

Planning a two minute composition

Matthew Hindson

Composer Matthew Hindson, has kindly given permission for the text of his 2001 Australian Music Day presentation to be reproduced on the HSC Online site.



Inspiration

Inspiration is more than having a flash of brilliance and instantaneously hearing a complete piece. Unless you are Mozart, it just won't happen!

Inspiration is generally having an idea that influences (or can influence) the total structure and background to whatever you write, giving you a frame on which to hang your musical material.

It is generally easier to write a work that is *about* something. If your piece has a focus, it is more likely to convey a sense of purpose and conviction to the listener, as well making it the process of writing it more directed.

Where can inspiration come from?

An initial burst of inspiration can arrive in an infinite number of ways. Here are some ideas.

Program music

In its most basic form, program music consists of the music following a *narrative* path, i.e. telling a story, or describing an event or an object. The best known example of program music is Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*.

A more advanced alternative is to write your personal response to an event or a story. This is potentially more interesting as it enables listeners to compare your view to their own. It also frees you from the "she did this, then this happened, then this happened" scenario, which may become predictable. An example of this is Peter Sculthorpe's orchestral piece *Kakadu*. Sculthorpe wrote this work before ever going to Kakadu. But, this doesn't matter as it's more about his response to the Australian landscape than a simple description.

However, it is still important to include direct programmatic references through devices such as word painting. For example, in *Kakadu*, Sculthorpe has a section based on bird sounds, which directly relate to the idea of the Australian bush.

Similarly, if you were to write a piece about, say, car racing, it would be advisable to have some musically pictorial references to the sounds that cars make somewhere in the piece. You might write such a concept into a main motivic cell, and then develop it, so it becomes fully integrated into the music rather than just a gimmick.

The image shows a musical score extract from *RPM* starting at measure 25, titled "Pesante Sempre". The score is for a brass ensemble and includes parts for Horns 1/3, Horns 2/4, Trumpets 1 and 2, Trombones 1 and 2, and Bass Trombone (B.Tr.). The music features a prominent motif of eighth notes in the horns and trumpets, with various performance instructions like "straight mute", "bend", and "pesante".

Extract from *RPM* in which the trumpets play a doppler effect motif.

Using a pre-existing musical work

When you are beginning to compose, using pre-existing forms as models can be a satisfying solution to the dilemma of structuring your piece. Composers have used pre-existing pieces in this way for centuries.

An example of a student's composition that does this is *Mixominimal*, by Angela Au. The model for this piece was the second movement of Paul Stanhope's work, *Morning Star I*. A preliminary glance immediately reveals the similarities. A gradually expanding motif is passed around the ensemble with a building texture. Devices such as modulations are employed in similar contexts. Both works end in similar fashion; a thinning texture after a climax.

Mixominimal

for four clarinets

1 ♩ = 164 Fast and Light

Musical score for four clarinets, measures 1-6. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. Clarinet 1 starts with a quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 2 starts with a quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 3 starts with a quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 4 has a quarter rest throughout. Dynamics include *pp stacc.* for Clarinet 1 and Clarinet 2.

Musical score for four clarinets, measures 7-12. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. Clarinet 1 starts with a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 2 starts with a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 3 starts with a quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Clarinet 4 starts with a quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest, then a quarter rest, quarter note G4, quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter rest. Dynamics include *crescendo...* for Clarinet 1, Clarinet 2, and Clarinet 3, and *sim.* and *p* for Clarinet 4.

Opening of *Mixominimal* by Angela Au.

It is important to consider the issue of plagiarism. This can be a difficult situation to address. If you wrote a piece that is substantially the same as someone else's and you don't acknowledge where you got it from, that is plagiarism. Changing a few notes here and there and then claiming it as your own is unacceptable.

Why is *Mixominimal* not considered plagiarism? Because the small-scale ideas that Au used in *Mixominimal* are used and developed in different ways to *Morning Star I*. The debt to *Morning Star I* is unquestionably substantial, but there is enough original material in *Mixominimal* to successfully categorise it as an original work.

59 A Tempo

Closing of *Mixominimal*.

What are some ideas that you could use from pre-existing pieces? You might find a particularly satisfying harmonic progression in a Carl Vine *Piano Sonata* and store it away for later use. There might be a way that a rhythmic cell is utilised in a Nigel Sabin piece that appeals, and thus you may wish to develop your own rhythmic cell in an similar way. It may be as simple as admiring the way the texture builds to a climax in a Graeme Koehne orchestral work, and using similar processes in your composition for three guitars. All are valid.

People listening to your piece will be expecting to hear something of your own personality in your music. You should try to avoid the scenario where a listener can say, "that just sounds just like what Ross Edwards would do". The best way to do this is to take large-scale ideas like structure or textural development as a model, and putting your own ideas such as pitch, rhythm, instrumentation, orchestration into that.

Analysing an extra-musical object

Another way to gain inspiration is to analyse an object that has nothing to do with music, and then to translate these results into musical ideas.

Nikki Barker was a student who used this approach. She was attracted to a piece of contemporary art, entitled *Vision of Ezekiel*.

An image of *Visions of Ezekiel* is available in the Tate Gallery online collections at <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/default.jsp>. Click on 'general collection' in the right-hand menu and scroll to the bottom of the page. Enter the following information in the 'simple search' box:

Artist	David Bomberg
Title	Vision of Ezekial

Click 'search' and when the image page appears, click on the image to enlarge it.

Nikki then analysed the ideas and themes of the painting as well as its physical layout. The figures in the painting are very block-like; hence she decided to use musical blocks (i.e. ostinatos) in her work. There is a strong sense of movement in the painting, and so it became a fast piece. The figures seem to be overlapping each other; canon is a musical equivalent, and this was used in the second section of the piece. The painting is not dark in mood; hence the music was not dark in character.

The details extrapolated from this painting also extend to the small-scale. The figures in the artwork seem to be tumbling downwards, and so the piece opens and concludes with a descending tumbling figure.

Score in C

Visions

for Clarinet, Violin and Piano

Nicola Barker

Vigorous $\text{♩} = 160$

The first system of the score is in 4/4 time. It features three staves: Clarinet, Violin, and Piano. The Clarinet part begins with a *sfz* dynamic and includes several triplet markings. The Violin part also starts with *sfz* and features a quintuplet. The Piano part has a *sfz* dynamic and includes a quintuplet. The system concludes with a *cresc.* marking in the Piano part.

Tumbling figure from the opening.

The second system is in 3/4 time and spans measures 83 to 86. It features three staves: Clarinet, Violin, and Piano. The Clarinet part has a *10''* marking above it and includes dynamics of *sfz*, *ff*, *decesc.*, and *pp*. The Violin part is marked *ARCO* and includes dynamics of *sfz*, *ff*, *decesc.*, and *pp*. The Piano part includes dynamics of *sfz*, *ff*, *decesc.*, and *pp*, and ends with a *cluster* marking. A note at the bottom right of the system is marked *8va sfz*.

* Performers: any note value but in this order

Tumbling figure from the end of the piece.

The end result was a work with engaging rhythmic and structural impetus that complemented the visual artwork. It achieved a strong musical and emotional result.

Using extra-musical objects as the basis of musical ideas need not be limited to the visual arts. For example, events such as a sporting match or a presentation at a conference could be analysed in a similar way.

Using musical ideas as starting points

Musical ideas and concepts can often form the initial bursts of inspiration upon which entire works are based. There are many possibilities for the use of musical ideas as starting points. Some of these are outlined below:

- **Instrumentation/performing media**
Writing for a particular combination of instruments (flute quartet, choir, orchestra, instrument and pre-recorded tape etc.) or for a particular ensemble to which you have access, such as the school string orchestra.
- **Occasion**
Such as being asked to write a work for a specific occasion (for example, your school's end of year assembly).
- **Rhythm**
Learning about a new rhythmic technique that you find interesting, or thinking up a rhythmic pattern that really appeals.
- **Pitch**
Coming up with an interesting harmonic progression whilst improvising on a keyboard. Setting out to write a piece based on a particular set of pitches, or even just on a single interval (like the Queensland composer Robert Davidson has in his *Violin Concerto*, where an entire movement is based on the interval of a major sixth).

Creating an interesting melodic fragment that may form the motivic basis for your piece.

- **Structure**
Thinking of various ways to structure a piece, for example, aiming to contrast short fast sections of music with long, slow sections.

The results are only limited by your imagination. The particular musical choices that you make in the inspirational stages provide a large bearing on the end product.

An example of a student's piece that was created in this way is *The Twists of Time*, by Caroline Lee. Her initial idea was to write a work for two bass clarinets, as this was a combination that particularly appealed. She also wanted a piece in which the instrumental timbres were similar, but in which she could utilise extended techniques in order to enhance the expressive possibilities.

Due to performance considerations, Caroline changed this initial concept to that of a duet for clarinet and bass clarinet. However, as you can tell, her writing for these two instruments is very successful, again revealing that she has had a strong starting idea before even writing the piece.

The Twists of Time

♩. = 80
spiky

Clarinet
Bass Cl.

mp *cresc.* *sfz f* *fp*

mp *cresc.*

Cl.
B.Cl.

sfpp *cresc.* *legato*

rit. *timbre trill* *A Tempo, Precise, Energetic*

Cl.
B.Cl.

decresc. *pp* *ff* *pp* *ff*

decresc. *multiphonic*

Cl.
B.Cl.

p *f* *f*

Cl.
B.Cl.

f *p* *f*

Caroline Lee

After inspiration comes planning: creating direction

Just like writing an essay, it is very important to plan your composition. It is possible to get away with not planning it, but it's much more difficult to achieve a successful result.

The overall guiding principle to planning your composition is to create direction in the music.

Direction is the sense that music is going somewhere, that things are happening. It conveys drama and involvement to the listener.

Direction is achieved in music through the manipulation of tension and release. Some things to keep in mind when planning issues of tension and release are outlined below.

Harmonic direction

- Are there sufficient modulations planned in your piece, or is it stuck in the one key?
- How do the large-scale modulations relate to any other pitch material you have used? Is there any relationship between your small-scale and large-scale material? For example, if the notes in your main melody were D G E F# D, then these could form the basis of the key areas in your composition.
- Are there interesting chord progressions used for harmonisation of phrases?
- Does the use of harmonic chords extend beyond simple triads or beyond overwhelming dissonance? Does your use of harmony complement the overall focus of the piece?

Texture: clarity versus chaos

- Have you planned enough textural diversity in your piece?
- Are there planned solo passages (or total silences)?
- Have you planned to use chaotic textures as well as clear textures? Does the chaos evolve from material, or does it suddenly change?

Instrument registers

- Have you planned to exploit the changing timbres of instruments as they play in different registers?
- When repeating sections of music, or motifs, have you planned to change the octaves in which these occur (to create contrast)?

Rhythmic complexity versus simplicity

- Have you planned to use techniques such as polyrhythm, ostinatos, rhythmic, syncopation, triplets etc. to create rhythmic complexity?
- Have you planned to contrast rhythmic complexity by employing rhythmic homogeneity?
- Have you considered different sections being constructed of different time signatures to further increase contrast?
- Have you considered altering the pulse of certain parts/fragments of the piece to reduce the levels of predictability?

Performance factors and virtuosity

- To what extent have you tried to integrate performer virtuosity into your plan?
- Has the level of virtuosity been planned beforehand? For example, extreme virtuosity grabs your attention at the very start of the piece, but care needs to be taken as to how this will develop over the course of the entire work.

New material versus old material (repetition)

- Have you planned for the repetition of sections and/or musical ideas within the one piece? Too much new material is boring. Some level of repetition within a composition is desirable.
- How have you managed such repetition? Have you integrated some degree of change into repeated sections? Too little new material is boring. For example, you could change the orchestration and cut a few bars out when it reappears. It will be basically the same, yet you have demonstrated skill in re-working older material.

Large-scale musical devices

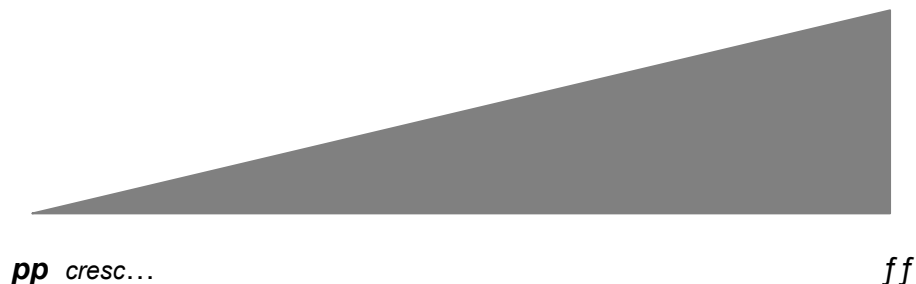
- Have you intended to use any large-scale musical devices in the piece? For example, counterpoint, polyphony, homophony, antiphonal writing.
- If so, how integrated is it into the entire structure of the piece?

Predictable versus unpredictable

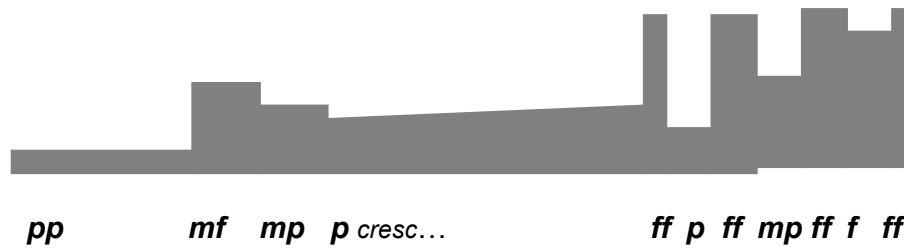
- Are your uses of musical elements such as dynamics and articulation predictable? Tension can be created by, for example, alternating passages with loud and soft dynamics, or repeating previously *ff* sections as *pp*. Sudden changes of dynamics, such as a subito *p*, help to increase the level of drama and keep the listener involved.

The due consideration of all of these factors (plus the many more that you can create yourself) will result in a solid and diverse musical structure, and potentially, one that properly takes into consideration aspects of tension and release.

It should be noted that in the planning of all of these factors, the progression from tension to release or vice versa need not be linear. For example, if you wanted to plan a basic crescendo in a section, the general dynamic shape could be linear, as in the diagram below.



Or you could achieve an effect that is overall quite similar, but which is more irregular on the small-scale.



Ways to plan your composition

There is no set way in which to plan a composition.

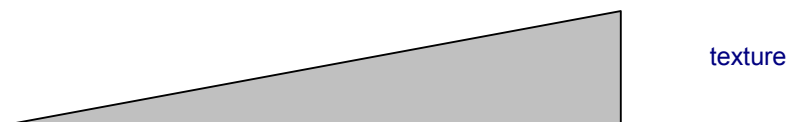
A method that works brilliantly for one piece may not be suitable at all for another.

A plan should be an initial codification of musical elements, but need not be strictly adhered to. If you get halfway through a section and find that it is not working, then it is perfectly alright to use your own judgement and follow what seems most musically sensible.

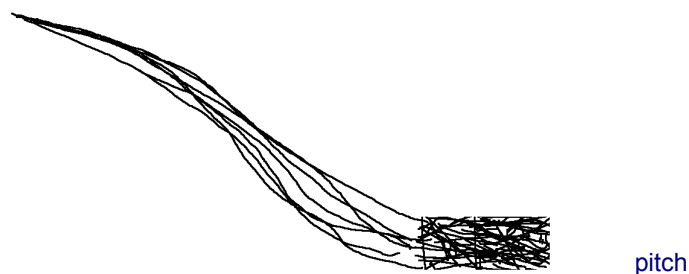
Bearing this in mind, one way is to write down, in pictorial form, the different sections of a piece based on some of your initial considerations and inspirations. An example of how this may be used to create a small section is outlined below.

A work is being planned for violin, cello and piano. The background ideas and motifs etc. have already been worked out beforehand. In this example, it's a piece about diving, and the intention is to write a segment roughly approximating the feeling of falling off a cliff into a river.

Say the initial idea was to have a small section that builds up texture, in a predominantly linear way.



The basic pitch contour will be descending for all instruments, ending in a cluster.



There will be a constant quaver pulse before the cluster. Each part will play in rhythmic unison. In the cluster the rhythm will suddenly become very complicated.



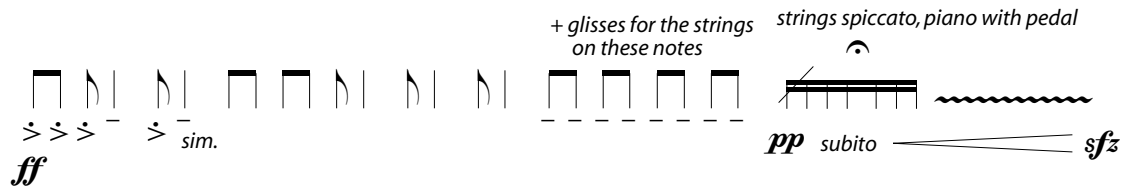
This rhythm will be translated to fit into barlines and time signatures. The total duration is planned to be about 10 seconds.

Already this gives some clue as to what the end result may sound like.

Other elements such as dynamics will then be added. By planning which dynamics to use early on, it's possible to get a much clearer view of the overall shape as opposed to having to 'add them in later'.



This also applies to features such as articulation and expressive techniques.



The orchestration of this section is planned to mirror the development of texture, with more instruments entering along the way. The violin will begin, followed by the cello and the piano.

Note: You don't have to have come up with the ideas in this order, you could start with the dynamics, for example.

After all of that planning, all that remains is the pitch material, which would probably come from some sort of material that you have already written in the piece. So when you are past the planning stage and into the writing, you could do something like this:

Presto ♩ = 180

Violin *ff*

Cello *ff*

Piano *ff*

Vln. *pp* *sfz*

Vc. *pp* *sfz*

Pno. *pp* *sfz*

In this example, the pitches chosen follow a broadly canonic scheme. If the pitches chosen were totally different, then the effect may be different as well. However the overall shape, and hence the overall direction, remains the same.

Presto ♩ = 180

Violin *ff*

Cello *ff*

Piano *ff*

Vln. *pp* *sfz*

Vc. *pp* *sfz*

Pno. *pp* *sfz*

Same plan but with different pitch material.

This approach to planning relies on you having discrete sections within your piece. There are many composers who work in this way. Peter Sculthorpe, Brenton Broadstock and even Olivier Messiaen's music is constructed in distinct sections.

Other composers such as Ross Edwards prefer to generate material bit by bit from their initial inspirations. However their music still displays a distinct consideration of the issues of tension and release as outlined in the previous section.