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LIFE

Music Games to Bring Out Your Child's Inner Mozart

A learning tool teaches children about composition, helping them create pieces instantly performed by an orchestra

By **DENISE BLOSTEIN**

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Andrew Bennett's 8-year-old daughter Eva composed a piece of music, an orchestra played it for her and then she improvised a ballet dance to it—all in the course of an afternoon.

Eva hasn't studied composition, and she wasn't noodling with sophisticated music-sequencing software. She was playing a simple boxed game, with a set of transparent cards and a smartly designed website, that draws upon an 18th century composer's trick refashioned for the digital age.

The game, called Compose Yourself, is one of a handful of clever new exploratory-learning tools meant to engage children who may have little or no experience playing a musical instrument in the act of composing.

"The game is very intuitive and easy to use," says Mr. Bennett of Attleboro, Mass., whose daughter got started on her tune, which she called "Second Shot," shortly after unboxing the game.

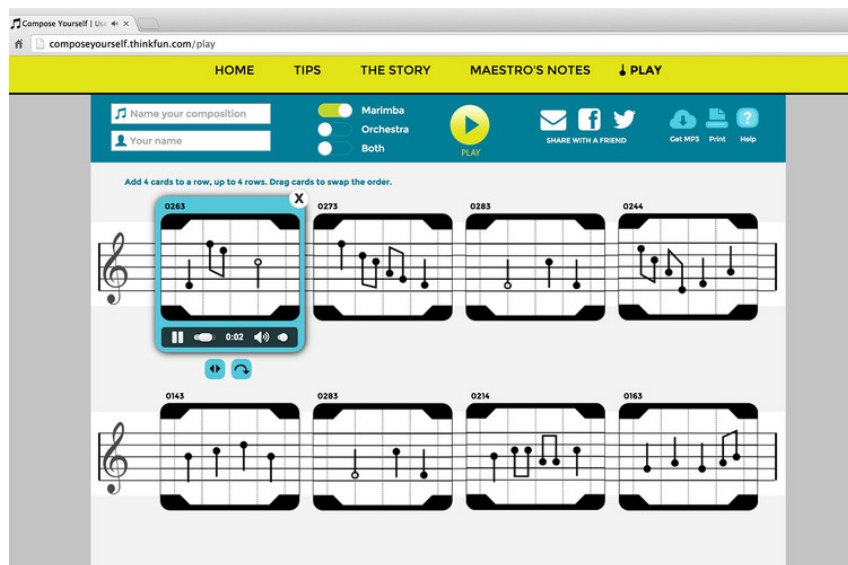
The creator of the game is a composer, producer and electronic cellist, Philip Sheppard, whose works have been featured in more than 30 films and television documentaries. Mr. Sheppard says he is passionate about showing people that they are fundamentally musical, and he wants to make learning about music, and composing in particular, more approachable for children. "We talk about playing music," he says, "but we never talk about actually playing with it."



Composer Philip Sheppard conducts a recording session of the musical fragments in *Compose Yourself*, a composition game he designed. The session took place at Abbey Road Studios in London. *PHOTO: THOMAS BOWLES PHOTOGRAPHY*

Mr. Sheppard designed *Compose Yourself* for children ages 6 and up; the distributor is ThinkFun, an Alexandria, Va., company that specializes in brainteasers and logic games such as *Rush Hour* and *Chocolate Fix*. A recently launched game, *Robot Turtles*, teaches children the basics of computer coding by disguising it as a board game race among terrapins.

Compose Yourself does something similar, enabling children to create music using the building blocks of Western harmony, but without requiring them to learn the rules. The modular flashcards show musical fragments which children combine into musical phrases, in some respects “programming” their pieces.



Children arrange the musical fragments or building blocks to compose a piece. Plugging the fragments into a website, they can hear their piece performed by an orchestra. *PHOTO: COMPOSE YOURSELF*

Mr. Sheppard, who also teaches at the Royal Academy of Music in London, came up with the idea that became Compose Yourself when he found himself on a tight writing deadline. A film director called him one evening to request two new compositions by morning. Mr. Sheppard saw a coffee-fueled all-nighter ahead and then thought, “What would a classical composer do?”

He remembered learning about a compositional gimmick for generating tunes dating from the days of Mozart and Haydn. A German composer named Johann Philipp Kirnberger came up with a dice game that could create an endless stream of minuets and waltzes, the popular dance music of the day. The game assigned one measure of music to each face of a die, which were rolled to create random musical themes or melodies.

“They would probably come up with a single motif and sort of flip it around and get as much out of it as they could,” Mr. Sheppard says.

Dozens of imitations and variations on Kirnberger’s game were published in the late 1700s, says Columbia University music historian Elaine Sisman.

Mr. Sheppard scribbled down a few single measures of music on transparency paper he had at hand, cut them into squares and got to work trying different combinations, rearranging and rotating. He made a recording of the resulting pieces and sent them off to the director, who was impressed.



Transparent cards in Compose Yourself can be rotated and flipped, each yielding four possible musical fragments or building blocks. Children assemble these blocks into a piece. *PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS*

That quick fix became the set of 60 cards in Compose Yourself, which can be arranged

into thousands of different combinations. Because the cards are transparent, each card yields four possible fragments. Children arrange the cards and then, plugging the number associated with each fragment into the website, they hear their composition.

“All of us were totally blown away by how it sounded,” says Kari Yakos, of Bozeman, Mont., describing the moment she and her children, Bella, Liam and Clive (7, 5, and 3 respectively), listened to their first piece. Ms. Yakos says they were eager to try it again.

One reason the game works so well is that Mr. Sheppard and ThinkFun went to great lengths to make the musical results sound exceptional. Professional musicians recorded each of the four possible fragments for each flashcard at London’s Abbey Road studios. After putting it all together, players can choose to hear their work performed either by solo marimba, performed by Evelyn Glennie, a three-time Grammy winning percussionist; by a full symphony orchestra with lush arrangements written by Mr. Sheppard; or by marimba with orchestra accompanying.



Compose Yourself game PHOTO: THINKFUN

Early-childhood experts agree this type of play can be powerful. Kerry Renzoni, who teaches music education at the State University of New York at Buffalo and who previously taught pre-K through sixth-grade music in public schools, says high-quality musical experiences nourish children’s inquisitiveness. For them, to see that “my ideas are honored— it creates lifelong

interest,” she says.

A number of other digital tools also aim to accomplish this goal. A software program called Groovy Music helps children compose music using a graphics-driven interface. Children can select from three different scenarios, including a futuristic city and a jungle; each provides its own array of sounds and instruments that children can work with to create a tune.

Similarly, Morton Subotnick’s Music Academy software, developed by its namesake, a

pioneer of electronic music, is designed for children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Children can paint sounds with a computer mouse and learn to distinguish how musical pitches and rhythms differ.

O-Generator is yet another example, this one aimed at ages 10 to 15. The software program focuses on contemporary and world music, inviting users to tinker with diverse styles, from the Latin clave rhythmic pattern to West African djembe-driven percussion.

Apple's GarageBand has also become a go-to for music teachers who want to help satisfy and further stimulate students' urges to compose music. "You're not really composing your own compositions, you're sort of sampling to put together your own piece," says Lynn Tuttle, a senior policy adviser at the National Association for Music Education, "It's a hook-in to build confidence in composing."

Ms. Tuttle says creating gets a lot of emphasis in the current arts curricula standards that the music-education association and other arts-advocacy groups developed jointly to guide educators.

Mr. Sheppard says he sees Compose Yourself as a springboard for children to potentially become interested in studying music. He believes children are accustomed to hearing the rich orchestral scores of movies and videogames these days, and will be drawn to create their own with the game. "I think the initial appeal to children is the instant result from something that appears to be at first abstract," he says.

Ms. Yakos says her children enjoy composing songs their grandmother can play on piano. She says she is thrilled that they were able to have a positive experience with music right away, without encountering the frustrations that often turn children away when first learning to play a musical instrument. "My kids didn't have any fundamental musical knowledge but they were able to create something beautiful." she says.

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