



ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL PIANO INSTRUCTORS

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APPI NEWSLETTER

com-po-si-tion

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by Sue Ruby
APPI President

Hello, my name is Sue Ruby, teaching artist, and Co-Founder of APPI, and I am *terrified* of improvising in public! And truth be told, I'd be mortified to try to share any of my original works, even in our own APPI Composition Festival. There, I said it!

My formative piano lessons made little mention of improvisation/composition or the importance of developing these skills. To me, composers were revered beings whose works came to them mysteriously in the night. Improvisers were technical magicians who had been born to "play by ear." Me? I could sightread; I wasn't "gifted" in these other areas.

It was late in my teaching when I discovered that, like reading, the skills of composition and improvisation can be broken

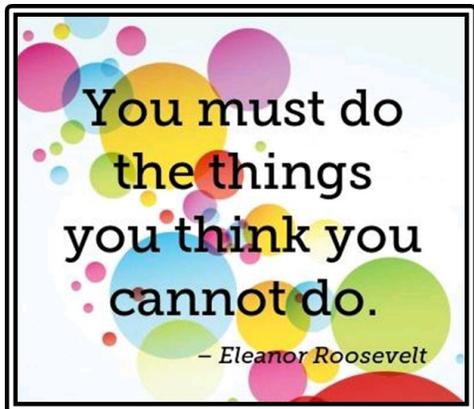
down, taught, and developed in attainable steps and techniques. But I was just too scared to try. My attempts always sounded amateurish, like a total beginner. Well of course they did! — I WAS a total beginner in the world of improvisation and composition ... and I still have a long way to go.

Fortunately, I have two rich resources to help me on my journey to find my inner Composer: my students and APPI.

My students have shown me how to question, experiment, have fun, and "play with my music" at all points in the learning process — from the first exploration of a piece to using that last recital piece as a stepping off point for new creations.

In addition, APPI has supplied great

inspiration. APPI is rich with resources! Within our ranks are many "hidden" composers: Mitch Grussing, Jeremy Hanson, Rebecca Hass, and Jana Wilkes to name a few. We have incredibly talented improvisers: in our midst: Jim Lansing, Maura Klimisch (former member/current Board member), and Rachel Malarz. Want a clandestine lesson in these arts? Ask an APPI pal! Savor the articles in this issue; they are all written by our very own APPI members. And take a cue from your students: PLAY with your MUSIC and create something new. 



by Mitch Grussing,
Piano Instructor/Composer,
APPI Composition Festival Judge
www.grussingmusic.com

There's a special kind of reward that comes from creating something. People do it all the time, often as a hobby, and sometimes as a profession: cooking, coding, knitting, candle-making, carpentry, painting, movie-making. Like all of these acts of creation, a cultivated level of music-making is not an innate gift, and the same is true for composition. I didn't emerge from the womb clutching a tablet of staff paper — I just happen to enjoy creating things, and I'm fortunate never to have believed that creativity is someone else's job.

As music teachers, we know that practically everyone can learn to do music. Yet I often hear highly experienced music teachers saying that they can't compose. If you are one of these teachers, then I am both sorry and delighted to tell you that you're wrong! I'm writing this article for YOU. I want to help you discover your own ability to compose, and I'll give you a few ideas that might help you to get started.

When I say "compose," I'm not referring to the act of creating an impeccably notated score. That's not the goal unless the assignment is specifically to practice the act of notating music, so neither you nor your students need to write down every detail in perfect form. Think of it like writing a reminder on a sticky note. You'd probably write something like "get carrots, go to

bank," or even "carrots/bank," rather than "Today I need to purchase carrots and deposit six checks at the bank." Similarly, if you're just notating something for your own use, you can take some shortcuts. Scale passages, ostinatos, and even rhythms can be abbreviated. Or maybe you won't feel the need to write down anything at all. In this case, a simple recording can fill in nicely for a printed score, since you'll have a reference should you want to resurrect the piece in the future. The ubiquity of smartphones makes recording easier and more convenient than ever. A clearly notated score is only necessary if you are planning to make it available for other people to play. Then you'll want to be as clear as possible.



**"Play" Is the key word ...
Play with the Instrument.
Play with sounds.**

When you're sitting down to compose, try not to think of it as a project that you need to complete. Instead, think of it as purely recreational. You might have spent your whole career using your instrument as an instrument, and now it's time to think of it as a toy. You just need

You're a Composer!

to play: play with the instrument, play with sounds. You don't need to accomplish anything. Just play.

If you don't do a lot of composition, or if you've never composed before, that's fine. The best way to learn to do something is simply to do it, so start small and play with the sound. Remember, "play" is the key word, so give yourself plenty of room,

Play with melody

plenty of permission to experiment. If you'd like to play with melody, you might start by playing a major or minor scale. (It doesn't matter which one, so you can pick.) Can you take the notes from that scale and play them in a different order? Of course you can! And you'd have just improvised a diatonic melody. Now that you have that melody, how can you tinker with it? Can you repeat it to make two parallel phrases? How about two contrasting phrases?

Play with rhythm

Let's do a similar exercise with rhythm. You can easily improvise a rhythm by tapping some combination of quarter notes, eighth notes, or whatever subdivision you choose. The next step might be putting this rhythm into phrases. Some possibilities might be two identical phrases; two parallel phrases with different endings; a mini-rondo where you alternate a recurring phrase with new phrases; or any

continued on page 4 ...

by Anne-Marie Graffunder,
APPI Member

What Would That Sound Like?

The holidays have passed; recital season won't be in full swing for a while; what can we do? Compositions! Although I am not trained in teaching composition and in no way am I an expert at this, I have really come to enjoy and value encouraging my students to compose their own pieces, and I am learning right along with them. Some students will naturally enjoy this more than others, but I believe all will benefit from the challenge.

For myself, the teacher, I benefit from seeing the student put theory into practice. What are the gaps in their understanding? Where do I need to improve in my explanations of rhythm, etc.? We can also benefit in ear training from the work of transferring a sound in the mind to keys and paper/computer-generated score. For example, I currently have a student who has started a shipwreck composition. What interval is the sound of the foghorn? Where should it be played on the piano?

The question of "What would that sound like?" is central to many of my students' compositions because thematic compositions are generally the most popular. Thinking of a favorite activity, animal, place, or other theme can often bring to the student's mind sounds and images that we will then try to express on the piano. There are many possible ways to

begin. I encourage the students to "think small." The thought of putting together a whole piece is overwhelming. One small motive is all we need to get started - it could be just a few notes. That idea can be repeated in sequence on different pitches or variations.

For beginners, question and answer compositions of eight measures work well. Typically they will stick with notes of a C or G pentascale which is familiar and comfortable. One way to do this is to literally write out a question - for example, "What does your budgie like to do?" Answer: "He likes to fly and eat and sleep." (I have someone considering a budgie (parakeet) composition). The natural rhythm of the words as we say them can be written down, and then notes are added to fit that rhythm. To help with figuring out the rhythm I like to lay out cards with notes of various values on the floor. We can clap and speak

the rhythm finding note values that match. Well, OK, this is also just a fun way to get off the bench for a while! This method can also be used to help the student

set words from a hymn or poem to the student's own new tune.

Sometimes a student really enjoys a certain piece or a certain musical element in a piece. Last year one of my students based her whole piece on being able to incorporate a glissando. She had also liked playing a piece with Alberti bass and these two elements were combined to make a waterfall composition. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. As composer Wendy Stevens said, "Creativity is recombining elements that already exist in a new way."

There are also a wealth of composition aids published and on the web which give step-by-step composition starters. I like Wynn-Anne Rossi's *Creative Composition Toolbox* for having examples to follow, realistic length, and ready-made motives. Another book is *Piano Teacher's Guide to Creative Composition* by Carol Klose. Ideas are found in method books and online too. Nicola Cantan from *Colourful Keys* is currently offering a free "Animal Menagerie Composing Guide." Her two-motive plan could be used for any theme. (Find more information on composing at: colourfulkeys.ie/awesome-added-benefits-teaching-composing-piano-students/). On a related note, the theme for this year's *Piano Explorer* magazine composition contest is "pets." What a fun topic!

Finally, the point is not to make a prize-winning composition, although that would be a joy. The



You're a Composer!
cont'd from p. 2...

other combination of phrases that you can think of. And then, you can leave it alone as a rhythmic composition, or you can set pitches to it. You could combine this with the scale exercise, where you play a scale using the rhythm you just created, and then rearrange the scale in ways that you find interesting. All of this can be improvised—no need to write anything down!

Add accompaniment!

Getting tired of monophony? Add accompaniment! At this point it might be helpful to notate what you're creating. If you are a vocalist or if you play a monophonic instrument, you can make a duet, or you can add a harmonic instrument such as a piano or guitar (or marimba, or pipe organ, or ...). If you're composing at the piano, try adding chords, and keep in mind that chords come in all sorts of exciting flavors! Blocked, broken, legato, staccato, loud, soft, high, low, triads, dominant sevenths, major sevenths, ninths, elevenths, thirteenth, clusters — so many possibilities!

Write a theme & variations

Writing a theme and variations is a great way to try a variety of compositional techniques with a very small amount of musical material. For your theme, start with something really simple from one of the exercises above and do something fun with it for each variation. It's a bit like creating a bunch of little

compositions but without the need to start completely from scratch each time. You've seen this from before, but just as a reminder, you can adjust all sorts of things for each variation: tempo, meter, mode, texture, register, articulation, etc.

As you become more comfortable with composition, do give yourself permission to write easy pieces. You can write pieces for your students, or you can write simple things for yourself to play. It doesn't have to be technically challenging, or theoretically intricate, in order to be satisfying. An additional benefit to this is that if you would like to share your music for others to play, the music's accessibility will allow more people to learn it and enjoy it.

Do more with less

The most important lesson I learned about composing is to do more with less. My early compositions had lots of exciting ideas and very little development of those ideas. I could easily have chopped such pieces up into more compositions. This would have given each exciting idea room to grow. Give your ideas the same treatment. Give them room to grow into something.

Useful Tip: Get Out of the Way!

Probably the most useful lesson I've learned from teaching composition is to get out of the way and let the student determine how to

craft the sound. I can ask questions or offer suggestions, but I'm careful to avoid telling the student what to do. One of my more enthusiastic student composers recently composed a piece in mixed meter. He didn't set out specifically to compose something in mixed meter; he just composed something that sounded good to him. Initially, I had to stop myself from "correcting" his music to fit into a single meter. I had to allow the piece to be what he wanted it to be, and this was an opening for us to talk more about time signatures and measures and what purposes they really serve. So now, rather than having a square composition that his teacher forced into a single meter, my student has a work that's truly his own, with exciting and unpredictable changes in meter. As a bonus, he also has a deeper understanding of time signatures.

Helpful Resources

Please don't mistake any of the above suggestions for *The One and Only True and Proper Way to Start Composing!* These are only jumping-off points. As you try new things, you might develop some jumping-off points of your own. Make a note of these, because you can use them as composition etudes for your students. If you're not quite ready to create your own exercises yet, there are some composition methods out there. *Creative Composition Toolbox* by Wynn-Anne Rossi and *Music by Me* by Wynn-Anne Rossi and Kevin Olson are both terrific series with lots of fun composition etudes.

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Collaborative Composition with Students

by Rebecca Hass, APPI Member (condensed from Fall 2015 Newsletter)

I've been teaching composition to some of my students for quite a while, but recently I attempted doing a studio-wide project, an adaptation of a collaborative composition idea from the Teach Piano Today blog (teachpianotoday.com) that they called "Mail a Motive." In their version, each student writes a motive and mails it to the next person to develop, but I just collected and redistributed the pieces each week to save time and hassle.

We did our first round during the month of May, a time of year post-studio recital when students often get in a rut due to busy schedules. It was a great success, and usually took only five minutes from each lesson.

This is the process we followed:

1. I made sheets that included directions, some examples of motives, and blank staff paper at the bottom. I demonstrated some famous motives (i.e., Beethoven's 5th Symphony,

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, the Imperial March from *Star Wars*, the theme from *Jaws*) and discussed how the composer had used it.

2. Each student then composed a short motive during the lesson. We talked about using rhythmic themes or certain scales or chords to give them ideas.
3. During the following week, each student received someone else's motive to build on (write 2-4 new measures), and we talked about ways to manipulate a motive (repetition, sequence, inversion, retrograde, etc.). In the lesson, each student played what they were given by previous students.
4. During the 3rd & 4th weeks, we repeated the process again, continuing to switch people each week.
5. After the 4th week, most students learned the piece that they ended up with and record-

ed it at the next lesson. Most kids could practice a couple times and record on the spot, since many pieces just used a melody. Some students chose to take it home to practice. I then uploaded them to SoundCloud for students and parents to listen or download. I also handed out copies to each student of every piece they participated in.

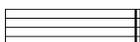
Composing is helpful to build students' reading and writing skills as well as creativity. Even students who were initially hesitant to compose found it easy to write a small amount of music at a time. This has been a fun community-building activity as students wonder how their pieces are coming along and eagerly await hearing their conclusions. They have also gotten to know some new people in the studio, even though they aren't working together directly. I highly recommend trying composition with students in this collaborative, and fun, format!



You're a Composer! cont'd from p. 4...

**Get started. Give It a try
Have fun!**

I hope this article has given you some easy entry points into composition. I hope you try it, and I hope you find it fun. Getting started is the hardest part, but it's the most necessary step. Any author will tell you that the most important thing is just to write. Even if you think it's terrible, you can revise it and turn it into something beautiful. You can't revise *nothing*. So give it a try, and remember to have fun!



*What Would That Sound Like?
cont'd from p. 3...*

goal is to encourage creativity and practice theory, listening and "musical thinking" skills. It will be difficult at times, but also rewarding. Part of the reward for my studio comes at the end-of-the-year recital. I record the students playing their compositions, and the recording plays as pre-program music before the recital. The parents love this as it is so fun to hear the different personalities of the students in their compositions. The whole process does take time, and some of our efforts are more successful than others. Nevertheless, I find it worthwhile. Perhaps this quote attributed to Beethoven applies, "Don't just practice your art, force your way into its secrets."

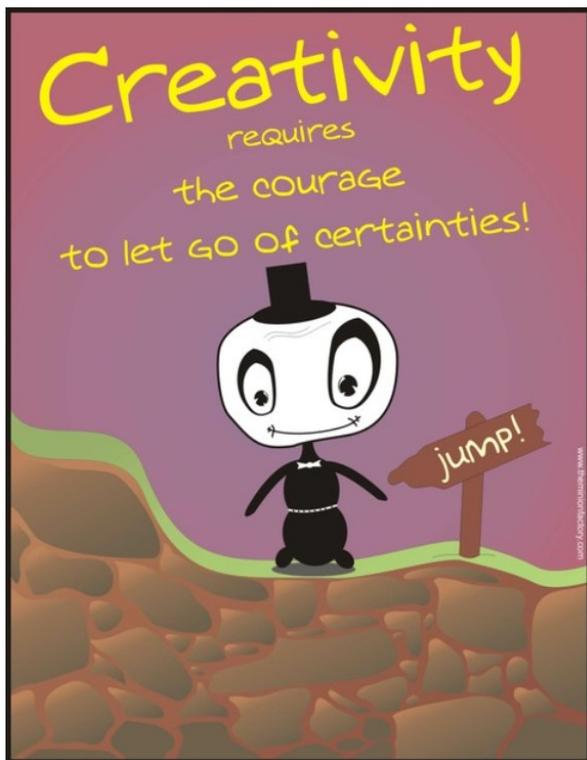


by Wynn-Anne Rossi, Co-Creator
of APPI Composition Festival

www.rossi-music.com

Are we there yet?? It's an old car joke, but it aptly applies to my long journey as a composer. With creating music, there's always a new sound around the next corner, and each new direction builds the illusion that I'm almost there. Of course, I will never arrive. Composition is an endless ride, complete with sight-seeing and always rolling into new frontiers. That's what keeps it fresh and alive!

I started making up musical stories when I was three years old. The piano was my favorite toy, and the imagination that drove those early years is why I am a composer today. I'm a huge believer in the natural creativity of all human beings. Every student in my studio learns how to create original music. I don't



Creativity Requires Courage - Motivational Cartoon by Abie Davis (The Minion Factory)
Visit TheMinionFactory.com for more cartoon motivational!

Cars and Composition

ask them if they want to compose. I tell them they GET to compose!

Loving to create is natural, but we can easily turn passion into roadkill with rules, regulations, and judgment. It's tricky to teach composition, because it is entirely different from teaching piano performance. A published piece of music dictates a specific roadmap to success that we can pass along to the student. However, an original piece is a path of self-discovery. Creating music reveals what the student thinks and feels. The young composer is "at the wheel," deciding which way to turn. Right and wrong do not apply in the same way.

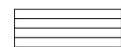
After many, many years on this journey, I have a lot to say on the subject. I've written two complete composition workbook series and offered numerous residencies across the country, encouraging hundreds of piano, band, and orchestra students to compose. I've been a composition judge at the state, regional, and national levels for NFMC, MTNA and the Festival for Creative Pianists in Denver. Over the years, I've seen a beautiful transformation taking place. Musical creativity is picking up speed, and high quality works are coming from young musicians of every age. This revolution started with small steps by piano

teachers like you. Are we there yet? No. But we are light-years ahead of where we were just one generation ago.

There is good news for you who are ready to climb on board. You aren't alone. APPI is one of the most progressive piano teacher organizations I've run across, and we are fortunate to be able to share what works and what doesn't with one another. And you don't have to recreate the wheel! Helpful composition workbooks and materials are now available. Here are a few options that I've produced along the way:

- *Wednesdays with Wynn-Anne* Alfred video series (14 episodes) with exercises in music creativity: <https://www.alfred.com/blog/composition-tips-wynn-anne-rossi/>
- *Music By Me* (5 books), FJH Music, by Kevin Olson & Wynn-Anne Rossi. Best for use in groups or camps with plenty of interactive exercises.
- *Creative Composition Toolbox* (6 books), Alfred Pub, by Wynn-Anne Rossi. Best for use in private studio. Streamlined, tool-based lessons.

We are in this together, and from time to time, we all have the right to squirm a bit as we adjust to twists and turns in the road. This is a new era of creativity in the piano studio, and it's a great time to be teaching music!



by Joyce Ramsey,
APPI Newsletter Co-Chair

Introducing hAPPI hour!!

Laurie Sanderson’s email invited us to come and:

- Drink a glass of wine
- Eat a few appetizers
- Play a duet (or not)
- Chat about piano teaching (or about other things)

Six APPI teachers participated. We enjoyed Laurie’s exceptional hospitality and each other’s company in a warm & fun hAPPI hour!!

Did we:

- Drink a glass of wine? – YES
- Eat a few appetizers? – YES
- Play a few duets? – YES, we even played an 8-hand, 2-piano version of Pomp & Circumstance (see photos)
- Chat about piano teaching & other things? – YES to both!!
- And, did we have fun?? YES!!



Come & join us the next time a hAPPI hour is scheduled!! You’ll enjoy an informal, kick-back time getting to know your APPI friends better. But take my warning, you had better plan for more than an hour ... ! (After 3+ hours, we decided we better get on the road & get ahead of the upcoming snowstorm!)



Recommended Resources for Teaching Composition	
compiled by Jeremy Hanson & Joyce Ramsey	
Title	Author
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Awesome Added Benefits of Teaching Composing to Piano Students colourfulkeys.ie/awesome-added-benefits-teaching-composing-piano-students/ • Animal Themed Piano Student Composing Project colourfulkeys.ie/composing-project-all-levels-piano-student/ 	Nicola Cantan
Teaching Music Through Composition: A Curriculum Using Technology global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199840618/	Barbara Freedman
Music Composition for Dummies (publisher: Wiley)	Scott Jarrett/Holly Day
Piano Teacher’s Guide to Creative Composition (publisher: Hal Leonard)	Carol Klose
The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Music Composition (publisher: DK)	Michael Miller
Composition Tips with Wynn-Anne Rossi: Wednesdays with Wynn-Anne (Free 14-episode Video Series): alfred.com/blog/composition-tips-wynn-anne-rossi/	Wynn-Anne Rossi
Creative Composition Toolbox: A Step-by-Step Guide for Learning to Compose (Bks 1-6)	Wynn-Anne Rossi
Music By Me: A Composition Workbook (Bks 1-5)	Kevin Olson/Wynn-Anne Rossi
Composing Music: A New Approach (publisher: University of Chicago Press)	William Russo
Helping Students Compose: composecreate.com/index-of-composition-corner-posts/ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructing Good Melodies (i.e., rhythm, motives, contour) • Teaching Composition: Q & A 	Wendy Stevens
Tim Topham’s Podcasts on Composition - https://tintopham.com/?s=Composition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to Get Your Beginner Piano Students Composing Music - Carol Matz: tintopham.com/how-to-get-your-beginner-piano-students-composing-music/ • Piano Composition: Encouraging Your Students to Write Music – Tim Topham: tintopham.com/piano-composition-encouraging-your-students-to-write-music/ • LH Improv Patterns for Student Compositions – Tim Topham: tintopham.com/teaching-video-lh-improv-patterns-for-student-compositions/ • Composition Kickstarters: 5 Ways to Inspire Your Students to Write Music - Nicola Cantan: tintopham.com/composition-kickstarters-5-ways-to-inspire-your-student/ 	Tim Topham’s blogs/podcasts
Composition for Young Musicians: A Fun Way for Kids to Begin Creating Music (publisher: Alfred)	Jennifer Wilson

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Founded in 2001, APPI enables piano instructors of all levels and abilities to network with others to energize and enhance the art of teaching piano. In addition to professional development and networking opportunities for teachers, APPI offers a variety of educational activities for students. Meetings are held the second Friday of every month at Schmitt Music in Brooklyn Center. We have so much to learn from each other—come join us!

We're on the web!

<http://www.appimn.org/>



Join us on

facebook



Upcoming APPI Events

FEBRUARY

Saturday, Feb. 23, 2019 — EFT

EFT: Capoeira Academy Workshop

Where: MN Capoeira Academy, Richfield

Time: 1:45-2:45 pm / Cost: \$15

Registration Deadline: February 1

Sunday, Feb. 24, 2019 — Pieces & Pieces Performance Class for Students 12+

Where: Valley Community Presbyterian Church, Golden Valley

Time: 3:00-5:00 pm

Cost: \$5/person

Registration Deadline: February 15

MARCH

Friday, March 8, 2019 — Teacher Meeting

Topic: Encouraging Excellence: Tips from (& for) a Judge on Performance Preparation

APPI Member Presenter: Laura Harding

Where: Brooklyn Center Schmitt Music

Time: 12:00-1:30pm

APRIL

Friday, April 12, 2019 — Teacher Meeting

Topic: Money Matters!

APPI Member Presenter: Jim Lansing

Where: Brooklyn Center Schmitt Music

Time: 12:00-1:30pm

Saturday, April 13, 2019 — APPI Piano Festival & Composition Festival

Where: Valley Community Presbyterian Church, Golden Valley

Time: 8:30 am-5:00 pm

Cost: Piano \$16; Composition \$20

Registration Deadline: March 15

April 15, 2019 — Deadline to apply for the 2nd annual APPI Professional Development Grant

Instructions & Details: APPI website: Members Area, Documents

Submit: to Sue Ruby via email (ruby11sue@gmail.com) or hard copy/snail mail

MAY

Friday, May 10, 2019 — Teacher Meeting

Topic: Preparing Students to Play in College

Guest Speaker: Dr. Amy Grinsteiner, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

Where: Brooklyn Center Schmitt Music

Time: 12:00-1:30 pm

JUNE

Friday, June 14, 2019 — Teacher Meeting

Topic: What I Learned from Composing and Kick-Starting My First Album

APPI Presenter: Rebecca Hass, APPI Professional Development Grant Recipient

Where: Brooklyn Center Schmitt Music

Time: 12:00-1:30pm

Sunday, June 16, 2019 — APPI Planning Retreat

All Members welcome!

Where: 1323 32nd Ave. NW, New Brighton

Time: 6:00-9:00 pm

Summer 2019 Opportunities

NCKP – National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy	July 24-27	keyboardpedagogy.org/national-conference-info2
80 th Annual Schmitt Music EXPO	August 11-18	www.schmittmusic.com