

Composers who wrote by involuntary or 'inspired' methods.

A brief survey

George Lloyd insisted that 'I write what I have to write', and that his composition was part conscious and part unconscious, a balance of inspiration and technique. Although out of step with 20th Century ideas on music composition as a wholly intellectual process, many previous composers had expressed a similar point of view and acknowledged the subconscious as part of the process.



Johannes Brahms: Lloyd's own description of the process of composition could have been taken directly from Brahms' advice to young composers. Brahms stated that when composing, he was 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, these are the ideas that will endure in your compositions.*" This dream-like state is like entering a trance-like condition - hovering between being asleep and awake; the composer is still conscious but right on the border of losing 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 certainly mythologized, nevertheless there is evidence for that he possessed an extraordinary facility which 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*"

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. Conductor Marin Alsop writes: *Mahler He 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."*

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

Tennyson seemed to have had frequent experiences of transcendence, starting from boyhood and lasting throughout his life. For example, he wrote *'I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone, all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest. . . utterly beyond words - this for lack of a better word . . . a kind of waking trance. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words? There is no delusion in the matter! It is no nebulous ecstasy, but a state of transcendent wonder, associated with absolute clearness of mind.*

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 perpetuated this sensational image, 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 that Yeats avidly and patiently studied and organized.

Brahms again: *"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. Another aspect of this art, which is extremely vital and demands great emphasis, is privacy. It should be unthinkable of attempting 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."*

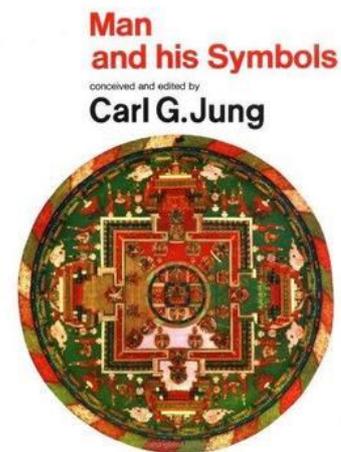
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Carl Jung, in *Man and His Symbols*, wrote: "An author may be writing steadily to a preconceived plan, working out an argument or developing the line of a story, when he suddenly runs off at a tangent. Perhaps a fresh idea has occurred to him, or a 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.'



Although most academic composers abandoned 'inspirational' composition in the 20th century in favour of more intellectual and less emotional procedures, the belief in some form of Muse which inspires composition has continued in popular music. **Jim Morrison** called the spirits that at times possessed him "The Lords," and wrote a book of poetry about them. **Little Richard** said, "I was directed and commanded by another power." Of the **Beatles** Yoko Ono has said, "They were like mediums. They weren't conscious of all they were saying, but it was coming through them." 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." **John Lennon** told of mystical experiences as a young teenager: "I used to literally trance out into alpha... seeing these hallucinatory images of my face changing, becoming cosmic and complete." [The Playboy Interviews 1982] Of his song writing Lennon said, "It's like being possessed: like a psychic or a medium." [Ibid., p. 203] **George Harrison** was found to have subconsciously plagiarised an earlier tune, 'He's So Fine', a verdict that had repercussions throughout the music industry. He claimed to have used the out-of-copyright "Oh Happy Day", a Christian hymn, as his inspiration for the song's melody. **Billy Joel** believes that his songs exist on another plane, and he must tap into them through his subconscious and dreams the melodies against a background of amorphous coloured shapes. **Sting** has a similar approach, using yoga to extract his material from another realm. Both he and Joel use *synaesthesia* – translation of one stimulus into another – e.g. colour into sound.

Cole Porter, on the other hand, when asked what stimulates him to write, responded: "My sole inspiration is a telephone call from a producer."