

Interview & Article by: Carlee Baldwin

WHO IS A COMPOSER?

Hi friends! This is Carlee Baldwin, and I can't wait to tell you more about who a composer is and what they do.

A composer is someone who writes music. It sounds simple, but it's so much more than that. Composers have a wide range of what they write music to. That could be composing the background music to movies, melodies to songs, or even jingles in commercials! Composers are especially important in the theatre.

You're in for a special treat because I have interviewed a very dear friend of mine who just happens to be a successful composer! His name is Spicer Carr, and he is currently earning a Master's degree at Temple University, in the Musical Theatre Collaboration program. He's an amazing person with the true talent of composing. I'm excited for you to get to know him more through this interview. He has so many wonderful things to share!

SPICER CARR

Picture courtesy of Spicer Carr, UVU School of the Arts

Question:

In theatre, what is the role of a composer?

The simple answer is this: To tell the story through music. But, like most everything in life, it is far more complicated than that. A composer is meant to guide the audience's ears and eyes. We tell you what to listen to and what to feel. We can even tell you where to look! For example, let's say there's a scene with two characters (Character A and Character B). Character A is sneaking up on Character B, and let's say I don't want you to see Character A. I can write a song for Character B that's uptempo and energetic. Your ears and eyes are then focused on Character B, unaware that Character A is about to pounce! But what if I want you to see Character A? Then I'd give Character A the song, and your attention is shifted!

If the book writer/lyricist creates the story, then the composer is playing with it. But how do we play with it? Through time and pitch. Music, in its simplest form, can be boiled down to time (rhythm and meter) and pitch (scales, melodies, and harmonies). It is our job to decorate time and pitch so you know what's going on.



Question:

Who is your favorite

composer and why?

Oh, that's a tough one! I love lots of different composers (from different genres) for different reasons. I love Offenbach's wit, Jeanine Tesori's honesty, Stravinsky's inventiveness, Scott Joplin's Playfulness, and

Nico Muhly's passion. I could go on and on (honorable mentions include John Adams, Michael R Jackson, Prokofiev, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Sullivan, Clara Shumman, Fats Waller, Thelonius Monk...).

But if I had to pick one (especially considering the subject of Musical Theatre) I would have to say Stephen Sondheim is my favorite. Sondheim might seem like a cliché, but he's famous for a reason! Sondheim is able to write both entertaining and memorable songs, but what makes him so unique is that these songs operate on a deeper level. When you listen to a Sondheim song he is not only writing something about the character or the story, he's writing about a deeper, universal truth. I can only hope to achieve that level of genius someday.

Q&A WITH A COMPOSER

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about Spicer!



Click on the piano keys to listen to some of Spicer's music!

Question:

Why did you become a composer?

I've always been composing to some extent. I started playing piano and studying music when I was about six years old. And during that time, I've always been composing. Now, I never considered myself a composer for two reasons: One, I didn't realize that was an option. And two, I always fancied myself being an actor or performer. But when I began my undergraduate degree and saw the level of talent my peers had, I soon realized the actor's life was not for me. I had a short identity crisis and tried everything out. But I kept being drawn back to writing. So, I took music theory, composition, and songwriting classes and just started writing. I was lucky enough to have some of my early work put on by the Theatre for Youth and Education Center at Utah Valley University, which really was the nail in the coffin. I remember seeing hundreds of children clapping after a performance of *Alice in Wonderland* (which I wrote the music for). It was an amazing feeling, and from that point on I was Spicer the composer.

Question:

What's the most challenging thing about being a composer?

The most challenging thing is knowing whether a song is right or wrong. When I say "right or wrong" what I mean is this: Does the song work in the scene? Does it advance the plot or theme? Does it tell us anything about character? Am I helping the audience to hear this story? These are the questions I constantly ask myself as I write. It's easy to write a good song, it's harder to write the "right" song.

Question:

What's your advice to someone who wants to be a composer?

Practice, practice, practice! Being a composer is much like any other musical discipline, it requires practice! But how do composers practice? We study the work of other composers. We learn about music theory. We do various exercises in counterpoint and harmony. We learn about music from different cultures and backgrounds. And we write, write, write! If you want to be a composer go (right now!) and start writing. Spend at least an hour a day working on a composition. It doesn't have to be long, it doesn't have to be good, but it must be honest and authentically you. Perform your work for others. If you can't perform it, find others to perform it for you! Make a concert of your music one night for your friends! Ask for their advice and input and take it to heart. If you want to write music for the theatre, find a collaborator (a book writer and/or lyricsit) and start a project together! The only way to become a composer is to compose!

SOURCES

A special thank you to Spicer Carr for being interviewed for this article.

Picture of Spicer Carr: Courtesy of Spicer Carr, UVU School of the Arts

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