

PODCAST 5: WRITING FOR PIANO

Hello. I'm Erik Nielsen. I'm a professional composer and Senior Mentor at Music-COMP, formerly known as the Vermont MIDI Project. This is the fifth in a series of podcasts designed to help you compose for specific instruments and ensembles. Today our focus is the piano. While we can't really consider it underused like some of the other instruments in this series, composing for it presents a lot of challenges which I'll try to address.

How **do** you compose for piano? All those fingers, all that potential can be really scary if you don't play piano yourself. In this podcast I will give some tips about ways to write for piano effectively. I hope the information will make composing for piano easier and less mysterious.

The main concept I'll focus on for the next few minutes is the need for different kinds of balance when writing for piano. I'll be using two finely written student works to illustrate the various points I make. However, first I want to briefly mention what I'll call the "octave principle." In general, don't make chord spreads in one hand (that is, from pinkie to thumb) greater than an octave and when playing one note at a time don't make leaps greater than an octave from one note to the next.

One of the wonderful things about the piano is the fact that there are over seven octaves of notes available. With this enormous range it's important to keep the entire instrument in mind and balance the various registers. Too often students write only for the middle of the instrument, the octave or so on either side of middle C. While this area of the piano can sound lovely, areas below and above the middle have great potential as well. For dark and heavy or very percussive sounds, put both hands in bass clef and use the low register. For mysterious or light sounds, use the upper register with both hands in treble clef. Or for a fascinating and unusual sound, spread the hands apart and include both high and low notes. And try not to use only one register of the piano for an entire piece.

Our first example shows how effective using different registers can be. It's called **Nella Trance di un Sogno** ("In the Trance of a Dream") and it was written by Johna Saltsman, a high school junior, for Opus 25. If you look at the printed example you will notice that right away Johna creates a dreamlike atmosphere by using left-hand arpeggios, that is, chords with the notes played one at a time rather than simultaneously. These chord tones are quite spread out in the left hand and cover two octaves just in bars 1-7. Let's listen to the opening few bars. ("**Nella Trance**" **excerpt one**) While the melody begins just above middle C, by bar 9 it is playing 1-2 octaves higher. Now let's listen to a passage near the end. ("**Nella Trance**" **second excerpt**) All in all the piece covers almost five octaves of the piano and does so in a way that enhances the effectiveness of the melodic and harmonic material to create a successful work.

One valuable aspect of the piano to keep in mind is its ability to use horizontal **and** vertical sounds. That is, it can play melodically and chordally, either separately or at the same time with chords accompanying melody. It's important to balance these two musical possibilities and not rely too much on one or the other. With piano in particular, it's very easy to fall into the trap of just writing chords or repeated figures rather than having a true melody. Make sure the melodic material is strong and varied enough to hold the listener's attention. It's also easy to rely only on one harmonic pattern or group of chords for the entire work. Again, make sure there's variety in the chords and harmonic progressions to keep the piece interesting.

Our second example, written for Opus 17 by Mavis MacNeil, another high school junior, is called **Wait, What?** Its title refers to Mavis's inability to concentrate on one thing for long. She feels she gets distracted too easily and uses this piece to poke fun at that aspect of her personality. The work certainly changes moods often, sometimes rather abruptly, though we need to recognize how hard Mavis worked and what skill she showed in creating such a piece, something which belies the notion that she's unable to stick with anything.

Much of the piece uses only a single line in each hand, kind of like what Bach does in his two-part inventions. Let's listen to some of it. ("**Wait, What?**" **excerpt one**) It's difficult to keep the

listener's interest for long when there's only one note at a time in each hand, but Mavis does it. How does she pull it off? In a word, balance. She balances the rhythms of the two hands so that they aren't always playing simultaneously. She balances the relative importance of the two lines so that sometimes we notice one line more than the other. She has worked hard to keep both the melody and bass line interesting. **And** she makes sure that the two hands work together harmonically. This is very important. It's amazing how much more effective a work is when there aren't what I call accidental dissonances. There are places in the piece where Mavis purposely puts clashing notes to increase tension. (“**Wait, What?**” **excerpt two**) But that's very different from the composer not noticing when notes unintentionally clash. Attention to harmonic consonance and dissonance as well as the importance of the bass line is also very much in evidence in our first example. Listen to how effectively Johna balances the melody and the descending bass line. (“**Nella Trance**” **excerpt three**)

To summarize, when writing for piano, it's important to keep a balance in a number of areas and ask yourself these questions. Does the piece use at least some high and low parts of the piano as well as the middle? Is there balance in the use of the right and left hands so that both have something worthwhile to contribute to the piece? Does the melody balance with the bass line, keeping in mind that a well-written bass line is not just the foundation of the harmony, but also forms a melodic counterpoint to the right hand's material? Is there balance of horizontal and vertical, lines and chords? If the answer to most of the above questions is yes, and your thematic material is interesting, you ought to be well on the way to composing successfully for piano.