

# The Creative Child Could Be Any Child

## Drawing Out Inherent Creativity in Compositional Experiences

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The creation of something original at any level involves a commitment to a particular vision. It also involves an element of risk. When your own children bring home a picture, a poem, something they call music (committed to paper with their own highly original notation), or when they ask you to listen to their new song (an improvisation in disguise), they come with a pride in their accomplishment and a smothered reluctance, cloaked in embarrassment, to expose themselves to possible misunderstanding, criticism, or worse—apathy. When an established composer, painter, or poet completes a new work and presents it to the public, it is possible that the same attitudes prevail. Perhaps the most important element we can bring to this kind of situation is a sympathy for the *intent*, a respect for the integrity and sincerity of the statement as it appears, and a recognition of the artist, whether child or laureate, as a sensitive human being.

This attitude can be supremely difficult to maintain. Some students do not appeal to us physically, others do not appeal to us emotionally, others have habits of social behavior that we find discomfiting, and still others arouse some hostile, unknown chemistry within us. We must try to remember that the creative effort at hand, no matter how small it is and no matter what form it takes, represents an extension of the most intimate personality of its creator. We must accept it as an "offering" and encourage continued efforts in that direction.

Because such a creation represents the public appearance of an individual's privacy, it is imperative that we do not encourage further efforts in our own image or superimpose our own limitations on the personality of another. We can draw a loose analogy to coloring books, in which outlined drawings impose on the child the necessity of staying within limitations determined by someone else. While this activity has value in its own right, it is not to be confused with *The author is Professor of Composition at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York.*

the values inherent in discovering one's own limitations.

We must be careful about imposing outside limitations on the free expression of the creative child. What we see as a distortion in his art work is only a deviation from our point of view. The distortion is his point of view, and it is a valid one, because art deals with distortion. Consider, for example, the work of El Greco, whose attenuated figures stretch upward in search of some communication with the divine. Consider also the work of the contemporary sculptor Giacometti, whose elongated, emaciated figures represent a very private vision, interpreting the world as he knows it and giving us great insight into his feeling for it. To say that a difference in point of view is a distortion would be to say that the music of Brahms is a distortion of Mozart—that only one view is valid.

Self-expression is encouraged when a child is allowed to make mistakes. We must be careful to criticize his work in the context of its musical expression rather than on the basis of our personal views of right art and wrong art. To criticize the work by saying, "This is wrong... That is wrong... Here it is wrong," is to stop the flow of the free creation and to interrupt the private, intimate communication that the child is offering. It is much more effective to encourage the student to analyze the form and content of his own effort and that of others to establish whether it all belongs together; in this way, he can see his errors as flaws in consistency or lapses of contextual relationships. Incomplete efforts, partially satisfactory statements, or obscure definitions can be criticized constructively by asking for further development. For example, "Let's see how you could develop that point a little bit more... Let's see what would happen if you tried to carry that discussion a little further... Let's take a look at this example (by some composer such as Bach or Debussy) to see another way of doing it—it may suggest a way for you." All of these com-



ments have suggested a need for further development or for clarity and emphasis; at the same time they have allowed room for the student to do it in his own way as a positive assignment rather than a punitive correction. We must remember how difficult it is to say anything about art in terms of its being correct or incorrect. The works of the masters are magnificent examples of failures to abide by their own laws. The world of art is the world of exceptions. The world of art is the world of the exceptional.

These attitudes can be put into practice through such class assignments as these: First, you might discuss with the students the writing of a short piece of music (about thirty seconds) that would describe how they feel, what they think, or how they react to something in their lives. This assignment might ask different things of each student. For instance, "Write a piece about the feeling you have when you ride your bicycle," "... about the windshield wipers on the bus in the rain," "... about the sounds that you hear as you wake up in the morning." As they begin to recall these experiences, have them consider the sound sources available. You might suggest that they select a limited number of sounds in order to focus their thinking and their translation of experiences into sound.

Many teachers are concerned about notation. The assignment should specify that the students are to write their pieces on paper, with a copy for each of the performers required; they are to indicate what the performers are to do by using any means of communication (notation) they choose. They don't have to use conventional music notation in the first assignment. In fact, it is preferable to avoid its use for two reasons: first, this removes any advantage that those who already know conventional notation may have over those who are unfamiliar with it, and second, it causes the students to think of ways in which they might best symbolize their musical intentions.

A discussion of the issues of musical prac-

tice must necessarily include how one is going to control the passage of time, the timbre of the sounds, and the selection of specific pitches. Discussions of these phenomena should deal specifically with the issue without indicating a special way in which to notate this information. I have found that students are able to create very interesting and ingenious systems of notation. The following are a few examples:

One student in my class used drawings of a face, a foot, and a hand to represent vocal, hand, and foot sounds. He allotted a specific duration of time to each vertical line on graph paper and used horizontal lines to indicate the duration of each sound.

Another student wrote a piece in which all the sounds were the same; he indicated their proportionate length by using the code "x = 1, y = 2 of 1, z = 3." This is a very sophisticated system in that it encompasses the two principal elements found in all rhythmic organizations of music—the group of two and the group of three.

Some students used numerals from 1 to 100 and simply drew a line through the appropriate numerals to indicate the sustained length of any sound. Some used a contour line to indicate the relative rise and fall of vocal noises. Others used an X above a line and an X below a line to indicate high and low hand-clapping noises; they used similar symbols for other effects.

After the pieces have been written down, the next important step is to perform them. Each piece that is written must be performed so that the adequacy of the notation can be determined and any problems can be corrected. For instance, many of the students did not include indications of speed or loudness. During the performances, it was discovered that some symbols were completely intelligible to the composer, but somewhat less so to the performer. We were then able to discuss the lack of specific meaning in certain symbols or the lack of a sufficient number of symbols to provide the essential information. At that time, standard music

examples were brought into the discussion, observed by the students, and compared with their own efforts.

Some of the notations used by my students are like those found in many avant-garde scores today. And filling in the vertical and horizontal squares on a piece of graph paper to indicate a limited rhythmic and melodic line is not unlike the notation of Gregorian chant. Making these comparisons was an interesting and important part of our discussions of the students' notations. After discussing the graph paper notation, we attempted to sing Gregorian notation. We also tried to perform avant-garde notation, using the limited resources and experience available at the time. The students soon realized that a more specific symbolic system was necessary for the accurate reproduction of their compositions, which led naturally into the study of traditional notation and music calligraphy.

We discussed the form of their pieces in very simple terms: "Did the piece interest us? . . . What was the major element of interest in the composition? . . . Was the interest in the piece sustained? . . . Were there any obvious flaws in the piece? . . . Did it end better than it started? . . . Or the reverse? . . . Was it successful except for the one spot where it seemed to fall apart and then recover itself? . . . Why do you think it fell apart? . . . What specifically caused that lapse? . . . What would you do to repair that spot? . . . Did you find the effort required to perform the work equal to the amount of enjoyment you received?"

Several things are at work in such a situation. A nebulous original stimulus has been translated into a specific musical idea and a specific musical symbolism, by which we can reproduce the original and preserve it. The exercise of the critical faculty, from both aesthetic and technical points of view, has been encouraged by this very simple, beginning effort. A situation of mutual concern for the successful realization of an idea on the part of the composer and the performer (a fellow student) has been evident.

Out of this combination of efforts and out of the personal point of view that is realized and revealed in the individual student's composition, we may come to know something about that student—something we might not discover through normal academic intercourse.

The object of such procedures is not to teach composition as an end in itself. The whole process of being able to translate one's musical impulses from any given stimulus into music notation suitable for specific understanding and performance can be a very important tool for every student of the arts. Getting involved with music by actually

manipulating the materials—the factors of time, pitch, loudness, timbre, and texture—into formally organized shapes can reveal a great deal to the student. He can be encouraged, by example, to observe how similar procedures and processes have been carried out in the hands of both the "masters" and other creators of music. There is a direct identification between the young person who has put onto paper his own thoughts, no matter how innocent or flawed, and the more experienced composers. After being shown an example in which Mozart solved a problem in order to achieve a small musical climax, many of my students who have solved the problem in the same way have said, "Mozart did that, too!"

The purpose of this kind of study is not only to deal with students of known gifts; another purpose of this combination of the creative act and the joy of pursuit is to discover the inherent creativity that is within every person. The degrees of achievement and accomplishment may vary, but these procedures and attitudes have been successful in teaching classes of students whose ages ranged from thirteen through nineteen and whose musical sophistication ranged from no previous instruction to considerable knowledge about music. This success has been possible because we have grappled with the idea of self-expression, have searched for tools to bring it about, and have discovered the intimate personality of each creative colleague.

The teacher's resources are his intellect, personality, sensibilities, sensitivity, commitment, willingness to risk himself, and courage to expose himself. If he can understand the nature of his own humanness, he may be able to understand the nature of the humanness in his students. The creative child could be any child. The teacher's responsibility may not be to separate those who are creative from those who are not, but rather to encourage all students to be creative, to enjoy the pursuit of creation, to believe in the possibility of achieving the impossible, to believe in themselves, and to express themselves in their own ways to the limits of their own knowledge and abilities at any given time. To decide that a certain child has a limited future is to shut off the teacher's opportunity to help him achieve a goal that is still unknown to both of them. The teacher should encourage and instruct every child as if it were possible for that child to reach the pinnacle of excellence in his own chosen field as well as that of the teacher. Every student must be encouraged to go "all the way" with the assurance that the teacher has done nothing to prevent it. Perhaps a major responsibility of the teacher is just staying out of the way. ▮