

Composers who wrote by involuntary or 'inspired' methods.

A brief survey

George Lloyd declared unambiguously: *'I write what I have to write.'* He readily acknowledged that his composition was part conscious and part unconscious, a balance of inspiration, in the form of an 'inner voice', and technique. His music did not resonate with those 20th century developments which saw composition as a wholly intellectual process, but his 'old school' composition tutors and his models were in no doubt that the prompting of the subconscious was an essential part of the process. There are many examples of composers who wrote in this way, and this article suggests a few of them.

Johannes Brahms: Lloyd's description of the process of composition could have been taken directly from Brahms' advice to young composers. Brahms had to be *"in a semi-trance condition...the conscious mind in temporary abeyance,"* and only in this way could he be *'in tune with the infinite.'* *"Usually, the best ideas flow from the hand or mind without any particular effort, and these are the ideas that will endure in your compositions."* In this trance-like state, the composer hovers between being asleep and awake, on the edge of consciousness.



Mozart: Modern scholars now challenge the notion that Mozart composed in a passive mental state, simply letting the music come to him. Although such claims of 'unconscious composition' were based on a probably fraudulent letter and were certainly mythologized, nevertheless there is some evidence that his composition was not a wholly intellectual process. Mozart's first biographer, in collaboration with Mozart's wife, stated *"He wrote everything with a facility and rapidity, which perhaps at first sight could appear as carelessness or haste; and while writing he never came to the klavier. His imagination presented the whole work, when it came to him, clearly and vividly."*

In 1854 **Robert Schumann** had a dream. Angels appeared and dictated music to him. On waking, he wrote down the 32-bar tune in E flat major and used it as the basis for a set of variations.

Richard Strauss was sure that at least some of the music he wrote was "dictated" to him by "Omnipotent Entities" not of this earth. [Harman and Rheingold, Higher Creativity, p. 46.]

Giacomo Puccini was convinced that *Madame Butterfly*, was dictated to him "by God." [Ibid.]

Gustav Mahler embodied a contemporary self-awareness of the unconscious as the point of departure on the creative journey. *"My need to express myself musically -- symphonically -- begins at the point where the dark feelings hold sway, at the door which leads to the other world -- the world in which things are no longer separated by time and space."* (Quoted by conductor Marin Alsop)

George Gershwin testified that *Rhapsody in Blue* came to him suddenly, that he heard and saw *"the complete construction of the Rhapsody, from beginning to end."*

Operetta composer **Rudolf Friml** said: *"I sit down at the piano, and I put my hands on the piano."*

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And I let the spirit guide me! No, I never do the music. I never compose it; oh no, no!"



Music critic and theoretician **Heinrich Schenker** (1868-1935) wrote this of a compositional moment: *"The lightning flash of a thought suddenly crashed down, at once illuminating and creating the entire work in the most dazzling light. Such works were conceived and received in one stroke."*

Arnold Schoenberg mirrored this image of sudden insight, stating that musical inspiration can well up as *"a subconsciously received gift from the Supreme Commander."*

W B Yeats and his wife **Georgiana Hyde-Lees** held more than four hundred sessions of automatic writing, producing nearly 4000 pages, which Yeats avidly and patiently studied and organized.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) *"The Benedictine abbess, visionary, and composer produced, among other works, an impressive array of liturgical songs and a morality play with music, included a portrait of herself under the influence of divine intervention in the preface to her Scivias (1151), an account of her mystic visions, which contains 14 lyric texts designed to be set to*

music. Hildegard claimed that from the age of five, she experienced visions, which served as the source of her writings, illustrations, and music. In Hildegard's portrait, flames of divine inspiration engulf her head as she sits alone in her room, eyes raised toward heaven, notating her visions on a wax tablet. Her assistant, Volmar, stands outside and, looking through a window, witnesses the effect (Hildegard's artistic output) of the divine intervention that has seized her. She is not an active agent in the production of her works. Rather, she is presented as a passive receptor, a conduit for the voice of God." (from Anna Calenza: The Efficient Causation of Artistic Inspiration with Regards to Music)

Carl Jung, in *Man and His Symbols*, wrote: *"An author may be writing steadily to a preconceived plan, working out an argument or developing the line of a story, when he suddenly runs off at a tangent. Perhaps a fresh idea has occurred to him, or a different image, or a whole new sub-plot. If you ask him what prompted the digression, he will not be able to tell you. He may not even have noticed the change, though he has now produced material that is entirely fresh and apparently unknown to him before. Yet it can sometimes be shown convincingly that what he has written bears a striking similarity to the work of another author- a work that he believes he has never seen."*

and:

*"The ability to reach a rich vein of such material [of the unconscious] and to translate it effectively into philosophy, literature, music or scientific discovery is one of the hallmarks of what is commonly called genius." "We can find clear proof of this fact in the history of science itself. For example, the French mathematician **Poincaré** and the chemist **Kekulé** owed important scientific discoveries (as they themselves admit) to sudden pictorial 'revelations' from the unconscious. The so-called 'mystical' experience of the French philosopher **Descartes** involved a similar sudden revelation in which he saw in a flash the 'order of all sciences.'*

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Although most 20th century composers abandoned 'inspirational' composition in favour of more intellectual and less emotional procedures, a belief in 'the Muse' in some form has continued in popular music. **Jim Morrison** described the spirits which possessed him when writing as "*The Lords*," and wrote a book of poetry about them. **Little Richard** said, "*I was directed and commanded by another power.*" Yoko Ono has said of the **Beatles** "*They were like mediums. They weren't conscious of all they were saying, but it was coming through them.*" Lennon said of his song writing: "*It's like being possessed: like a psychic or a medium.*" According to **Keith Richards** "*The Stones' songs came spontaneously like an inspiration at a séance. The tunes arrived 'en masse' as if the Stones as songwriters were only a willing and open medium.*" **Billy Joel** believed that his songs existed on another plane, and he had to tap into them through his subconscious, which dreamed the melodies against a background of amorphous coloured shapes. **Sting** used yoga to extract his material from another realm. Both he and Joel used *synesthesia* – translation of one stimulus into another – e.g. colour into sound.



Arthur Rackham *Elaine and the Grail*

Not all composers used this technique, of course. **Cole Porter**, when asked what stimulated him to write, responded: "*My sole inspiration is a telephone call from a producer.*"

George Lloyd's methods.

With hindsight, the George Lloyd archive reveals that his dialogue with his subconscious appears almost inevitable in the context of his upbringing, his education, and the key events of his life. He was generally reticent, at least in public, about specific techniques of composition and his long association with mysticism, but he described his methods in enough detail to confirm that he deliberately relied on his subconscious mind as a source of musical ideas, and that he trained himself to enter a psychological state in which the music could 'flow through him'. His preference is best summarised in correspondence with his father while still a student, in which they agreed that music should be 'felt' and not 'concocted,' so that the music was heard in the mind before the intellect imposed technical form and structure. His first task was 'to prevent the brain box blocking everything the body knows' – a line he took from his contemporary, the Bloomsbury poet **Paul Roche**. He regarded the intellect as an essential editor, judgmental but without originality. His creative ideas came from unconscious dreaming, from allowing the mind to wander without direction, almost as if lost. If he tried to think of a tune, none would come, but after he went through a ritual procedure to inhibit the intellect, the tunes would appear spontaneously. These esoteric procedures may be bracketed with mysticism and 'hocus pocus' but for George Lloyd they were a practical gateway to composition, and a central element of his technique.

George Lloyd's bohemian childhood and the methods he used to overcome the psychological trauma of his wartime injuries has been documented in detail elsewhere, but a summary will provide the context for his lifelong association with mysticism. He grew up at the heart of an international, experimental, and

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non-conformist artistic community. His American grandmother, Frances Lloyd (nee Powell) joined the St Ives artists' colony in 1895, when the composer's father was an infant. She gave lectures to the New York Theosophical Society, and her paintings included religious and spiritual themes. George's mother was half Irish, a student of Celtic folklore and archaeology, who spoke some Irish and a little Romany and associated with Gypsy people and the pioneers of the Irish Celtic Revival. George's first opera, *Iernin*, written when he was 21, told the story of a fairy woman who 'broke through' onto the human plane. The libretto was written by his father William, and the music for the opera was inspired by the composer's mystical experience at a stone circle on the Cornish moors.

Following the psychological devastation of his wartime experience, his wife Nancy made a detailed study of psychology, and she practised several psychic and spiritual methods to assist with his recovery. For 55 years, from 1942 until almost the end of his life, George did not visit a doctor, but practised daily meditation, recitation of mantras and several methods of divination including the tarot and radiesthesia, (the science of vibration) and the use of the pendulum. He was adamant that he continued to use these methods only because they were successful. They worked.



He began writing music at the age of 8, and at 14 he knew that he would be a composer and demanded a full-time musical education. As a student at 18 he compiled detailed tables of the 'rules of composition' set out by his teachers – all prominent music educators – and concluded that because they did not agree with each other, then he should not worry about 'rules.' (See separate article about his analysis of these 'rules.')

Instead, he followed his own path, and said 'I write what I have to write.' Although he rejected their formalized 'rules of composition', his 'old school' musical education included close study of Brahms' advice to composers, and he appears to have followed that advice rigorously. He never gave up writing, despite obstacles which appeared insurmountable. When his long slow recovery from trauma led him to the disastrous production of *John Socman*, he abandoned the music world and established a successful market garden business, growing flowers and mushrooms. The work was physically demanding, but unless he spent some time each day at his scores, he felt unwell and soon became ill. Composition was an essential part of his life, despite the rejection of his music by academia, conductors, and the BBC. The rejection of the establishment did not stop him writing, but he resolved to manage without them, and spent 20 years of writing with no prospect of performance. At the age of 60, after recovering his health, he resolved to try again and spent the remaining 25 of his life recording everything he had written and producing some of his finest work. He never gave up because he had an inner compulsion to write.

George left a few isolated clues to his composition techniques, and together they present a coherent picture of his methods. He did not compose at the piano, but he wrote the sounds in his mind directly onto paper first as sketches, then as a short score, using a pencil. In some cases, the sketch comprised several staves, representing the melody, harmony and counterpoint fully formed. He adopted a regular

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daily schedule, following Brahms’ dictum about discipline and distraction:

“Another aspect of this art, which is extremely vital and demands great emphasis, is privacy. It should be unthinkable to attempt to compose unless you are sure you will not be interrupted or disturbed. The Muse is a very jealous entity, and she will fly away on the slightest provocation.”

In 1948 used his commission funds for John Socman to build a music studio extension onto the Old Keeper’s Cottage, with a double door from the house. When the outer door was closed, it meant that he was working and not to be disturbed, insulated from the sounds of the world outside. When he moved to London in 1972, he installed the same double door arrangement, with heavy soundproofing to the walls, floor, and ceiling of his 3rd floor flat. He did the carpentry work with his own hands so that he could work without noise distraction and his mind could be free of external stimulus. When starting a new work, he would clear his diary of all appointments for a period of weeks and would be at his desk very early in the morning. His wife Nancy acted as gatekeeper, deflecting all visitors and telephone callers. He would silence the musical chime of the bracket clock in his study as part of his preparation ritual, and Nancy would signal the regular to him by ringing a Swiss cowbell outside the double door.

In preparation for a new work, he would carefully devise a prayer mantra and write it in ink, using a dipped pen on a small piece of paper which he kept by his bed. If he woke in the night, and before rising each morning, he would recite the mantra several times, as a form of prayer for a productive day. Once at his desk, his first task was to ‘empty the well’, by which he meant that he would clear from his mind any random musical themes or ideas which had been ‘buzzing around in his head.’ He would write them out in sketch format, even if only one or two bars of music, and place them in a folder, which was then closed and put away on a shelf. When the ‘emptying of the well’ was done, he would meditate on the mental image of clean pure water flowing into the bottom of the well, to open his mind to new ideas. These ideas would emerge first sometimes as a colour, sometimes as an orchestral texture, and sometimes as a sensation or emotion which he could not describe. *‘If I could put it into words, I would not need to write the music.’*

He described the process of subconscious exploration as analogous to entering an underground maze, and the appearance of the first idea in the form of a colour, texture or emotion was like ‘finding a clue.’ This referred to ‘Ariadne’s clue’, or ‘Ariadne’s thread’, the ball of thread which she gave to Theseus to help find him find his way out of the labyrinth. The analogy of Ariadne’s clue relates directly to his study of the Carl Jung, who likened the journey of the psyche (soul) towards self-knowledge to a journey into a labyrinth. Lloyd described his Seventh Symphony (1959) as being the ‘deepest’ of anything he had written to the extent that he was unable to say whether he wrote the symphony because of a nervous breakdown, or whether he had the nervous breakdown because he was writing the symphony. George placed great importance on his physical health. When asked if he regretted his years in the wilderness as a market gardener, he replied, “Not at all – I got my health back’ and he acknowledged the importance of physical labour, both for good health and as an aid to composition. His capacity for heavy labour was remarkable, and when constructing a large water cistern for his

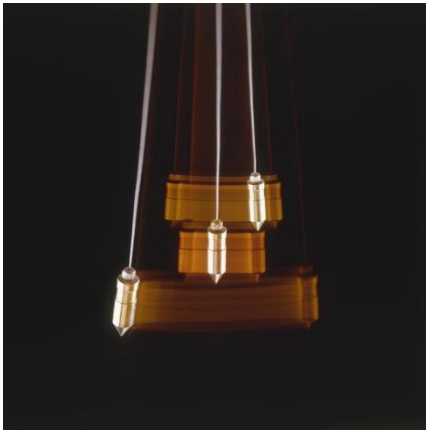


From Carl Jung’s **The Red Book**.

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greenhouses he dug out, loaded, and moved over one thousand wheelbarrows of Dorset clay. He built several large greenhouses with his own hands, pioneering the use of polythene instead of glass. When he returned to musical life in London in 1972, his daily walk was an essential part of his routine, even when in composition mode. In common with Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann and Tchaikovsky, walking was an essential component in the formation of his ideas. As Brahms advised: *"When ideas come to you, go for a walk, then you will discover that the thing you thought was a complete thought, was actually only the beginning of one."* (J Friedmann, Ph.D. <https://thinkingonmusic.wordpress.com/tag/brahms/>)



The prompting of his unconscious was concerned with pattern and structure as well as emotion. *"Musical composition represents a process by which order is created out of chaos. Menuhin suggested that rhythm imposes unanimity on the divergent, melody imposes continuity over the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous. Similarly emphasizing the idea of order, Bliss wrote that the composer must "bring something significant under recognizable control. He must stand as a master of order," and that the act of composition is like "bending an intractable and springy piece of steel into the exact shape which you intend it to have. It will invariably tend to spring back..."* (Jonathan Davidson, writing about George Lloyd's

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Although his initial ideas originated in esoteric and mystical sources, Lloyd acknowledged that once he had his material, the real work began, applying the formal intellectual techniques of composition learned initially by copying his acknowledged mentors, **Berlioz** and **Verdi**. *"Verdi was my God"* he said, and he was so attached to the score of *'Otello'* that his sister Marianne recalled that as a student he carried the heavy volume with him for two weeks, kept it at his bedside and would study it in any spare minutes, including at mealtimes. Once again, he followed the model of Brahms:

"Inspiration is of such importance in composing, but by no means all that there is to it. Structure is just as consequential, for without craftsmanship, inspiration is a 'mere reed shaken in the wind' or 'sounding brass or tinkling cymbals'. Great compositions are not the fruits of inspiration alone, but of severe, laborious, and painstaking toil.

His tutors were in no doubt as to his obsession and his technical ability. Harry Farjeon, Lloyd's teacher at the Royal Academy wrote of his young student:

"He gave a whole term to canon, and another to fugue. He wrote excellent fugues, theoretically correct and musically vivacious, and he heartily despised them all.

(The Monthly Musical Record June 1939)

Regardless of their mysterious origins in the subconscious, Lloyd's final polished scores, written in ink with a dipped pen, owed as much to his active acquisition of knowledge, his rigorous technique, and his disciplined work-rate as they did to his initial inspiration. And all these stemmed from his dedication and compulsion to compose, and his temperament, which in the words of Harry Farjeon *'lives, breathes and exhales music.'*

See also, [George Lloyd, 'Shaman or Showman'](#) by Peter Davison.