

LAB NOTES

» LESSONS FROM MUSIC EDUCATION RESEARCH

Crystal Chan

McGill music education professor Joel Wapnick studied piano beginning at age nine. "Both of my teachers were excellent communicators and they had great insight into both the technical and musical aspects of music making at the piano," he explains.

Here are fascinating snippets from Wapnick's graduate seminar in music education, particularly applicable to young children. To learn more, find the articles at McGill University Library—many of which are available free online.

ON MUSICAL PREFERENCES...

1. Cassidy, J.W. & Geringer, J.M. (1999). "Effects of Animated Videos on Preschool Children's Music Preferences." *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 17 (2), 3-7.

» Older children develop musical preferences based on tempo, performance medium, familiarity, and social influences. But preschoolers are not affected. The key then is to introduce preschool children to a large variety of music. In fact, at that age the level of approval from a teacher has the largest effect.

» Don't force children to describe and relate to music verbally. Likewise, just because a child is not able to express appreciation for music verbally, it doesn't mean that they are not absorbing it.

» Quick Quote: "It should be noted that preference for one style or piece of music over another may not be the goal for many music educators. It may be more important to teach children to listen willingly, thoughtfully, and attentively to less familiar music, regardless of whether they will eventually acquire a preference for it over other styles."

2. Brittin, R. (2000). "Children's Preference for Sequenced Accompaniments: the Influence of Style and Perceived Tempo." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 48 (3), 237-248.

» Similarly, Brittin found that children at a Grade 2 or higher level preferred 'faster' song styles. Piano chords were perceived as 'slower'

even when they were not. This has a lot to do with perception—as kids get older they're increasingly affected by social conceptions. From Grades 2-6, children were more and more set in their preferences.

ON MUSICAL ENJOYMENT...

3. Demorest, S. & Schultz, S. (2004). "Children's Preference for Authentic Versus Arranged Versions of World Music Recordings." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 52 (4), 300-313.

» When introducing unfamiliar music, start by playing versions with familiar elements, for example, 'pop' song versions. Use these merely as a gateway; it helps create a more positive context for children.

4. Temmerman, N. (2000). "An Investigation of the Music Activity Preferences of Pre-school Children." *British Journal of Music Education*, 17/1, 51-60.

» Children prefer moving and playing with music. Improvised dance is also good; as for singing, children prefer singing with others. Listening by itself may therefore not be the most enjoyable musical experience for children. When it comes to playing music, ensure children have access to a lot of different instruments or methods so they do not get bored.

ON IMPROVISATION...

5. Koutsoupidou, T. & Hargreaves, D. (2009). "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Improvisation on the Development of Children's Creative Thinking in Music." *Psychology of Music*, 37 (3), 251-278.

» Encourage musical improvisation. It significantly affects the development of creative thinking. In particular, it promotes musical flexibility, originality, and syntax in children's music making.

Wapnick has taught at McGill since 1978. In 1979 he established the School Music Research Laboratory at McGill University, one of the first of its kind in the country. He is also a scrabble player who won the 1999 World Scrabble Championship and is one of two people to have ever won the WSC, the US National Scrabble Championship, and the Canadian National Scrabble Championship.

DEAR COMPOSER

Michael Colgrass

Michael Colgrass is a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and educator. To learn more about Colgrass, see page 28.

I RECEIVE MANY LETTERS FROM CHILDREN. Here are two letters from teenagers at Laurel Valley High School in New Florence, Pennsylvania, who were encouraged by their high school band director, Jim Colonna, to write to a composer. I have a continuing correspondence with both students. Their letters are a ray of hope that the arts and living artists have meaning for young people. Mr. Colonna is an example of what one teacher can accomplish by stimulating the minds of his students.

LETTER FROM:

Erin Gallardy » Age 14 » Seward, Pennsylvania

Dear Mr. Colgrass,

On the way home from the district choral auditions Mr. Colonna and I got into a very deep musical discussion. Well, it might not have been deep to him, but it was deep to me.

Some music education in our school makes me so mad. What people don't realize is that we, the young adults of America, are the future of everything, including music. They think music is for really nerdy, rich, smart people, not for the average person. Music is an art that requires skill, not some dumb air head getting a quill pen and staff paper and jotting dots on paper. Music is also a very personal emotion that takes a lot to get out of you, and also down on paper. Where will music go without people like you and Mr. Colonna who take the time to talk to teenagers who you've never met? You guys are the people we look up to for guidance in this big craziness of the music world. Music is so many adjectives I don't know what really to describe it as.

So get ready because I have a whole bunch of questions.

- » Why do some people like classical music and others not?
- » Why do you learn more about emotions as you listen to and study music?
- » Why can't some people feel the music?
- » Why is music such a deep subject?
- » How can you bring out the musical creativity in yourself and others better?

DEAR ERIN:

Let me try to answer these apocalyptic questions one at a time.

» **Why do some people like classical music and others not?**

I think music is like food—you tend to eat what the people around you eat. Meet new people and you start eating new foods. For example, many people don't eat yogurt, because yogurt isn't heavily advertised, like hamburgers. And few know how to prepare it so it's really good - with fruit, raisins, nuts and honey. The question is not only the taste of this food, but its relationship to your lifestyle—yogurt isn't associated with any social life that is known to be fun, whereas the hamburger is an American institution and McDonald's is a place to meet your friends. Classical music is like yogurt to many people. They may try it once or twice, but, that's usually not enough. There has to be some form of continual contact and the music, like a nutritious food, needs to be integrated into their lifestyle.

» **Why do you learn more about emotions as you listen to and study music?**

Because music is the language of emotion. The history of music is the recorded history of human emotion, different ways people expressed their feelings over the centuries in response to their surroundings. Music is important therefore to help children grow emotionally. I know music has many other values—it helps develop our minds, it relaxes us, it gives us solace when we are blue. But most of all it helps us to develop empathy for others, to respect human feeling. I really don't care how "bright" someone is (at adding up numbers, for example, or doing science projects). But I am very impressed when someone shows understanding for the feelings of others. This is what music, and other arts, helps us learn to do, and that makes music an important activity for children to learn and enjoy.

» **Why can't some people feel the music?**

Well, some people have trouble feeling any emotion—or expressing it, at any rate. Emotions need to be developed like language or imagery. Our senses are like muscles: the ones you exercise are the ones that will grow strong. You can actually practice feeling, the same way you can practice expressing yourself in words and making pictures in your mind. Music gives us a way to practice developing emotionally. Maybe that's why some people don't like music - they're afraid to express their emotions, afraid they'll lose control of themselves, break down and cry, or get too charged up and not know what to do with the energy.

Why is music such a deep subject?

Because emotions are unfathomable. With music, you can even express contradictory feelings—like sorrow and joy—simultaneously,

which is sometimes how we feel them. That's what makes emotions so interesting. That's what drives composers to try and recreate emotions, digging into them for new insights. Emotions are like the gold embedded in mountains. No matter how much you dig out, there's always more, somewhere. And, of course, there's fool's gold and real gold, like with emotions. To be able to tell the difference between superficial music that may excite your taste like sugar, and great music that nourishes you forever, requires a lot of digging. But what an adventurous dig it is!

How can you bring out the musical creativity in yourself and others?

Musical creativity, like any creativity, starts with copying and imitating. You don't just pop out of the womb writing music. You need to learn musical language the way you learned your native tongue. You learned to speak and write and read by listening and imitating others. Then gradually, you started getting your own ideas and started writing and speaking your own way - like your letters to me, which are original. So learning to create is the same as learning anything else—you copy. Mozart copied Haydn, Beethoven copied Mozart, Schubert copied Beethoven, and so on. But only at first. Gradually their own personalities came out, partly shaped by their models and partly made from their own uniqueness. The more you learn about how others do things, the more you learn how to do things your own original way.

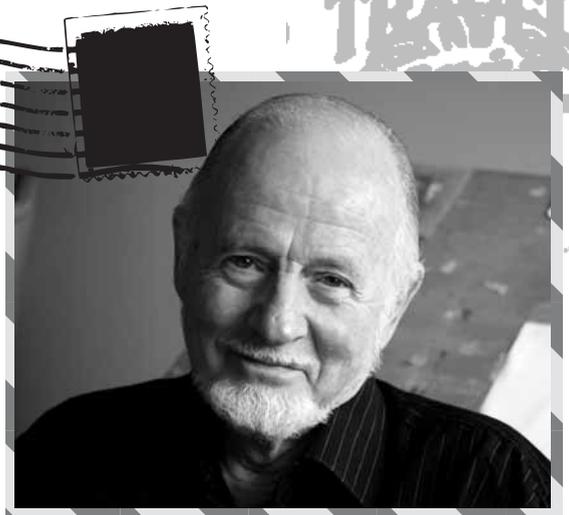
LETTER FROM:

» Jaclyn Kuzminsky, » Age 13 » Bolivar, Pennsylvania

Dear Mr. Colgrass,

I wrote a report about your music. I know you don't want to read about yourself, but you might get a different perspective on your music. Most of the people who wrote about you were probably older and have formed an opinion of how they think music should sound. Since you're a "modern composer," I think modern minds should give their opinion because their minds are more open, but can still give their opinion with feeling. I find it really exhilarating when music totally changes your emotions, then it stops and you're so confused you don't know whether to cry, laugh, or yell at them for making you feel like that.

Now I have a question: How do you focus your attention when you want to create?



DEAR JACLYN,

You're asking a question that has puzzled some of the best minds in music. Let me offer two ideas on this subject:

1) Creativity is a habit. Think of the habits you have right now and how you developed them. For example, do you have a time when you study? Perhaps between five and six, just before supper? (I assume you do your homework!) Recall how you developed that habit and how it feels to have it. Have you noticed that if you do your homework at the same time every day you tend to concentrate more easily? The idea is to do the same with creating. To create with ease and comfort, you need a place physically set apart from your other activities, because creating is an act set apart from other things.

2) Establish a set location for creating only. Lay out your materials on your "creating" desk—music paper, notes to yourself, lists of ideas, etc. - and don't ever do anything else on that desk. That way when you return the next day everything will be just as you left it and your mind can "pick up where it left off." This helps you organize your ideas. Whenever you have an idea you can write it down and place it in your own creative spot, even if you have no time to work on it at that moment. This way you accumulate ideas and have a "home" for them—they will be waiting for you when you get back to that creative location. Also, your unconscious mind will work on an idea for you in the meantime since you have clearly identified the idea and your mind has a place to locate it physically. I call this technique "anchoring a location." Your brain learns that when you sit down at that spot creative ideas come to you, because that's all you do in that spot—create. ■