The Art of Musical Composition in Israel from an Educational Approach

Composing for an Audience of Children and Young Adults

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Introduction

The term “Musical Composition from an Educational Approach” (MCEA) relates to all music composed for an audience of children and young adults. At times, in order to appeal to a wider age group, the educational aspect of the music is not apparent, nevertheless, it can always be found hidden in the music. MCEA is often accompanied by explanations of the musical instruments and the style of music performed. In the compositions introduced in this essay, the music is combined with a storyline. At times the music and the storyline are completely intertwined and at times the text has a transitional role within the musical piece.

As a result of the composition’s educational goals, a composer writing MCEA is confronted with a number of limitations. Composers must use relatively simple musical materials, yet, at the same time, maintain their personal musical and artistic style.

The composer’s difficulty in maintaining his/her artistic freedom of expression, while writing MCEA, stems from the audiences’ inexperience as listeners. For the most part, this lack of experience necessitates the use of certain compositional tools. Composers cannot disregard the specific musical style chosen for a piece of music, nor can they ignore other external factors such as the audiences’ level of musical knowledge. Composers must find a creative way of answering to the demands and goals of their work while at the same time keeping their freedom of musical expression. These apparent obstacles challenge composers and at the same time have the potential to inspire their imagination. The aspiration for complete liberty in writing on the one hand, and the obstacles and restraints on the other hand, complement each other. The following essay will focus on the dilemmas and decisions composers must face when they are writing MCEA. The main conclusions of this essay are the result of the analysis of two musical pieces; one written by Yehezkel Brown (1965) and the other by Tzvi Avni (1971). Both pieces represent different approaches to MCEA.

There is a lack of written material on the process of composers’ artistic decisions, particularly of Israeli composers. Most of this essay is based on written materials concerning musical education. In papers and articles on different aspects of Israeli music there are but few mentions of this subject, therefore in this essay there are no direct quotes but summaries and conclusions.

In the first and second parts of this essay, I will present guidelines for writing MCEA. In the third chapter, I will discuss the particular significance of children being the targeted audience of MCEA. In the fourth chapter I will present examples from the two above compositions.

I would like to note that this paper was written by a composer and not a researcher. Therefore I take the liberty to express my opinion freely and give examples from my personal experience writing MCEA.
Part I

Guidelines to Writing a Musical Composition from an Educational Approach

It is important to keep in mind that MCEA should not be disconnected from its broader musical context; it is part of the musical framework characteristic of the time period in which it is written. Likewise, the presence of composers’ personal expression in MCEA is no different than any other piece of music they write. The following is an attempt to define the qualities unique to MCEA.

The Relative Simplicity of MCEA

Musical simplicity plays a defining role in a musical piece’s ability to communicate effectively to an audience. This is true not only of MCEA but of musical composition in general. Children’s capacity for musical understanding and the extent of their ability to remain focused on the music must be taken into consideration when writing MCEA. These abilities differ widely between age groups. Music composed for preschoolers, grade school students or high school students is considerably different. The simplicity of MCEA is characterized by a relatively small amount of musical materials within a composition and the simplicity of each component therein. Rhythmic complexity, rich polyphony and complex harmony are usually not part of MCEA. Musical simplicity appears at differing levels; from overall simplicity to cases where one component of the music is quite complex but within the broader musical and theatrical context it is communicated easily. Through the analysis of various musical components the simplicity of a musical piece is revealed. These components include: melody, rhythm, harmony, polyphony and orchestration.

A. Melodic Simplicity

Melodic simplicity is crucial in enabling the audience to comprehend a composition. A melody is considered simple when it is not composed of leaps or notes that differ from the mode or scale being played. A simple melody also contains recurring melodic patterns.

1. The Melodic Line.
   A simple melodic line avoids large leaps and intervals. It is characteristically song-like and uses mainly stepwise motion from note to note.

2. The Diatonic Aspects or The Modality of the Melody
   Integrating notes within the piece, which are not included in the tonality of the melody, might upset the attention of the listener. The diatonic framework as well as the mode of MCEA is characterized by relative stability within the stylistic framework in which it is composed.
3. Repetition

In MCEA one may find repetitious motifs or melodic units. Another characteristic of this principal is the presence a primary motif.

B. Rhythmic Simplicity

Rhythmic simplicity is many times part of MCEA. Yet, in many cases rhythmic complexity doesn’t interfere with the listeners’ understanding of the melody or the composition. Therefore rhythmic simplicity is not always part of MCEA.

C. Harmonic Simplicity

This principal, as is the case with all of the above principals, is characterized by different levels of complexity and depends on the style of the piece. In MCEA composers prefer a clear harmonic, diatonic framework consisting of basic development, infrequent harmonic change and the use of consonant cords. This does not mean that the composers are limited to writing outdated neoclassic or romantic music, but for the most part, they will not choose to write severe atonal, dissonant music.

D. Polyphonic Simplicity

At times a young audiences’ ability to absorb a number of sounds simultaneously is undeveloped; therefore the extent of polyphonic complexity is dependent on the audiences’ specific developmental age and stage.
Part II

Text as a Platform for MCEA

It is difficult for children and inexperienced listeners to relate to music that is not connected to a certain text or story. Most young audiences are not used to watching a purely musical performance. Performances or shows aimed at children and young adults use music as accompaniment or as a soundtrack for an event external to the music. So too, in MCEA, it is necessary to use text. Text is used in the beginning of a performance as an explanation of what is about to happen or during a performance in order to advance the storyline.

A. Narration
   The narrator’s role in a musical piece is to unfold the storyline and explain the music. Thanks to the narrator the composer can loosen his direct relationship with the text and use a freer musical language. For the most part a composer will avoid having the narrator speak and the music played simultaneously. This turns the listener’s attention away from the music.

B. The Presence of a Human Voice
   In other examples not brought here, such as in opera, one can find that the singing and the acting of a singer advances and leads the storyline and at the same time evokes emotions in the listener. Through the presence of a human voice, and not purely instrumental music, one may find deeper and more meaningful layers in the composition.

C. Explanations of the Composition
   Explanations about the music, the musical instruments and the musical style are an important part of musical education. They lead to better musical understanding. These are not always part of MCEP, but a performer may choose to include them as an introduction to the piece or within the storyline.
Part III

The Unique Significance of Children and Young Adults as the Targeted Audience of MCEA

Tools to Understanding Music

Many children are gifted with an abundance of imagination and associative thought patterns. Tools external to the composition (e.g. Use of text, see previous chapter) are meant to ease children’s’ encounter with the music and help them focus their direct attention on the music and the musical event. These tools come into play in different ways, and have a variety of aspects to be taken into consideration. Some of these aspects are brought here.

1. **The Visual-Associative Aspect**
   The familiar and easily accessible sense of vision helps a young audience comprehend the abstract musical information communicated to it. A text presents various visual images such as descriptions of characters and events taking place. Through the use of costumes and set design these images become entirely visual.

2. **The Emotional Aspect**
   MCEA relates to an emotional realm that aspires to reflect as much as possible the young audiences’ inner world. More often than not MCEP reflects cheerful and happy moods rather than extremely serious and grave ones.

3. **The Cognitive – Developmental Aspect**
   A young mind is still fresh and open to many different musical materials. A young listener may absorb new musical material more quickly than an older experienced ear. This freshness and openness enables a composer of MCEA to sometimes overlook stylistic conventions of musical composition.
Part IV

Examples from Musical Compositions

1. **Primary Motif**

   In Brown’s *Dira Lehaskir (Apartment to Let)* the primary motif appears in different places throughout the composition and in varying transpositions.

   ![Motif Example](image1)

   Brown – *Dira Lehaskir*

   In Avni’s *The Three Legged Monster* the motif also appears throughout, as it does in Brown’s work. Yet, in Avnin’s work the motif changes modes depending on its context within the composition. Rhythmic changes of the motif also appear in this composition.

   ![Motif Example](image2)

   Avni – *The Three Legged Monster*
1. **Melodic Simplicity**

The first example from Brown’s work is of a melody played by the bassoon. The melody spans the octave out and down, in stepwise motion, and contains chromatic notes.

The second example demonstrates the use of stepwise motion as well, but in this case there are also leaps of 3rds, perfect 4ths and perfect 5ths. These three intervals are easy on listeners’ ears. They might even find themselves’ singing along.

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1

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2

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3

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Brown – Dira Lehaskir

The following example from Avni’s work demonstrates the use of stepwise motion and leaps of 3rds, perfect 4ths and perfect 5ths. One can also observe minimal use of consonant intervals.

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solo, dolce

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Avni – The Three Legged Monster
2. Rhythmic Simplicity

The following examples show the relatively simple use of rhythmic structures and their relationship to the beat. Brown uses only eighth and quarter notes, except for one case in which the clarinet plays sixteenth notes. The notation of the base appears on the first and fourth beats - the strong beats (the time signature is 6/8). The accompaniment is notated on the relatively weak beats - 2, 3, 5, 6. It is also important to note that there is no change in meter which might interfere with the continuity of the piece.

A more complex example but still relatively simple:

Brown – Dira Lehaskir
Avni – The Three Legged Monster
3. **Harmonic Simplicity**

In the following examples, the use of simple traditional harmony is demonstrated. In Brown’s composition appears a musical fragment built on G major and minor. In Avni’s work a well known harmonic sequence appears: \( I \rightarrow IV6/4 \rightarrow IV \rightarrow I \rightarrow V6/III \rightarrow III \)

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*Brown – Dira Lehaskir*

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*Avni – The Three Legged Monster*
4. The Relationship of Music, Text and Storyline

The first example taken from Avni’s work, *The Three Legged Monster*, shows a correlation between the story being told and the music being played. The narrator is telling the audience that the heroes are walking toward the monster. The music played in the background strongly suggests walking: eighth notes in leaps on the cello and quarter notes in leaps and stepwise motion from note to note on the double bass.

In the second example the heroes of the story, the two violins and the french horn, are walking together. With the help of simple and straightforward orchestration the composer clearly demonstrates the relationship of music and text.

Avni – *The Three Legged Monster*
Summary

In the process of writing this paper, I came to a number of personal conclusions regarding the composition of MCEA. The guidelines brought here are merely suggestions which composers can pick and choose from as they please. It is most probable that composers will not give up easily on their personal artistic language and ways of composing in order to arrive at complete communication with their audience. Nevertheless in the compositional examples given, the composers use a number of these guidelines.

With a narrator’s help, composers are free to put aside many of these guidelines and write as they please. They depend on the storyline and the narrator to facilitate the audience’s understanding of the music.

The inexperience of the audience is usually not taken into complete consideration by a composer. At the same time, some of the compositional limitations that stem from this inexperience create new and interesting musical situations. For example: a complex rhythm combined with a simple melody or a chromatic melody in free steps and fragments.

In MCEA, the composers’ greatness is revealed through their ability to maintain their personal musical and artistic language and at the same time communicate with their young audience, who in turn will enjoy and revel in the familiar while gaining new knowledge of music.
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