

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



g2d4 4776.14 5/12 H#2
a) diagram b) wPf4→e5

- 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.

[888] C2 P.Einat, O.Comay & G.Costeff
2nd prize Champagne tourney
Portoroz 2002



e1e8 4887.26 9/14
SPG 12.5 moves

1.c4 a5 2.c5 Ra7 3.c6 bxc6 4.d4 Ba6 5.d5
c:d5 6.e4 dxe4 7.Sf3 exf3 8.b4 fxg2 9.b5
gxh1Q 10.b6 Bb5 11.b7 Sa6 12.b8R Qxh2
13.Rxd8+

"An orthogonal and a diagonal Excelsior. A picturesque idea!" (from the award).

[889] C3 O.Comay, P.Einat,
G.Costeff & U.Avner
1st prize Vodka tourney
Portoroz 2002



g4f6 4155.80 15/4 S#3

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 bequeathing the world problems that elicit reader responses of the

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.g8S+ Qxg8+ 3.Qg5+ Qxg5#
1...Qxb7 2.Sd7+ Qxd7+ 3.Qf5+ Qxf5#
1...Qxa7 2.Bxd4+ Qxd4+3.Se4+ 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.

[890] C4 O.Comay & G.Costeff
2nd prize Macleod Whisky tourney
Moscow 2003

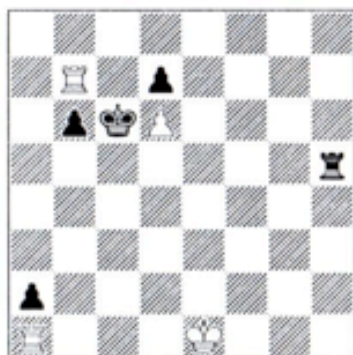


c6e3 4155.80 5/12 H#2
a) diagram b) wKc6 ->d6

a) 1.Rd4 Qe4+ 2.Kxe4 Re7#
b) 1.Qe4 Qd4+ 2.Kxd4 Ba7#

Halkidiki, Greece, 2004, marks the zenith of my powers and my official arrival as a universal composer, able to compose great problems in many genres. Helpmates, direct mates, proof games and fairy chess, I had mastered them all and had the whisky, vodka, champagne, Tzuika and other unidentified spirits to prove it. En passant I won a prize for the following study which Yochanan Afek composed while I was at the beach.

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



e1c6 0500.13 4/5 Draw

1.Rc7+ Kxd6 2.Rxd7+!/i Kxd7 3.0-0-0+
Rd5!/ii 4.Rxd5+ Kc6 5.Ra5! bxa5 6.Kb2
draw.

i) 2.cRc1? Rh2! 3.Kf1 b5 4.Kg1 Rb2.

ii) Kc6 4.Kb2 Ra5 5.Ka1.

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 tournaments 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.R3f2 Rf4 2.Kd2 Rg4 3.Ke2 Re4#

Another of my efforts recently appeared in *The Problemist* showing a “sophisticated cycle of defensive motifs.” I solved it in 3 minutes, 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 pleasant result that I am now considered both a remarkably 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 separate 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 fashioned 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 mortals. It requires the enjoyment of good times, a sense of humour and an appreciation of those more talented than us. These are necessary skills we develop in our daily lives, making the application to composing straightforward.