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# *Musical and Literary Composition: The Revision Relation*

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## **Introduction**

Compositional research has determined why and how writers think, plan, write, and revise, to name just a few processes. Janet Emig has stressed that writing is a unique process between forms of language and composition ("Writing..." 122). Therefore, several modes and variations of writing have distinct characteristics yet to be examined. Composition in music is an incredibly diverse process that requires more examination.

Writing for musicians isn't exactly a routine process. Inspiration, improvisation, and emotion are just a few of the factors characteristic of their processes that set it apart from other types of writing. Revision in musical composition is also a unique part of musicians' writing. However, musical revision still involves some of the same types and methods of revision used by writers.

Revision in writing has certainly been explored in multiple aspects. Strategies for revising have been examined, but revision methods in various disciplinary writing processes have not been connected. To understand musicians' writing processes, the most important piece of their processes must first be understood: revision. This examination should prove relevant towards what we have already analyzed about writing and revising and serve to answer the question, "What is the relationship between the revising processes of musicians and writers?" A valid comparison would prove valuable to understanding musical composition and determining methods to improve musicians' writing habits.

Revision seems to dominate the composing process of most musicians. The initial explanation involves the multiple reasons composers need to revise their work: molding the text with the melody, trying to fit words in a specific meter, and accommodating other variables unique to musical revision. The number of factors affecting the need to revise is greater than the number affecting other stages of writing.

More explanation is provided through Stan Bennett's examination of musical creation and processes. Bennett explains that the process of revision can take place in various points of writing music, so that no particular order of writing stages exists. Because of this recursive approach, more time is spent revising than completing other parts of the writing process. Several other researchers also support the recursive characteristics of writing and revising. Arthur Applebee states that most process research has mentioned or developed arguments from that point: writing develops recursively and may move throughout stages in no particular order (582).

Because it is often the largest and, thus, the most influential part of their writing processes, revision can say a lot about musicians' methods. Various researchers have undertaken the task of

understanding revision and determining which characteristics and variables are to be examined. When making a comparison among disciplines, revision methods can be connected by their similarities and contrasted by their differences, according to the variables involved in the process.

Writers think and revise differently based on multiple internal and external factors: “the writer’s familiarity with the subject matter, the length [of the piece]...the audience and purpose...the mode and genre...and the writer’s personal composing habits” (Boiarsky 68). The nature of how writing occurs and compositional elements (length, amount, etc.) are affected by variables associated with the writer: skills and complexity, disposition, “ego-strength,” and the attributes of the writer’s mode (Emig “On Teaching...” 131). This causes differences in revision comparable across disciplines.

Researchers such as Sondra Perl, Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte have examined writing processes at different skill levels. Another researcher concludes that skill affects the process of revision: the amount and types of revisions have been shown to vary between experienced and novice writers (Breetvelt 105). Previous analyses of skilled writers, then, will provide a means to teach improved writing habits. Understanding similarities in the revising habits of musicians and writers can improve the understanding of musician’s writing and determine more effective methods for their processes derived from the methods of skilled literary writers.

## Methods

To determine what connections there are to be made and interpret their relevance, I have used previously conducted interviews to analyze the revising processes of eight professional musicians, including Carl Broemel, Craig Finn, Lissie, Orenda Fink, J.D. Cronise, Brian Fallon, Teri Suarez, and Corin Tucker. These interviews all appeared on the website *Songwriters on Process*, a site “dedicated to the creative process of songwriters.” The interviewer, Benjamin Oipari, holds a PhD in English Language and Literature and has conducted over 100 interviews with nationally acclaimed songwriters from a wide range of genres. For each interview chosen for analysis, the musician is a well-known professional with multiple years of experience.

Variables that are evident in each songwriter’s revising process have been categorized and developed from categories of revision created by researchers in the field of writing studies. Points of analysis of various researchers have been condensed and combined to determine what comparisons can be made in a broader sense for my own examination.

This research will allow me to demonstrate how these songwriters revise according to determinations of writing process researchers. I have also appropriated research on the revision processes of writers to use as a template for comparison between writers and musicians to demonstrate the implications of any connections provided between types of writing. The data from such analyses of writers compared with my own analysis of musical revision yields several important points to consider.

## Contribution

Several aspects of the revising process are comparable across interviews. There are several studies in which certain variables are examined when a writer revises. The points I chose to analyze were those that were consistently included in multiple songwriters’ processes: the type, amount, and timeline of revision.

## Type of Revision

Revision types can vary in multiple contexts, but primarily between form and content. When viewing the underlying purposes of revision, differentiating the types of editing provides an explanation of what sort of changes revision brings about. Form changes include basic stylistic and

grammatical changes such as additions, deletions, word choice, and punctuation (Perl 331). A change in form can apply to structure in general as well.

Other revisions involve content changes—more complex or thoroughly processed alterations. This type of revision involves a wide range variables to consider, including audience, message, and persuasion. Content revision can also include large-scale deletions and additions.

Musician Carl Broemel’s method of writing creates revising opportunities as he writes. He will write synonyms near words or nouns that will be placed one on top of another so that he can choose what he prefers later. When it is time to revise, Broemel will simply strike out the less important words or those that don’t create the clearest message with the intended emphasis. Craig Finn mentions that he uses the same technique of including multiple words to choose from later. Deletion is common for the sake of melody or meter. The idea that melody shapes revision is unique to the process in music: “I write lyrics that get paired later with music, and when the two are together, things always change” (Opipari). This concept requires further exploration due to various preferences.

Both Broemel and Finn utilize deletion and word choice often, which is indicative of form revision. But the underlying reason for their revisions is to clarify their message in the most effective way possible—a more complex change than expected of such editing. Their work, then, consists of some mix of the two revising types.

Faigley and Witte provide an example of the differences in revision through their examination of differences between what they call “surface changes” and “meaning changes” (407). They claim that skilled writers have more of a well-distributed mix of both kinds of changes. This perspective explains the musicians’ combination of form-based and content-based revision where they create changes in meaning with their word choice and revisions for meter in order to relay their message more effectively. The text-based revisions in meaning have larger consequences on the piece than grammatical or syntactic changes invoke. When contrasted with Faigley and Witte’s work, it seems that the musicians display highly skilled levels of editing in this manner.

Lissie’s strategy is implicative of the same skilled methods where she “finds lines that seem too generic” and attempts to replace words with ones that have more meaning (Opipari). She also tends to write everything out with little organization. This requires her to move around the pieces later to improve the structure of her work. Altogether, Lissie’s revision includes more of an even mix of form and content editing, or a mix of meaning and surface changes.

Other studies have also acknowledged the major differences in revising among writers of different skill levels. According to Iris Breetvelt, Huub van den Bergh, and Gert Rijaarsdam, writers with more experience are focused on changing meaning while less skilled writers are more focused on grammar, syntax, and lexicon (105). Perl agrees that novice student writers are intent upon revisions of form and develop their discourse through organization with audience and coherency in mind (331).

Orenda Fink describes her revisions as taking “something plainly stated” and rewriting it “with imagery or description” (Opipari). J.D. Cronise writes and revises his lyrics based on the model of a central idea contained in a single line or phrase. Writing on a computer allows Brian Fallon to revise easily by moving text around frequently and making quick replacements. He also likes to highlight certain ideas to keep track of what needs to be reviewed or changed. Other musicians also mentioned that they revise due to a need for connection between the song and

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words. Such revising strategies must involve more content-based revision than form editing, meaning that the quality of the majority of professional musicians' revising habits matches that of professional writers.

Most of the songwriters' processes were quite similar; this is due to the similarity of their writing conditions and goals. Carolyn Boiarsky reveals three major goals of revision: "(1) to communicate a specific message...(2) to communicate a message to a specific audience, and (3) to communicate a message to an audience as effectively as possible" (70). Skilled musicians and writers must regularly consider their message and audience during their writing. Changes related to this idea almost always involve more meaning and form revisions than content and surface changes. The nature of musical composition and its flexibility in terms of grammar or syntax reduces the hindrances caused by structural errors.

### **Amount of Revision**

The amount of revision can be measured in two different ways: by the amount of text revised or by the amount of revision that takes place. Although this concept is closely related to time, there are different variables involved in each method.

The methods of revising previously mentioned help provide insight into how much text is revised. Broemel and Finn's method of replacement suggests that a few single words are often changed in their lyrics. Cronise mentions that he will concentrate on smaller portions of the lyrics to work harder on the more important areas.

The amount of revision in musical writing has been shown to be mostly content and meaning related. However, there are not necessarily a large number of these changes. Teri Suarez and Fallon state that they rarely revise or rewrite lyrics. Some lyrics are never changed after the first writing.

Experienced writers often make more revisions than less skilled writers. Skilled writers also revise larger portions and "diagnose problems that have bearing on the meaning of the text as a whole" (Breetvelt 105). Writers with less ability tend to be hesitant about deleting large portions of texts, unlike more advanced writers (Breetvelt 105). In contrast, it seems that the songwriters here revise only small parts of their writing by minute amounts—which is more similar to unskilled writers. The underlying reasons, though, are different than that of writers due to the unique variables affecting musical revision.

The amount of revision is affected largely by time, but also by emotional impact. It is a challenge for musicians to revise when they want to keep the original emotion of a piece intact. Sometimes revising becomes excessive unless such revision retains the intended feeling. Lissie remarks that she won't revise lyrics that are written quickly or with great emotion so that she doesn't ruin any creativity. This is a major reason that many musicians do not revise or delete larger parts of their work. The nature of lyrical writing is also less subject to the need to change to comply with rules that bind professional writers.

### **Timeline of Revision**

The concept of the effect of time on writing or revision is absent throughout much compositional process research. This comes with few exceptions which show how writers of varying skill levels "differ with respect to the moment they engage in certain cognitive activities" (Breetvelt 105). Throughout the interviews, time was mentioned as a major factor in revision and must be included as such.

The first important implications to notice about this are the constraints time places upon the songwriter. Deadlines for writing affect how and when the artists revise their work due to concerns for marketing—a direct relation to audience. Bennett acknowledges that time can help or hinder a musician's process (4). Finn mentions that restrictions on time limit what he says could possibly be "an infinite amount of revision," but he also thinks "it's usually better to have some

financial or time constraints because it forces you to make some decisions” (Opipari). The capacity for a large amount of revision becomes condensed due to the deadline that most professional musicians must follow. Broemel agrees that without a deadline, musicians may have a tendency to start the process of revision over again after it was “finished” which “can make for an endless process” (Opipari). Fink works in an unorganized fashion to write and revise so there is a lot of pressure associated with the timelines imposed upon her. For Corin Tucker, revising occurs on a specific schedule. In this case, Tucker says that the time constraints increase her productivity because she is motivated to continue working when suffering from a “block” to preserve any creative thoughts: “I know that what I have is not great and that I am going to replace it or throw it out, but if I keep writing I try not to beat myself up because that can defeat creativity” (Opipari). It seems that conservation of creative ideas can impact various choices in revision where other writers would not need to consider this factor. However, professional writers do work under deadlines and time constraints in much the same way.

Another contributing factor within the concept of time is how long a songwriter spends revising their work. When considering the length of the revision process, the end of revision can be assumed as the moment the musician believes they are finished or when they must stop their work to have their song produced and released. Broemel knows he is finished with a song “sometimes right away, other times not until I record it and can get that distance of an observer...” (Opipari). For many other artists, a consistent length of revision time does not exist because of varying ideas, creativity patterns, perspectives, and other changing factors between different songs. Lissie says that she knows when she’s finished with a song simply if she enjoys playing it.

Many variances in the time and order of revising processes can be due to the need for connections between the song’s musical portion and the lyrics. Cronise will revise differently based on whether the lyrics or melody is written first. In the latter case, he’ll “work on various parts of the song at once and revise verses here and there” and then “craft the melody to fit” (Opipari). When Fink begins with a melody, it creates difficulties for her to revise the lyrics to match, which is why she usually begins with the words and revises the music around them. Another example of how the melody affects the composition of lyrics and the time at which revision takes place is how Finn notes that singing or instrumental parts of a song create a need for the revision of the words: “Sometimes I’ll have a great word but I can’t use it with the music” (Opipari). He notes how he can revise his work many times over a long period because of this. There is a bit of disagreement about what is typically written first. Although many songwriters tend to follow one order, some

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artists, like Tucker, agree that the order of composition and revision is arbitrary: “It can really happen either way, with the lyrics or the melody” (Opipari). Fallon believes that they are often made at the same time. This unique factor in musicians’ revising could be contributive to an understanding of the variable boundaries affecting only musical composition.

The recursive nature of writing and revising is also important when considering how time affects revision. Fallon comes back to writing and revising over break periods that sometimes last as long as a month. His writing doesn’t occur every day either, so he may stop in the middle of lyric writing before continuing a day or more later. These recursive patterns are common throughout many other musicians’ revising methods as well. Suarez, on the other hand, believes that finishing a song “in the moment” without interruption is important. Writers with experience revise at times evenly spread out throughout composing stages because of their focus on the entirety of their discourse (Breetvelt 105). The recurring nature of the songwriters’ revision processes suggests greater writing experience and skill.

Most of the musicians examined believe that revision could continue indefinitely, while the amount that they do tend to revise contradicts this statement. The reason for this is that a larger amount of time is spent on revision than any other part of the process due to the recursive nature of this writing stage. Although revision can occur indefinitely throughout the writing process, the amount of revision that takes place is minimal in comparison to the amount of times this stage is revisited. This matter entails total similarity to literary revising methods that have been consistently deemed recursive by multiple researchers including Applebee, Perl, and Emig.

## Conclusion

What has been presented is the existence and importance of a relation between revision in music and literature, with similarities echoing the results of revising process research on writers. Understanding the relationship between revising in music and literature can help musicians, students of music, and teachers understand what they need to learn about revision. Professional musicians revise similarly to highly skilled writers and consider many of the same variables. Anything that affects the process of revision can also be compared to allow writers and songwriters the opportunity to evaluate what affects their writing.

Musicians can use what knowledge we have about revision and improving the practice to better understand how they revise their music and how they can learn to do so more professionally. The similarities of this stage of writing across disciplines suggest that multiple compositional research studies can apply to musical composition as well.

Any qualitative findings will present researchers of composing processes and revision with yet another new angle to view and define the process. There are, however, many variables requiring further exploration: emotional effects on composition, differences in other unique forms of writing, understanding melody's role in musical composition, defining the skill level variations between musicians and writers, and of course time's effect upon any type of writing.

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