

## About our Guest

Don Freund is professor of music in composition at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where he has been on faculty since 1992. His students from a 50-year teaching career continue to win an impressive array of awards and recognitions.

He has been described as “a composer thoughtful in approach and imaginative in style” (The Washington Post), whose music is “exciting, amusing, disturbing, beautiful, and always fascinating” (Music and Musicians, London). He is an internationally recognized composer with works ranging from solo, chamber, and orchestral music to pieces involving live performances with electronic instruments, music for dance, and large theater works. Many of his works are available on commercial CD.

The recipient of numerous awards and commissions, including two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Freund has served as guest composer at a vast array of universities and music festivals, and presented master classes throughout Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, and South America. He is also active as a pianist, conductor, and lecturer.

As a festival coordinator, he has programmed over 1,000 new American works. He has been conductor or pianist in the performance of some 200 new pieces, usually in collaboration with the composer.

Freund's piano concert repertoire extends from new music to complete performances of Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier and his own pianistic realizations of Machaut. He has performed his Earthdance Concerto with numerous university wind ensembles.

Up-to-date news on works and performances as well as videos, audio files, and pdf scores of over 100 of his compositions can be found at [DonFreund.com](http://DonFreund.com).

## Reflection

Contemporary music, according to Don Freund, extends the Western European musical tradition into the 20th century, emphasizing structured, composed music. He differentiates it from contemporary pop music.

Creativity, for Freund, is about invoking creativity in the listener, expanding their perspective on existence. He believes artists should demonstrate that life is about constant growth and upgrading one's "software" through new ideas and experiences.

To cultivate creativity, Freund advises individuals to dig deeper into their thoughts, explore limitations, and experiment. He highlights the importance of teachers encouraging creativity and providing constructive feedback.

Improvisation is essential to composition, serving as the starting point where ideas are recorded and refined. Freund sees composition as the process of shaping these ideas deliberately and consistently, leading to recognizable compositions.

Collaborating with composers offers valuable insights and perspectives. Freund encourages instrumental teachers and students to collaborate with composers, as composers often possess unique and creative insights into music.

Freund believes that young composers should be familiar with the works of great composers like Tchaikovsky, Bach, and Beethoven to appreciate their problem-solving and innovative approaches. He also encourages teachers to engage with composition to better guide students.

In terms of innovation, Freund suggests that composers need not reinvent the wheel but should seek to make slight adjustments or refinements while understanding why they want to make these changes.

Freund recommends approaching music as information, identifying redundancies and information in compositions. He advocates for analyzing music in terms of sound, harmony, melody, rhythm, and growth (SHMRG).

He criticizes key signatures and meter signatures in music notation software, as they can inhibit creativity. Freund hopes software developers will create more flexible tools that allow composers to break free from rigid constraints.

Overall, Don Freund emphasizes the importance of nurturing creativity, collaborating with performers, and exploring new ways of thinking about and composing music.

## **What is contemporary music for you?**

### **Justin Bartlett:**

When we were talking about questions we'd like to ask in this podcast, we were thinking, well, what even is contemporary music? At face value, it seems like it'd be a very simple definition, but, you know, in the modern world, it can mean many things to many different people. For some people, it might mean commercial music, or film scores, for others it could be art music. What is contemporary music to you?

### **Don Freund:**

Well, of course when I say contemporary music to anybody who's not in my little world, they think it's contemporary pop music. So I usually say art music, which is the world that I'm most excited about being involved with and working in and training people to work in.

And so much of what I've always studied as new music or art music or contemporary music, it's basically talking about the extension of the Western European musical tradition into the new world of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and trying to bring other things into it, but never losing the sense that we're talking about composed music, we're talking about written music, we're talking about music that is very structured around the idea of a composer.

## Creativity

### **Ludwig Treviranus:**

You once wrote: "we're trying to invoke creativity out of the listener." Can you expand on that and how you go about, first of all, number one, doing it in your own writing, but perhaps figuring out a way to teach that philosophy to your students?

### **Don Freund:**

I had a student the other day say, "I just want to make people happy and give them music they like." But I'm saying that's not our job, as artists. We want to demonstrate that there's more to existence, more to life than you currently think there is.

We can create the kind of music that gives a sense that there is a person who had an idea that was not the same as what had been given to them. Instead, it is a new fresh look at things, a way of understanding reality, some aspect of our existence that makes us understand that, "wow, life is a series of always upgrading your software."

You want to be growing, you want to be always finding out new things about the way our minds work and the way we can turn something like sound into thought patterns and then out of that into something that's emotionally meaningful to us. To do that, we can't just keep doing something because we know people are going to like it.

We want them to like it, but we want them to like it not because it's what they've always thought they liked. Rather, it's something that we can show them that they would like that they've never thought they could like. When we give the listener that experience, it awakens in them their own creativity.

To me creativity is the one thing I'm not going to give up on. I think that's what makes human beings different from robots and at least the way we define ourselves as being somewhat different from animals. But of course, maybe the whales are just as creative as we are. We just haven't learned how to appreciate it!

Seeing creativity in human beings is what I find to be the most defining and exciting aspect of life.

### **Justin:**

You've actually written about creative practice, and this misconception that creativity is a gift endowed to a few. Could you talk a little bit about that and how people can develop a creative practice?

### **Don Freund:**

The main thing is, To dig a little bit deeper into your thoughts. One of the ways I apply this in teaching composition is always insisting that, whatever a student has written, they should try something else just to see if there is something they haven't yet thought of. The thing I'm concerned about— and I'm not a person who always sees the dark future coming at us— but the one dark thing I'm seeing happening in our world is that people are too easily entertained and satisfied by uncreative activities.

Kids are so excited about everything and everything is such a new experience. But, there are a lot of things that are dulling their appetite for wanting to come up with new ideas and new things.

I think we have to counteract that by doing as much as we can to stimulate everybody, especially kids who are developing their habits and their attitudes about the world.

But it's not too late for anybody to start trying to find new ways of looking at things. The process is to create some sort of stimulus, some sort of activity for creativity, so that when someone does something, they're rewarded for that.

## **Basic composition ideas**

### **Justin:**

What would you say to somebody who thinks "oh, that's all wonderful, I should practice creativity in a world that's getting less and less creative" but they don't know how to get started. How would you recommend kickstarting that process?

### **Don Freund:**

The way that I've been able to find the most distinctive individual kind of statements from young composers or people that aren't composers or don't think they're composers, is to give them something very limited to work with. As soon as they start playing around with a very limited resource pool and see how the choices they're making yield a result, the payback in that is self-fulfilling. But first of all, you need to give them the idea that they should try to do it, and then someone has to applaud what they've accomplished so that they want to go back and do some more with it.

I think one of the problems is that instrument teachers feel very unqualified to work with composition and creativity. I mean, a teacher has to have some sense that they can give a student things to work with and can also give them feedback. So, we really have to work with teachers to develop their sense of joy and satisfaction when they appreciate and applaud a student's creative work.

The way I've always thought anybody can teach composition is to use some very basic materials. It's funny because this is the first week of classes here and I always, for the first composition master class, have my students write pieces just with two pitch classes. They have to be a half step apart allowing octave displacements, and it has to be a form that's just one line. With these limitations, they can't do all the cheesy things they're used to doing.

At first they feel like, "how can you do something with two pitches a half step apart?" But there are two great things that happen with that. One is they have to come up with ideas they wouldn't normally pursue. Because people just don't normally write pieces for all minor seconds and major sevenths- it doesn't fit into their instrument. And when they do that, they have to start defining what their idea is and how it progresses.

What's most interesting about this is the other students in the class are listening to these pieces, and because they know it's only going to be these two pitches, they can get on the wavelength of the composer much faster than if the composer just comes in and plays some piece without these defined limits. So, I'm a great believer in limitations. And if there's any way to get people creating, it's not to just say, "go do something." Say, "do something with only this and see what you can do."

## Composition vs Improvisation

**Justin:**

How are improvisation and composition related? Where do you draw that line?

**Don Freund:**

Improvisation is where it all has to begin. You can get an idea recorded, either on paper, on your iPhone by singing into it, or by playing things on your instrument and exploring. That's where everything has to start.

It's good for improvisation to have some sort of direction to it. That's why I think if you're only using two notes, one rhythm, or if you're only using a certain limitation in what you're improvising about, it makes the whole process a little more productive.

But the main thing that I'm excited about is composition and what makes composition happen. In the place of improvisation or as a culmination of improvisation is this concept of getting an idea identified in some way. So you can say: this is what the idea is, this is what I want to work with and then making choices and having those choices be deliberate and consistent.

So once you play an idea a certain way and you like it and you've done that several times, it becomes a composition. Then you've determined that I like these notes in this particular order, played this certain way, and there may be other things you can do with it, there's enough recognizable identity there that I've created a thing.

## Working with composers

**Ludwig:**

There are going to be a lot of young students all around the world experimenting. I'd like to promote the idea of collaborating with composers. What are your thoughts on the benefits for instrumental teachers and students to collaborate with composers?

**Don Freund:**

Well, I'm prejudiced. Of course, I'm a composer, and I think composers are the coolest people in the world! I have a lot of friends who are tremendous minds and great musicians that are theorists and I'm always heckling them, because I always think that composers are the ones who have the real exciting thoughts and really understand what music is about.

So, I couldn't agree more that getting in touch with the composer and getting their thoughts and getting their responses is a good idea. And I think most composers are also happy to listen to others. Especially young composers, even if it's a seven-year-old writing their first piece.

## Learning from the great composers

**Justin:**

Are there certain techniques and styles that every young composer should be familiar with?

**Don Freund:**

My entire sense of what a composer is began with Tchaikovsky and Bach and Beethoven. And I just can't conceive of composition without being excited and fascinated by the problems they had; how they managed to write the music they wrote, and the ideas they were able to put together in such fascinating ways.

What I feel is holding young musicians back from learning from other great composers is this reverence they have for them. Bach for instance, is just so great that it seems like God came down and gave him these wonderful pieces which he just wrote down. But that kind of thinking doesn't appreciate the problems that every artist faces when they're putting things together.

My joy every year is to practice Bach practically every day. And my joy is always to see how he dealt with these problems and how he came up with his way of looking at things when everybody else would have taken it in a different direction.

Another example would be the model of Sonata Allegro form, which is such a fascinating thing, because there are problems in it. How do you make a recap meaningful? I mean, what's the point? How do you make someone believe that getting back to that main theme is meaningful, how do you sell that? It's fascinating how composers had to build a re-transition that makes a recap meaningful, because it's always different.

How did they make this work? Basically, it's formalized, so it's kind of stupid. That it comes to life is because the composer realized if they just wrote pro forma, their piece would have no actual vitality and energy in it.

## On innovation

**Justin:**

Do you think a composer has to entirely reinvent the wheel or is there a place for people who just make slight adjustments or refine what's already existing?

**Don Freund:**

I don't think we can possibly reinvent the wheel. 99 percent of everything you do is going to have some sort of track record, somehow it's gotten into your mind and you recognize it as a pre-existing thing. But of course, you want to look for the thing you can do that's different.

And I think the main creative challenge is why do you want to make it different? What do you want to accomplish by putting this extra thing in and then how does it invade the entire work to make other things have to respond to that. If you find you like this note, then how does that make the other notes that are around it in the piece have to somehow respond to that new way of looking at things?

## **Composers mindset for non-composers**

### **Ludwig:**

And I think as teachers, we don't need to formally study composition, but just take a little bit more interest in how the map unfolds. Because then it makes it much clearer for us as a teacher pointing out where the different themes are, how they develop when they modulate to a minor key and why that's special.

This is why this conversation is really valuable. Not just for those that are wanting to teach composition, but also just for teachers in general to make music more interesting. And so that when a performer is up on stage you're not thinking about lights, camera, action.

You're thinking, "alright, here's the first theme, here's the second theme, now it develops." You're going through your paces and before you know it, the piece has ended.

## **Music as Information**

### **Don Freund:**

One point I would like to include is that we should look at music as information. There are two things: there's redundancy and there's information. Anything that continues is redundant. Anything that changes what you might expect to happen is information. It's important to start listening to music that way.

If a piece starts out with piano, it's just a piano playing. But, is it a piano playing in a different range? Is it a piano playing with a different kind of rhythm? Is it a piano playing with a different kind of dynamic sound? What things are changing? What things are being sustained? And that's also a key to being creative, taking something and analyzing "what can I do to this?" Maybe the melody can change. Maybe the harmony can change. Maybe it's the sound that can change. As a sort of a checklist, I use the acronym SHMRG: Sound, Harmony, Melody, Rhythm, and Growth.

These are the different parameters one can look at. In the process of trying to teach composition, I think it's important that you don't just get the students to think about harmony and pitch, but to start thinking about sound and shapes.