

YOU CAN COMPOSE!

A Collection of Useful Ideas for Hammered Dulcimer Players and Other Musicians

Until 1995 I didn't compose new music, and I'd only feel confident enough to cautiously try new things with existing pieces; but after having found the following ideas from various sources and experiences (including some very helpful composition lessons from a pro named Aldo Forte), I became a writer of original pieces anyway --- and you can too! Really! This is worth considering! Composing is actually not a mysterious domain for a select few; it can be a joyful and fascinating pastime for anyone who decides to try a few tricks and ideas.

The following pages are packed with loosely organized but quite practical explanations of easily understandable techniques for coming up with your own music, no matter what your training in music or style has --- or hasn't --- been. After experimenting, you can develop what seems to work best for your own goals. Take your time browsing these concepts, and make sure you try some on your own before reading too far. Best wishes for your new material!

--- What are your goals?

- **Personal** desires and feelings
- **Musical** choices, yearnings and capabilities
- **Spiritual/philosophical/communication** vision --- do you have a message? Does it involve a worldview?

--- Various forms a piece can take:

- Straightforward **melody** alone.
- Straightforward melody with chosen chords that can be played on the dulcimer at the same time by the soloist.
- Straightforward melody with chosen chords to be played by another instrument.
- Straightforward melody with open options for chords, etc.
- A series of **patterns** only (what may be called an "etude" --- a study --- or maybe an impressionistic plan of aural imagery). This idea brings up the question, "How important shall the melody be?" Even fiddle tunes make varying amounts of melodic emphasis depending on the approach of the arranger/performer, and sometimes the melody is only hinted at or non-existent.
- Patterns with somewhat of a melody accented among them (like my "Wind in the Maples").
- A **series** of specific chords and/or a bass line, that repeats with changes of one sort or another (as in my "Forest Succession" or Pachelbel's Canon in D). This, by the way, can be merely two chords going back and forth many times (as in the fades at the ends of my "Samhradh, Samhradh" or "America the Beautiful" --- like G and Am).
- An idea in any of the above realms, which you purposely leave open to **improvisation** each time you play it, all or in part --- you can determine how improvisation can be applied and to what extent. (Jazz, Bluegrass & Classical expectations often leave a certain section for soloists to head off on their own using ideas from the motifs, chords, etc., then they come back and things are "normal" again.)
- It's important to remember that composing can involve many **different levels**: You can write a tune and leave the task to others to develop it, or you can experiment continually with it, or you can work hard to arrange and orchestrate it (as soundtrack writers tend to do, or I do in the studio with multi-tracking, or a band does in rehearsals), or anything in between. It's all part of the field of composing.
- Often the form, etc., is determined by expectations of the **settings** it will be used in, limitations of the player or instrument, etc. No problem! You can choose to work with that if need be. Soundtrack writers always have to make compromises. Tchaikovsky wrote pieces for his friends (the greatest virtuosos) to play, who came back and said the parts were impossible, so he rewrote to make them workable, and they've been played happily ever since. Another option, of course, is to choose settings to write for that don't require compromises so you don't have to deal with anything.

--- **The shape of a melody:** A tune has a "**profile**" that can be sketched, or that is described by the notes in written music: it may start at the top and cascade down and then climb back up, or it may be a series of mountains or a fairly random collection of hills, or it may start low and climb to the top. It may start in the middle of the scale and end at the bottom or top of the scale, or vice-versa (as in my "Spartina"). It may be very dynamic, or it may be very static, depending on the style and intent of the composer.