

## An Invitation: Make Up Your Own Tuck Everlasting Music Box Tune

*By Grey Larsen*

*Composer of the music box tune in the original 1980 Tuck Everlasting movie.*

In Natalie Babbitt's book *Tuck Everlasting*, Mae Tuck has a special music box. From the author's description we know that its music feels magical and enchanting, both to Mae and the others who hear it. When you read the story, you get to imagine for yourself what the music box sounds like, and you have your own feelings that this imaginary music brings up in you.

When you watch the Disney movie of *Tuck Everlasting*, you hear how the composer William Ross imagined the music of that music box. When you watch the original 1980 version of the movie *Tuck Everlasting*, you hear how I imagined that music.

This is part of what's so fun about being a composer: you get to explore your own imagination, play around within it, and finally bring out from your imagination something that is real, something that other people can actually listen to. When people listen to your music, they feel new feelings and they come to know something about you, perhaps something that they could never put into words. They feel something new and fresh within themselves, too.

You can be a composer if you want to. All you have to do is decide that you are going to create some music, and then take your time, and do it.

When I was in sixth grade, I had no idea that I could be a composer. That idea would never have occurred to me. I thought composers were all people who had lived a long time ago and were dead now.

Near the end of the school year, my sixth grade music teacher gave my class an assignment. She asked us each to create a piece of music.

When she said those words, I was dumbfounded. For some reason, until that moment, I had never imagined that I could create new music, music that didn't exist yet, that I could be a composer. This idea was like a skyrocket going off in my head, a huge turning point in my life. Since that day, life for me has never been the same.

I worked long and hard on my new piece of music, a very short piano piece. I took my time with it and played around with it, and it kept changing little by little. It seemed to have a life of its own.

Finally, one day I felt that I was finished, that the music was done. When I played it for my class (of course I was very nervous) and people listened to my music, it was like the final piece of a puzzle fell into place for me. I had created some music, out of my own imagination, music that had never existed before. I played it for people. It traveled from my fingers on the piano keys, through the air, to their ears. They were the first people in the world that ever heard that music. They received it and appreciated it, and in some very small way, it changed them. It became a tiny new part of their life experience, their life history. This experience, this process of musical creation and exchange, was magical to me and I

loved it. Starting that day, I knew I was a composer. I have been creating music ever since. I am so grateful to my sixth grade music teacher for opening that door for me with her very simple suggestion: “Create a piece of music.”

So I am making the same suggestion to you. You can create your own new music. You can carry this out in any way that you want to - you’re the composer, so you’re the boss. But here is one way you might like to try: create your own *Tuck Everlasting* music box tune.

The music box tunes that you hear in the Disney *Tuck Everlasting* movie and in the 1980 *Tuck Everlasting* movie are just two out of a billion different tunes that that music box could play. Yours doesn’t have to be like those other two.

Think about music boxes. They are small, and to me there’s something mysterious about that music being all down inside them, where we can’t see it being made. We know that they are simple little machines, but it feels like they are partly alive or conscious, at least to me.

The tunes they play are not usually very long. What else can you say about them? Well, they don’t get softer and louder, and they don’t usually get faster or slower. Their music is kind of steady in those ways, and it can repeat over and over. It can feel dream-like or hypnotic. How do people feel when they listen to them? Do you think that music boxes make people feel peaceful and quiet? How do they make you feel? Why do you think that is? What is special to you about their music?

There are no right and wrong answers to these questions. Different people will have different answers, and that’s good. But the way you answer questions like these for yourself, and the different questions that occur to you, will help guide you in making up your music.

If you’re going to make up a music box tune, there are certain things you don’t have to worry about. It doesn’t have to be very long or complicated, it doesn’t have to speed up or slow down, it doesn’t have to get loud and soft, it doesn’t have to have words. You could say that these things are limitations on the music I suppose, but composers love limitations. Limitations are like fences that make the musical space you are exploring more manageable, a place that you can get to know very well, a place that doesn’t take two weeks to walk across. “Limitations” feels like a negative word, but instead you could call them “guidelines” or “landmarks” or “stepping stones” or “pathways”, things that help you discover where you are and where to go. You can always move the fence if you want to. It’s your fence.

Knowing the *Tuck Everlasting* story also helps. The story gives you a context, a landscape of people, places, images, forests, flowing water, turning wheels, feelings of love, longing and regret, mystery. You might think mainly of Mae Tuck when you imagine the tune of the music box, or of Winnie, or of the spring water and where it might come from, or you might imagine yourself in the shoes of one or several of the characters. The feelings and associations you have with the music box are different from everyone else’s, so your music box tune will be unique. That’s great.

You might even find that you start out making up a music box tune but end up with something entirely different, like a song with words or a piece of music that would be good to dance to. That’s another wonderful thing about being a composer: you often end up with something really surprising, wonderful and unexpected. Composing is about freedom. So

what if you don't end up with a music box tune. You end up with *something* beautiful and new. You don't have to know what it is while you're creating it, you can decide that later. Still, it can be really useful to have a starting idea or framework, like the intention of making a music box tune. Where will you end up? You don't know till you get there. Composing is a great adventure.

You don't have to be able to play an instrument to be a composer. Your voice, your humming, whistling - those are instruments, the most natural ones in the world in fact. And you don't have to know how to read music or write it down. (Becoming a composer though might give you some reasons to *want* to learn to read and write music. Those skills can come in very handy, for keeping track of your ideas and for communicating them to other musicians.)

It can be a very big help to have some way to record your musical ideas, whether they are sung, hummed, or played on an instrument. That's because it can be hard to remember all of your ideas as you revise them and come up with new ones. They can slip away from you.

An audio recorder (hardware or software) is great for capturing them. It's like a camera for music. By recording your ideas, you know that they are safely stored where you can retrieve them later, and then, relieved of the task of holding them all in your memory, you can make more space in your mind for new ones. (Don't erase those recordings! Name them and save them so you can find them again. These are some tricks of the composer's trade. Try not to learn them the hard way.)

You can ask others to help you too. You can ask someone to write down your ideas in music notation if you want. Or, let's say you are imagining the sound of a flute. You could ask some flute playing friend to see if they could learn to play what you sing to them. Then you would know how it actually sounds on a flute. Once you've heard it, you might decide that it would really sound better on a guitar.

An essential part of being a composer is having other people hear what you have composed. That completes a cycle. When your music has come to the point where it is no longer a private experience for you but is a shared experience with others, it's like it has surfaced from underwater, or it's like a jet touching down on a runway. Your music has come forward into a different light. You may feel that it is not fully cooked yet, that you want to keep working with it. Sometimes it's good to let it sit a while on its own before you do. Or maybe it does feel complete. Only you will know.

When I share something I have composed for the first time, I usually feel that I am hearing it differently. The fact that there are other ears listening somehow changes it for me. I think that composers realize at the first sharing of a new piece of music, whether we can articulate this thought or not, that composing is a form of communication with others. When others listen to your music it brings up feelings in them that are unique to them, feelings that you can never fully know, but they are feelings that could not have occurred if it were not for your imagination and your music. There's a mysterious and wonderful exchange going on.

It would be great if you had a group of people, such as your music class or a group of friends, who were all exploring composing at the same time. Then you can all be composers and

listeners for each other. All of you would discover together what the process of composing is like and you could all support each other.

In that situation, I would highly recommend this ground rule. When you listen to a fellow composer's work, don't criticize it. Share how it makes you feel or what images it brings up in you. Share what you like about the music. When you share your composition, especially when composing is new to you, you are sharing something very personal. The only things you want to do for your fellow composer is to share and enlarge the joy of creation and to encourage them to keep going. That's what we would all like for ourselves. Though there are such things as music competitions, I have always felt that creativity doesn't really mix with judgment and competition.

If you do compose a new music box tune, or anything else, I would love to hear it. If you send me a tape of your music, I will listen to it and I will try to get back to you as soon as I can.

Welcome to the club.

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