How I became a great composer

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Hard work and talent are supposedly the necessary ingredients for a great composer. I used to believe that too, until my experiences of the past few years have proved otherwise. These experiences have introduced me to an entirely new composing method, fast, enjoyable and far more suited to the vast majority of us.

In July 2001 I attended my first annual PCCC (Permanent Commission for Chess Composition) meeting in Wageningen, Holland. These annual meetings take place in some affordable European town over one summer’s week and are attended by 200 or so problemists. Thirty of those problemists are commission members that sit around a big table, their little country flags waving, while an intense discussion about Fide album points masks the intrigue of the calculating 4th vice-president’s planned coup d’état.

At the same time, in close proximity, the other problemists engage in activities such as solving competitions, lectures and most importantly, short composing tourneys whose awards are distributed later in the week. The prizes are typically spirits representing each country such as Whisky, Vodka and Champagne.

So there I was in Wageningen, sitting at a table with my friends Ofer Comay and Paz Einat when they asked me to join them in composing a helpmate for one of the tourneys. Having never composed a problem before I happily agreed. Since I could not contribute much I bought a round of beer and mostly marvelled at how cooperatively the black and white pieces behaved, so different from the world of studies. When I could spot a cook I would mention it but otherwise I just enjoyed watching, adding a joke, complementing an elegant approach and generally keeping everybody happy.

This process repeated itself for several days through mates in two, helpmates and proof-games. When they finished a problem we would check it on the computer, fix the thousand or so cooks and hand it in to the tourney director. Then in the award ceremony I found out that I had won 3 prizes. Established problemists were whispering my name.

The following problem is a good illustration of my early style.

/887/ C1 P.Einat, G.Costeff & O.Comay
3rd prize Macleod Whisky tourney
Wageningen 2001

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g2d4 4776.14 5/12 H#2
   a) diagram b) wPf4-->e5
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a) 1.Qe6 Bd5 2.Kxd5 Qd3#
b) 1.Qc4 Rc5 2.Kxc5 Qa7#

The next year in beautiful Portoroz, I already contributed mightily. If a composition is 99 percent perspiration then my role in the following proof game is one percent.
sort “Crap. Kosachevski 1929 shows a complete Babson with 7 fewer pieces.” Great composers, on the other hand, simply start at the top:
1.Bg8? Qxb8!
1.Bd5? Qxa7!
1.Bc4! zugzwang.
1...Qxb8 2.g8=Q+ Qxg8+ 3.Qg5+ Qxg5#
1...Qxb7 2.Sd7+ Qxd7+ 3.Qf5+ Qxf5#
1...Qxa7 2.Bxd4+ Qxd4+3.Sa4+ Qxe4#
Moscow 2003, was another milestone. I assumed more responsibilities and sometimes even made up half the team. As the reader may see, the quality did not suffer, on the contrary.

You might think I was satisfied with my success. You would be wrong. I am ambitious as they come and a great composer must master several genres. It would have been simple to learn selfmates like everyone else by starting at the beginning and bequathing the world problems that elicit reader responses of the
HOW I BECAME A GREAT COMPOSER

[891] C5 Y.Afek, O.Comay & G.Costeff
1st prize (eq.) Uralski Problemist TT
Halkidiki, 2004

1.Rc7+ Kxd6 2.Rxd7+!/i Kxd7 3.0–0–0+!

With such successes there was no reason to
limit my creative efforts to PCCC meetings.
On my family visits to Israel I now include a
composing session. Paz provides a list of tour-
neys and their themes and suggests a matrix,
Ofer gets it to work and I pet the dog. This
technique has produced dramatic results as the
following excellent problem shows:

[892] C6 O.Comay, P.Einat & G.Costeff
2nd place Macedonia 2004

h8c3 0876.52 9/9 H#3
a) diagram
b) remove wRh5, add wBh5

a) 1.Bd6 Bf4 2.Kxc4 Bg5 3.Kxc5 Be3#
b) 1.Rf2 Rf2 2.Kd2 Rg4 3.Ke2 Re4#

Another of my efforts recently appeared in
The Problemist showing a “sophisticated cy-
cle of defensive motifs.” I solved it in 3 min-
utes, not bad considering it was the first time I
had seen it.

Given that others do the actual composing
work, it is critical to correct misperceptions
and give the real composers the credit. When
people compliment me on my problems I tell
the truth: “I just buy the drinks. Ofer and Paz
do all the work.”

Fortunately, most composers mistake such
truthfulness for modesty, leading to the pleas-
ant result that I am now considered both a re-
markably talented composer and an admirably
humble person. Even John Beasley, otherwise
a paragon of intellectual rigour, wrote about
my “typical modesty.”

Posterity may prove kind to me. As time
passes it will become more difficult to sepa-
rate Costeff from Comay. In their wonderful
collaborations, was Korolkov the composer
and Mitrofanov the joke teller, or was it the
other way round?

As the reader can see, my composing method
has nothing to do with the old standards of
hard work and talent. In fact, this old fash-
ioned method produces thousands of awful
problems, much frustration and very few great
composers. This is no accident, as talent and
hard work are better left to the talented and the
hard working.

My system of composing, on the other hand,
draws on the skills possessed by many of us
mortsals. It requires the enjoyment of good
times, a sense of humour and an appreciation
of those more talented than us. These are nec-
essary skills we develop in our daily lives,
making the application to composing straight-
forward.