Composer’s Corner

Owen Hartford

I came rather late to composing mandolin music. A brief history: I started out playing the violin in high school and college orchestras and thought for awhile about being a music major, but gave that up when I realized I’d have to play in front of juries.

I brought a violin with me to Nigeria in the Peace Corps, but after it came unglued several times in the tropical rainforest, I gave up playing for several years. After I returned to the States, a friend and I started a folk group in Boston in the early 1970s — the Gloucester Hornpipe and Clog Society — which is still going. My inclination is to write pieces for whatever group I’m in (or whatever group will play them), so I wrote a lot of Celtic/folk style tunes during those years.

I moved back to California in the ’80s and hung out with friends who sang standards and pop tunes of the ’50s and ’60s and began writing doo-wop-like songs for awhile. I also joined the Berkeley Mandolin Ensemble at that time and began to experiment with mandolin ensemble pieces.

In the late ’80s I moved back to Boston and in the early ’90s I joined the Providence Mandolin Orchestra and have played with them ever since. I am very grateful to have had a good mandolin orchestra to be able to write pieces for, and we are fortunate to have Mark Davis as our conductor, who is very encouraging of new works —and a good judge of what works and what doesn’t. I often make revisions to pieces based on feedback from Mark and the orchestra.

When I write music, I like to take it on as a challenge. I like to write music in various genres — folk, pop songs, something minimalist, something complicated, a song cycle, something funny, or a children's opera. I’m not sure I have a recognizable style (I’ll leave that to others), but I’m more interested in exploring, finding out what I can do, finding out how different kinds of music work.

Others writers of the Composer’s Corner have written well about how they write pieces and where ideas come from. My pieces often get started in a lot of the same ways: a melodic idea, a chord progression, a rhythmic pattern. Sometimes it's a piece I hear that really grabs me and makes we want to do something similar. Sometimes it’s a piece I hear that I don’t like and tell myself I could do something better. In fact, after I finish a piece, I often feel I could do something better and want to move on to the next thing.

I usually write on the computer and am able to listen to everything as I write it. I often start by noodling around on the mandolin or the piano to find the motifs and harmonies that interest me. Sometimes I improvise on my MIDI keyboard as I record what I play into the computer. Then it’s a matter of separating the wheat from the chaff and putting together something that makes sense. Sometimes improvising is a good way to tap into that part of the brain that is not involved with editing or planning.

I think I write rather slowly, often tinkering with the first draft of a phrase, harmonic pattern or melody many times until it seems just right. I find that if you alter one note or a harmony, it often means another note or harmony has to change to have it make sense again. It’s like a word in a sentence — if you make one change, you often have to change something else to make it flow properly or to make the meaning clear. I also liken the process to taking a ball of clay in your hand and turning it over and over until it fits just right. Sometimes what works best is to set the piece aside for a period of time, if I get stuck. Often, the solution to what seemed like a difficult problem suddenly becomes obvious.

I think one of the most interesting parts to composing is how a piece evolves. It’s easy enough to come up with a short catchy phrase, but then, what do you do next? I don’t usually envision whole pieces right from the start — as some composers seem to do. I try to let the piece grow organically and see where it needs go. After an opening phrase, I need to think and feel what it implies. What do I want to hear next, and how do I get there? What needs to be expanded upon, how can the idea be filled out? What needs to be repeated to establish the idea — to remind the listener of where they’ve come from? What kind of alternate or follow-up section is needed to provide some relief for the ear, yet is related and does not drift too far away? What form will work best? Sometimes I think of it as being like a story teller: maintaining a theme, including a few surprises, adding depth to the story as it goes along, repeating some key ideas,. I can’t say I always do this successfully, but it’s what’s in the back of my mind. But also, it’s not always such an intellectual process — different styles of music demand different approaches.

Aside from writing music, my day jobs have included teaching various (non-music) subjects — from elementary to college level courses; curriculum development and educational research; photography; audio visual materials development; graphic design and video production.

Some music is available for listening on my website, www.[bluehillsmedia.com](http://bluehillsmedia.com), and a complete listing of my works for mandolin orchestra can be found there. Please email me if you are interested in any of the sheet music.

I received the second prize in both the 2012 and 2014 International Plectrum Composition Competition, ‘Jose Fernandez Rosas’, based in Spain. The 2012 prize was for "Urban Sketches." There is a very fine performance of it by the New American Mandolin Ensemble at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPKOS3e0LQ8>. The 2014 prize was for "Carousel," which has not yet been recorded.

The attached score, Country Bicycle, is one of my folk style pieces. This arrangement is for four mandolins and/or guitar. Feel free to arrange it in different ways, using different instruments or parts at different times. We usually play it through a few times, slowing down and ending on the A part with an extra D major chord at the end.