

SAMUEL R. HAZO

Frequently Asked Questions

Where were you born and raised?

I was born on November 15th, 1966 at St. Clair Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I grew up and lived in the same house in Upper St. Clair, a southern suburb of Pittsburgh, until the day I moved out and bought my own home. My parents wanted a big family but were told by doctors that they could not have children. When they were forty, they were happily surprised with their one and only baby, me. I graduated from Upper St. Clair High School in 1984 and went on to major in music education at Duquesne University. When in high school, I broke my leg while scoring a run for my baseball team. Due to the location of the break, I was not permitted to play sports for an entire year. So, I joined the marching band. I would consider it the best broken leg ever.

How did you get interested in music?

First and foremost, my father always had music playing in our house, so that must have had an influence. Also, when I was two years old, I watched "The Little Drummer Boy" on TV. When my parents asked me what I wanted for every holiday after that, I told them, "a drum." By the time I was four, I had amassed a collection of drums so big, my parents decided to get me a real drum set and private lessons. I started taking private drum lessons at age 4, violin lessons in school at age 8, and classical guitar lessons at age 9. From 3rd grade thru 8th grade, I played violin in the school orchestra and from 7th grade thru 12th grade, I was a percussionist in the middle school and high school bands. Also, I always had a garage band outside of school in which I usually played guitar or drums. (The name of our first garage band in middle school was Medium Rare.) When I was in 9th grade, my mother bought a beautiful Yamaha white upright piano from a cousin whose nightclub was going out of business and I taught myself to play it. Today, that very piano is in my living room and usually what I use when experimenting with composition ideas.

How did you start composing?

I began composing when I was 29 years old. Prior to then, I had written radio jingles and pop tunes, but I never actually scored out a composition for a symphonic style ensemble. How did it all start? ...On July 19th, 1996, my wife and I hosted our friends, Steve and Rebecca, at our home for the Opening Ceremonies of the Atlanta Olympics. After hearing the premiere of the 1996 Olympic theme, I had wished it went in a slightly different, more powerful, direction. The composer was (and is) one of immense talent and reputation, but that specific piece didn't hit my ears the way I hoped it would. So, I walked over to my piano and told my friend and fellow band director, Steve, "I wished it sounded like this..." Then, my hands landed on magical keys as I played. When I was done, Steve said, "Man, you should write that down." So, with no degree or lessons in composition, I spent the better part of that week over-confidently developing my ideas and scoring them out for wind ensemble. The next week I showed it to my former college band director, Bob Cameron, and he said he'd program it. Sitting in the audience while a top shelf university wind ensemble played my music made me want to write another.

What advice do you give to young composers?

In a blanket answer, I would say what I say to all writers, but especially aspiring composer. This is my own philosophy, so it is not out of a book but from my own experience. There are four creative elements of music from which you can begin: melody, harmony, rhythm and texture/timbre. To be unique composers, we must find which one is our natural creative strength, and always start with that one. That way, we ensure that what we create is in our own style and doesn't sound like anyone else. Take time to discover which one comes naturally to you in a creative way. My personal strength is melody, even though I am a percussionist and some might think it's rhythm. Additionally, the three areas that are not as strong might take longer to perfect, but we will never let them take away from our natural creative strength in the composition. Regarding something deeper, we will find that the master composers have layers in their works. There is one layer for the musicians so that it is stimulating to perform. Another layer is for the listener who must find it enjoyable or provoking. The third layer is for the analyst or historian to appreciate the compositional techniques that were used. A master's composition has all of those properties.

I would add that composers must know what they are going to write before they begin scoring it. I see and hear many pieces that young composers have written while sitting at the computer trying ideas. They playback something they like and build on it. Then they do the same thing for the next section, etc. Although they may finish the piece, it's not actually complete; nor does it have a beginning, a middle or an end. It's just stream-of-consciousness writing. Many times it can't even be played by real musicians. Every respectable composer I know who may be smart enough to do this also is smart enough to know it never works.

Your musical idea must be outlined, planned, well-thought-out and so full in your head and your heart that scoring it will feel like a euphoric release and not a labor. Imagine that you have a gigantic crush on someone, and that person approaches you and whispers his/her phone number in your ear one time. The excitement of memorizing that phone number until you can write it down or save it is precisely how it should feel to score your musical ideas.

Who is your favorite composer?

I do not believe I have a "favorite" composer. But, if you asked me a thousand times, and I could not stand being asked anymore, I might admit it's Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Which composition of yours is your favorite?

I once heard Taylor Swift asked this question about her songs. Her response was an analogy that I would classify as genius. She said that her songs are like clothes. Every time she buys clothes, the ones she just bought are her favorites. There are some older outfits that still hold a special place, but the newest ones are the most special..

Additionally... My college orchestration professor was Dr. Joseph Willcox Jenkins. His choral and instrumental compositions are staples in modern literature. He always encouraged me to compose from the time I was in his classes. Perhaps he saw something in me that I never saw. Twenty years after having me as a student, when he would attend concerts to hear his music and the programs included my music as well, he would handwrite me congratulatory letters that I treasure to this day. He ended all of them the same way, "May your favorite composition always be your next one!"

I subscribe to both of these philosophies. My favorite composition truly is my latest or my next.

What is your favorite instrument?

Probably..... The conductor's baton.

What are some things about you that people would be surprised to know?

- I know a ton of pop songs on the piano and I accompany my, presently teenage, daughter on them while she sings.
- My favorite color is purple.
- There are a few things I cook so well that people said they should be served in restaurants.
- I reached the highest master level on Tiny Wings.
- I was kicked out of band class in 8th grade and again in 11th grade. (I won't give reasons, but it was definitely my fault!)
- I was barely accepted into college, but then graduated with honors and was named the most outstanding graduate in music education.
- I have never tried any recreational drugs, and alcohol doesn't have a pleasing taste to me.
- I threw the discus in track and played first base and outfield in baseball.
- I considered being a pilot but couldn't turn my back on music. (Now my son wants to be a pilot.)