

# THINK LIKE A COMPOSER

Written by Dale Trumbore for Graphite Publishing

A few years ago, in an interview, I was asked to describe a new piece I'd written. I started to respond, but the interviewer stopped me right away.

"Don't just talk about the text," she said. "Composers always want to talk about the text! Tell me about the music."

But in a composition with words, the text is the music. I ask myself a series of questions about each text I'm setting, and from these answers, I derive everything about the music, from minor details like shaping dynamics to the large-scale arc and form of the composition. If a finished piece represents a string of decisions, then these questions are the key to untangling that string.

Here, I'm unraveling the seams of three of my pieces—"Breathe in Hope," "In the Middle," and "Sometimes Peace Comes"—in the hope that my own questions will become a set of tools you can use to gain insight into any choral composition, new or old. As I'm



composing, I unfold these answers like petals, note by note, over a period of months or even years. But you can ask the same questions of any composition's lyrics, make your own guesses about how the composer has answered them, and look ahead to the finished score to watch your answers bloom in fast-motion.

I start by asking one big question for every text I'm considering setting to music:

**What does this text capture about humanity? What makes this poem worthy to be shared with a larger audience?**

We're digging in deep, right from the start, but this question isn't quite as lofty as it appears. There are so many ways that a poem, found text, or bit of prose can capture a deeply human experience.

The text could reflect an emotion that I've experienced but never seen captured in art. It could make me feel that the author and I have something in common; we share a similar worldview. Or the poem might distill and capture what it means to be alive—the messiest, grittiest, funniest, most profound or unpleasant parts of our human experience.

When I first read Laura Foley's poem "Sometimes Peace Comes," I felt something restless within me begin to quiet and settle. Reading what would become the text for "Breathe in Hope," which I originally encountered as two of Maya Jackson's Facebook posts, I recognized an experience—wanting to stay in an uncomfortable emotion until it changed me—that I'd never before seen expressed with such poignant, succinct accuracy. And I first read "In the Middle" at the beach with my family in Wareham, Massachusetts.

Barbara Crooker's poem "In the Middle" describes running down a beach and lying in a hammock. Just before I read the poem, I'd run down a literal beach. I'd taken a nap in a literal hammock. My family has returned to the same beach and house nearly every year since before I was born. If there's anywhere that I feel the weight and significance of time passing, it's here.

Reading Barbara's poem and seeing my own experience rendered in metaphor, I was most struck by the line that begins "Sometimes we take off our watches." I read it as setting aside not only our watches, but our phones, our email, and anything else that could

IN THE MIDDLE of a life that's as complicated as everyone else's, struggling for balance, juggling time.

The mantle clock that was my grandfather's has stopped at 9:20; we haven't had time to get it repaired. The brass pendulum is still, the chimes don't ring. One day I look out the window, green summer, the next, the leaves have already fallen, and a grey sky lowers the horizon. Our children almost grown, our parents gone, it happened so fast. Each day, we must learn again how to love, between morning's quick coffee and evening's slow return. Steam from a pot of soup rises, mixing with the yeasty smell of baking bread. Our bodies twine, and the big black dog pushes his great head between; his tail, a metronome, 3/4 time. We'll never get there, Time is always ahead of us, running down the beach, urging us on faster, faster, but sometimes we take off our watches, sometimes we lie in the hammock, caught between the mesh of rope and the net of stars, suspended, tangled up in love, running out of time.

— Barbara Crooker, from "Radiance"

steal our attention. The poem reminds us to look up: at our family, at what and whom we love, at the stars.

The first time I read each of the three texts mentioned above, I felt more human, more awake, and more alive. When I find that emotional resonance in a text, I want to share it with everyone I know. Luckily, choral music is designed to do just that: to disseminate information through sung words to listeners eager to find emotional resonance. This is why I write so much choral music; I believe our audiences arrive hungry for not only entertainment, but connection.

Once I have answers to my big-picture questions, I read the text aloud, so I can observe the natural cadence of each punctuation mark and the organic prosody of these words. I speak the text until I know where my voice naturally rises and falls, where I want to talk quickly, and where my speech slows down. Then I ask:

**What are the most dramatic or quietest moments of the text? Where does the epiphany or turn, the biggest moment of revelation, occur? Where do I find moments of tenderness, softness, or nostalgia?**

In a piece of music, we can easily identify the highest note of a piece, or the loudest. In a poem, though, I'm not looking for a climax so much as the moment when the speaker of the poem has a realization or shift in their perspective. A moment when the poem turns toward its ending, or where something new is revealed. A solution. A suggestion. An image

that remains long after I've read the last line. When I set these moments to music, I want a listener to feel like they're the ones reaching an epiphany. I want the harmonies underpinning these words to feel as transformative as the text itself.

Reading the posts that later became "Breathe in Hope," I found this heightened moment in Maya's recognition that we must become experts, not in recovery, but in revolution. In the chorus and the piano accompaniment, the music supporting this final moment is loud, pleading, and insistent.

But in "Sometimes Peace Comes," the two loudest moments are not necessarily the most dramatic lines of the text. When Laura describes "a wide, high plain" of enlightenment, I can't help but imagine a real place: the field outside my window in Saratoga, Wyoming, at the residency where I composed the piece. The biggest epiphany of the text occurs, to my ears, in the final line, and it's a quiet recognition: an acceptance of our place in the world. In the music, the moment just after that is the loudest. Like Laura's "wide, high plain," this ending envelops the singers and the audience until we're floating outside of time.

Once I've identified the highest and lowest moments in the arc of a piece, I have tentpoles on which to drape a canopy of notes. To lock in the form of a new piece, I consider not only by the emotional trajectory of the text, but also recurring words, phrases, or images. I ask:

**What words or images repeat here? What vowels or consonant sounds recur throughout? Do words rhyme, either internally or in a set poetic meter?**

I always mark up a text I'm setting, drawing lines to visually connect repetitive or similar images. Sometimes I draw so many arrows and connecting lines that the poem itself becomes illegible, and I have to print a second set of the words to use as I'm composing.

excerpt from "Breathe in Hope,"  
Dale Trumbore

excerpt from "Sometimes Peace Comes,"  
Dale Trumbore

When I set a text to music, any linked words become musical motives. The motives won't necessarily be melodic; repeated images are just as likely to share a similar harmony, rhythm, or texture. If I'm setting a text written in a specific meter or rhyme scheme, those two elements will also shape the melody and rhythm, as well as the form of the piece.

While the poem "In the Middle" is written in free verse, without a set meter or rhyme scheme, there's plenty of internal and slant rhyme here: "time," "chime," "twine." We also find "lie," "life," "rises," and "horizon," which all share a long i sound. In the musical setting, I decided to amplify and echo this sound throughout, using "ahh" as an ambient vowel, a wordless addition to the texture.

The poem balances two competing concepts: a feeling that time is running out, and a desire for love—an experience that transcends time. Just like the long i vowel above, the word "time" is hard to miss in this text: "juggling time," "we haven't had time," "time is always ahead of us." The word repeats, but so do other time-based images: leaves falling and children growing up. Because time is associated with an inescapable gravity here, I decided to link each musical mention of "time" with a chord that always resolves down.

In the poem, love is just as inescapable a theme as time, with repeated mentions of not only the word "love," but images like bodies twining together. Here, love offers us a momentary respite from time's inescapable pull. By the time I reached the first mention of "love" in my composing, I'd already written the "time" chord. Love lets us escape time's gravity, so it resolves up.

As I'm looking for recurring and significant images in a poem, I may stumble upon an unfamiliar or uncomfortable emotion, or one that challenges me. I ask:



*p* 3 *mf* *poco rit.*  
 jug-gl-ing time...  
*mf* time... *mf* time...  
*mf* time... *mf* time...  
*mf* time... *mf* time...  
*mf* *mp* *poco rit.*  
 3 5 3 5

excerpt from "In the Middle,"  
Dale Trumbore

*rit.* (long)  
 93 *f* *ff*  
 S. love,  
 A. *f* *ff* love,  
 T. *f* *ff* love,  
 B. *f* *ff* love,  
 93 *rit.*  
 Pno. *f* 5 3

excerpt from "In the Middle,"  
Dale Trumbore

Can I reasonably ask an audience to sit with those emotions? How can the music move through these emotions while simultaneously asking an audience to confront them?

I never want to thrust an emotion on singers or an audience. Instead, I want to leave room for an audience to bring their own experience and background into any encounter with my music. This often translates to building literal space into a composition's most challenging emotions.

"Breathe in Hope" asks us to sit with our own discomfort until we reckon with it and translate it into action. I had no idea, at first, how to express in music the concept of intentionally staying in pain, let alone ask a chorus and audience to hover in that uncertain space with me.

There's a certain vulnerability to how this poem asks us to remain in our discomfort before taking action. "This is going to sound wrong," Maya Jackson writes, "but I hope this pain lasts / I hope that it holds / I don't want to heal / just yet." In my setting, the first statement of this text is simple and quiet. There is room in the sparse texture and pacing, ample space for an audience to grow comfortable processing their relationship to these words. The piece, I hope, first welcomes us in without telling us how to think or feel. From there, it grows in intensity, asking us to reckon with our own accountability.

My job is not to purposefully make an audience uncomfortable as a gimmick or trick, but to lead listeners to new and purposeful insights. In the process of setting words to music, I often reach new insights and discoveries, too, which leads me to my next set of questions:

How does this text resonate with my own lived experience? Does this new text have any themes in common with my past work?

What would we do if we didn't have the privilege of being distracted

I know we must honor our personal lives.  
 I know we must not live in darkness.  
 I know we must celebrate the grace in our humanity.  
 To keep our lungs from collapsing.  
 We must breathe in hope.  
 And so have I. Taken in joy. And beauty. And selfishness. And  
 frivolity. And laughter. We are wonderful.  
 Humans. We find the light.

But I fear the moment passing.  
 Already distracted from the fire though the smoke is still filling our  
 lungs.

This is going to sound wrong.  
 But I hope this pain lasts.

I hope that it holds.  
 I don't want to heal  
 just yet.

We have become experts at recovery.  
 I hope we become expert at Revolution.  
 — Maya Jackson

Certain themes recur in my music, to the point that I worry whether I'm repeating myself. I write music about change and anxiety. I write about empowering others to take action, staying awake to the present moment, and moving through the winding, unpredictable fog of grief. I write about fearing death; I write about learning how to live with what we fear when we have no other choice.

I return to these themes because my music naturally mirrors my real-life concerns. My writing—words and music—lets me safely explore what scares me most. In this way, my creative process is like descending into a dark cave with a flashlight: I get to choose where I shine that light and how deep I descend.

The themes that recur in my work aren't "repeating myself"; they're what I hope to spend my whole artistic life exploring. I want the texts I choose and the music I write to facilitate that journey for others, which brings me to my final set of questions:

**How is this text asking anyone who reads it to change? What is it asking me, the performers, and the audience to reconsider within our own lives?**

A really good poem or piece of music will alert you to the immediacy of your life: you're here, it's happening. Wake up! It will show you a fresh way to view what you thought you knew: a wide, high plain; a moment passing; returning to a familiar beach. Good art holds you accountable, or asks you to hold yourself accountable. This doesn't always have to be heavy, or deep; good art might simply hold you accountable for finding more joy or laughter in your life.

I can ask and guess at the answer to each of my questions before I begin writing a new piece, but it's only in the act of composing that I find my answers. Even working with similar themes, I reach a new epiphany each time. After all, we don't lose one person we love, become an expert in navigating loss, and never suffer through grief again. We don't put down our phones once, then never need another reminder to look up. Progress isn't a single action but a series of hard conversations and steps forward.

If you consider my sequence of questions—if you think like a composer—before learning a new piece, you'll unlock not only an explanation for why the music exists the way it does, but a reason to sing it. You sing to illuminate a deeper meaning that the poet and composer have jointly instilled in the work. You sing for the feeling of becoming, briefly, something greater than your singular self. You sing so that the music, your understanding of it, and the audience's perspective will shift and deepen—so that, to quote Laura Foley again, "you find out what it is, / what it is, / and your part in it." ▼

