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Ron Roozendaal, Psychological analysis of musical composition

This paper develops a model of musical composition, inspired by compositional models in writing and architecture and by an analysis of existing musical models and compositional data. The assumption underlying such a strategy is that the compositional process is a general one, or at least, that its fundamental abstractions are general.

The paper first describes models of written composition. Bereiter and Scardemalia's models of "knowledge telling" and "knowledge transformation" are treated at length, and are distinguished from each other mainly by the mode in which the composer is working: from a "seat of the pants" kind of inspiration, which Roozendaal classifies as Platonic, or a more structured and principled goal-directed effort, which he considers Aristotelian. This characterization of these classical viewpoints seem to me an oversimplification, but such a discussion is outside the scope of this summary.

The last example from written composition is the notion of "cognitive modes" from Smith and Landsman. These are essentially a collection of mindsets in which one might approach written composition. This seems to me a decent level of abstraction as long as one doesn't try to make too much of it. More on this point later.

The compositional model from architecture is not much discussed. It resembles the cognitive modes described above, but broken into three broader groups: orientation, experimentation, and implementation.

The paper next discusses musical notions of composition. The first is Sloboda's model, which divides the process into conscious and unconscious chunks. The chunks influence each other in what appear to me to be arbitrary ways, and the divisions within the conscious chunk – "idea" "theme" "intermediate form" and "final form" – seem plucked out of thin air. Which isn't to say that these are bad divisions, but I bet I could just as easily make a model with five subdivisions, or nine. This is the problem that keeps reappearing in this paper: poorly constrained problem definitions lead to poorly constrained models that predict everything and, therefore, nothing.

In the final part of his background analysis, Roozendaal examines composers' notes, ostensibly to glean insight into the compositional process. No doubt much insight is there to be had, but what Roozendaal comes up with is a contortion of their sentiments to fit the structures imposed by the models already described. The quote from Beethoven could certainly be used as an illustration of knowledge-transformation; the problem is that it could also be used as an illustration of any other completely general framework, in the same way that creationists see God in everything, all the time.

The model Roozendaal comes up with is, at heart, a superset of those described to this point, though it seems most directly inspired by the Cognitive Modes model of written composition. Once the model is defined some composers are then observed during

composition tasks, and with these findings the model is then “evaluated” based on – well, it’s never made quite clear what the evaluation criteria are.

The problem with this paper, and the model it contains, is that it ultimately says very little of substance. How, for instance, would you falsify this model? The only real “prediction” concrete enough to evaluate is that the compositional process results in increasing amounts of structure. This is reasonable enough; one does not write a poem and then, when it’s finished, change individual words –

Wait a minute. One does, in fact, produce a poem and then change it at every level of abstraction: you can change one word for another (the most atomic change possible) you can shift the order of the stanzas, you can alter the rhyme scheme or the stress pattern, you can change the theme. At some point it is reasonable to say that you’ve actually changed poems, but where this point is exactly is impossible to determine. And this is precisely the problem: all of these things can occur, and do occur.

Composition is a free-for all. Which is not to say that there are not features of the compositional process that occur frequently, or that some flows, from least structured to most structured, or from vague idea to concrete instantiation, do not occur more frequently than others. At one extreme lies the too-general: everything goes. At the other extreme lies dogmatic tyranny: this, and only this, is how you write a poem. Both sorts of models could be useful for something, I suppose: the former to specify a grab-bag of techniques and tricks that one might want to employ; the latter to give a recipe: “How to write a Top-40 single.”

The critical point is that the proponent of a model understands this continuum, and knows where along this continuum his own model falls. I don’t get the idea the author has thought much about this. If he did, it doesn’t come out in the paper.