



# **Spheres of Influence for Composers**

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

## **Different Teaching Models**

In many cultures, especially those that use a one-on-one oral tradition, music training follows a Master-Disciple model. Here, the teacher instructs the student based on the training that they received (usually in their youth), while also enhanced by their own personal experience. In fact, the highest praise that a student can hear is when someone says, “I hear your Guru in your music.” Eventually, the student is expected to create their own pieces, but only after mastering many well-known works from their tradition.

By contrast, in many Western cultures there is much more emphasis placed upon individual expression. This certainly has advantages for people’s artistic autonomy, as well as creates incentives to investigate (and embrace) a much wider range of influences. Yet, it can make the process of training more challenging. Why? Because this more fluid, less hierarchical relationship between a teacher and student is trickier to manage. Consider that a student often does not know how much or little instruction they want (or need) at any given stage. This also holds true for different pieces (that often are in different stages of completion) that the student is working on. A student receives feedback from the teacher that takes a while for the student to process, and that can sometimes be misconstrued by the teacher as a vote of No Confidence.

Of course, a student should trust their intuition about which instructor(s) and approach(es) feel most appropriate and productive. Yet, it’s vital that the student come to a new coaching relationship with a basic level of trust at the outset. After all, if everything feels *completely* familiar, the chances are good that the student is not being exposed to new ways of creating and/or analyzing their works. We’re not apt to be as creative or skillful in our art if we only stay in our Comfort Zone.

Sometimes a student might ask themselves:

*“How will I be able to determine if a teacher will be a good fit for me?”* or

*“How do I assess the right balance of autonomy and surrender/trust with my teacher?”* or

*“How will I know if my current teacher is truly supporting my musical vision?”*

The first step is for the student to acknowledge that studying with a composition teacher is an actual relationship, with all the uncertainties and rewards that come with it. We all face these very same questions in other areas of our lives, including: art, employment, housing, romance, etc. In the end, the answer to these questions is to simply observe our experience as consciously as possible, and compassionately draw wisdom from that awareness.

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On the other hand, the teacher must be very observant about how much challenge the student can reasonably take on while still feeling momentum at any given time. If the amount of support and constructive feedback is not balanced, there is a real risk of alienating a student or possibly derailing them from their art altogether. The recovery time for such a student can be anywhere from weeks to decades . . .

### Optimizing One-on-One Communication Dynamics

When a student receives feedback from a teacher, there's a direct connection happening. Hopefully, the teacher is not just reacting to a student's work with immediate, ill-considered opinions. Rather, the first step should be to ask what's the intention about the piece; i.e. *what world is the student trying to achieve?* From there, the teacher can then reflect on what aspects of the piece currently fulfill that vision, or "What Works?" Obviously, in order to gauge an accurate context for the feedback, they need to know either: 1) what stage of the creative process the student is in (Inspirational, Developmental, or Editorial), or 2) what percentage of the piece is complete.

The next step would be to describe what aspects of the piece don't fulfill the vision/intention of the piece to the student, or in other words "What Doesn't Work As Well?" Again, the teacher is obliged to be aware of their own prejudices and preferences, and focus on the gap between What Works and What Doesn't Work As Well. Although the assessments about the piece are personal, the extent to which the teacher can language the assessments impersonally can have a huge impact on the receptivity (and trust) of the student. Most importantly, there is no prescription offered in this stage! All too often, a student is robbed of the gift of creating their own solutions when a teacher prematurely makes suggestions. Of course, suggestions can be quite useful when coming from a knowledgeable and intuitive teacher, but that is really for the final stage of the coaching process, not the beginning. Students invariably feel more respected and engaged in the process if the teacher asks permission from the student for every stage of feedback: 1) "What Works?", 2) "What Doesn't Work As Well?", and 3) "Possible Prescriptions".

Composers are surely influenced by far more than just a teacher. How and where someone grows up can have a huge impact: the degree of musicality in a family, access to training and instruments, particularities of a given decade in the culture, degree of community cohesion, amount of musical awareness, and even the physical climate. An equally important influence can be what one's peers are listening to or playing/singing. These factors are simply mentioned to provide context for our next area of concern — what lies beyond a one-to-one teacher-student relationship.

### Seven Spheres of Influence

Though the communication model described above might be new, the essence of being coached in a one-to-one format is familiar to many in our culture. What is *not* so clear is that there are other spheres of influence that extend beyond this direct teacher-student relationship that can have an equally significant impact. We often hear about how being in a new environment can catalyze a composer's creativity. There is a long tradition of organizations and institutions setting up Composers in Residence programs and/or retreats to assist with this.

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Many composers (including myself) swear by the rejuvenating qualities of being in new environments to find inspiration. Yet, are we actually conscious of the entire range of influences that are occurring? Often multiple influences are happening simultaneously, so it is difficult to pinpoint what they are and how we are absorbing them. For instance, we might travel a considerable distance in order to study with a particular teacher. Wouldn't it be to our benefit to know how much of what we are receiving is coming solely from the teacher, versus from the culture or even the physical environment we are in?

What is listed below is a meta-map of the spheres of influence that a composer can draw upon. This also applies to other performing artists (actors, variety artists, etc.) as well as fine artists (painters, photographers, etc.), and narrative artists (authors, screenwriters, etc.).

The "Seven Spheres of Influence" echoes other seven-based domains: the seven notes of a diatonic scale, the seven days of the week, the seven colors of the rainbow, the seven liberal arts, the seven chakras (energy centers of the body), etc. The Seven Spheres of Influence can be absorbed over a long period of time, in a concentrated block of time, or even instantaneously in a purely non-linear fashion (sometimes referred to as a "transmission").

1st Sphere of Influence — Direct input from a living teacher ==> the most common, one-to-one scenario, when we are live with our teacher, in the moment.

2nd Sphere of Influence — Internalized or "channelled" utilization of that living teacher's methodology ==> when we literally imagine the voice of said teacher in a way that feels absolutely tangible and are able to implement their approaches.

3rd Sphere of Influence — Study of a particular composer's work (or a significant teacher) ==> a living or dead composer whose work and approaches inspire and inform us.

4th Sphere of Influence — Drawing from a whole style and/or musical culture ==> styles and cultures that represent the sum total of musical contributors who precede or sustain the traditions.

5th Sphere of Influence — Inspiration from an entire culture beyond musical genre/style ==> this can include political, secular, or religious practices, geographical/population contexts.

6th Sphere of Influence — Drawing directly from Nature ==> in addition to the restorative aspect of being in nature, we can draw inspiration from the beauty, power, delicacy, variety, and timelessness of the natural world.

7th Sphere of Influence — Drawing from Universal Source ==> various religious and spiritual traditions describe the forces at work in the universe as a kind of "source".

By recognizing and embracing these spheres of influence, we can access different sources of knowledge beyond a single teaching relationship. Part of the journey of becoming a more embodied composer includes knowing which spheres of influence will be most beneficial to us for any given time period or project.

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### Feedback from Your Community

Having completed the overview of these archetypal seven influences, it's important to recognize the impact of feedback from community members, which often occurs more frequently than with teachers. These sources are listed in order of public to personal:

- \* social media/forums
- \* known musical peers (collaborators/composers/general musical community)
- \* friends
- \* roommates/partners
- \* family

When interacting with people outside of a formal teaching framework, it's essential to be clear with people whether you want feedback at all, and if so, how much. Just because people know you're a composer or songwriter doesn't necessarily give them the right to express their opinions about your work without your permission. Because these sources are usually not trained musical coaches, the feedback tends to be quite varied in its clarity and usefulness. Nevertheless, it *can* be very useful to get input from a wide variety of sources who bring different points of view as well as life experiences to their responses. I have personally been surprised (or even delighted) by people's comments about my works, and often unprepared to discover how affected they were by one of my pieces. As always, not taking their comments personally is the goal, even as the comments touch upon a very personal expression of who we are.