develop, or embed the ideas. But the realization, development or embedding of an idea must be determined according to the idea, not according to the teacher.

Originality, spontaneity, insight, irony, sense of humor, tactical ingenuity, serendipity might be learned, but cannot be taught. Teaching concerns itself with method, while the attributes of a good composer (originality, spontaneity, insight, etc.) circumvent method; they are, possibly, anti-method. Every pedagogy, even when aimed at liberation, is composed of precepts and generalizations. Composers, themselves wanting to set up each particular composition as though it were a precept and a generalization of what is to follow, will act inconsistently with the pedagogies they know.

## Formulation

Two sources of the aversion to teaching are (1) the attack on hierarchy, and (2) the neglect of formulation. Some are averse to teaching because they dislike the visibility of hierarchy; others are averse to teaching only because they have neglected formulation.

If the activity of formulating ideas—taking care in ‘putting them into words’—were seen as crucial, indispensable for composition, that is, if composition were taken to imply radical thinking, then one would need the pesky insistence of a curious person, a person who suspects that one’s ideas might be needed, not as a help but as an ally.

A teacher can offer the formulation of a thought which might provoke a student to engage in a new process of thinking, and to apply the new process of thinking in a process of composition which will give rise to a personal style and perhaps a new thought, distinct from the teacher’s thinking, composition, style, and thought. If this were to happen, it might provoke a student to engage in a process of composing based not on the wish to adopt a style, to do something liked, to conform to the taste and sense of reasonability of society as it is, but on the wish to explore the consequences of the thought in a thinking process, with ideas and ways of composing which could propose the style, liking, taste, and sense for society not yet existing.

## Desired Consequences I

A teacher makes the audacious claim that the goal of teaching is the obsolescence of the teacher. A composer makes the equally audacious claim that the goal of composing is the indispensability of the composer.

To draw this distinction links the contradictions to today’s society which teacher and composer find themselves in: current society denies teachers their obsolescence and composers their indispensability.

An imaginatively composed teaching is indispensable for having one’s contemporaries enter into the conversations with compositions (what has been referred to as the desired consequences for a composition).

The discussion of criteria consulted by a composer touches on the potential significance of the composition, its input, contribution, social consequences, its ‘message’; this discussion also holds the potential to teach composition to those who would be its students.

“When asking students the question: ‘Why do you want to compose?’,  
the best answer given to me thus far has been:  
‘I HAVE NO CHOICE!’ ”

(Gaburo, Collaboration One: The Beauty of Irrelevant Music)

Gaburo’s glee on hearing this answer—bad news that it is—must have come not only from the linking of composition with a sense of necessity, but also from the double entendre: composition does something about the situation of having no alternative, where ‘to do something about it’ in this case means response to a lack of choice as a problem provoking creation. Composition creates alternatives.

To the extent that a composition shows how alternatives were chosen according to criteria, it teaches. Thus a teacher who asks students to compose thereby invites those students to become teachers. The teacher

who would make such an invitation confronts three compositional problems: formulating alternatives and criteria, creating the context of sharing, and the performance of offer and response. Teaching must then be approached as composition, and the teaching situation is then a place where the function of teacher and the function of composer overlap.

“To the extent that a composition shows how alternatives were chosen according to criteria, it teaches.” This extent might equal zero, for a composition shows criteria only to a person who has inferred the criteria; that is, only a person who has inferred the criteria will say that a composition ‘showed’ the criteria. Under current conditions, it is already a feat if a composition has succeeded in signaling to the listener that something was chosen. The audience which understands that something was chosen must hold some image—even if not the composer’s image—of a set of alternatives from which the composer chose.

Criteria, then, are a matter of discussion, and the discussion must have a context, a time and a space and a certain level of discourse, in which it can take place. Where else is such a context to be made if not in a ‘teaching situation’?

I am aware that education is not a miraculous process capable by itself of effecting the changes necessary to move a nation from one epoch to another. Indeed, it is true that by itself education can do nothing, because the very fact of being ‘by itself’ (i.e., superimposed on its context) nullifies its undeniable power as an instrument of change . . . Precisely because education is not the lever for the transformation of society, we are in danger of despair and of cynicism if we limit our struggle to the classroom.

(Schor and Freire, A Pedagogy for Liberation, 129)

Since the context (the time, the space and especially the level of discourse) for the discussion of criteria cannot simply be found, it must be created. The creation of a context, if not to be thought of as composition, at least requires the thinking of a composer.

The purpose of teaching composition, of learning skill in composing, is to prevent squandering good ideas in bad pieces: where the idea is not only wasted in a context that doesn’t need it, but is also spoiled for a context that might need it.

# Composing the Performance of Teaching

If teaching is to be understood as responding to students by sharing power and offering alternatives and criteria, a composer who would teach composition confronts three compositional problems: formulating alternatives and criteria, couching the offer and response, and creating the context of sharing power. Teaching must then be approached as composition, and the teaching situation is then a place where the function of teacher overlaps with the function of composer.

The composing teacher tries to get students to grapple with issues which the teaching composer does not outgrow: the current constitution of 'I', the description of the current epoch, and the selection of strategies for I's confrontation with the epoch.

Composition of performance—composition, that is, taken to be the synthesis, according to socially conditioned and society-conditioning preferences, of the consequences of a premise established by human (anti-natural) fiat—is an attempt indispensable to the performance of compositions.

## Environment of Discourse

A composition can assert its distinction, its provocation, its statement only if it is treated as though it wants to be distinguished, as though it aims to provoke, as though it wishes to make a statement. Listeners (students?) will distinguish, respond to provocation, and formulate statements only if they are treated as though they want to describe, as though they want to respond, as though they want to formulate.

Ideas are welcome, but they are not what a student of composition needs from a teacher. The contribution urgently needed from a teacher is increased sensitivity, and sensitivity increases when a distinction is introduced. Distinctions might be introduced with hints, gestures, examples, but not without formulations. The formulation of a distinction establishes a moment of increased freedom.

Waive the privilege of access to the absolute truth, and a kind of discussion is then possible which would not be possible without waiving the privilege of access to absolute truth.

The premise of teaching has been that better knowledge leads to better actions, that is, to actions chosen after consulting better knowledge as criterion. Teachers know better than to rely on this premise. Teachers could begin to look at the environmental conditions in which a person will consult better knowledge in choosing actions.

Teaching: when I bring about an environment of discourse in which those whom I claim to teach learn what I would have them know. I may not know afterwards whether I taught, or the environment of discourse taught.

In a social world which responds to the manifestation of desire with contempt, apathy, oblivion, preaching, and derision, a teacher not only asks for the manifestation of desire, but also asks for allies in the attack on contempt, apathy, oblivion, preaching, and derision.

If hierarchy is inherent in the teaching situation, then a project for the composing teacher would be to expose it, to undermine it, to jostle it.

If the concept of composition excludes imitation of models, and models are not to be done away with, then how else to treat a model? (Problem for a respondent) “. . . the pupil would have to gather from them the fact that one must come to grips with all the problems—not how to.” (Schönberg, Style and Idea)

I construct the consistency which connects the consistency of one composer with the consistency of another composer. In presenting a composer’s work and views, I distinguish the consistency of the views investigated, written about, presented, from the consistency of my viewing the consistencies.

Two teachers:

1. “I have to prepare!”
2. “I have to prepare the first sentence of a class; the first sentence has to be composed. From there I have to provoke, respond, demonstrate the development of an idea.”

First statements apply leverage to the level of discourse.

Carefully chosen first statements can protect the discussion at the outset against the avalanche of agreement.

“The choice is gloomy: conscientious functionary or free artist, the teacher escapes neither the theater of speech nor the Law played out on its stage: the Law appears not in what is said but in the very fact of speech. In order to subvert the Law (and not simply get around it), the teacher would have to undermine voice delivery, word speed, and rhythm to the point of another intelligibility.”

(Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers”)

“In the teaching situation, no one should anywhere be in his place.” (Barthes) The fall-back phrases which oil the usual discourse with unreflected-upon agreement are to be made out of place. Teaching could change the state of knowledge by changing the state of language, such that phrases that once allowed one to “get by” no longer pass unchallenged. One of the performances that becomes available when phrases fall under suspicion is that of catching oneself. If, for example, I am one of the participants in a discussion in which we have decided to dispense with all phrases that imply faith in objectivity, and unwittingly I begin the next sentence with “It seems to me. . .”, and stop, this performance shows the moment in which usage clashes with thought.

I also learned how to give up my power as a teacher (not delegate it but abrogate it) and how to help my pupils as well as become someone they could talk with. I learned to listen to them, to be led by their interests and needs. In turn I became involved in creating things in the classroom—in doing research on myths and numbers, in learning from the experience of the students. My students and I resembled a community much more than a class, and I enjoyed being with them. We worked together in an open environment which often spilled out of the school building into the streets, the neighborhood, the city itself.

(Kohl, 14)



As teaching situations necessarily involve impromptu moments, casual conversation, banter, “ice-breaking”, one could let compositional thinking and playfulness reach into these preludes and postludes to getting down to business.

## Witness

JZ . . . I not only say ‘that’s what I saw’, but ‘given this context, that’s what I saw’, and would call that a witness. I’m checking. Is this what you wanted?

ME I was thinking of situations, for instance, a lecture in which some lecturer has given a presentation and then there’s a question-answer period, and a young student raises a hand and asks a question of the lecturer that perhaps questions one of the premises of this person’s lecture. Instead of addressing the question, the lecturer will find one of numerous ways of saying ‘Yeah yeah, that’s very nice. I’m always glad to get a question like that. Now are there any other questions?’ [laughter] and this happens so frequently that nobody even finds it funny anymore.

JG It’s not funny. [laughter] I’m laughing but that doesn’t mean it’s funny. [laughter]

CW That’s one of Lesley’s tragedies.

SP So in that situation you’re putting what?

ME In that situation what’s missing is someone to witness the interaction between the lecturer and the student.

HB Witness would be a whole roomful of lecture attendants getting up and leaving upon that.

CW Mm hm.

ME Mm hm.

HB That would be a demonstration of witnesship. This is so ridiculous if such a thing happens everybody must leave. Just go. But it doesn’t happen. Because witnessing does not seem to be an instruction to action. It seems to be an instruction to documentation. It is absorbed by research.

The concept of ‘witness’, as distinguished from ‘observer’, ‘spectator’; from ‘advocate’, ‘judge’, ‘recorder’, and ‘reporter’, indicates that a person sees, hears, and speaks publicly about what she sees and hears. A witness is called for when a doubt has been raised—publicly—whether an event has taken place, or not. The concept of witness admits of a variety of motivations, guided, however by the motivation to make public a socially functioning statement of what has taken place.

WB Not that anyone would care but that term has a long history that way going back at least to the . . .

SP Which word has a long history to it? Witness?

WB To witness in that capacity. To witness as in to give, to bear testimony to, rather than to witness as in to passively observe. The witness to an accident does not bear testimony to it. That’s what’s becoming the law, in the eyes of the law. In the history of social protest to witness means indeed to bear testimony to that which occurred, but with the implication that the testimony which is born is an action rather than simply a relation, a report.

A listener  
will not become a witness  
without having had one.

The current state of listening—to music and to talk—suffers from lack of witness.

We in music seem to be the only ones who are living in that impossible world in which unjustified, false belief not only parades as but is published as knowledge. We have a very serious situation in that regard. Music has become the final resting place for all of those hoary psychophysical dualisms such as heart and brain, the cognitive and the sentient. Well, we're having a problem and that is part of our problem. The notion of serious discourse about music is a concern to me not because I have to be concerned essentially about the state and fate of discourse, but because I'm concerned about the state and fate of music.

(Milton Babbitt, Words about Music, 175)

A teacher of composition must be two witnesses:  
a witness to the student and a witness to what the student did.

I learn how to witness what that which I do, does. The fulfillment of a desire has consequences. This idea is expressed in several fairy tales, but there the moral of the story condemns desire—which it equates with over-reaching ambition and acquisitiveness. On the contrary, to favor desire and fulfillment while maintaining critical scrutiny is what a composer teaches—to support desire so that one may scrutinize the consequences of desires fulfilled rather than the consequences of obligations met.

Paraphrase is incorrectly assumed to be the most credible form of receipt that one has understood—or has been understood. Paraphrase is often accompanied by the phrase “Do you mean . . .?”, which shows the respondent to be overlooking the fact that a paraphrase is a transformation of the initial statement. Verbatim repeat is underestimated as a credible receipt. A respondent who checks by verbatim repeat gives a sign that this respondent considers the formulation to be of significance.

Paraphrase has other functions besides conveying a falsely reassuring “I know what you mean”. It can function as correction or refusal. It plays a role in brainstorming, in the attempt to develop an answer to an unanswered question, where the aspect of transformation is precisely what is wanted.

To respond with a paraphrase is different from responding with an analogy, so long as analogy is understood as the attempt to point at a structure applied in two distinct systems. The colloquial threat to analogy is “It's like . . .”; contrary to this usage, response by analogy emphasizes the difference between the two systems.

## **Criticism, Dismissal, Correction**

Dismissal need not result from malice; casual remarks and attempts to compliment easily exhibit the features and serve the function of an effective put-down. The aim of the dismissal—intended or not—is to banish a problem, issue, or offer from public discourse, and so deny them a social function.

“All student input needs to be appreciated and responded to: ‘Nice question’, ‘Good point’, ‘Thanks for the clarification’.” (Thomas Benjamin, “The Learning Process and Teaching”)

Hear, hear!—All input needs to be appreciated and responded to!

Or: On the contrary—All input needs to be appreciated and responded to.

Speech is irreversible: a word cannot be retracted, except precisely by saying one retracts it. To cross out is here to add: if I want to erase what I have just said, I cannot do it without showing the eraser itself (I must say: ‘or rather . . .’ ‘I expressed myself badly . . .’); paradoxically it is ephemeral speech which is indelible, not monumental writing.

(Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers”)

Dismissal wishes to act as such an eraser for the responded-to.

When a composer has the reputation of being a bad teacher and yet is known as someone from whom one can learn, the conflict in reputations could be due to a failure to distinguish between criticism and dismissal, but also to the appearance of criticisms among the dismissals.

The word ‘correction’ conceals, under the one notion of static hierarchy, a variety of behaviors: correction according to the consistency toward which the student was aiming; correction according to a criterion not yet consulted by the student; correction according to a set of rules to which the student tried to conform; correction according to a set of rules to which the work generally conforms, unbeknownst to the student; ‘correction’ according to rules which are appropriate neither to the student nor to the work.

Implicit invitation by the student affects the gesture of correction:

1. invitation to regard and admire;
2. invitation to check for self-consistency (immanent critique);
3. invitation to check for consistency with a set of rules;
4. invitation to brainstorm on continuation of work in progress;
5. invitation to discuss the desirability of the consequences of desired choices.

A teacher can offer alternatives to the invitation assumed by the student. Uninvited correction, when not itself an invitation, dismisses an offer.

## **Instruction and Orientation**

Within the power of the respondent, i.e., among the choices open to the respondent is the choice to respond by instruction or by orientation. Instruction tells you explicitly what to do. Orientation makes a change in the environment according to which you tell yourself what to do. An instruction would be when I say, “Please, turn up the heat”; you obey or don’t. Orientation would be when I hunch my shoulders, rub my arms, breathe on my hands, and shiver, and you, detecting that the temperature of the room makes me uncomfortable and acting on your sense of hospitality, decide to turn up the heat.

I could instruct a person who wishes to write for the trumpet to avoid the low range, especially in muted passages, to be sparing of the high range, to make sure that high notes are prepared, to take advantage of the trumpet's agility, incisive attack, large dynamic range, etc. Or: I could orient a person who wishes to write for the trumpet to the phenomenon of the trumpet and trumpet players. I could invite a trumpet player to meet with us, try out a few exercises, show mutes. The person who wishes to write for the trumpet could be asked to watch the player's neck while high and low notes are attempted, to see what a pianissimo attack looks like, to sit in on a rehearsal and watch what the players do when they have to change mutes, etc.

To give instructions when an orientation would suffice, and to persist with orientation when instruction is needed, both are condescending.

(Humberto Maturana visiting Brün's seminar)

To show an alternative orients a respondent to choose.

To offer several instructions can function as orientation. (Alternative instructions, or a compound or constellation of instructions)

## **Gesture**

Gestures of scolding,  
warning,  
holding  
forth,  
reminding,  
teasing, indicting, bantering,  
looking askance,  
confiding,  
confessing,  
prescribing,  
pleading,

Gesture: not to 'do', but to 'perform'. Sullivan's description of gesture as a hybrid medium wherein one medium borrows distinctions from another, could be applied to the performance of teaching.

To be able to imagine and perform, with attention to voice, vocabulary, and gesture, the most insidious of slanderers and flatterers.

If all teaching is also a performance (and not the other way around), then when does a performance teach? For a performance to succeed in entertaining is not sufficient—most successful entertainments confirm only the already believed, and stave off reflection. Neither will an unentertaining performance suffice. One requirement most likely is that the performance include an element of self-reference.

Gestures of being astonished,  
calling a bluff,

conceding a point,  
bragging, boasting,  
burlesquing . . .

Giving advice grates for want of variety of gesture.

To be able to imagine and perform, with attention to voice, vocabulary, and gesture, the most insidious of slanderers and flatterers could help to remove hope from its favored status as criterion for making decisions.

It is in the power of the respondent to disregard the gesture with which a remark is made, by taking it at its word—that is, responding to the sentence as though it were spoken within another gesture. In this way an attempt at dismissal by sarcasm, taken as a proposal, can become unexpectedly a contribution.

“Showing a painting of a white area [I said] ‘Master Kandinsky, I have finally succeeded in painting an absolute picture of absolutely nothing.’ Kandinsky took my picture completely seriously. He set it up right in front of us and said: ‘The dimensions of the picture are right. You are aiming for earthliness. The earthly color is red. Why did you choose white?’ I replied ‘because the white plane represents nothingness.’ ‘Nothingness is a great ideal,’ Kandinsky said. ‘God created the world from nothingness.’ He took brush and paint, set down on the white plane a red, a yellow, and a blue spot and glazed on a bright green shadow by the side. Suddenly a picture was there, a proper picture, a magnificent picture.”

(A student of Kandinsky, quoted in Frank Whitford, Bauhaus, 98)

. . . disputing,  
bemoaning,  
mocking,  
exhorting,  
venturing a suggestion, harping on something,  
applauding,  
shutting up,  
commiserating . . .

Suggestion for a director—also appropriate for a teacher?—create a distinct style of address for each actor, for each student: speed, humor, level of friction, in-joke, goal, vocabulary, tones of voice, gestures.

## **The Performance of Being a Student**

“Lessons, then, where advanced students of composition are concerned, should be in the nature of friendly discussions illustrated if necessary by master and pupil with relevant quotations from the works of composers of excellence of all periods, and the pupil should state clearly what his difficulties and problems are . . . A pupil who puts his work in front of his master and then sits like an oyster, mum and dull, is really more of a cross than one who is too talkative, severe trial though the latter can be.”

(Jacob, 6)

And if a pupil does not, or can not, or will not state clearly what the difficulties and problems are?

Five initial poses of a student meeting a teacher:

1. tolerant (knowing it all)
2. reveling in contrariness
3. unable to begin, not knowing how to choose, stuck
4. secure, but interested, that is, not completely secure
5. playing by the rules rather than playing along: obedient

Two contemporary performances of being a student: (1) the student knows it already, and therefore it is of little interest; (2) the student is not interested in it, and therefore knows it already. How to perform facing such a performance?

“In an open situation the teacher tries . . . to deal with each situation as a communal problem.”  
(Kohl, 16)

## Question

Sometimes an offered question is sufficient impetus for those who have learned the question to supply the insights necessary to invent answers. Sometimes an offered question conveys the sufficient insight for those who know the question to invent answers.

If the teacher poses legitimate questions (that is, questions to which the answers are not known by the teacher), then the teacher and student are, or become—vis-a-vis the question—colleagues.

1. The teacher addresses problems of the student which the teacher has already mastered (‘Illegitimate questions’).
2. The teacher’s mastery of approach emerges while offering the student a problem which the teacher has not mastered (‘Legitimate questions’). In this instance the teacher shares power, but not directly with the student; rather indirectly through the problem.

Socrates’ every response is a question. Most of the questions are placed as open moments within a chain of argumentation, wherein he seeks assent to those components of the argument which he thinks unlikely to be contested. Since the initial assertion of his conversation partner is contradicted by the culmination of conceded points, Socrates’ process of questioning appears not to ‘make an argument of his own’ but to dismantle the argument of his partner in conversation.

Socrates satirizes his conversation-partners’ assumption of reductionist logic: that the whole argument (to which Socrates’ addressees disagree) is the sum of its parts (to each of which his addressees almost cannot but agree). Since they agreed to the parts, they swallow the whole.

A question and the way it is asked lead a respondent by pointing at a range of answers it considers admissible.

The respondent need not remain in thrall to the question's range of admissible answers.

## Assignment

ME . . . You said you would want to find out a lot of different things about this student, where this person had been, what they were thinking of, and what they wanted to do. What would you do with that description of the student?

JG Make an assignment.

ME Hm.

SP Hm.

HB That's what it's for.

Josephus comes up with ideas for fulfillments of assignments not given by Aloysius; that is, both Aloysius and Josephus are busy generating assignments.

(Fux, Gradus ad Parnassum, 29ff, for example)

Formulate an assignment such that it creates a context in which a student wants you to teach. Let the assignment create the context.

## Face to Face

A composer is most likely to consult another when feeling stuck on a problem, at an impasse (thus the disparagement of composition teaching as 'therapy'). Since the compositional problem is concocted by the composer, an outsider might be puzzled that the composer doesn't decide to drop it and move to some other. The puzzled outsider would be missing several points: that a stuck moment might be a sign of potential breakthrough; that it is the difficulty of the posed problem that is seductive; that the posed problem is likely of interest for its links to a problem not posed by the composer; and that the impasse might derive from a lack of problem: the composer might be mistakenly inspecting the ideas that are there in the posed problem instead of looking for an additional idea which is not there.

## Vocabulary

Artists use and hear jargon terms of which understanding is assumed precisely because the terms are jargon. Upon examination, often the assumption is seen to be unfounded, if not also the confidence in the usefulness of the terms.

Some terms which have acquired a precise technical meaning serve the development of thinking about composing (and thus also of composing) when these terms are temporarily uncoupled from their technical meaning.

In the performance of teaching, a decision is to be made regarding vocabulary: whether to renew the vocabulary of discourse frequently, rapidly changing the images referred to in discussing a problem or to introduce and explore a few terms so that a shared vocabulary can become the means for generating new ideas—from which a usage develops.

“After three or four years of working together, we have developed a shared vocabulary which allows explorations, conjectures, and formulations to be discussed on a high level. Then new people come in and don’t know what we’re talking about.”

(Gaburo in a conversation)

The generation of an enclave affords one the luxury of such problems.

## Sharing Power

Those who contemplate pedagogy assume a dichotomy: either encouragement through ‘being nice’, positive statements, rewards, etc., or encouragement through being ‘tough’, enforcing discipline, administering punishment. If contemplation of pedagogy were coupled with critical observation of the (discouraging) social environment against which teaching labors, then both policies would be seen as standing among the generators of discouragement.

“One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor . . . pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether peoples or individuals) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity . . . How can the oppressed, as divided, inauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?”

(Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 31)

“I learn by teaching.” (Thomas Benjamin, *On Teaching Composition*) Lacking committed stress, this sentence would convey the unintended message that you (and everyone but I) don’t learn by teaching. Use of the third-person I (Brün)—‘I learns by teaching’—could ferret out an insight about learning: that everyone who says ‘I’ learns by teaching, including students.

“In order to elicit the current self-description of a system I wish to understand, I have to grant it the power of the respondent.”

(Brün, My Words and Where I Want Them, 111)

The teacher is a respondent; the student is a respondent; the phenomenology of these two respondents depends, in part, on whether the teaching situation is treated as a one-way medium, a two-way medium, or a more-than-two-way medium.



## **What Do I Teach such that I Teach Composition?**

The question “what do I teach?” points at the not-yet-known alternatives and not-yet-consulted criteria which the teacher would like to present to, or investigate with, students. Under the image of teaching I would like to support, however, these alternatives and criteria form only part of the subject matter. The other part is to be derived from the teaching situation: who is present, what has been brought; local trends, hot topics, and simmering controversies.

For the situation to be a teaching situation the participants—students and teachers—must attempt to connect the subject matter which they constitute with the title under which they meet.

The following list of answers to the question “what do I teach such that I teach composition?” represents a network of ways to approach, work on, think about what I have learned to call—and currently prefer to call—composition.

What do I teach?

The desirability of . . .  
Fear of . . .  
Aversion to . . .  
The abundance of . . .  
Preference for . . .  
To ask when . . .  
The difference between . . .  
The dialectics of . . .  
The ability to discern between . . .  
The necessity of . . .  
Attention to . . .

The desirability of coming up with an idea which requires the medium chosen, the structure chosen; the requirements of an idea.

Experience with the technique of ‘brainstorming’ illustrates how widespread is the ability to come up with ideas. Scarcity is introduced by qualifications: new ideas, really new ideas, good ideas, very good ideas, lots of ideas, the right idea. Thus the problem is not having ideas but having an idea of what to do with ideas such that they play a role, fulfill a need or desire, solve a problem.

The composer asks questions of the initial idea and the proposed medium regarding the traces which the idea requires to have left and the traces which the medium is capable of preserving. (Sullivan, “The Performance of Gesture”)

In the process of composing, the idea acts as a pretext. The composer forms a web of consistencies around this idea, which becomes a pretext for the statement that emerges. That a respondent may later discover this idea and attach significance to it, does not deny that the idea was a pretext for the composition and statement which emerged from it.

In the notes on the first production of the Lehrstück The Mother, Brecht says of the set that only those props were used without which the play could not happen.

“ . . . the stage . . . was not meant to simulate an actual locality. Instead the stage itself assumed a position, as it were, in regard to the events: it quoted, recounted, anticipated, and reminded. With its sparse indications of furniture, doors and the like, it was kept to the objects that played a role; objects, that is, which, were they missing, would require the action to proceed differently or not at all.”

(Brecht, performance notes for The Mother, 133–4)

The purpose of teaching composition, of learning skill in composing, is to prevent squandering good ideas in bad pieces: where the idea is not only wasted in a context that doesn’t need it, but is also spoiled for a context that might need it.

“A compositional method exists to write pieces. It is not sacred, and when the piece has reached through application of the method a sufficient degree of completeness,

it will begin to assert its own rights and needs. These may often seem to contradict the original method or call for changes in the work's design. Do not hesitate when such a situation arises. If the method has served long enough to allow the work it has produced to contradict it, it has more than fulfilled its function."

(Wuorinen, Simple Composition, 164)

This paragraph could have been the first of a book which would bracket the notion of method, and change it from being the tool for making acceptable products efficiently, to being a probe where the method is half object of interest and half pretext for serendipity. (Composition as planned serendipity.)

The synthesizer teaches a readiness for ready-mades. The counter move will have to be made by composers, whether by turning away from the synthesizer, or subverting the synthesizer, or thinking of an idea which requires the synthesizer.

### Fear of the decay of information

I distinguish between tendencies which can be avoided, which must be 'guarded against', which can only be retarded.

That which I can avoid will not happen unless I do it.

That which I must guard against will visit uninvited unless I take precautions.

That which takes its course sooner or later according to what we currently know as laws of nature, namely: decay, as in "decay of information" (Shannon and Weaver), can only be retarded. (Brün)

Facing the one-way inexorable process of the decay of information, I am loath to try to exhaust all the possibilities of an idea.

A teacher's response to a student's work in progress could point out repeats, constancies, and periodicities (which speed the loss of information) that the student overlooked.

In some cases, a drone-like constancy results from too little redundancy.

Variations on 'simple':

A listener apprehends components without yet comprehending the arrangement.

A listener perceives the simplicity of an arrangement on which complexity has been conferred by complex components.

A listener is subjected to a simple arrangement of simple components (leaving open only the question of why it was done).

Ongoing projects:

composition of prose: prevention of meter

composition of atonality: prevention of tonality

composition of dramaturgy: prevention of drone.

Instruments and instrumental combinations are subject to the dynamics of decay. They have heydays, become used up, suffer entire epochs in which their social function renders them untouchable, even when a compositional idea calls for them. The pipe organ, for example, still resists all attempts to disentangle it from the church.

A person who would compose expects, correctly, that this person's first act as composer would confront the person as an interesting and admirable stranger. The person is, however, incorrectly preoccupied with inherited standards of interest and admirability, and neglects the technical requirements of estrangement.

The subjection of an initially interesting idea to inversions, reversals, disguises, twists, deletions, exaggerations, condensations,—focusing on the hitherto taken-for-granted, specifying what has hitherto been left to accident—such that it is no longer interesting in the way it was initially, opens the possibility that it could become interesting.

Aversion to imitation.

The ideology which presumes the uniqueness of the individual hinders the teaching of composition. (The pattern of the presumption: “Every person is unique. Therefore every product of that person's activity is unique.” A variation on this ideology assumes that nothing new, original, or unique is ever to be expected or desired.) The thought that makes uniqueness into a problem which requires experimentation and construction, and risks error and failure—this thought helps create a social context wherein composition is needed. Thus technique can be judged according to its adequacy in meeting the criterion of distinguishability.

Good improvisers panic at the claustrophobia induced by the repertory under the fingertips; the sensitivity remains a reflex, in contrast to a composer, who reflects on the claustrophobia-inducing situation and thus can choose to preserve the moment panic, or discard it in favor of another situation, or disguise it as a deliberate set-up and so invite witnesses to the situation rather than spectators of the improviser's predicament.

Contributing to a general attempt: I make my predecessor my ally. Respect for the composer to whom I wish to pay homage rules out imitation; on the contrary, it requires the distinctness of my offer, temporarily linked to the other by the description of a shared attempt.

The abundance of unintended messages; protection against unintended messages.

A composer follows a line of thought in realizing an idea. In concentrating on the line of thought, the composer might neglect to foresee the undesirable interpretations to which the work is prey. A teacher can orient a student to the negative thinking necessary for taking protective measures. Better that the piece remain an unsolved puzzle than leave itself open to unwanted easy understanding.

Choose such consistencies as will help a witness defend the composition against its unintended messages.

Find the threshold between 1) a structure which has accumulated a history of meanings and can still be alienated from its accumulated history of meanings in the creation of a new meaning; and 2) a structure which has accumulated a history of meanings and can no longer admit new meanings.

“... this return of the tabooed should not take the form of a harking back to unproblematic categories and solutions; rather, what may legitimately return are past problems.”

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 53–4)

To compose a consistency which is inconsistent with all messages unwanted by the composer opens the possibility that even unintended messages might become wanted.

Preference for creating the illusion of something, the effect of something, over the reproduction of the real thing.

Compositions partake of the power of the respondent in the nesting of events which can be spoken of as ‘references’. The reference names the statement or event to which the composition responds.

Contrary to common practice, however, ‘reference’ need not mean ‘quotation’. Instead of lifting directly from that to which it responds, a composition could quote itself in the name of the other.

The antagonism of composition toward facts suggests that quotation be turned to reluctantly. A more sophisticated procedure would be to invent one’s quotations. In the process one might identify what it was in the structure of the quoted which prompted one initially to quote it. Since quotation links the present work to the context which originally gave the quoted item meaning, the variety of the quoted and its original context drowns out the quality one wanted to emphasize in quoting it.

Two assumptions made regarding the practice of quoting: (1) that the item (and not its context) generated the meaning apparently conveyed by the item; (2) that the quoted item somehow acts as a representative of the context it came from.

To ask when  
repetition is not repetition  
activity becomes stasis  
a step is seen to have been a leap  
a simple process yields a complex result  
a small change gives rise to a large change.

“Consistent and nothing but” (Adorno) describes fractals and the delusion that they are the meeting place of science and art. Likewise symmetry, since it can integrate anything into an aesthetic whole, meets no resistance and therefore accomplishes nothing.

Technique: Learn technique as a solution to a particular problem, but also as a solution of a set of problems, to which, through an act of creation, a problem can be added, thus requiring a change of the technique, and contributing to its evolution.

Ambiguity: when an element is understood as capable of functioning in more than one consistency. ‘Clarification’ of an ambiguity: when the functions suggested by an ambiguity are reflected unambiguously elsewhere, thus connecting the several possible consistencies in one consistency.

The difference between element and function, and interest in preserving the identity of an element under change of function.

Function: what an element does in the system which gives it a function. (In a tonal piece, an F# might be an element; surrounded by a D and an A the F# might function as the third of a triad; within a harmonic progression the triad might function as dominant and the F# function as leading tone.)

Preserving an element under change of function: the element F#, having functioned as the third of a D major triad and as a leading tone in G, becomes surrounded by a D and a B, in the company of which it now functions as the 5th of a b minor triad: the pitch is preserved; the function given it by the harmony changes.

A function might be treated as an element which can preserve its identity and acquire other functions.

The aversion to ornament might be temporarily suspended when the composer hits on an idea which gives to an ostensible ornament a structural function required by the whole in formation.

The ability to discern between the significance of an event for a composed system and the significance of an event for perception.

A compositional idea might call for 20 gradations of an attribute where perception can barely discern 20; a compositional idea might call for 20 gradations of an attribute where perception can discern 5 or 6.

A transposition of a pitch might also transpose its timbre.

Two notations of one sequence of durations might each call forth from a performer a distinct performance.

Sophistication in teaching composition would include sophistication of insight into perception. Aside from the sometimes surprising ability to 'learn' new psychoacoustical boundaries, ambiguities arise in the boundary between 'just noticeable difference' and significant difference.

One index of such changes is the attribution of unplayability to a piece of music. Compositions once declared unplayable are now included in instrumental repertoire.

The dialectics of significance: when an increase in the number of alternatives increases, and when it decreases, the significance of a choice.

If a piece for piano is inadvertently confined to the middle registers, then a reminder of the possibility of high and low increases the significance of the time during which the piece stays in the middle. The middle register appears chosen; the piece performs confinement to the middle rather than simply being it.

Instances in which an increase of the number of alternatives flips from raising the level of significance over to lowering the level of significance: the expansion of possibilities for rapid modulation allowed by the diminished seventh chord; change in the significance of dynamic changes when each note has a new dynamic marking; the entrance of the second voice as opposed to the entrance of the third voice as opposed to the entrance of the sixth voice.

The necessity of having something preserve its identity so that change may be known (to have change there must be something which undergoes change)—the necessity of a carrier for modulation.

‘Having something . . . ’ could mean something immediately recognized, or something conjectured, imputed, inferred, pieced together, discovered, revised . . . in each case some of the features of the ‘something’ are to remain constant in order for it to show change.

Attention to dramaturgy, emphasis, upbeat and downbeat, speech behavior, gesture . . .

Here the list of answers breaks off; the question “what do I teach such that I teach composition” is one of the open questions, that is, questions which remain legitimate even after having been answered.

# Compositions that Teach: Open Form

## ‘Open’ and ‘Didactic’

There exist pieces about which it is said that they were composed for didactic purposes. Those pieces remain of interest to the extent that the pieces exceed didactic purposes, or to the extent that the pieces dignify didactic purposes (against the pejorative sense given to ‘didactic’), or to the extent that the pieces and didacticism are at cross-purposes.

Instances: The books of preludes and fugues by Bach, Die Kunst der Fuge; Chopin Etudes and Preludes; Debussy Etudes—but with ‘etudes’, ‘studies’, the question arises whether these are studies for their composers, or studies for their students? Etude books for instrumentalists could, while ostensibly posing problems for playing technique, also address problems of composition.

Bartok and Ravel took the assignment to write easy-to-play pieces as an opportunity to create effects they would not have been able to achieve without this constraint. Ravel’s Mother Goose Suite could almost be considered didactic in two directions, in that one could learn from inexperienced pianists the potential for expressiveness of “non-expressive” playing technique.

The first of Debussy’s Etudes distances itself from pedagogy with the rhythmic and harmonic pranks it plays on the Czerny five-finger exercise. In literature, Queneau’s Exercices de Style shows what happens when an anecdote is told ninety-nine times, each time with a distinct rhetorical or narrative style. One would not study this work in order to master the ninety-nine styles; rather one would study the composition of its way of calling into question the importance of plot to narration.

Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* are examples of compositions which show alternatives and criteria. Brecht attempted in these “teaching pieces” to show an unresolved dilemma in a context of descriptions of the dilemma which could make it appear as a solvable problem.

Brecht, after all . . . wished not to dispense words of wisdom and pithy slogans, but to activate thought processes in the audience . . . Brecht’s attempts to kill subjective nuances with the aid of a blunt instrument, and to do so conceptually as well, are technical means of his art. In his best works, they are a principle of stylization, far removed from any pedagogical *fabula docet* [the story teaches].

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 47)

There exist pieces about which it is said that their form or structure is “open”.

Usage varies.

Some have used the term in the attempt to distinguish compositional experiments in variability of form.

“Aleatorio can be played several times in succession, provided that the interpreters change the character of particular parts . . . These possibilities for change are not chance—they present only a field of possibilities—and ask of the interpreters to make an arrangement of them. Aleatorio is an open composition. . .”

(Evangelisti, performance notes for Aleatorio)



“For many listeners one of the clear experiences of a score of this kind . . . [is that] there is a definite perception that this structure is only one of a constellation of possible structures.”  
(Fuller, 187)

“This search for ‘suggestiveness’ is a deliberate move to ‘open’ the work to the free response of the addressee.”  
(Eco, The Role of the Reader, 53)

“Today’s artists would rather do away with unity altogether, producing open, unfinished works, or so they think. The problem is that in planning openness they necessarily impart another kind of unity unbeknown to themselves.”  
(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 204))

Some have responded to the fact that many of the descriptions which purport to distinguish open works apply to other works as well. Two strategies are adopted in these responses. One strategy is to retain the distinction open/closed, and introduce a new formulation of the distinction.

“For musicians the term ‘open structure’ has curious and rather limiting connotations. It has been associated almost exclusively with various random procedures of composition, the use of which may, in fact, just as readily yield a closed structure as an open one. In its most characteristic manifestation, the open work seems to be one in which perception replaces object. In other words, the focus of the open composition seems to be not so much upon the object of perception but rather upon the process of perception . . . form becomes a model of the self as it first encounters the world . . .”  
(Delio, Circumscribing the Open Universe, 2)

“What I call open texts, are, rather, reducing . . . indeterminacy, whereas closed texts, even though aiming at eliciting a sort of ‘obedient’ cooperation, are in the last analysis randomly open to every pragmatic accident.”  
(Eco 7))

“The sonata movement of Viennese classicism was a closed form despite its dynamic quality, and no matter how precarious the closure might have been. By contrast, the rondo, with its deliberate vagueness and oscillation between refrain and ‘couplets’, is a decidedly open form.”  
(Adorno Aesthetic Theory, 314))

The other strategy is to admit that all works are open, and retain the distinction as one of degree rather than kind.

What you [G. M. Koenig] said now about the score—in some sense all scores are open. I would subscribe to it completely. It’s a question of degree then. Something like Variations II or Variations I of Cage is open in a way that Debussy’s Jeux is not. And yet both of them are

still open in the sense that they're waiting for some kind of realization which we know will vary depending on who does it, how they interpret it and so forth. So there's always some margin of openness in any text before it is rendered into sound."

(Christian Wolff, quoted in Fuller, panel discussion)

"So called open texts are only the extreme and most provocative exploitation—for poetic purposes—of a principle which rules both the generation and the interpretation of texts in general."

(Eco)

"Every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance."

(Eco)

"A work of art therefore, is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself."

(Eco)

The controversy over when to call a work 'open' and 'indeterminate' has survived several versions of an answer which should have settled it.

(Eco, Brün)

"Every score is determinate and specific in that it defines the finite set of questions to which it offers answers."

(Brün, My Words and Where I Want Them)

open form, open structure,  
open ended,  
open society,  
open book,  
open classroom,  
opening,  
gala opening,  
opening to democracy,  
open door, open air, open field,  
open spaces,  
open-and-shut case,

open mind,  
open face,  
open heart, open person, open wound:  
the word ‘open’ has a rich contextual history.

There exist pieces about which it is said that the openness of their forms links them to didactic purposes.

“This music is drawn from the interaction of the people playing it. It requires for its performance independent self-discipline (unpoliced by a score defining fixed relationships and timings) and a capacity and special alertness for responding to what one’s fellow performers are doing, the sounds they are making or changing and their silences. The responding can be variously deliberate (there is time and you are free) or must be quick and sudden (there are precise requirements which appear unpredictably)... In the meantime others pointed out the pedagogical character of this activity and some social implications (for instance, a kind of democratic interdependence).”

(Wolff, liner notes the Opus One recording of For 1, 2, or 3 People by the Percussion Group of Cincinnati)

“The one merit of such a purely formal score [Cage’s Variations I] is that it releases the initiative of the performer—it gives participation in the act of composition and hence a genuinely educative experience.”

(Cardew 37)

“... the score and its requirements for making this music is such that anyone seriously wishing to, whether or not musically trained or professional, can read and use it; the music might be an incentive to do that, that is, to make of listeners performers.”

(Wolff)

“Brecht’s plays also end in a situation of ambiguity ... the specific concreteness of an ambiguity in social intercourse, a conflict of unresolved problems taxing the ingenuity of the playwright, actors and audience alike. Here the work is ‘open’ in the same sense that a debate is ‘open’. A solution is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience. In this case the ‘openness’ is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics.”

(Eco 55)

The ‘open form’ score offers alternatives; the performer must appoint the criteria—however the manner in which the open-form work offers alternatives may invite the performer to draw distinctions which could then become criteria.

An exception is Cage’s Variations II, which asks that the performer put those questions which may arise into a form such that they can be answered by the ‘score’ (measurements of the distances of five points to six lines). This instruction would indicate that the score provides a sort of generalized set of criteria (an oracle) for choosing among alternatives which the performer must generate.

The difference between a row and an oracle is the placement of artifice.

Boulez promotes the idea of the deliberately self-taught composer.

From whom does the self-taught composer learn?

From himself. Herself.

From what does the self-taught composer learn?

From compositions.

Under what circumstances would one learn from a composition?

When one asks it questions.

Is that all?

When the composition offers alternatives.

And?

And criteria.

The ability of an audience member to elevate the mere existence of hearing to a level of listening, must come from a desire to do so. If composers prefer an audience educated to listen, composers must assist in that educational process by composing works which help bridge the gap between hearing and listening. It seems self-evident that a significant percentage of music does not promote listening at all.

(Udow)

Every composition bridges a gap between some hearing and its listening. A composition can help teachers who are capable of listening to raise the desire of students for the listening which that composition promotes. A composer would assist this process by composing works which offer a gap to be bridged.

(A distinction between hearing and listening: the listener's awareness of what the listener's language does to what is heard.)

“An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters therefore is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.”

(Walter Benjamin, The Author as Producer, 233)

One learns from the ‘closedness’ of a good composition. One observes how its ambiguities are pinned down on both sides by consistencies. One observes how that which we know from inherited aesthetics to be wrong, bad, risky, tasteless, ugly, weak, unheard-of is nested in such a context as makes it a necessary consequence of a quasi-axiomatic construction.

The difference between the composer as teacher and the composition as teacher is that the composer begins with the power of a respondent; the composition begins bereft of this power—which it acquires only through an ‘as-if’: it is treated as if it had the power of response by its respondent.

If a composition is new and experimental, it is possible that the performer of such a piece undertakes actions the significance of which the performer does not yet know.

Is the composition then to be thought of as incapable of showing? No, but the composition, in order to realize its potential for showing, relies on the presence of someone speaking up for it: a respondent.

The desire to open possibilities is haunted by the tendency to exhaust all possibilities. The opening of possibilities risks usurping possibilities; thus ‘openness’ and ‘exhaustive’ must be faked in order to function as pointer rather than as usurper.

What von Foerster says about the concept of information reflected in the use of ‘audio-visual aids’ in teaching could also apply to the presentation of a composition, for pedagogical purposes or not.

We only have to perceive lectures, books, slides and films, etc., not as information but as vehicles for potential information. Then we shall see that in giving lectures, writing books, showing slides and films, etc., we have not solved a problem, we just created one, namely, to find in which context can these things be seen so that they create in their perceivers new insights, thoughts, and actions.

(von Foerster, “The Perception of the Future and the Future of Perception”, 91)

## Obedience

The performers who have decided to perform a piece which explicitly asks them to take initiative and make decisions do what they are told. One shouldn’t be surprised if the conscientious performers, having been told to take initiative and make decisions, attempt to second-guess the decisions the composer would have made.

Let’s go back to Variations I (1958) which I regard as a key work in Cage’s output. Unlike Cheap Imitation, the score of Variations I emphasizes the total interdependence of all the attributes of sound. Transparent sheets of lines and dots make up the score. The dots (sound events) are read in relation to a number of lines representing various aspects of sounds . . . The one merit of such a purely formal score is that it releases the initiative of the performer—it gives participation in the act of composition and hence a genuinely educative experience. In the balance on the other side is the total indifference (implicitly represented by such a formalistic score) to the seriousness of the world situation in which it occurs. Can that one merit tip the scales?

(Cardew, 37)

The gesture with which an assignment is given prompts the respondent in the way to receive the assignment. (The respondent, though, retains the power to follow the prompting or not.) Many works which have made explicit that they are giving an assignment to the performer, do so by attaching the word ‘any’. Though ‘any’ seems at first to be a generous offer; soon the absence of constraint or preference can be detected to represent a withholding of potential criteria, and a withdrawal from dialogue by the dialogue partner. An astronomical number of alternatives with few limiting criteria brings on paralysis or obedience. The history of new, experimental compositions that have been treated by performers with resentful obedience is well known. Under what circumstances would I say that the piece elicited resentful obedience?

The reason for that multiplicity is that you would not then be able to exercise choice. If you're making eighty-eight loops, very quickly you get uninterested in what it is you are doing.

(John Cage, quoted in Kostelanetz, 118)

The mix of instruction and orientation peculiar to a score, meeting the requirements for mix of instruction and orientation peculiar to a player, determines, in part, the kind of initiative the score is able to elicit.

Some would say that that was a lot of trouble to go through just to get at some cookies. And it was. Others would say that that was just some trick to take up space with something other than cookies. And it probably was. Yet others would say that I was the very sucker for which that was designed. And I am. There is another view. I see the care with which the packaging was done as an invitation to enjoy what I found there, to take this perhaps first chance the whole day to unravel something, to speculate on the kind of person who might have designed that packaging of those contents, to do almost anything but gobble up the contents

(Harlock Verkade: 1969, 2)

I can imagine a context in which to utter the word 'any' has a liberating effect, and I can imagine a context in which to utter the word 'any' discourages, disappoints, provokes resentment. It is hoped that a performer of a score which uses the word 'any' feels called upon to compose, in that it is up to the performer to create the context wherein the word 'any' has a liberating effect, since the composer did not.

If I emphasize 'you may', I point to a backdrop of expectations which assumes 'you may not' (I dare not?).

Eco shows the corollary, that works which aim at "eliciting a sort of 'obedient' cooperation", which he refers to as 'closed', are the ones most 'open' to interpretation.

Open form scores rarely distinguish between instruction, invitation, and assignment.

Open-form orchestral works show the current contradiction between the concert situation and the teaching situation in that these works require the technical accomplishment of a top-notch professional orchestra whose members have the spirit of adventure of a group of students.

## **A Composition's Assignment**

The openness of a work of art can be taken by a respondent as that work's assignment.

The pieces composed under the assignment: Open form! began to make explicit the possibility that a work of art (with its degree and kind of openness) could be accepted by its respondents as an assignment. Its respondents (listener and performer) are asked to imaginatively reconstruct the alternatives from which the composer chose and the criteria consulted while choosing. The respondent might in some cases possess more than one imaginative reconstruction, and thus be able to exercise choice of interpretation.

A composition's assignment to a listener is different from the composition's assignment to a performer insofar as listener and performer exist in differing situations in which to try out their constructions.

The idea of versions relies on hearing the varied against the repeat: varied repeat. The first condition of significant alteration is the declaration by the ‘altered’ of its antecedent (though error, doubt, change of mind, illusion may be involved in the declaration).

That which Evangelisti asks explicitly of the players of Aleatorio for string quartet—that they agree on a version among the numerous possible versions, and that if the piece is done more than once on a program, each performance should be a distinct version—this is an assignment ideally given by every piece. Chamber music poses problems of group decision-making. What distinguishes a piece in this respect is its degrees and kinds of variability. In the case of Aleatorio, for instance, the assortment of alternate playing techniques and *ossiae* provide tools with which to tackle one of the main problems posed by the piece: the problem of giving a distinct “character” to each of the three sections.

“In other words the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed.”

(Eco 62)

The respondent who takes up an assignment may be interested in the assignment for reasons other than those of the respondent who gave the assignment.

When does the assignment given by a work require composition to fulfill it?  
(When is an assignment a composition assignment?)

## Desired Consequences II

Occasionally one hears musicians report about the rehearsing of a piece in which they had no initial interest that they were beginning to “hear things”, which they hadn’t expected to find in the piece. Such reports hint at the significance of the situation of rehearsal for the possibility of letting a composition have a function akin to teaching. The tradition of open rehearsal retains a promise of the bridging of the gap between the concert situation and the teaching situation.

Missing from both the musician’s rehearsal and the listener’s rehearsal is a forum for speaking about the perceptions and connections which the rehearsal situation made possible. Conversation—as yet—rarely invites pursuing in detail what were the “things” that the musician took such pleasure in hearing.

“To compose, at least by propensity, is to give to do, not to give to hear but to give to write. The modern location for music is not the concert hall, but the stage on which the musicians pass, in what is often a dazzling display, from one source of sound to another. It is we who are playing, though still it is true by proxy; but one can imagine the concert—later on?—as exclusively a workshop . . . where all the musical art is absorbed in a praxis . . . Such is the utopia that a certain Beethoven, who is not played, teaches us to formulate—which is why it is possible now to feel in him a musician with a future.”

(Barthes, “Musica Practica”)

The workshop-concert would have to have those aspects of a class that allow the sustaining of an environment of discourse, for instance the possibility of follow-up. The concert-workshop would differ from

a lecture-demonstration in that, instead of reporting about the answering of a legitimate question, the workshop would invite the assembled participants to address legitimate questions.

SP How does this fit—witness and now dismissal—into teaching composition? I’ve been evading . . . You have the composition of teaching. When people ask ‘How can you teach young students composition? Don’t you brainwash them? You tell them your style?’ That’s what my father said, ‘How do, you know, how does one guy teach another person how to be creative?’ It seems like it’s, you know, a fallacy.

LO It seems similar to problems we’ve talked about in relation to designing society which is that if you stipulate the structure under which something is going to take place, take shape, have existence, then you will prevent exactly that which you want to have happen, which is a living, growing, and changing-itself, designing-itself society. And so the difficulty is to raise the awareness of the problems and of how to solve problems I think on the level of, in that particular area of designing society and in teaching composition.

SP Mm hm, good point.

LO This doesn’t answer what you brought up which is . . . connects . . .

SP Well, it does bring up this notion of self-organizing, self-designing. What would you have to teach, or how would we speak of teaching such that it doesn’t take out the very vital thing which is the person wants to self-organize, self-design, self-compose.

“The Song of Art” and “The Nest of the Song” (1979), two titles for one experiment designed and instigated by Patrick Daugherty (in collaboration with many others), made a contribution to the idea of composing a process of eliciting. The structure of the experiment was as follows. “The Song of Art” (“an interaction between the work of artists and the work of other community groups”) consisted of two events: (1) a workshop to which some twenty artists and representatives from some twenty community advocacy groups were invited, and (2) a concert the next evening. The group representatives were asked to prepare for the workshop by writing a statement of the “desired consequences” of the group’s activity. At the workshop, the statements were read, and then the representatives of each group wrote a statement of the desired consequences of a piece which they had never seen or heard, and would have liked to. The statements were then taken by the artists as points of departure for the composition of pieces to be presented two months later. The next evening after the workshop was a concert of compositions of music and theater by Daugherty, interspersed with readings of statements of the desired consequences of each piece written by the participating artists; the concert was open to the public.

“The Nest of the Song” was the name given to the follow-up event two months later. During that time the artists had composed and rehearsed pieces filling three programs—performed at the public library and two community centers—keeping in mind the descriptions of desired consequences written by the community group representatives.

The didactic intention of the project was to have the term ‘desired consequence’ enter the vocabularies of the participants, so that: one would have an alternative to ‘goal’ and ‘activity’, and, as I now say, the friction generated by the networks of connections of composers and activists working under one proposal would elicit a change of image from both.



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