Introduction

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What is a composer, and what do they do? In the broadest (if perhaps most conservative) sense, a composer might be someone who creates music through the assembly of elements into an 'aesthetically rewarding form'.[1] 'Give me some stuff, and I'll organise it for you' writes composer and musician Frank Zappa. 'That's what I do.'[2] Composing might mean manipulating notes on manuscript paper to create a reproducible 'musical work' for instrumentalists in a concert hall, but it could equally involve working exclusively in a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) on a computer, using music production techniques and electronic instruments to write the music for films or video games. The figure of a composer might also might become blurred towards the margins: is John Cage still composing when he blends vegetables into a smoothie for an iteration of his piece *0′0″*(1962) for instance, or Pauline Oliveros, when her text-based score invites the performer to lie '[b]y a river or stream, listen[ing] for the key tones in the rushing waters' instead of picking up an instrument?[3] The word 'composer' might also come with baggage around who it may or may not apply to. Even today, in Western traditions especially, composition is often seen as following 'patriarchal structures in the way it is created, disseminated, and even perceived', enacted largely by 'a privileged, upper class, white "he" . . . [whose] creation seemingly springs from his mind, untouched by his surroundings or his situation'.[4]

Composers today have access to an unimaginable diversity of musical styles and forms of production to choose from, and because of this face an unprecedented complexity of musical cultures and attitudes with which to engage. Composers may employ notational systems, or they may express their ideas through recordings, oral traditions, or other platforms. They might include the manipulation of sonic properties and characteristics such as pitch, timbre, rhythm, and so on (either generated themselves through virtual instruments or for others to perform), or may offer more open-ended, dialogical invitations for performers to explore the sounding possibilities of their environments on their own terms. Their approach to structure and instruction will sit on a spectrum between meticulously

formalised and fully indeterminate, and their activities might range from solitary time writing on manuscript paper to more dynamic and social forms of creativity such as group jamming and other activities that blur the boundaries between composer, performer, theatre-maker, and artist. As technology continues to democratise the practice of composing – for example with music creation and notation software now available on the phone in most people's pockets – the production and distribution of new music is far more accessible now than ever, and the list of ways that someone might create music and sound is becoming endless.

In truth, there are as many ways of creating music as there are composers in the world, but despite (or even because of) the incredible plurality of practices to engage with, it can be daunting for an emerging composer to 'take the plunge' and create music. The idea of 'composition' should be an invitation rather than a barrier. Composing is a discipline rich with potential – one that means many things to many people and continues to be moulded and explored by the many different communities of music-makers around the world today – and anyone who strives to create 'with' and 'through' sound should consider themselves a composer, regardless of how engaged they are with communities of practice or how they approach writing music. That said, because anyone *can* compose does not mean that they can necessarily compose *well* (i.e. by effectively or idiomatically employing compositional techniques and devices for specific situations and requirements). The different contexts and circumstances a composer may choose to engage with – for example concert music, music for film and media, music for worship, interdisciplinary art (such as gallery installations or music for theatre), social or educational contexts (participatory and social events, pedagogic music, etc.) – all require certain skills and knowledge around the techniques, cultures, and histories of different approaches to music-making. This book seeks to furnish readers with some of this knowledge (or at least pathways to it) through discussions of both broader compositional processes and techniques as well as more in-depth examinations of several specific disciplines and practices. In this introduction I begin by tracing a brief cultural history of the composer in the classical music tradition and their shifting role in society in order to frame discussions later in the book. I will then explore alternative narratives and definitions of composition, challenging us to think about what composition might (and perhaps even *should*) mean for us in the twenty-first century, before finally outlining the approach taken in this volume and explaining how it is structured in light of these discussions.

A Western History of the Composer

Whilst people have been creating and ordering sounds for millennia, the labelling (and subsequent professionalisation) of composition as distinct from other music-making activities appears to have only originated in twelfth and thirteenth centuries, specifically in the European art tradition. As practices of worship music developed to incorporate increasingly florid musical lines, for example the complex melismatic extemporisations of plainchant that we encounter in the music of Hildegard of Bingen, so too developed a need for the accurate notation to provide 'a detailed plan for coordinating the actions of two or more performers'.[5] The practice of separating parts into harmony became more widespread, and while the older theory and practice of discant (adding harmony to a plainchant melody with parallel intervals such as thirds and sixths) was predominantly shared orally, the complexity of the isorhythmic methods of polyphony being developed during the Ars Nova movement required a method of notation capable of communicating precise pitches and durations.[6] Where the standardised plainchants used as source texts were taken as divine, and therefore without worldly author, the new composition techniques being explored by the so-called Notre Dame school composers quickly earned infamy, and thus attribution. Where other vernacular idioms like the troubadour songs continued to function as orally transmitted and performer-led,[7] the act of 'making and notating a polyphonic "work"' came to be recognised as a specialised skill[8] and by the late fifteenth century the authors who produced such works were credited as *compositores* (literally those who 'put together' the separate musical elements required for a choral partbook).

Through the vast epistemic reach of the Holy Roman Empire, compositional knowledge and practice became solidified and disseminated in theoretical treatises during the Renaissance. Works like Gioseffo Zarlino's *Le Istitutioni Harmoniche* ('The Art of Counterpoint') (1558) set out to unite music theory – associated with God and the 'music of the spheres' – with the human craft of composition, directing composers to combine their instinct towards sonically appealing traits with an understanding of the philosophical, cosmological, and mathematical principles of music in order that their works become 'more perfect'.[9] Whilst the work of Zarlino and others might be seen to us now as emancipatory, it needs to be remembered that the new discipline of composition was still carefully controlled by the church at this time, only being taught to 'pious men', and

with the primary method of employment as a composer being from religious institutions.[10] They could find work as an organist or Kapellmeister in a local church for instance or seek freelance relationships with wealthy landowners who had private chapels. It was only towards the end of the seventeenth century that the composer became more commonly employed by aristocrats and royalty, primarily engaged to write religious music but also increasingly songs, dances, and other functional music intended to entertain the court.

The proliferation of music genres around this period also expanded the composer's possible mediums for creative expression away from the clear binary of sacred and profane. As the development of opera became entangled with its social desirability, for example, the aspiration of wealthy patrons to have bespoke works created for them led to a boom in commissioning of new pieces exploring a range of historical and contemporary topics.[11] Employment from royal and aristocratic patrons was often financially attractive, but despite the high salaries some composers still held a preference for avoiding the dependence and servility that this form of employment entailed. Court composers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'typically had the status of lackeys, serving at the lord's whim and forced figuratively to prostrate themselves at the lord's feet in asking submissively for the slightest favour. To be sure, the relationship between lord and court composer varied with the master's personality and the extent to which he respected his servant's genius.'[12] Infamously for example, Johann Sebastian Bach was briefly imprisoned for his 'impertinent' attempt to retire from the service of the Duke of Weimar in 1717.

During the Western Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century, a new scientific obsession with measurement and taxonomy led to an ontological revolution in the standardisation of musical genres. Prescribed orderings of movements and categories of works pervaded all instances of sacred and secular music from instrumental works (the sonata, string quartet, symphony, etc.) to opera and oratorio, that 'challenged composers to design coherent sequences of textural and stylistic oppositions'.[13] As the church's grip on society was loosened, composers 'underwent "social emancipation" from the extra-musical demands of church and court and experienced the vagaries of independence', seeking funding instead from other establishments: 'professional organizations, private musical societies and a new species of music institution intended to embody the ideal of musical autonomy . . . [such] as, in Britain, the Philharmonic Society in 1813 and the Royal Academy of Music in 1826'.[14]

This period also brought the formation of standard operatic and concert repertories against which new pieces were composed and evaluated, creating an emergent paradigm of distinctive musical 'works' in critical circles, narrowing the potential for performer improvisation and extemporisation that had been a key part of earlier musical cultures.[15] This created increasingly strong demands for autonomy and originality,[16] and generated a narrative of compositional 'greatness' and 'genius' in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture.[17] Composers were frequently public figures, and composer-performers like Franz Liszt are well documented as being treated like major celebrities.[18] Outside the major cultural institutions of concert halls and opera houses, compositional activities also included the less professional, but no less formal, writing of music to be played by and with friends in a domestic setting. This was the predominant way that many female composers without access to major resources of orchestras and concert halls were able to develop their musical voices, for example.[19] The pursuit of chamber music evenings that marks this period's Biedermeier aesthetic was very much a middle-class endeavour, and even into the nineteenth century we see that those without access to the material resources of instruments, leisure time, and private space were relatively unlikely to be engaged in compositional endeavours.

This institutionalisation and mythologising of the composer became entangled with ideologies of dogma and control. As musicologist Lydia Goehr observes, a nineteenth-century composition is 'not just a score but a cultural object designed to guard against a performer daring to avoid adherence to the composer's wishes'.[20] The establishment of a group of male composers in major positions at universities and conservatoires at the 'nucleus of a musical pantheon'[21] provides a skewed picture of the state of musical composition during this era that academia is in the process of trying to disentangle. Through this period the vocabulary of functional harmony became extended by the use of increasingly 'extreme' chromaticism into a realm of ambiguity and colour. This necessitated ontological questions about what music 'was' or 'did' beyond any pre-existing reliance on dissonance technique (i.e. the maintenance and release of tension through particular relationships of consonance and dissonance) to govern other musical parameters like flow, texture, and structure. More than ever, the growing social autonomy of the artist positioned musical expression as 'the individual composer's subjective will or self':[22] a doctrine of the affections that assumed certain sounds and gestures to be inescapably linked to emotional response, where 'music was "about" something . . . [and] "said" something to man's deepest emotions'.[23]

In the expanding world brought about by the industrial revolution with its increased focus on globalisation, the autonomy of the composer was becoming increasingly challenged. Within the thriving economies resulting from growing labour markets, the rationality of European thought was replaced by aspirations of power and desires for 'compositions that would symbolize a nation's identity'[24] became ubiquitous, marked by a shift in the cultural landscape from compositional autonomy and towards folk music and heritage.[25] Compositional practices also became increasingly imbricated with other art forms and disciplines – particularly scientific developments and psychoanalysis – and through a series of 'World Fairs' held in cities including London (1851) and Paris (1855–1937). European musical culture was exposed to music from colonised nations in the Global South. Tribal art and jazz music particularly sparked the imagination of emerging composers, and by the early twentieth century the complex stratification of music and blurring between 'high' and 'low' art that came to characterise the rest of the century had already begun with the arrival of radio and cinema offering access to new creative opportunities and audiences (as well as sources of income). In the domain of visual art, works like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) radically changed the aesthetic conversations through its use of readymade and found objects, fundamentally challenging the work-concept, and bringing about what Paul Griffiths calls 'the demise of the great composer' as a default cultural position.[26] Another important challenge to the composer's agency was recording technology, which made it possible to reproduce and distribute works, both detaching the artwork from the artist as works acquired new uses and meanings away from the control of the artist – much to the concern of thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno – but also facilitating much wider forms of profile-building and use for music.

The rupture of World War I with its mass physical and social destruction in Europe and Russia brought about radical developments in music. Composers searched for artistic 'solutions' to reconstruct the broken world (and 'broken' tonal system) around them, finding order in mathematical procedures (Arnold Schoenberg), Greco-Roman aesthetics (Igor Stravinsky), and natural structures and design (Béla Bartok).[27] In response to a perceived decadence of Romantic values that no longer seemed suitable in a society in such flux, there was also a shift back to a 'functional approach to composition – for example with Paul Hindemith's *Gebrauchsmusik* ('music for use') movement – where the composer filled a social need by objectively 'making' work for national and civic events. After World War II, the devastation was even more severe, and required a post-war

rebuilding programme of radical cultural renewal. 'It can be no surprise that 1945 represents a shift in music', writes Paul Griffiths. 'The destruction, havoc, grief, and misery felt across the world – and the widespread hopes for a new social order, and therefore a new culture – demanded not just reconstruction but an alternative paradigm.'[28] In America for example, Minimalism was bursting to life in response to the country's newfound financial dominance,[29] whilst experimentalists like John Cage were deploying aleatory techniques to create 'works which are indeterminate with respect to [their] performance'.[30] Many of the developing practices around this time explored the blurred edges of the role of the composer by challenging the limitations of the role, for example by either affording the performer increased compositional agency (e.g. through improvisation) or removing responsibility from the composer altogether (through chance procedures or musical quotation) on one hand, and the composer taking over some of the traditional functions of the performer (such as in electronic music) on the other.

Towards a New Definition

By the end of the twentieth century, globalisation and the radically changing technologies and aesthetics of modernity had produced such a diversity of musical activity that it is almost impossible to comprehend the entire compositional landscape. Where it might have been possible to understand the musical innovations of the post-war decades such as *musique concrète* or postmodernism with relative contextual ease, the blurring and unravelling of new music through the twentieth century make the formulating of 'easy' unifying elements nigh-on impossible. As Tim Rutherford-Johnson observes, we cannot 'set the music of [today] within the same contextual depth as, say, the serial music composed in the early 1950s (a product of wartime technologies . . . and the desires of a young generation to start again) or the early minimalist music of the mid-1960s (a product of jazz and non-Western influences, counterculture, and influences from the visual arts).'[31] The connectivity of the Internet at the end of the last century further catalysed a fervent pluralism. Composers and audiences could now access sounds from across the globe at the click of a mouse, 'emancipating' the genres and idioms such as concert music, film music, and popular music that were previously far more siloed by performance institutions and the commercial categories that underpinned record labels. One particularly impactful thread has been the breakdown of distinction

between 'art music' and popular music, as younger generations of composers grow up with increasingly broad listening habits. Equally, as Alex Ross observes,

> some of the liveliest reactions to twentieth-century and contemporary classical music have come from the pop arena, roughly defined. The microtonal tunings of Sonic Youth, the opulent harmonic designs of Radiohead, the fractured, fast-shifting time signatures of math rock and intelligent dance music, the elegiac orchestral arrangements that underpin songs by Sufjan Stevens and Joanna Newsom . . . [all] carry on the long-running conversation between classical and popular traditions.[32]

Yet in spite of this sonic diversification, many of the ideas that constitute the composer and composition are still deeply enmeshed in the eighteenth-century Western paradigms of knowledge, dissemination, documentation, and ownership, where a composition is primarily assumed to be a musical product or 'work' that exists as a repeatable (and therefore commodifiable) entity and the hegemony of the 'authorial voice' underpins any definition of what 'composing' actually *is* and who is doing it. The Enlightenment's positioning of the 'composer as "master" over ideas, music, and performers'[33] further established assumptions around value and worth which obfuscated the power dynamics of global relations and rendered much of the creativity and innovation of global musical traditions insignificant. This has left us with complex and uncomfortable legacies and repercussions of colonialist culture in our present-day musical community, where our paradigms, tools, and creative models of creation are firmly inherited from 'Eurological' music-making (to use George Lewis' term[34]) whether that be in 'the commissioning paradigm, the concert protocol and experience, the clearly defined roles and hierarchies . . . [or] the musical instruments that are . . . composed for'.[35] Even today in many institutions, compositional practices that are performer-led or improvisational – defying the colonialist ideologies of compositions as fixed, transmutable texts, capable of transmission via notation or sound recording – are treated with suspicion. Elaine Mitchener observes that these ideological pitfalls are replicated in many of the ways that composition is taught, created, and evaluated, where there is a persistent belief that:

> Western European classical music is the epitome and apotheosis of musical excellence, by which all other music is to be judged. Anything outside of the Western classical music canon is an add-on, exotic and without intellectual foundation. This backward, reductionist viewpoint is dangerous . . . [and] has caused a narrowing of sound world experiences. These long-held views underpin notions of musical

hierarchies and serve to undermine anything or anyone that doesn't look or 'sound' like them or what they know.[36]

Trying to consider a decolonised history of composition poses complex methodological challenges, since the framework of 'composition' as an autonomous activity is itself a Eurocentric construct – which largely did not exist as a concept in continents outside the Global North until the early twentieth century[37] – and is deeply enmeshed with Western ideals and approaches to music.[38] As in pre-Enlightenment Europe, the blurring of roles between poet, songwriter, philosopher, and composer in many Indigenous cultures poses ontological questions around where to boundary any definition of composition as an activity (and indeed, a profession). Let us take as an example the Indigenous communities that make up the Aboriginal Australian peoples. These communities often create music alongside social practices, such as bonding rituals and education, with 'composed' musical elements (as might be thought about in the context of this book) like melody and rhythm being deeply intertwined with the storytelling and religious counsel tendered by a community elder. These societies place great value on songs – particularly those given as gifts or acquired by inheritance – as well as instrumental pieces used for dances or ceremonies.[39] Music in this form is inseparable from everyday life, and our earlier framework of composition as making music objects (or facilitating encounters with music) by assembling sound materials in an expressive way falls short in identifying what the value and intent of creating new music is in this context. Additionally, there is a belief in many of these communities that songs are received from the spiritual domain, and as such are distinct from the human agents who acquire them.

The subtle distinction between discovery and creation is further nuanced by musical practices in Papua New Guinea, as Stephen Blum observes.

> [For] the Kaluli people (Papua New Guinea), an act of spontaneous composition creates a 'path' (*tok*) so that composer and listeners can 'simultaneously experience a progression of lands and places and a progression of deeply felt sentiments associated with them' (Feld, 1982, p. 151). Listeners who are familiar with the places named and with the techniques of performance have no way of knowing in advance just how the composer will connect and coordinate place names, melodic shapes and ways of using the voice. . . . Rather than creating or discovering new paths during performance, musicians may retrace paths inherited from their predecessors or revealed to them in visions.[40]

This intersection of performance practice and composition – where a framework or repertory of events or instructions is then modified to respond to surroundings – is particularly evident in jazz music. A jazz composition, usually written as an 'open text' of melody and chords, is a dialogic and collaborative invitation for the performer to improvise 'with' and 'around' in the moment of performance. The focus on improvisation in jazz is often characterised in academic literature as a 'kind of craft, in contrast to the art of composition'[41] and therefore belonging to a tradition of performance practice – 'in the negative sense of something unprepared and unforeseen'[42] – firmly outside the 'carefully notated' European tradition of composition. As Laudan Nooshin points out, the ideological formula where '[a]bsence of notation equals non-cerebral, which in turn equals non-art, which is inferior to real art'[43] distracts focus from other aspects of compositional innovation and achievement. 'The jazz assemblage' for instance, writes Georgina Born', is 'lateral and processual. Jazz entertains no split between ideal musical object and mere instantiation, no hierarchy between composer as Creator and performer as interpreter of the Word. . . . [J]azz's ontology is primarily material and social.'[44] As with much of the African(-American) derived popular music of the twentieth century, jazz's engagement with sociality and group music-creation, the recording process, and re-creation and remixing as part of the richness of a musical object challenges the agency and autonomy of a 'composer' in the eighteenth-century classical sense, in lieu of creativities that embrace the realities of race and class. It is telling that in China – where the figure of a 'professional' composer only emerged in the 1930s – that 'compositional technique' was synonymous with notational literacy for several decades after the Cultural Revolution, despite the movement's proposed de-politicising of art and broader reaction against Maoist uniformity and political control.[45]

This is not to say that jazz music is necessarily any less 'composed' than an instrumental score; a fact made evident by the awarding of the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for composition to rapper, songwriter, and producer Kendrick Lamar. As many global traditions show us, non-notated practices like improvisation and composition are not binaries: whether musical material, instructions, or prompts are notated, stored in a musician's memory, or only realised in performance, the choices and frameworks underpinning the sounding manifestation necessarily falls within a class of composition of sorts. Recent scholarship by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and others challenges us to see all modes of composition – including Western common practice – as composite; contingent on a spectrum of strategies