

How to write a song

What is a song?

Music played through a speaker does not sound the same as music played through headphones; however, this does not create hesitation when a song is to be identified. Played out loud, through headphones, through car speakers, or even live by physical instruments, one quickly latches onto a sense of familiarity when their favourite song plays.

A mathematician might say, "A song is identified up to natural equivalence," as were the musician to play a wrong note at a non-crucial moment, it would be dramatic in that moment to suggest an entirely different song is being played.

Let us now draw a distinction between a song and an instance of a song. Emotionally, it feels as though this settles the dispute. An instance of a song is the familiar concept: a recording on a CD, a live performance, a cover, etc. However, the excited energy which pushes the concept of an "instance of a song" into clarity simultaneously pushes the concept of a "song" into abstraction. The song becomes a theoretical object, and an instance of a song becomes a physical realization of its Platonic counterpart.

Other examples of pairings between theoretical objects and their physical counterparts are kindness paired with an act of kindness, an artistic experience paired with an artwork, or indeed the number five paired with five rocks.

Where this becomes most interesting is in the mind of a composer. How does one compose when what they create is not what they are driven by? Explicitly, composer C does not create a song but instead creates an instance of a song, so how ought C be driven? The answer begins with a shift in perspective: one ought-not forge a song but instead ought to raise a song. Indeed, whether music is created or discovered is not known, but it is my contention that in either case, the music should feel as though it was discovered. A good test is to see if it feels as though somebody else wrote it. Indeed, a creation born in a moment of true flow will be fascinating to that same craftsman at a later point.

Thus, to become a good composer is to become a good parent. A good parent patiently listens and follows their child's interests without judgment or concern for how that parent feels about the activity. In the same way, a good composer does not write metal because metal is cool but instead allows the song to find itself through patient listening.

Where, in that case, does one begin when writing a song? The answer is that the process has already started. In fact, it started long ago. Those who are compelled to compose have musical ideas already inside them, but they are covered in many layers of one's own mind's confusion and lack of self-awareness. Moreover, the musical idea is young. In fact, it is but an infant, so any ideas of its future are projected hopes from our own weak minds and thus must be ignored. Again, the job of the composer is to be a good parent.

Obdurate begins with a blank score. A grand staff, piano. Excellent musical notation software must be chosen. The correct choice is Guitar Pro. A novelty amongst certain communities, but this program is cheap, efficient, intuitive, and the sounds are excellent.

First come chords. This, by far, is the most important part of the process. Beautiful chords have the power to generate emotion even when played in block patterns, with no sensible timing, on an overly digitalized piece of software. Never fall into the misbelief that having good-quality sounds or instruments is crucial for good-quality composition. The opening chords and oboe melody of *A Metric Based on Insects* have almost identical emotional pull when played on Guitar Pro as when played from the album (where the quality of the tones is higher).

Beyond this is years of developing the skill of parenthood. Listening back to the block chords may call for attention to harmonic tempo, a rhythm, a melody, an extension, a retraction, a different tone, a layer, a sample, compression, equalization, spoken word, invisible lyrics, etc. One follows one's best judgment of decision. The song does not know of these concepts. It is the job of the composer to offer, in the same way that a child may not know of the concept of tennis, it is up to the parent to offer such a pastime.

The most important part of the process is to enjoy the challenge of not knowing how to create the sound that you are after. As a concrete example, *Comic Book Channel* required guitar recordings (in fact, the entire album did in the end), and I do not play guitar. This is not a hurdle; it is an opportunity. I simply learned guitar and then recorded the tracks (in extremely small, bite-sized chunks). The learning gained from this experience is indescribable. One inevitably comes across hurdles; one simply problem-solves. The key is to keep making progress; the feeling of moving forward will help maintain motivation.