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## 20 Ideas For Composing

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- 1.** Decide the most important elements in advance For instance, if it is a dance track the drum sounds are of the utmost importance. However if it is a song the melody or words are probably the most important element, the rhythm sounds can be decided later.
- 2.** Good music has energy and conviction and will probably work reasonably well in any circumstance. If the composition or track is basically good, which synth pads you use, or reverb unit, will not be so important. If it is not good the best sounds in the world will not help enough.
- 3.** Use what you have got now. Use the equipment you have available, it is a fallacy to think that hiring a valve compressor or better sequencer will help. If the track is successful there are specialist engineers who can add the final gloss and correct the odd blemish, resulting from using more basic equipment.
- 4.** Know yourself. You only get out what you put in. If you are mentally tired stop and rest. If you cannot start, force yourself to make a start, no matter how small. Know yourself and be honest. There is a difference between being mentally tired and can't be bothered.
- 5.** Do what works for you. Some creative people are almost like office workers. They start, finish and take breaks at predetermined times. If you find that enables you be creative then do it. However, if you find it is better to ease yourself into creative work by wearing old jeans and your favourite jumper, curled up on the sofa with a cup of coffee, then do that. When a composition is finished no one cares how you wrote it (except your biographer in several decades time).
- 6.** Complete compositions, especially when you are starting out. The learning benefit as well as the confidence gained is incredible. The finishing of a composition can sometimes take most of the work.  
You will also have something to play or show your friends, colleagues or music business people. How many times have you been talking to someone who has expressed an interest in hearing your music but you have nothing finished to play or show them?
- 7.** Start now - this minute, or rather when you have finished reading this article. Composing can be very tiring when you are fully involved. That telephone call, trip to the bakers, cleaning the living room or reading reviews of new equipment can wait until you have a

break. And if you are working really hard you will need a break quite soon. American business guru Tom Peters put it succinctly - "to get going, get going".

**8.** Start from where you are now. There are numerous books on creativity, sports psychology, time management etc. that will probably help you but you can track them down and read them later - start composing now. The same with being fit. Researchers have shown that being fit helps the brain work much better and gives you far more physical and mental energy. However it takes about three months to get fit and you cannot wait that long before you get composing.

**9.** Creativity is largely independent of physical health (although this appears to contradict the previous statement). It is possible to compose really good music when you are ill or depressed. Some people are even very creative when suffering from bad migraine.

**10.** Do what you believe is right for you. There is a lot of disinformation out there. One group in the '80s used a Sequential Circuits Prophet 5 synthesizer when they performed on Top of the Pops. However the synth actually used on the recording was an ARP Quadra. One bass player, who records with a modern Japanese bass guitar, uses a vintage American one when he appears on television. So if the sound is right for you, it is right.

**11.** Develop the skill of working on several levels. Sometimes it is necessary to go through the minutiae of a composition, such as just working on one or two notes of a phrase or slightly adjusting the reverb settings. Sometimes it is essential to listen to the composition as a whole and improve large scale formal aspects of the composition, rather than just changing the odd note here and there.

**12.** Appraise the finished work honestly. If you believe it is good, play it to people. Don't precede it with apologies such as 'and I wrote it very quickly' or 'I only had one synth module'.

If you are not sure how you feel about it, play it to friends or responsible colleagues and ask them such questions as 'I think it is almost there but there is something not quite right - I can't identify what it is'.

If it did not work out, look upon it as a few more steps on the road to being a good composer. Bringing a composition or track to completion is nearly always beneficial in some way.

**13.** Time is not that important (unless of course you are working to a deadline). Although no one is suggesting you take two years to write an eight bar fanfare for a school play, it is the finished work that is important. If a composition or track is based on a bass riff or drum loop, does it matter if it takes ten days to get it just right?

**14.** Remember, rarely do you start from nothing. The chords and scales you are using probably already exist, so you are starting with basic forms and probably working within a well established tradition. Some composers start with ideas from other compositions or songs. Using something as inspiration or a starting point is neither plagiarism or morally wrong.

**15.** Different elements of a composition can be studied separately. If you feel your melodic invention is weak, study strong melodies in any musical style, even if you would not usually be interested in them. Folk song, ballet music (especially Tchaikovsky's

Nutcracker), the classic musicals, 'fifties and 'sixties pop songs, French chansons, classic Italian popular music etc.

Similarly if you feel your harmony needs more work the sources are endless; jazz standards, the Beatles, Beach Boys and almost any classical composer.

For improving rhythmic aspects of your composition, don't just only play through music in the style you work in, listen to jazz arrangers, the many good rhythm programmers around or the more rhythmic classical composers such as Bartok, Stravinsky, Steve Reich and Philip Glass - it is easy to find suitable music to study.

**16.** If you have the rhythm of a phrase but are stuck with the notes, it does not matter. You can always come back to it later and get the notes right. Similarly if you have the melodic pitches, but cannot get the rhythm to work you can work on the rhythm later as well.

**17.** Rituals are part of life and lots of creative people use them either intentionally or unintentionally. If you find a sheet of blank manuscript paper, in pristine condition, threatening use crumpled manuscript paper, or reuse old sheets. If you find the blank page inspiring use new, neat manuscript.

The same with media. If the ritual of breaking open the packaging of a new box of reel-to-reel tape or a new CDRW inspires you, do that. If not use tape that already has part of it used. (Bearing in mind of course reusing master tape too many times can result in a loss of quality).

**18.** Visualization is now an accepted psychological technique so if it helps, visualize the song, track or composition in your head; how it feels to listen to it, imagine taking the demo version to your friends or colleagues, and visualize them listening to it. As you progress through the composition, if you get stuck, lose direction or find so many ideas you don't know where to take it, the original image of the work will still be there to guide you.

**19.** Make a mental (or written) note of why you made certain decisions. If you set out to write a driving track with lots of overdrive effects, remember that. When it is finished - which could be several weeks later - you will know why you originally produced that particular sound. You can then decide to stay with the original intention or soften it, if the sound is too harsh. Maybe you will be tempted to add more parts to a very minimalist work. Then you can decide whether the new parts will improve the work or whether you should stay with the original intention.

**20.** Know when a composition is finished, this is not easy to know and probably can only be learnt from experience. Sometimes more work can make all the difference and turn the work into something really good. However you also have to know when composition or track reaches a stage where you can only make it different, not better. There are even occasions when more work will even make it worse. It is so difficult to be objective and know when to stop but you do get better at it.