

# COMPOSERS AND CHILDREN: A FUTURE CREATIVE FORCE?

By MICHAEL COLGRASS

I recently had one of the most enlightening—and somewhat embarrassing—experiences of my professional career as a composer, which gave me a new understanding of the relationship between the composer and the middle school music teacher. I was commissioned, along with 14 other composers by the American Composers Forum BandQuest project to write a short piece for eighth grade band. As part of the commission, we were asked to pay a couple of visits to a nearby school to work with the children on the piece of music. My school was the Winona Drive Senior School in Toronto. When I had some early sketches for my piece I visited the school. The band director, Louis Papachristos, introduced me to the students and I handed out the parts for them to read through.

I talked about the piece for a few minutes and then started conducting. There was no sound, or perhaps I should say no sound that I recognized as any I'd written. I heard wheezes, sputterings and honks that I didn't know instruments could make. I stopped and gave a few instructions on how to play what I had written. As I started to resume conducting, a sweet girl playing oboe looked up innocently and asked, "May I look at my fingering chart?"

Feeling helpless I looked at Mr. Papachristos who smiled sheepishly and shrugged. We struggled for a while more through my sketches, the students very respectful and doing their best. Afterward, in a state of shock, I talked with the band director. He pointed out that some of the things I had written were simply outside the children's experience and showed me how I might make my ideas work. He told me that, for example, solos are risky because 11-12 year-olds are very self-conscious about playing alone in front of others. Also, that a range of approximately an octave was an advisable limit; that step-wise scale patterns are technically the easiest to play; and that children feel most confident when passages are strongly doubled.

I was stymied. I wanted to write a piece that was better than most of the children's band music I had heard. But here I found that most of the technical means normally available to me were being cut off. I was used to writing music that requires a variety of instrumental techniques. In fact, my experience had been mostly with professionals who could play virtually anything I wrote. How could I now write a piece that would satisfy me as a composer and still meet the needs of these young beginning musicians?

My first reaction was to rationalize: After all, they're children. What can you expect when they can hardly even play in tune? But I knew that was an excuse. The truth was, I could write complex, highly demanding pieces, but I simply didn't know how to write interestingly for amateur musicians, let alone 12 year-olds. I was the one out of tune—I didn't know how to meet the requirements of this project.

My thoughts went to composers like Monteverdi and Bach and Vivaldi, who made a living writing for inexperienced musicians, amateurs in fact. And it sounded beautiful. How did they do that? Could I write music for eighth-graders who had been playing their instruments for perhaps 1-2 years and make it sound good? And if I couldn't, what did that say about me as a composer?

That's when I jumped out of the pan into the fire.

I got the idea of composing a piece with graphic notation. Instead of conventional notation, which requires specific rhythms and pitches, I could write abstract shapes, like wavy lines and

dots that expressed musical sounds and shapes, and have the students perform them. I had done this before with children, because music written in graphic notation is easy to create and easy to sing. You don't have to know all the scales and intervals and rhythms because you are, in effect, making up your own sounds inspired by the images.

Armed with what I thought was a sure-fire solution to my problem, I asked the players in the band to create a graphic piece together on the blackboard and sing it. They did this with ease and enjoyed it. Then I asked them all to write a piece of their own and bring it in for our next workshop. Three days later we went through the pieces they brought in, singing our way through each one as the writer of each piece directed the performance. They were getting a feel for the creative process, seeing that they too could compose, however basic and primitive their beginning soundscapes might be. As we made more graphic pieces in the following days they got better and better at the process. This was getting exciting. Maybe my band piece could be a graphic piece we would all write together!

Soon we formed the Composition Team, made up of eight band members who were particularly talented at creating these abstract musical landscapes. We learned which graphics sounded best when we sung them and which were easiest to teach someone else to sing--the basic job of being a composer. The children were tackling the same basic shapes and structures that professional composers do, creating little pieces with a beginning, middle and end. We worked this way for a few weeks, always singing what we wrote.

Now I ran into the big snag.

We had been singing these pieces with success. But when it was time for the band for them to play them on their instruments we ran into trouble. Children have considerable control over their voices. They can whoop, hiss, whisper, call out, swoop from the bottom of their voice to the top (just listen to the operatic cacophony on any playground at recess), but playing those sounds with the same freedom and control on their instruments was a completely different story. They simply had never had the experience of playing random pitches and rhythms freely on their instruments.

It was now very clear to me that we needed to train the band members in playing these graphic symbols on their instruments--not just singing them--with private coaching, home practice and, as the band director emphasized, individual testing. This coaching wouldn't take long, but it would have to be concentrated. [Two or three weeks] One month would probably be enough. But we had run out of time. Christmas was around the corner and the band had to prepare for its holiday concert.

Now the members of the Comp Team suggested that, in order to get some music the band could play and that would sound good, we use conventional notation in our pieces, at least part of the time. But this would mean learning how to write out a score. I anguished over the technical knowledge of orchestration they would need to do that, but finally decided to take them through the longer, but more specific, process of scoring music with normal notation. Three of the students were particularly eager, so under my close guidance and with a lot of overtime, we created three short notated scores.

But now project time was over, and my initial plan to create and perform a graphic piece had not been accomplished. And there was no time left to practice the notated pieces. I had spent five months at the school, going in two and three times a week! Was it too late to coach the band members on playing graphics on their instruments? As it turned out, it would require re-learning, because the children were already set on a "right and wrong" way of playing an

instrument. This new idea of just playing freely was foreign to their whole idea of music-making and they felt awkward and self-conscious about it.

In terms of time, this was an expensive lesson. When I finally understood how we could have created and successfully performed a sophisticated graphic piece within a relatively short time--probably three or four weeks--it was too late. My naivete and inexperience with middle school bands had made me ineffective as a composer. The five months at the Winona Drive Senior School was probably more of an education for me than for the band members.

And learn I did. The knowledge I had gained about how children approach playing instruments made it possible for me to write a piece that met my standards as a professional and theirs as beginners. My idea was to write a piece based on Gregorian Chant, because those melodic lines are simple and elegant and are by tradition doubled. Group unison would sound stylistically appropriate and the students could feel secure playing them. I could even incorporate some graphic notation. For example, I used one technique I called the "murmuring effect," where they play any notes they want as fast as possible and very softly in the low register of their instruments, which suggests monks praying. And I used a collage effect without bar lines, with a number of instruments playing the same melody separately, freely overlapping each other, creating a montage of sound. So the piece combined both traditional and modern techniques that the children could easily play. I called the piece Old Churches.

When this project was over, The American Composers forum videotaped a day of interviews and rehearsals, replicating the whole process we had gone through. What had the students learned? One of the kids from the Comp Team made the point--and the others agreed--that graphic notation should be the first training a child receives on an instrument, because it is "goof-proof." With this method of exploring an instrument freely, a child learns to have fun with music and not become overly preoccupied with playing the right notes and rhythms. This free exploration of a musical instrument tends to give children much needed confidence and also opens the door to the idea of improvising. Later, when conventional notation is introduced, it is less intimidating. An analogy would be letting children play in a pool for a while before giving them swimming lessons.

What did I learn as a composer? Overall, I would say it was a lesson in humility.

I was reminded that music can have intellectual interest and convey emotion without being complicated. Stripping my music down to the bare essentials--highly limited range, few if any solos, no virtuoso flourishes or grand effects--challenged my imagination and sense of fantasy. As an extra bonus, I found the contact with children stimulating and fun, a healthy counterbalance to the solitary existence we composers sometimes lead.

My experience here was with young band, but this project opened my eyes to the larger subject of professional composers writing for children in general--band, orchestra, chorus, any and all musical groups. When I reflect on the whole experience, I ask myself: Since writing for young musicians is such a valuable experience for composers, why don't more top professional composers do it? One obvious answer is that having a new piece of music played at your local elementary school is not as glamorous as a premiere with a symphony orchestra or professional chamber ensemble. But there are other reasons. Our conservatories and university composition programs simply don't ask the composition major to write for children. Nor do they train composers in the art of writing for amateurs in general. Composers learn highly sophisticated techniques playable only by virtuoso musicians and often performed for highly specialized audiences.

So what can be done to improve this situation? I think the answer lies in cooperation from both sides of the fence—from the composition professors and composers and from the primary and secondary school teachers and music directors. Let's take one at a time.

To those who run the conservatory and university composition programs, I would recommend that you require each student composer to write at least one piece for a young chorus, orchestra or band as part of his/her creative musical education. First, the student composers should carefully research the needs and requirements involved in writing a good piece for that level. Every composer knows that writing music within strict limitations is stimulating to creativity. We study Beethoven symphonies and admire the way he based a whole movement on a single motif. Haydn and Beethoven both wrote comparatively easy music for their patrons to play—that's how the piano trio came into existence, as a medium initially created for amateurs. And Bach's weekly job was writing for church singers.

But how many of our best composers write for amateurs today? Generally, the only works composers write for children are solo piano pieces for training purposes. While some very good works have been written for children's bands, choruses and orchestras, the goal of too many composers who write for children is primarily pragmatic, placing function ahead of aesthetics. The great masters of the past were able to do both—write pieces that worked and were also great music. How often can we say that about music being written for children today? Today's composers need to develop the skills to shape a musical idea with emotional content in a simple way that a young musician can play or sing. As a supposedly well-trained and experienced composer, I found writing music for middle school band was virtually outside my capability.

The directors of middle and high school band, string and symphony orchestra, and choruses could help greatly to expand the repertory by contacting the local university music school or conservatory and talking to the composition teachers. Tell them you are interested in new compositions for children and would be happy to work with the student composers, educating them on the needs of young musicians. Encourage them to create special projects for student composers that would acquaint them with the technical requirements of writing for children. We're talking here about taking perhaps four to six weeks out of a four-year program for such a project. I think many composers and their teachers may feel that elementary and secondary school music is something that just "takes care of itself," and that music teachers are not particularly interested in new music by symphonic composers.

In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth, but I had to be connected to that world by the BandQuest project to find out that music educators are delighted at the idea of meeting composers and trying out new works. Mr. Papachristos welcomed me on this project and gave me all the time I asked for. And he said he learned some techniques in the process that he would like to use in training youngsters. Composers and teachers need to connect and create a link, and the initial thrust for this alliance can come from either side.

What prevents teachers from commissioning professional composers directly? Dan Albert, band director at the Williams Middle School in Longmeadow Massachusetts, recently drummed up grant money from an organization called the Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation, who commissioned me to write a work for the middle school bands in their area. Albert's enthusiasm inspired me and I set to work using my newfound skills. I ended up writing three pieces, one each for their two middle school bands and one for high school.

And we did a graphic notation music creativity project as well, but this time I did it right. I took all the teachers of the Longmeadow schools through the graphic notation idea, this time also

including the admonition that the student instrumentalists be trained in playing graphic notation markings. Michael Mucci, band and orchestra director at Longmeadow High School, carried this idea the furthest and had his students come up with student compositions for band and orchestra that they not only composed but also conducted on the concert along with my commissioned pieces.

Imaginative works for children will be published and performed widely, even by college and professional bands. Publishers would be happy to know that our best composers are interested in writing for young musicians. As it stands, publishers provide stock fare to the schools, music that is easy to execute but often emotionally superficial. If our top composers became interested, publishers would be happy to provide them with helpful guidelines for the different levels of children's music

By working with music educators, composers might also become more involved in defending our music education system. Sweeping cutbacks to music in schools threaten the very heart of the music profession. Collectively, composers could be a force for better music education, which is where the audiences of the future are created.

The aim of the BandQuest project is to raise the standards of children's experience with music by creating first-rate music for young students and thereby adding a new dimension to their education. Most of these children will not become professional musicians, but as music lovers and taxpayers they will one day be asked whether the arts are worth paying for. Their taste for music could well be swayed by early personal experience with a composer or composition student. What a wonderful notion.

### **Suggestions for Teachers**

Apply for grants to fund professional composers to write for your band, chorus or orchestra. Listen to their music and tell them what about their music appeals to you. This lets them know you're serious.

Contact the composition departments of nearby universities or colleges and invite the composition students and teachers to attend your school concerts.

Talk to prominent high school, university and conservatory ensemble conductors who have successfully commissioned works and ask for their guidance.

Encourage music schools to teach music education majors to write music and perform it as a required part of their education.

### **Suggestions for Composers**

Tell your composition teacher you want to learn something about writing music for children, and do a project for credit.

Listen to the highest-quality pieces for middle school ensembles and use them as models. If you don't know what to listen to, ask your university wind ensemble or band director for help.

Contact a middle school band, chorus or orchestra director and ask for technical guidelines on writing for their ensembles-ranges, rhythm and interval limitations, etc.

Visit the school and meet the ensemble you want to write for. Bring a sketch and try it out. Be sure to invite feedback from the teacher.

## **Suggestions for Music Education Programs**

Allow more time for music education majors to practice teaching children.

Require music education majors to write music, and to perform and conduct the music of their colleagues.

Require music education majors to play in wind ensemble and orchestra and sing in the chorus.

*For more information on the American Composers Forum and their BandQuest program contact:*

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