

Musician and Composer

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Arts, A/V Technology & Communications

Interests: Music, musical instruments, entertaining and performing, composing or arranging music, recording, promotion

Earnings (Median as of 2019): \$51,670

Employment & Outlook: Little or No Change Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Musicians and composers express themselves through the use of instruments and/or voice. While many musicians write their own music, recognition as a composer is usually reserved for those who compose original works meant to be performed by other musicians. They each tend to specialize in a particular musical genre, although crossovers are common. In addition to contemporary compositions, musicians and composers are able to draw on a vast collection of music in the public domain for new arrangements and interpretations.

Video game composers not only create the music heard in the background of a game, but are responsible for the various cues and other sounds that dictate the entirety of gameplay. Composers may also work on other aspects of the game's audio elements, such as sound design, inte-



Photo courtesy of Pedro Sanchez

gration, or computer coding and scripting. Since many games now use existing music, some projects employ a music supervisor who is in charge of sourcing this music, instead of a composer.

Work Environment

Musicians compose and practice in studios, often located in their homes, and perform in diverse environments, from cruise ships, nightclubs, and churches to large concert halls and stadiums. Some perform outdoors when weather permits. Performance makes up only a fraction of the musician's workweek, with the bulk of their time taken up by practice, rehearsals, composing, travel, and other responsibilities, including recording, if they are a recording artist. With the exception of orchestra members, church organists, and a few others, most musicians and composers are self-employed. Musicians have the highest chance of succeeding professionally if they live near major cities, where the greatest number of employment opportunities can be found.

Video game composers usually work in both an office and a studio, whether one belonging to a development company, an independent studio hired on a freelance basis, or a home studio.

Occupation Interest

Most people who choose to become a professional musician or composer do so after becoming proficient at one or more instruments. They enjoy expressing themselves creatively in this "nonverbal language," and, in the case of musicians, enjoy performing for an audience. While they have certainly learned that practice is the key to success, they demonstrate other necessary qualities as well, including creativity, stamina, confidence, and the ability to cooperate with other musicians.

A Day in the Life-Duties and Responsibilities

Musicians divide much of their time between practice and rehearsals, performing, and any related travel, and, in many cases, recording and promotion. A practice session normally involves an individual musician learning a brand new piece, polishing a technique, or gaining proficiency on a new instrument, whereas rehearsal involves the whole band or ensemble, if there is one, practicing a complete piece of music for performance. Established musicians with a de-

Profile

Interests: Data, People

Working Conditions: Work Inside

Physical Strength: Light Work

Education Needs: High School Diploma or G.E.D.,
Junior/Technical/Community College, Bachelor's Degree

Licensure/Certification: Usually Not Required

Physical Abilities Not Required: Climbing,
Kneeling

Opportunities for Experience: Apprenticeship,
Military Service, Volunteer Work, Part Time Work

Holland Interest Score: ASE, ASI

gree of professional recognition may have a manager to handle the details of promotion, scheduling, recording, and production, while those who are just starting out may have to do everything themselves.

A successful professional composer may be offered commissions to write advertising jingles, film scores, orchestral works, or other types of music. Some composers are also hired to arrange music—that is, take an existing work and have it performed in a novel way. For example, a composer might take a pop song and turn it into an orchestral work. When not busy with their creative work, composers meet with clients and spend time promoting their talents.

Musicians may also set aside time for composing music or writing songs. They also listen to recordings by other musicians and keep abreast of new equipment and technologies. Because the field is so competitive, making a living as a full-time musician or composer is difficult. Therefore, many musicians and composers also hold day jobs that divide their attentions even further.

Video game composers often begin their work at the early stages of a game's conception. They meet with the game designer and flesh out a concept for the game's music and sound. As the composer then works on developing the music, he or she has to keep in mind the specific demands of video game music. Usually,

Duties and Responsibilities

- Playing one or more musical instruments
- Studying and rehearsing scores
- Playing from memory or by following a score
- Composing or arranging music
- Improving and transposing music

ally, the composer develops a handful of themes, which correspond to the different modes of the game. These themes have to be sturdy enough to withstand continual repetition and flexible enough that they can be modified as the gameplay demands. The composer also has to create musical cues that indicate specific events that may happen in the course of the game. The

composer may work with a separate audio professional known as a sound designer to create the film's audio component. In smaller projects, the game composer may double as a sound designer, or help with other aspects of the game such as integration and computer coding and scripting.

Many scores are composed electronically but some scores may make use of live musicians, either in small numbers, or for higher budgeted games, a full orchestra. Other games do not use original music at all but source pre-existing songs. These games typically employ a music supervisor who sources this music and helps obtain a license from the music to ensure that there are no copyright violations. A music supervisor may also commission new songs directly from recording artists.

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Immediate Physical Environment

Musicians play in a variety of settings, ranging from elegant concert halls to bars to weddings and other private events. Depending on the type and size of venue as well as the type of music they play, musicians need to pay attention to the effect of the performance environment on their instruments and especially on their bodies, as they can be at risk for ailments such as hearing loss and repetitive motion injuries. Video game composers typically work in an office or studio.

Human Environment

Musicians interact with many different people, most notably their audiences and other musicians or singers. A session musician will also work closely with studio technicians, a touring artist may travel with his staff and stage crew, and a church organist will collaborate with the music director and minister. Composers often work closely with a film director, advertising team, video game developer, choreographer, and other professionals.

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Communication Skills

- Expressing thoughts and ideas

Creative/Artistic Skills

- Being skilled in art, music or dance

Research & Planning Skills

- Analyzing information

Research & Planning Skills

- Creating ideas

Technological Environment

Musicians playing instruments that are not electric or electronic, including string, wind, and other traditional instruments, are concerned mainly with the operation and maintenance of those instruments, although any performing artist typically needs to also work with microphones, amplifiers, and other electrical equipment. Additional musical technologies are involved in working with electric guitars, keyboards, and the like, and for recording artists there is a world of sound recording technology with which to become familiar. Video game composers often compose electronically as well and have to be familiar with music production software.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

Musicians today generally need at least a high school diploma. Most will want to pursue a strong college preparatory program, with electives in music and courses specific to their interests, such as creative writing, electronics, or film studies. Private lessons, summer music camps, and extracurricular performance opportunities are extremely important. Proficiency on one or more instruments will be required for admission to a college music program or conservatory.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Arts
- English
- Foreign Languages
- Humanities
- Instrumental & Vocal Music
- Mathematics

Related Career Pathways/Majors

Arts, A/V Technology & Communications Cluster

- Performing Arts Pathway

Postsecondary

In general, musicians must find the balance of formal and informal education that best meets their needs. An unusually talented musician may choose to forego college and move directly into their performing career. On the other hand, some musicians benefit from at least a bachelor's degree in music. Music programs include courses in theory, composition, arranging, and performance. Instead of music, one might consider majoring in music education, audio engineering, or even double majoring in music and business. Continuing education courses in pi-

Famous First

Atari's classic 1972 video game *Pong* was the first game to use sound effects. Designer Allan Alcorn figured out that he could use the sync generator to produce different tones which became the game's sound effects.



Photo courtesy of Pedro Sanchez

and tuning, instrument repair and construction, or other related courses might be good choices as well.

Related College Majors

- Music Conducting
- Music General Performance
- Music History & Literature
- Music Piano & Organ Performance
- Music Theory & Composition
- Music Voice & Choral/Opera Performance
- Music, General

Adult Job Seekers

Adults who take up an instrument later in life face stiff competition; however, it is common for a musician to become a composer later in adulthood, and for musicians to switch instruments later in life. Although musicians can work part time, the hours, and often the pay, are not always conducive to parenting and other adult responsibilities.

Advancement opportunities are limited and, in most cases, highly dependent on one's level of success. They include chaired positions or opportunities for solos, more lucrative recording contracts, performance fees, or commissions, and/or the ability to hire a manager to take care of business responsibilities, thus opening up more time for creative pursuits. Only a very small percentage of musicians and composers reach celebrity status.

Job seekers might consider joining professional organizations such as the American Federation of Musicians, considered to be the largest such organization dedicated to furthering the careers of professional musicians, to seek career advancement opportunities.

Those looking to break into video game composing should, in addition to musical training, be familiar with a wide range of video games, in order to understand the ways in which music is used in games. Most video game composers today work on a freelance basis. It is recommended that potential candidates develop a show reel, in which they provide a sample of their work, or even better, a game demo, in which they compose an entire sample soundtrack for a game. Contacting independent studios and sending along demos is a good way to get in the door. Candidates should also look out for opportunities in the world of mobile gaming and virtual and augmented reality.

Professional Certification and Licensure

There are no certificates or licenses needed for most performers or composers, although a few organizations offer certification that may be required for jobs in that specialty, such as the American Guild of Organists.

Additional Requirements

Musicians are usually artists with a passion for their craft, but forging a professional career in this field is no easy task. Aspiring professional musicians need to be prepared for all the financial hazards of freelance work, including an inconsistent income (or backup income from another source) that needs to be spread over periods of no musical work. As with any fine arts career, passion and persistence are often the most important qualifications. Video game composers, in addition to technical skill, creativity, and knowledge of the gaming world, must also be able to work well as part of a larger creative team.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings and Advancement of professional musicians are influenced by specialization, steadiness of work, demand for the instrument played, place of employment, location, personal ability and professional reputation. Median annual earnings of musicians and composers were \$51,670 in 2019. The lowest ten percent earned less than \$23,100, and the highest ten percent earned more than \$125,200.

Video game composers typically earn between \$30,000 and \$75,000 a year. In addition to the fees they receive, they may also earn royalties if the soundtrack is released as an album or digital download.

Musicians and composers who belong to a union may receive life and health insurance, and retirement benefits.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

Employment of musicians and composers is expected to increase only slightly in the next 10 years with an anticipated change of just 1 percent. As orchestras and other music groups face budget cuts, they will be unlikely to have the money to make major personnel upgrades. For video game composers, the outlook is considerably better, as more and more games are being produced worldwide and the

need for composers or musical supervisors is expected to grow. Nonetheless, most of these positions will be freelance as most companies no longer hire full-time composers.

Related Occupations

- Actor
- Dancer/Choreographer
- Sound Engineer

Related Military Occupations

- Music Director
- Musician

MORE INFORMATION

American Guild of Musical Artists

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agma@musicalartists.org
www.musicalartists.org

American Music Center

322 8th Avenue, Suite 1401
New York, NY 10001
212.366.5260
allison@amc.net
www.amc.net

American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP)

1 Lincoln Plaza
New York, NY 10023
800.952.7227
www.ascap.com

American Society of Music Arrangers and Composers (ASMAC)

5903 Noble Avenue
Van Nuys, California 91411
www.asmac.org

Game Audio Network Guild

www.audiogang.org

International Game Developers Association

1 Eglinton Ave. East

Suite 705

Toronto, ON M4P 3A1 Canada

www.igda.org

Music Publishers Association of the United States

243 5th Avenue, Suite 236

New York, NY 10016

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