

MICHAEL COLGRASS: STUDENT INTERVIEW ON MUSIC EDUCATION

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COMPOSER INTERVIEW

HNP You pose a question in one of your workshops about what can be done, essentially, to keep music as a core part of the education. The argument I often hear is music benefits other classes and test scores, but doesn't stand on its own as a core subject. What's your counter-argument?

MC Music is the epitome of multi-tasking. Playing in a band or orchestra, children learn how to move their fingers correctly in systematic patterns on a musical instrument; gear their breathing to match the phrases they are playing; discriminate by ear between various pitches, playing them in tune and in rhythmic coordination with the other musicians around them; continually flick their eyes back and forth between the music and the conductor in order to follow non verbal instructions; and overcome their self-consciousness performing a demanding action on public display.

And all these coordinated efforts are directed to the sole purpose of expressing emotion. Only in music do we teach children a skill for expressing emotion visually, auditorily and kinaesthetically, and emphasize the importance of doing so.

Through performing on an instrument or singing in a chorus, children learn to work within a group. They also learn a new symbolic language, create synapses in the brain that could not be created any other way, build self-confidence and perhaps most important, they have fun.

No other subject, in or out of school, requires so many simultaneous actions, using both thought and feeling -- not math, not science, not language. When Johnny or Susie plays well we say, "They have talent." In fact most everyone has "talent." Johnny and Susie work very hard to play a musical instrument well, developing their powers of concentration and depth of perception as a result. In the process they learn that their emotion quotient (E.Q.) is equal in importance to their intelligence quotient (I.Q.).

Those are all good reasons, but most important to me is that music training prepares kids to enjoy great music to the fullest. How many subjects teach you how to enjoy something? We say that the goal of American life is "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But we get so caught up in materialism that we seldom have time to devote to pursuing happiness. Put simply, music makes you feel good while developing the best in you, and it does so in the most intriguing variety of ways. I can't think of a more valuable gift to give a child.

HNP With your way of having children illustrate sound through symbols... what age do you primarily use this for? At a certain point would it be more difficult to come up with a symbol versus using traditional notation?

MC Age 8-9 is a good time to start. Kids at this age love graphic notation, because it is a way to construct something out of the noises they usually make daily with their voices on the playground. The limitation of graphics is that they don't show exactly how high-low, loud-fast, short-long and thin-dense the sounds are. Then conventional notation comes into play and students are more interested in learning it. But with graphics the students have already experienced the concepts of form, structure and contrast -- not to mention a method of

learning how to improvise music -- and doing this with graphics enabled them to get the overall picture of musical creation very fast. (See my interview in the Music Educators Journal, called "Composers and Children: A New Creative Force?" about my working with teenagers who had done graphics extensively with me and wanted then to move on to writing with the specific pitches and rhythms of conventional notation).

What/who are your inspirations?

I have a multitude of inspiring models. First, jazz drummers and jazz in general when I was a teenager; then the great composers and their music when I studied at the university; also great novels, plays and movies.

And this might surprise you: women inspire me. All my life the people who have shown the most sympathy and understanding toward creativity have been the estrogen/progesterone sex, much more than the testosterone-driven beings. Most of the men in my youth were interested mainly in sex (bragging), sports (competing) and money (acquiring). They tend to treat the arts as a frill in life, whereas women tend to rate the arts high in importance and always encouraged me to create. And I just simply love feminine beauty -- and, to me, all women are beautiful in one form or another, which is very inspiring.

HNP Concerning Bali- do you think your two years living there provided you with enough time to absorb the culture and represent it accurately? The only reason I ask is that I'm also in a class talking about Bizet's Carmen, and how it's really a French interpretation of Gypsy music.

MC I had two summers in Bali. I had enough daily contact with their music to get it into my ear, which is all I really needed for my purposes. Balinese music is not complex and it is very repetitive and limited in rhythmic and tonal scope. "Bali" is a simple piece, more or less one-dimensional (except for the addition of the middle section which offers a contrasting dramatic element to the piece). Once you understand their tonal world almost anything you do with the five-tone scale will sound authentically Balinese.

Are there any elements of this composition that are crucial for a deeper understanding? I would point out the simplicity of the five-note scale: C-E-F-G-B. This scale is typical to Balinese music, especially from the Ubud area of Bali where I lived and where Canadian composer Colin McPhee lived and developed his cross-over Balinese-Western style of writing. Check out his "Tabu-Tabuhan," a wonderful piece for orchestra, which mixes the music of east and west.

HNP Considering your earlier work Old Churches through your newer pieces, what have you learned about your limits when composing for a band without the more advanced technical abilities of professional groups?

MC In my view, setting limitations is at the heart of creativity. The golden period of music -- the classical/Romantic period -- is based on the idea of using limited materials to get a result. Beethoven's 5th Symphony is a good example with an entire first movement based on a four-note rhythm. Once you set your limits you work within them, which helps you focus your ideas. Writing music with unlimited resources and material on the other hand can confuse, just like giving a speech or writing an essay with too many ideas can confuse the speaker or writer, not to mention the listener or reader. Writing for young band requires a composer to set very severe limits in almost all ways -- instrumental range, rhythm, counterpoint -- so that a composer's most basic musical abilities are challenged: how to write something interesting using less. At first I was flummoxed by the challenge because I, like most composers, was so used to writing

for unlimited resources. To write well for kids you need a good, simple musical idea -- usually some kind of melody -- and then to find imaginative ways to use that melody without simply having the whole band play the melody together, which is the cliché of most young band writing: endless doubling. I learned to satisfy my creative fantasy and find new ways to allow my imagination to run free within those limits. But this required a brand of thinking that I was not used to. I had to learn to use the bare minimum of the many techniques normally available to me when writing for professionals. But I learned something from doing that which can be applied to writing for the most experienced adult players: to return to the basic elements that make a piece of music strong. In fact, anyone can write something complex; the trick is writing something simple and still getting your message across.

HNP Do you think every musician should at some point in their career perform seriously before teaching or moving on?

MC Yes. I think music education students should be required to give a solo recital, just like performance majors. Additionally, I believe that every musician should be schooled in the writing of music, because that is the most basic way to understand music, whether you want to play it, teach it or analyze it. I don't mean all musicians should become composers, but they should have the experience of creating as well as performing so they can understand music from the inside out.