

A Forensic Examination of a Composer's Compositional Process

The Creative Method of Ralph Hultgren

What this research will do

The act of composition of musical works is a complex and multifaceted process. This investigation seeks to uncover the process of composition from a personal perspective and to do so in a manner which will inform both the awareness of creative process and the utilisation of the compositional outcomes.

This research will unpack my process in composing. It will dissect that process so as to provide a clinical and detailed understanding of that procedure. It will enlighten the objective investigation from a subjective autobiographical locus that will provide critical information as to the why and when of compositional imperatives.

When considering how I compose it will describe choices. It will make the reader aware of the critical decision making which underpins the creative act and which takes place often at a subconscious level, by exploiting a knowledge base garnered from years of experience and study and focused in its outpouring by a host of influences which will be dealt with here and amongst the accompanying materials.

Why it structured as it is

This investigation is presented in a manner which allows the reader to work through a forensic line of enquiry. That objective approach is informed by materials gathered in the course of the study which give evidence of process and define outcomes.

It also provides potential for the reader to be made aware of what informs and generates the compositional process via an investigation of the autobiographical research paradigm that I utilised in previous study. Such a broad examination of the process requires a format that allows for a defined line of enquiry but which provides evidential tangents providing the reader with the opportunity to transit through materials quintessentially connected with the creation of the works under discussion. Such materials are best provided in various digital formats.

The reader may journey through this text, as a through line of investigation, or may 'visit' the other materials, the 'evidence' or 'data' as such, via [hyper links](#). These links allow the direct connection with the music under discussion, the sketches and the scores. It provides recordings of the works and also journals of the composer's reaction and interaction with the music, musicians and others.

Not a formal analysis!

Though the endeavour here is to present an objective enquiry it is done so with an inevitable subjectivity. It is presented through the provision of solid evidence and concrete awareness but not in the manner of a formal analysis but more as a personal gathering of truth from the testament that are the works investigated here. It will include an opening up of the act of composition by placing it under the microscope of objective process and subjective genesis.

Given that, the 'after the fact' formal analytical approach, that seems to dominate the teaching of compositional process, will be utilised only in my 'after the fact' and 'during the fact' ruminating over the activity of composition as I am and have engaged in it. I sense that this form of 'understanding' composition is not often representative of compositional practice and may not be the method utilised by composers themselves in the teaching of composition. It does not seem to be the manner by which practitioners compose but it does give a canvas on which to place objectively the means and methods of composition in a manner which may well inform the non composer.

Whether it is 'true' of the act of compositional is not within the ambit of this investigation. What is desired here is to show what I do and to allow as many as possible access to that creative activity.

Why this way?

To focus here just on 'how to compose' would be to lose an opportunity to inform this field of research. Further on I will consider how the research is positioned in a more complete manner but here it must be said that the decision making to work within certain paradigms to the exclusion of others, though not a denial of them, was purposeful and considered.

As alluded to above, a strict analytical approach, along the lines of Schenker and others would produce results useful to some. A purposeful description of the when, where and why of each work may prove useful to a further cohort but what is required of me here is to produce work that will benefit my community of interest; the composer, the conductor, and the teacher who is endeavouring to inform and empower their students. That demands that I participate in an investigation which brings to the fore those matters known best by me because I have participated in their construction and detailed it to the fullest extent, though in a quite personal manner.

Autobiographical locus

Locate materials from the autobiography chapter here Ralph and into the next section

Investigating self has to be quarantined from self indulgence but must be suffused with self awareness – a fine line to tread! Investigating self is pointless without a potent understanding of context, of social location and without, as Elizabeth Stanley informed me, knowing that "...we are none of us

unique great minds, all of us are social beings who see ideas derive, acknowledged or not, from particular socio political milieux...) ([1997:194](#))

Investigating self can bring with it an awareness of why decisions are taken and allow for a thorough connection with the process of and utilisation of a work from its conception through, continuing the birthing analogy, to its delivery in performance. Heeding Stanley ensures we do not become weighed down with self indulgence but one also must admit that to write a work so immersed in a personal life experience and then to write about it in this form may be considered by some to be quintessentially self indulgent or even self absorbed! I am cognisant of such positions but I comfortably and firmly locate myself in this autobiographical paradigm and assert that my open and honest review of my practice, its processes and outcomes, can only inform those seeking a full awareness of compositional method.

That is why I have chosen to place this investigation within the intellectual and emotional boiling pot of *My Sister's Tears*, a work composed as a response to my sister's suicide in November of 2003.

The work is autobiographical and the process engaged in is unpacked and dissected such that the very influences which produced the tonal material are considered. I then proceed to present the dialogue that was had with the musicians (conductors and players), the audiences and even the commercial music industry, who have chosen to publish and record *My Sister's Tears* and other works in this doctoral collection. My aim is to lay bare the discussions, the journals, the process and response to the work to ensure openness and honesty in this academic and artistic deposition.

Working with me as a conductor, Brydie Bartleet has brought a spotlight to bear on my work in that domain and has also brought a perspective to my consideration of my compositional output. Working in a lonely domain, the empty study and single mind space of the creative act, she has taught me that my compositions speak in particular ways to people and we have come to a point where we see that our work as conductors is about relationship. That sense of building relationship is not just to do with relationship with the ensemble but with the composer and with the audience. Often we conductors think not of the relationship with the composer in the manner in which we may approach relationships with the living and breathing people around us but it may well be best to attempt to build then the same type of relationship, as best as that might be achieved to better represent their artistic outpouring.

We had discussed the concept of relationship with respect to the role of conductor and I presented her with an impassioned description of how I had, in a different rehearsal environment to the one we work in together, via a journal I had been keeping. I stated that:

Relationship is something I have always been aware of but is becoming much more keenly considered by me. I know that my faith points me to this but I also know that the depth of my marriage and family relationships make me desire more fulfilled relationships with my

ensembles. I am not talking here of friendliness or love as we know it in contemporary society. It's more to do with the way we respect and consider and are aware of each other. ([2006:X](#))

Brydie notes in her journal that:

Everything that has fuelled my thinking about this process from day one has been about relationship. My initial trepidation about this process was fuelled by fears of making myself vulnerable in relation to a senior colleague. My desire to write about this process was sparked by an attempt to equalize the potential mentor/mentored power-imbued relationship that Ralph and I might have fallen into.

Such a personal relationship with a colleague conductor then became a personal relationship with the composer as Brydie took on the role of presenting one of my works, *Jessie's Well*. Her concerns about how to interpret were exacerbated as the composer became more than a name on the top right hand corner of the page and was suddenly manifest, in the flesh in the rehearsal room with her and the ensemble. The building of relationship then became a different matter for her (this needs evidence from her Ralph – the co constructed interview that we did has what you need) and the perplexing location she found herself in brought light to my investigation here.

How could I find a method to build relationship for her and then for others?

To describe a work through formal analysis meets the need of relationship on so far. There has to be another way and this clinical pursuit, coupled with the materials that reside along side, is another way. Possibly it is not the only 'other way' but it is my other way and one potently informed and underpinned with first hand knowledge and evidence. It is relationship building from the composer to the other musicians involved in the presentation of the composers work.

[My Sister's Tears](#) is a personal work and, from my perspective, the most effective place from which I am able to investigate. My rumination about others work can only be speculation. My truth telling about my work is just that, truth telling. Its subjective nature makes it uniquely open to review and reflection and therefore it provides a spectacular vantage point from which to view the creative outpouring which is composing. Others reflect on this and point to such truthfulness that works from the inner self and expresses truth in a unique manner. Russian composer and musicologist Denisov describes it poignantly in saying:

“In an ironic but very precise formulation, Mayakovsky described a similar 'pre natal' period as one that is characteristic of those who 'before they begin to sing, walk about for a long time, trampling out the vintage, and quietly wallow in the slime of the heart and the cockroaches of the imagination.' So the idea of a composition is often born 'from inner need' (if we may use that phrase). (1973:2)

This method of investigation was taken beyond this work into the intense consideration of process in other pieces produced in the period of my doctoral candidature. This ongoing process of refinement, of review and reflection, has made more potent the understanding of decision making and skill utilisation I engage in as I write. It therefore can cast a stark light on the process for others as well.

The reaction of others to my compositions has demanded from me a refining of my questioning of others, and a consequent reassessment of how I engage in such processes in respect to My Sister's Tears. It has given me a point of departure for personal reflection that has developed from a review and response to those works which are less personal and more pragmatic and functional. This has then allowed for a re-examine of process and that appraisal then presents further process and review which then brings perspective; a perspective found in the personal locus of a work about the death of my sister or more correctly, the life of my sister.

Why autobiography?

The conclusion that emanated from my previous investigation in this area, mostly in my [Masters](#) study, is that my composition is autobiographical research and the understanding of that autobiography is realising that it is a pursuit of my spiritual self. I noted that:

"I have alluded to some of my personal thoughts and deeply held feelings and even ventured into the intangible areas of the soul and spirituality. The creative factor is quite often glorified beyond what it is. I find it just is!" [\(1997:193\)](#)

Here it is imperative that the reader acquaints themselves with the concept of self reflexive investigation. There is much to consider in this area and there is a detailed investigation of it in [autobiography](#).

That previous study uncovered a dearth of materials in music which tease out matters surrounding this autobiographical mind set. I noted then that:

Given the predisposition to equate music research with the major areas of musicological enquiry, such as historical and repertoire-centred investigation and analysis, qualitative research appears poorly served within this area of interest. Little time and space appears to be allocated within academic structures or in the pages of refereed and non refereed journals, in regard to the theory-practice nexus that is artistic work. It may be presumptuous but catalytic, to posit that the more traditional areas of musicological investigation are often able to produce quantitative results and therefore more readily able to substantiate the need for support and the pursuit of their research programs. [\(1997:3\)](#)

My search of the literature this time has proved no more fruitful in the music domain. This situation adds weight then to the argument for the need to

provide such materials and to do so via interrogation of the processes of quantitative and qualitative research endeavours, even at such a personal level as is found in autobiography. I know that being able to present materials that will enhance the teaching of composition, conducting and music teaching broadly will mean this pursuit has served its purpose significantly. I am aware also that the broad landscape of scholarship in music will benefit from this pursuit.

What makes autobiography valuable here?

The truth telling reflected on above is one that provides a focused lens on the actions of the composer, this forensic method undertaken here on the more quantitative side of that ledger, and the subjective nature of the journaling and personal reflection provides an intimate and honest account of what propels the composer and his thoughts. The truth is that this can only be one person's view but there is every chance that this product will cast a light on the work of others and especially allow those who come from outside of the compositionally environment an insight which is not obviously evident in scholarship at present.

As mentioned previously, my past research had been an investigation of process but at a lesser level, I would think, than this. In considering my Symphony for Wind Orchestra, I stated that:

“The origins of the symphony....when was it written and what generated its creation? The processes of selection, combination or rejection of musical ideas are significant in understanding one's compositional process. What artistic or architectural influences were there? Why choose one melodic fragment over another, or embrace polyphony at one point and not at another? Seeking to contextualise my work is a paramount objective.” [\(1997:162\)](#)

In that work I found spiritual pursuit as my reason to write. The full indications of why can be garnered both in the [Masters](#) discussion and also in the consideration of autobiography found [elsewhere](#). What must be served here is the position I find myself in that continues to display my compositions as a part of my spiritual journey, possibly journey markers, and that the full realisation of how they are located in a research sense can best be investigated from this autobiographical, personal case study paradigm. In the unpacking of autobiography located elsewhere I note the journey aspect reflected on here. There is an evidential line that traces through the [program notes](#) and comments on my works, that allows the reader to see the spiritual expedition I had been on and the need to not only investigate what that means at the present stage but to do so from the same locus as before, a locus proved to be potent, and utilising a paradigm equally as potent, autobiography.

In the exegesis that accompanied my Symphony for Wind Orchestra, my contention was that a “...reading of (the) exegesis or the score of the symphony alone would be insufficient for the purposes of this project.”

(1997:197). Similarly, this document is not whole without a connection with the materials that constitute its completeness. And those complimentary expressions of my scholarship are integral to the whole that is this research mission. They contextualise and elucidate much.

Locating the Locus – where this research is positioned