Website Essentials for Composers
Must-haves for promotion and selling of your music

by Garrett Hope

Composer on **Fire**
with **Garrett Hope**

INTRO

Building a high-quality website is essential for a composer in today's world. There's no getting around it. We live in the age of the web and most of us spend a significant amount of time online.

As a composer it's critical that you have a website that is engaging, informative, functional, and beautiful.

I spend a lot of time looking at composer websites as I prepare for the podcast interviews. I've seen many good ones, a few great ones, but most of them have been lacking. The following short eBook outlines what I think are essential for a composer website to include.

You might be asking yourself why these are important. It's a good question. There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions and networking. But statistics show us that most information is being sought on the Internet and you need to have a website that helps people find you, understand who you are, what it is you do and who you do it for, experience your music, and to communicate with you.

Your website is your online business card and the primary way people will research you and get to know you. It is the place people will go to read your bio, listen to your music, and contact you.

Here are seven website essentials. On the following pages we'll dig deeper into each one.

1.   Bio—What It Is You Do & Who Are You Doing It For
2.   Portfolio—Letting People Hear & See Your Music
3.   Purchase Info—Make It Easy For People To Buy Your Work
4.   Contact Info—Email Addresses, Forms, and Domain Names
5.   Call to Action—Tell Your Visitors What To Do
6.   Responsive—Make Sure It's Tablet and Device Ready
7.   Aesthetic and Functional—Make It Pleasing To Look At & Easy To Navigate

ESSENTIAL #1: BIO—WHAT IT IS YOU DO AND WHO ARE YOU DOING IT FOR

This may be the most important page on your website. This is your chance to introduce yourself and get the reader interested not only in you, but in your music as well.

This must tell a story. People want to know why and how you became a composer. This is how the world will get to know you.

You can start by asking yourself the following questions:

- What's important to you?
- What do you love about music?
- Why do you write music?

Do not, and I cannot emphasize this enough, use your bio page on your website as a public C.V. So many composer bios on websites become a list of whom they've studied with, where they went to school, what awards they've won, who was performed their music, and other important, but not engaging pieces of information.

Use your bio to draw people into your story. If you must include the CV info do as after you have told your story.

People want to know why you write music and what makes your music stand out from everything else. So tell your story and make it engaging.

If you want more insight into this listen to Ep. 25 of the Composer on Fire podcast (http://composeron-fire.com/ep-25-aprille-janes-on-writing-better-bios/). This episode is an interview with Aprille Janes, who runs a business helping people tell their story more effectively.

A great way to start is to use the Pixar format. This prompt comes from Emma Coats who posted 22 rules of storytelling she learned while working at pixar. One of the 22 rules is this simple story telling formula:

Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____. One day _____. Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally _____.

Use this to prompt your story of how you came to fall in love with music and have chosen a career writing music.

The story of an composer who learned to write music while overcoming some adversity is much more powerful than a list of schools attended and composition teachers.

This is also your chance to speak directly to your audience. If you write primarily for a specific genre/ensemble/media/whatever than write this as if your audience was reading it.

Essential #2: Portfolio—Letting Them Hear & See Your Music

Your website also functions as a public portfolio. This is the place to let people hear *and see* your work.

The visitor to your website should be able to easily find and play examples of your best work. You need to curate this portfolio.

If you have video of performances include that on your website as well. People nearly always hear with their eyes first.

Another way people want to see your music is to look at scores. If you are using a WordPress website there are several plugins that allow the visitor to view a PDF while restricting them from printing or downloading it. This is optional, but nice.

Consider how you will host your audio and video samples. The easiest, and cheapest, solution is to host them off site and embed players and links. For audio use SoundCloud and for video use YouTube.

If you host the audio and video on your website you may experience bandwidth issues as people stream the files from your host's servers and you will quickly fill up the allotted space for your website on your server.

Both SoundCloud and YouTube allow you to embed players on your website. If you have even basic HTML skills you can tweak the HTML to control the size, color, and other options as well.

Make your music easy to find as well. Organize it by whatever method works best for you and your work. That may be by genre, ensemble, style, or date. With the use of tags and links you can actually cross link and organize your work under multiple categories. Again, this is easy to do on a WordPress website.

Essential #3: Purchase Info—Make It Easy For People To Buy Your Work

Is it clear on your website how people can spend their money on your music? How many different ways are you offering it to them?

Here are just a few of the ways you can offer yourself and your music to your audience, conductors, and performers:

- Sell copies of your scores.
- Sell recordings of your music.
- Offer to work for commission.
- Be available to clinician ensembles.
- Be available to guest conduct.
- Do freelance engraving, arranging, or sound design work.

Regardless of what your selling, is it clear how it can be purchased? Are there purchase links? Do you have an online storefront?

Make it as easy as possible for people to get what they want.

Do your best explain the benefits of working with you, especially as a clinician or guest conductor/speaker. What do you bring to the table that's unique? What sets you apart?

Essential #4: Contact Info—Email Addresses, Forms, and Domain Names

This might seem obvious, but I am constantly surprised by how many websites I encounter that don't make it clear, or easy, on how to contact the composer.

The simplest way of doing this is to list your email and phone number on your website. This choice, however, can lead to several major problems. The first being that it opens you up to receiving buckets of spam emails and unsolicited calls.

The best option is to embed a contact form on your website so interested people can email you, but your email is never displayed publicly. If you are running a WordPress site this is easy to do with plugins or built-in features.

Let's discuss your email address and domain name, or website address. Your domain name should ideally be *www.yourname.com*. If that is not available you can add *composer* or *music* to the site name.

You also you want to avoid using a hosting service that adds their name to your domain, such as: yourname.freehostingservice.com. The domain name should be as short and memorable as possible.

Lastly, set up your email account with your hosting service so your email can use your domain name. If your website is www.johndoe.com your email should be john@johndoe.com. Hosting services almost always include email services with hosting so you can set up your email right there, or—following some basic instructions—you can set up your domain's email with services like Gmail or Yahoo.

Essential #5: Call to Action—Tell Your Visitors What To Do

One of the worst and most frustrating web experiences is to go to a page and not know what to do or where to find what you're looking for. Ideally you will guide the visitor to take certain actions through the design and layout of the page. You can actually influence the thought processes of the visitors and what they will click on next by where you place your links and menus and what order the items are in. No kidding!

If you want people to listen to your music then make that the most obvious thing to do. If you would prefer people to email you, place your contact form front and center on the home page.

You can even explicitly tell the website visitors what to do. This is referred to as a CTA, or Call To Action. You might encourage visitors to sign up for your newsletter, to listen to your latest work, or to like you on Facebook.

Consider what you want the visitor to your website to do and design it accordingly. You'll probably need to keep in mind your intended audience. For instance, if you compose band music that's highly popular with community wind ensembles, and you're a conductor yourself, it might be best to have a great video of you conducting your music in front of such a group on your landing page.

Your website is not only your business card, but it's also an engagement tool with the people who are interested in hearing and seeing your music. Guide them through the site.

Essential #6: Responsive Design—Make Sure It's Tablet and Device Ready

Have you ever tried to visit a website on your cell phone or tablet and the entire thing looks like what you'd see from your full-size screen? The text is too small to read, and links are nearly unusable unless you zoom way in.

According to Google web searches done via mobile now exceed those done on traditional computers. This means your website MUST be responsive. A responsive website automatically adjusts the text and images to the format and size of the screen being used.

There are many pre-made website designs, especially for the WordPress platform, already available that are responsive. Go ahead and buy one. More and more people will be visiting your website from their phones and your site needs to be as accessible, easy to navigate, user friendly, beautiful, and responsive on a 4-inch screen as it is on your 13-inch Macbook Pro.

Another bonus to ensuring that your site is responsive is that Google favors responsive sites when searching from a tablet or phone.

Essential #7: Aesthetic and Functional—Make It Pleasing To Look At & Easy To Navigate

We are composers. We are artists. Though our art is auditory people will engage with our websites through the visual. Your site should reflect your personality. It should also be aesthetically pleasing.

I don't mean to say that every site needs to be beautiful. It should, however, make sense visually. I encourage you to consult with a designer—at the least, have one audit your site—to provide feedback on the visual experience.

Make your site easy to use. People have a low tolerance for frustration on the web. If a visitor can't find what they're looking for (or something isn't working) you might have lost an important connection, performance, or commissioning opportunity.

Here is a short list of design items to consider:
*   Color coordination: Your site should have a palette of colors and be consistent. You can use color psychology or not. It doesn't matter. Either way make your site look professional by being coordinated.
*   If you place text on top of an image, be sure that the image is not busy or doesn't have patterns that disrupt the reading of the text. Also, beware of contrast. If the image is light in color do not use a white color for the typeface.
*   Most people scan websites from the left to right and top to bottom. You can place menu items, buttons, links, A/V playback, or images accordingly to guide your visitors. I despise buzzfeed.com's click-bait style and slow loading pages, but it's a great study of website design that's purposefully crafted to draw you in, get you stay on the page, and click on an endless parade of links.
*   Related to the above item, the left side of your page will get more attention than the right. This doesn't mean you need to place all your links on the left side. Just the things you want the visitor to see first.
*   Make sure your CTA is above the fold. This means that it is 100% visible without needing to scroll down.

- Use hi-resolution images. HTML 5 and new coding languages actually allow browsers to load low-resolution images first (or only, if the the Internet connection is slow) before loading hi-resolution files. Also, make sure your photos are the correct size. If you are displaying an image at 100 pixels wide, but loading an image that's 1200 pixels wide you are not using bandwidth and data efficiently and are slowing down the loading of the page.
- Use headlines on your blog, bio, or any other content. It makes it easier to read and guides the visitor to what you want them to read, hear, or see.
- Catch the viewer's attention quickly. Most studies show that you have roughly 6 seconds or less to catch someone's attention. Consider your own browsing habits. How many times a day do you click on the link and make a snap judgement within seconds whether you will stay on the site reading, listening, or watching videos?
- Use up-to-date coding languages and scripts. Avoid Flash if you can. It was great in the early 2000s, but doesn't have the love it once did. It is also not responsive and iOS and Android don't support it on tablets and phones. Hiring a designer or purchasing a template (especially if it's WordPress) will take care of this.
- Do everything you can to make your site quick to load. This is related to the 6 seconds we have to get people's attention mentioned above. If a site is slow to load most visitors close the tab or browser window never seeing what it is you want to show them.
- Be intentional about your menu. Less is more. Again, guide your visitors.

Next Steps…

If all of this overwhelms you stop and take a deep breath.

Most importantly, your site should reflect who you are. If you are fun loving and outgoing, let your site reflect that. My friend and fellow composer Alex Shapiro's website (www.alexshapiro.org) reflects her love of nature, her humor, her *joie de vivre*, and her passion for music. You can also listen to Alex's thoughts on websites, music business, and self-publishing in Episodes 60 and 61 of the podcast (http://composeronfire.com/ep-60-alex-shapiro-pt-1-on-self-publishing-and-consortiums/, and http://composeronfire.com/ep-61-alex-shapiro-pt-2-on-being-in-control-of-your-career/).

When a visitor comes to your website they want to know who you are and you can convey that through the design, color, typeface, and images all before the visitor reads your bio.

If your site is due for an overhaul and re-design here are the steps I recommend:

- Visit 20–30 composer websites and write down what you liked and didn't like about each one.
- Using the list of what you liked on other sites take time to consider how you can incorporate similar features on your site.
- Consider how you want visitors to interact with your website and what you want them to do first.

- If you plan on doing the work yourself visit www.themeforest.net to find a great design. I strongly encourage you to consider using WordPress[1] as it will significantly reduce the amount of back-end work you will need to do. FYI: the Theme Forest link above is an affiliate link. This means that if you click on it and purchase a theme I will receive a small commission from Theme Forest. It doesn't add to your purchase cost, but it does allow me keep the lights on for the website and podcast.
  - Here is a great WordPress tutorial: https://www.siteground.com/tutorials/wordpress/.
  - Consult with a web designer to audit your site and help you improve the flow and design.
- You can also hire a designer who will work with you, and taking your list of features, will build the site for you. You can even have designers create a custom WordPress theme that will be one-of-a-kind for your site.
- Listen to Ep 72 of the Composer on Fire podcast with Arthur Breur where we discuss websites and online presence (http://composeronfire.com/ep-72-arthur-breur-on-websites-online-presence). Arthur's web design company is called FireSpike (https://www.firespike.com/) and they know how to speak with composers.

Oh yeah, one more thing. Get great head shots. Don't use a photo from your cell phone. The difference between hiring a photographer who specializes in head shots and your friend with a camera is vast. Trust me. It's worth the cost.

Extra resources:
- **25 Web Design Tips To Honor 25 Years Of The Web**
  - www.forbes.com/sites/cherylsnappconner/2014/03/27/25-web-design-tips-to-honor-25-years-of-the-web/#374ac008142c

  This is a few years old now (time in the web design and coding world moves VERY fast), but these tips are still extremely relevant. It is helpful that this article is written from the business perspective (thank you, Forbes) and if you are selling your music or your services than you are a business.
- **10 Useful Findings About How People View Websites**
  - conversionxl.com/10-useful-findings-about-how-people-view-websites/

  More information culled from real research about how people use, view, and scan websites. Use this information to design your site and guide the visitor to action.
- **We Analysed The Homepages of 20 Awesome Startups And Here Is What We Learnt**
  - https://www.hotjar.com/blog/2014/08/07/we-analyzed-the-homepages-of-30-successful-startups-and-here-is-what-we-learnt/?utm_content=bufferc63fe&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

  This page is also a few years old, but still very useful. What's valuable is that as these companies are startups they must get users to interact with their content or website in very specific ways. This article is presenting incredible information on how companies are designing pages to guide visitors to specific actions, be aesthetically pleasing, and easy to use.
- 5 Killer Web Design Tips That Will Make Your Life Easier
  - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/adda-birnir/5-killer-web-design-tips-_b_4038652.html

  Most of these tips are about typeface, font, and content.

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[1] A word about WordPress. WordPress is a free open-source CMS system for the creation and maintenance of websites. WordPress.org is the main website for the CMS where you can learn more about it. WordPress.com is a hosting site, much like wix.com, that allows you to create free websites. It is not affiliated with WordPress.org except for the fact that in the case of the WordPress.com the sites are all WordPress-based. If you already have a website with hosting and own a domain name I urge you to avoid wordpress.com unless you want to pay to have them host your site.