



## COMPOSING FOR THE GUITAR: Why Compose for the Guitar?

by David Hahn

This is the first in a series of four articles devoted to composing for the guitar. The series will cover different approaches to composition, techniques, and writing for the solo guitar as well as the guitar in chamber and orchestral settings.

Why compose? Everyone who plays an instrument or is musically inclined should compose music. There is no mystery about the art of musical composition; like playing the guitar, composition consists of 90% work and persistence and no more than 10% talent and inspiration. The act of composing is a vital part of making music. Whether you include making recordings of improvisations, writing music down on paper or into a notation program, or making up pieces in your head that you can play from memory- it's all to the good. In addition to improving your musical ear, composition allows you to create a piece of music tailored to your own specifications and tastes.

Why compose for the guitar? If you're a guitarist, whatever your skill level and whether you play classical, steel-string, electric, or some other variant of the instrument, it is very satisfying to sit down with a pencil and some blank manuscript paper and give shape to some of the more interesting melodies and harmonies which you think up or stumble upon while playing. Composing and arranging music can be a great help in improving one's sight reading. Are you able to find the sounds on the instrument that you hear in your head? Are you able to write down those sounds accurately so that you could give the page to another player who could then reproduce those notes on the guitar? These are some of the basic skills a composer should have.

Composing begins with many questions. The more questions you pose and answer, the closer you are to actually creating a new piece of music. These questions may include: What style will the new piece be? Will there be other instruments or voices involved? How long will it be? What form will the piece take? What genre will it fit? What is this new piece for-to play in the solitude of your home? Is it an etude, a gift for a fellow guitarist, a film track, or a finished work of art to be presented at Carnegie Hall? The answers to these questions and others will define the finished composition.

Designing ways to limit the means and results of your compositional explorations is a good way to proceed. Make composing a game using either rigid or arbitrary rules. For instance: 1) write a melody in a compound meter using only the 5th and 6th strings, 2) create a chord progression of 4-note chords fingered above the 5th fret- all of which use the open 1st string, or 3) make an arrangement of a song or a piece you know well.

Transcriptions are the "bread and butter" of many classical guitarist's programs; that is, much of their repertoire consists of pieces that were not originally written

for the guitar. The task of transcribing music is that of a translator who re-creates a literary work in another language. The act of transcribing includes many decisions which can help you develop compositional skills- for example, how to retain the integrity of the melody, how to maintain harmonic motion, or how to balance the intention of the original composer with the idiomatic nuances of the guitar. When we begin to stretch the concept of a simple transcription, that is, when we begin to add things to a piece that weren't there originally or take away things that were, we get into the realm of the "creative" arrangement.

Making a creative arrangement presents a very good compositional exercise. The process is closer to that of a composer and certainly, composers "arrange" in many ways to create new works. In order to arrange creatively, there are many decisions that have to be made: Do you want to change the rhythm, add an introduction, or change the mode or the harmonies? Imagine the original piece as an invitation to explore your own creative ideas.

My musical example is a "creative" arrangement of a familiar birthday song. I have chosen an intimate chord-melody setting using jazz voicings. If the piece were to be sung, I imagined a throaty alto in a smoky cabaret setting.

This is my concept of an arrangement of the song; your assignment is to create your own version of this familiar melody, perhaps changing the meter into a reggae style with a backbeat, working out 2-voice polyphony in the manner of J. S. Bach, or adding a series of blistering single-note runs in a fusion style. The possibilities are limitless, but you should begin by asking pertinent questions and let the answers guide the process.

# "A Happy Song"

arr. David Hahn

The image displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of four systems of notation. Each system includes a standard musical staff and a corresponding guitar tablature (TAB) staff. The first system (measures 1-4) features a melodic line in the treble clef with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 75$  and the instruction "legato". The bass clef staff contains chords and a dynamic marking of *mf* with the instruction "(hold chords down)". The TAB staff shows fret numbers: 9, 10, 7, 7, 9, 7, 7, 8, 7, 0, 5, 6, 7, 7, 6. The second system (measures 5-8) is marked "a tempo" and "mosso". The third system (measures 9-12) continues the piece. The fourth system (measures 13-14) ends with a double bar line and a *cresc. dim.* marking. The score is in the key of D major (one sharp) and 4/4 time.

Next Month- Part II: Composing for the Guitar: Approaches and Techniques