

How to Steal Like a Composer

Lesson and Activities by Danny Felsenfeld
New York Philharmonic Teaching Artist

Casing the Joint. Committing the “Crime”

For this activity, you’ll need:

- Something to write with
- Something to write on
- A vivid imagination

To get started, you must understand that composers take inspiration not just from their own minds, but also from their bodies, the worlds, and even from music made by other people.



Exercise One: The “Window” Symphony

Go to your window or door and open it.

Get outside yourself and, if you can, outside your room, even mentally.

Step One: Listen. Just listen.

Ask yourself these questions:

- 1) Listen carefully and ask: “What did I hear?” What was obvious or what was I straining to hear?

2) Take note of when something occurs while listening. What sounds were present and for how long?



3) Were there any interesting tunes or rhythmic ideas out there? Was there a car horn? A Jackhammer? A braying horse or mooing cow? Were bugs buzzing or people talking? Was there traffic in the distance? Jot down a few ideas to begin making your music.

Step Two: Make Some Decisions

What kind of piece do you want to write?

For which instruments?

How long will it be?

How will you incorporate the elements you heard?

Step Three: Write the Music

Start composing!

Maybe this means using a guitar and writing a song; maybe this means creating something to be performed using percussion instruments in your kitchen; maybe this means writing a piece for chamber orchestra.

Up to you!

Exercise Two: The Song About the Other Song

To get started: Find a piece of music you absolutely love! It does not matter what genre, who wrote it, or when it was written, but the assignment is **you have to love it.**

Step One: Listen

Listen to the piece of music several times. Enjoy it!

Let it get inside your ear for the purposes of the piece you will write.

Step Two: Make Some Decisions

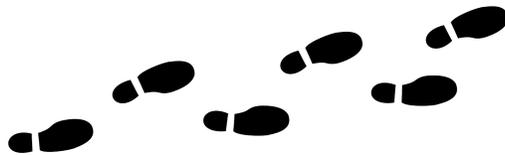
Ask yourself “what makes this piece go?”

Get specific- is there a rhythm or a tune or an instrumental sound that really stands out? Don't think too hard: make observations. Much can be made from a little.

Step Three: Write the Music

Start composing!

Like with our last exercise: think about what instruments you'd like to write for, whether it be for yourself or for an ensemble of musicians!



COVER YOUR TRACKS: If you loved a melody from your selected song or piece, learn it, but try changing some elements in it so it has your unique musical voice, or fingerprint. Move some pitches around in the melody, or experiment with different rhythms to make it quicker or longer.

By whatever means you create your music, it is yours to create!