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Children's Creativity and the Symphony Orchestra: Can They Be Brought Together?

by

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Children's Creativity and the Symphony Orchestra: Can They Be Brought Together?

Hang on to your hat! You are about to take a ride with Jon Deak: composer, New York Philharmonic bassist, teacher. Deak, who deems it important that musicians make themselves creatively available to the next generation, had a notion that young children could compose directly for the symphony orchestra. He has invested six years in working with grade school students to do just that.

The author shares in detail the discoveries he made about children's creativity as he worked with students in New York and Denver. Some readers may recall Jon's Meet the Composer residency with the Colorado Symphony, the Colorado Children's Chorale, and the Denver Public Schools which was chronicled in the September-October 1996 issue of Symphony magazine.

Examples of the Process

Deak then turns his attention to an explanation of the process he uses as he works with a class. From the simple beginning of one instrument and four sounds, the class moves toward a completed composition.

The way he approaches notation with students who may or may not yet read music is fascinating. The examples of compositions written by children age ten and under tell the story quite graphically. He also explains how children instinctively discover rules of harmony.

Our ride with Jon Deak ends on the stage of the New York Philharmonic. Read on to learn the details.

Children's Creativity and the Symphony Orchestra: Can They Be Brought Together?

Let me put this question more succinctly: Can children compose directly for the symphony orchestra? After six years in the trenches—the classrooms and concert halls, the boardrooms, homes, and playgrounds—I can answer resoundingly: yes, yes, yes!

The time for the “Very Young Composer” is now, and my hope in writing this article is that it will serve as an introduction to the subject, and be merely the first in a series to which others will contribute.

The subject is vast, important, even urgent. And fun. One mustn't forget that. I've had the time of my life watching miracles of creativity unfold from the hearts of children ages five to eighteen. (For the purposes of this article, I'll be talking primarily about grade school children, ages eight through eleven.) I can't possibly express here the look of joy on a child's face as she hears an orchestra perform something for which she composed every note herself.

“I've had the time of my life watching miracles of creativity unfold from the hearts of children ages five to eighteen.”

Actually, my main, “ulterior,” motives in pursuing this activity are at least threefold:

- ◆ First, we get to hear, as purely as possible, what goes on in a child's mind musically—often ideas that would never occur to a professional, and sometimes downright magic.
- ◆ Second, the child himself is allowed to express deep emotions usually not accessible or even “allowed” until much later as an adult, if then.
- ◆ And last, the symphony orchestra, or concert band, or jazz band, or chamber ensemble, benefits most importantly from having made itself creatively available to the next generation. For, despite our best and most inspired efforts, the repertoire of the orchestra—even the “new” music we play—remains rather authoritarian and distant from the child (not to mention even from many adults).

While it is true that we need our symphonic tradition of discipline and scholarship, you don't have to hold a Ph.D. to be creative!

How I Became Involved

Not too many years ago, I was sponsored by the Cary Trust and Marin Alsop's Concordia Orchestra to go into P.S. 3, Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn to work with children. I need to state at the outset that I have no formal training as an educator, and my hat is permanently off to the professionals in this field. All the school music teachers with whom I have worked in New York, Denver, Chicago, Vermont, and other places have been dedicated, skilled, overworked, and underpaid.

Anyway, as I entered the halls of this brave but struggling school, I was immediately struck by the blazing creativity of its children. The walls were lined, end-to-end, with beautiful examples of children's artwork. In fact, I realized that all my life I'd seen children's visual art, painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, prose fiction valued as creative means of expression . . . and concerts. Concerts of music by adults, or at least arranged for by adults. (That, after all, was what I was going to this school to do.)

Where was *children's* music? In fact, what *is* children's music? Standing there at that moment, I had to confess I had no idea. Was it "Mary Had A Little . . .?" Hmm. Was it Mozart or Mendelssohn? Not really, unless we expect our kids to become all-time supergeniuses. . . . Raffi? Disney? No. . . .

Looking again at the profound, free, beautiful artwork around me, I could see that, at least at this early, uninhibited age, no adult editing or restricting whatsoever was needed here. Nothing intruded itself between the child and his painting except a pot of paints and a brush.

"It hit me that the apparently insurmountable barrier blocking child composers was . . . notation!"

Yes! That's it! It hit me that the apparently insurmountable barrier blocking child composers was not academic knowledge, not decades of ear-training (children have marvelously sensitive ears), not even lack of knowledge about the instruments of the orchestra, since that could be overcome somehow, or so I felt at the time; the problem was . . . notation! Ha! (I may have even laughed out loud.) Notation? Big deal. I could do that myself. Let me be the paintbrush! Let my musician colleagues in the orchestra be the palette of paints!

I immediately (or so it seemed) went to John Duffy of Meet The Composer and told him, naively, breathlessly that I'd thought of a way I could enable ordinary children to write directly for the symphony orchestra. In reality, I had no idea what I was talking about. I'd never faced a class of school kids in my life, except at the Interlochen Arts Academy many years before, where I felt I'd not done the best for them, even though I liked the kids. After Meet The Composer told me to wait in line with hundreds of other applicants, I

went on bended knee to the New York Philharmonic, my valued employer and beloved artistic job of more than 20 years, to try to sell the idea of an extended leave of absence to the music director, Kurt Masur. In the end, he agreed to the concept of my trying out this idea with Marin Alsop and the Colorado Symphony, with the aim of bringing it back to New York.

The management worked out a one-year unpaid leave, to be spread over three years (the required term of the Meet The Composer residency), which meant that I shuttled back and forth from New York to Denver every two weeks, 52 weeks a year. It was an unprecedented arrangement, for which I was grateful, but it was no bargain for me, nor for my family (my children were then six, five, and three). But I was off on a quest, and I will forever be grateful to both Meet The Composer and the New York Philharmonic for making it possible.

Children's Art? How Cute! (Ugh!)

I can't tell you how many times a day I hear the above comment in some form. I've begun to hear it as a biased slur. (The "Ugh!" is my reaction.) Why, indeed, children's art? Of course, to really answer would take me beyond the scope of this article. But I must comment: children's art is not only beautiful and honest, it is deep.

If you don't believe me, go look at Picasso. Or Paul Klee. Or Jean Dubuffet and a score of other artists of this past century who appropriated children's art—not to mention "primitive" art—to glorify their own careers. Why is it suddenly a great idea because Picasso does it? I'm not trying to put these artists down. They were onto something. To this day, psychologists and others make entire careers out of interpreting the meanings and values in children's art. Such composers as Ravel, Berg, Prokofiev, Britten, Corigliano, and many others unquestionably understood the depth of the child, at least the child in themselves. But in the end, what interests me here is not the "inner child," nor interpreting or reformulating the child. I'm interested in . . . the child.

"Such composers as Ravel, Berg, Prokofiev, Britten, Corigliano, and many others unquestionably understood the depth of the child, at least the child in themselves."

First Attempts in Denver

I will never forget going into Horace Mann Middle School in northwest Denver. "What am I doing here?" I yelled at myself. "I'm not even a teacher. I should be back at home composing!" I couldn't control the students. I had a sloppy, changeable curriculum. And even the resident music teacher couldn't figure out what I was getting at. But somehow, when it came time for the kids to put their pieces together so that the all-city high school orchestra could perform them . . . well . . . miracles happened. Keith (age 12) and Matt (age 14) even conducted their pieces, a scary experience for each, but it seemed to temper them for further risk-taking in the realm of performing art.

“The look he gave me at that moment I will remember until my dying day. I could never hope to describe it, but I think it had something to do with permission and forgiveness.”

And George. George went eight weeks in the class without producing anything except some self-derogatory comments. Finally, in a long private session, I asked him if he hated the class. He answered that I wouldn't like what he had to say musically because it was ugly. How ugly? “This ugly!” And he played the ugliest chord he could play on his cello, which he couldn't play very well, anyway. It did sound pretty awful. I nodded, and asked him to play that again. He played the same thing. And again. OK, I said, that's your first note. What's next? The look he gave me at that moment I will remember until my dying day. I could never hope to describe it, but I think it had something to do with permission and forgiveness. The piece that he then worked out completely by himself for string orchestra (I helped as a sort of scribe) had more depth, dialogue, and compassion than many a professional piece I've heard. It came out conceptually

along the lines of the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto where the piano tames the “wild beasts” of the orchestra. And I know that this boy had barely even heard of Beethoven, let alone this concerto.

In one class, I tried working with synthesizers. I have temporarily discontinued this, not because I disapprove of the idea, of course, but because I found that at the early stages, the students got results so quickly that they were overwhelmed by the technology, and their own ideas were submerged by it, much as some older kids become fixated by the “top 40,” and stop listening to themselves. I know that there are excellent composing programs in existence, but for now, I need these kids to work with the simple, immediate focus of what they hear in the silence of their own heads, with a pencil and with a blank piece of music paper, or even just blank paper, period, since many of the young composers don't really even read music.

I should add here that, in fact, John Corigliano, Morton Subotnik, and a host of others have developed highly effective ways of working with children composers. In addition, Meet The Composer and Young Audiences have collaborated to sponsor a program in which I've participated called “Compose Yourself!,” which brings composers of widely varying backgrounds and approaches into the public schools.

Examples of the Process

By now, as you read this, you probably have many questions. I know. I still have them myself, perhaps more than ever. In fact, if there is one guiding principle I've learned from this process, it is that there is no principle, there is no method, no set procedure. Each child learns at a different pace, in a different way, toward a different end. Each child is unique and precious. Hmmm . . . that is sort of a principle isn't it! I've found that if I take each child seriously as *an artist*, she will

regard herself this way. Not to disparage math class, or science, or English literature, but when it comes to the kind of class I'm talking about, the fun of it is that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. Everything and anything is possible. Eeeyow!

My typical elementary-school class is made up of grades three through five, children ages eight through eleven. You can imagine the effect on the kids when I tell them that I will be treating them as adults, that there is no such thing as a wrong answer or a stupid question, and that as long as you treat him with respect, there isn't anything you can't ask a professional musician to do, including playing right along with him.

I find it hard to choose which students get into a class such as this. Often I've worked with whole "homeroom" classes of up to 30 public-school children. If the class is to be an after-school elective, I just tell the principal, or whoever is doing the selection, to give us the kids who "color outside the lines" when they do homework, as well as ones who have the time to take the class seriously. I do not require the ability to read music. I also don't mind rebels, or kids with attention deficit disorder, or special education children. Some of them have outrageously wonderful imaginations. Yes, if possible, I will work with an assistant or an associate, which always helps in extending the effectiveness of a class and addressing problems.

"I do not require the ability to read music. I also don't mind rebels, or kids with attention deficit disorder, or special education children."

There is a place for improvisation and a place for written composition, and I value both. I suppose, since my background is symphonic, and since I regard a concert performance of some sort as a valuable goal and focus of energy for a class, that I will spend more class time to that end, but I still find group and individual improvisation essential, and great fun, besides. As a class moves toward a culminating performance, however, I love to spend as much time as possible with each student individually. I've been told that this method is impossibly labor-intensive, but, hey, ask any composer if composition is anything but labor-intensive. In fact, ask any student or teacher how much time is spent on any science project, research project, class play, or choral concert. They are all labor-intensive.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, and need to describe a typical class procedure, more for the purpose of answering questions than for setting any guidelines. Ideally, a class of 15 to 20 students meets once a week after school, for a semester. The culminating event may be a performance by an all-city high school band, a conservatory orchestra, or an ensemble of, say, eight professional musicians, perhaps including some of the young composers performing their own music along with the professionals.

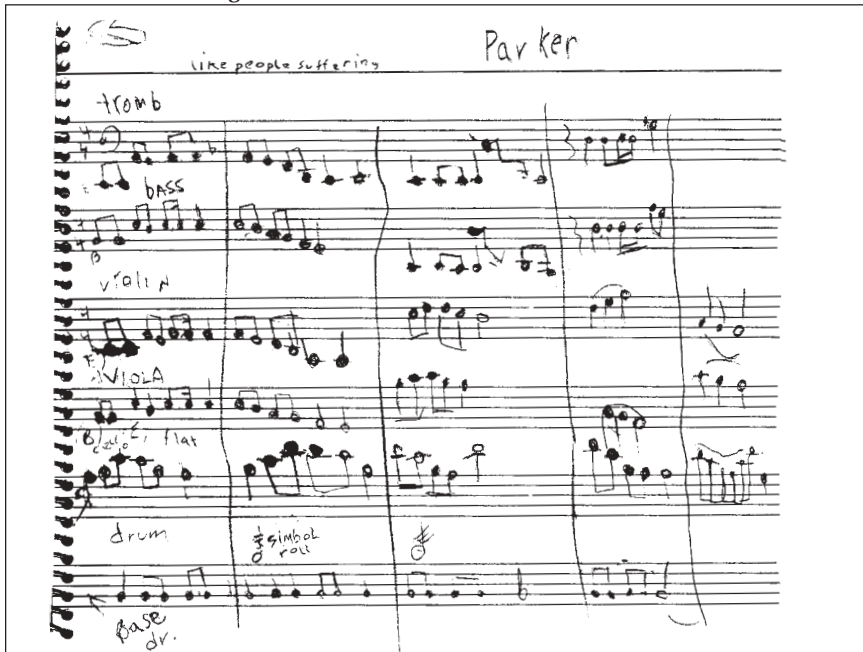
In the first week, we might focus on the flute. We'll have a brief discussion, use a simple handout describing the instrument, and play a tape. (I try to avoid too many recordings.) The assignment will be to simply imagine a minimum of four sounds you want the flute to play and to somehow write that down. In

“Notation? Yes, part of the fun is interpreting the child's notation, which can range anywhere along a line from near professional to a fantasy of swirls, syllables, and pictures.”

week two, a flutist joins the class, introduces herself, plays a short demonstration of the instrument, and proceeds to the main event: interpreting the students' compositions. The entire class listens, watches, interacts with each classmate's piece as it is played. This is almost invariably fun—even riotously fun—for both class and flutist. The kids, of course, will always write more than four sounds. (The only people, in fact, who ever follow that four-sound instruction have been in my adult classes!) Toward the end of the class time, the next week's instrument is introduced as above, and that is how the course proceeds.

Notation? Yes, part of the fun is interpreting the child's notation, which can range anywhere along a line from near professional to a fantasy of swirls, syllables, and pictures. It is also true that the visiting instrumentalist needs a healthy amount of patience, humor, and simple care for just what it is that the child is trying to

Illustration 1. Parker, age 10.



communicate. And, as an aside, I might say that not all of the miracles occur in the juvenile department; I have hired more than one professional musician who has come in stiff, contemptuous, and authoritarian, and in the process of helping uncover nascent music, been utterly disarmed and transported.

What, for example, would a musician make of a child's manuscript?

It might be in standard notation (Illustration 1);

Or it might be an utterly original graphic (Illustration 2);

It may be fanciful and story-telling (Illustration 3);

Illustration 2. Agnieszka, age 10.

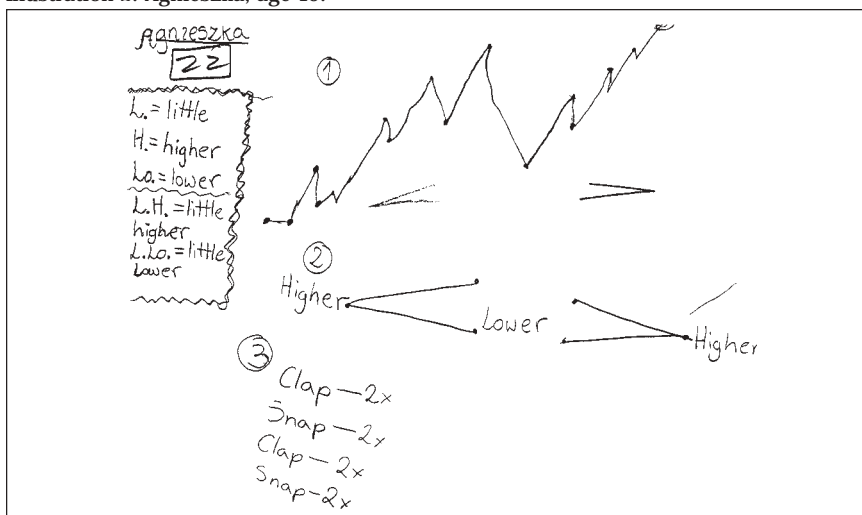


Illustration 3. Caitlin, age 7.



It may show development during the course of the class (Illustration 4);
And some children, of course, write out their own scores (Illustration 5).

But the general point is, since the child takes the work seriously, so should we. Every note that a child writes is precious.

The last example might prompt a question: Music theory, counterpoint, and orchestration are such complex subjects that even great composers continue to study them all their lives. How can we expect a child, who has trouble locating

Illustration 4. Leo, age 10.

December 1998

March 1999

The illustration shows two handwritten musical staves. The top staff is dated December 1998 and contains a single line of music in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is dated March 1999 and contains two staves of music: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Both staves have a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The notation is simple, using quarter and eighth notes, rests, and a double bar line. There are lightning bolt symbols at the end of the first staff and the second treble staff. The name 'Leo' is written in the center and to the right of the staves.

Illustration 5. Selena, age 9.

cresc.

violin and viola and trumpet and base and percussion.
Hit with metal

TITLE: ther andrizzle

By Selena

violin solo
viola solo
string
trumpet solo

loud and hard solo
cymbal
drum solo
loud and hard
harp

violin solo
bass solo

drum and trumpet together

END of my PIECE

The illustration shows a handwritten musical score on a spiral notebook page. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is heavily annotated with handwritten text in various colors and styles, providing instructions for different instruments and sections. The text includes 'cresc.', 'violin and viola and trumpet and base and percussion. Hit with metal', 'TITLE: ther andrizzle', 'By Selena', 'violin solo', 'viola solo', 'string', 'trumpet solo', 'loud and hard solo', 'cymbal', 'drum solo', 'loud and hard', 'harp', 'violin solo', 'bass solo', 'drum and trumpet together', and 'END of my PIECE'. There are also some symbols like a lightning bolt and an 'x' at the end of the score.

middle "C" on the piano, to navigate through all this and write for an ensemble, let alone an entire orchestra? Indeed, even seconds after I say out loud that the money-back guarantee is that the children have written every note of what the audience just heard, I get the inevitable questions. "Yes, but who did the arranging? Who wrote the actual music? What I just heard sounds like an orchestra. I took eight years of piano lessons, and I could never do that!" And the answer is, of course: "Oh, yes you could."

As to how children do it, I don't really know. I'm working with an associate right now, a fine composer named Melissa Shiflett, who just yesterday said to me, "Jon, I don't understand how these kids are doing this. You just give them an assignment and they come back with all these wonderful little pieces, for more and more instruments now, playing together. It seems like a kind of magic." Well put, Melissa. It certainly is, and it renews my faith in the human spirit every time we have a class or an individual session. (Well, sometimes we do have really rotten days, it's true.) But the kind of "magic" we're talking about here is not like seances, or *Wingardium Leviosa!* (for you Harry Potter fans), or talking to the dearly departed. When you think about it, you can see how it's possible.

Take music theory. How can children know the rules of harmony? I allow them to develop their own, instinctively, as they feel the need. I am inspired by Leonard Bernstein, who said that as a small child he developed his own names and language for chords: "governing chord" and "vice-governing chord" for dominant and sub-dominant. Bernstein's genius aside, I thought to widen that to the sheer experiential colors of chords.

For example, when I was young (and decidedly not a genius!) I heard a strange chord just by itself in the introduction to Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, asked my piano teacher to play it for me (it turned out to be an augmented triad), and played it endlessly with the pedal pushed down, imagining that my house had become a space ship, gliding over the sand dunes of northern Indiana. Was I so unusual? Hardly, I think. So I thought: what do other kids hear in these intervals, these triads? Sure enough, when I play, for example, a major triad in various keys on the piano, or as arpeggios on my bass, I get widely varying responses, usually (not always) exhibiting a trend: "a sunny day" (high register), "a sunset" (low register). But also, "hard." "A wedding." "Teeth." Or even "hate"! Remember, there are no wrong answers.

One of my favorite responses to a high register diminished triad was: "My cat scratching the furniture." And to the low register: "And now he's scratching it down near the rug!" What fun this game is! Do we honestly think that children do not go through incredibly complex emotional responses to music? And that this is not retained on some cellular level deep in the wordless parts of their minds? Kids just need permission to use these feelings, in an atmosphere of respect from their peers and teachers. But that is the subject for a book, not this article.

For the mechanics of getting down on paper the composition from a child who does not know standard notation, I follow a simple rule of thumb: If the child can sing, hum, tap, clap, play on a recorder, keyboard, or other instrument something three times in a row the same way, I'll write it down. They soon realize I'm taking them seriously, and a focus will take place in even the most attention-deficit-disordered child. (Indeed, it is in precisely these children that this quality appears most strikingly.) If the students don't tell me what octave to put the trumpet in, it doesn't go in at all. "Make the trumpet play this note, where it sounds like it's growling at you." OK. Now we're talking. But how loud? How long? And no multiple-choice answers, either. Kids, as any of us, can easily deny their own judgements in the presence of professionals and say, "Yeah. Like the one you just said."

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The line between enabling and spoon-feeding is tricky to perceive, just as is the temptation to edit, rather than leave alone. How many times have I had to bite my tongue not to say to a child, "It would sound so much better if you just . . ."? And how many times have I breathed a sigh of relief that I resisted, because what the child came up with was so much more fresh and original than what I, knowing the "rules" would have done.

The Colorful Variations and a Conclusion, of Sorts.

Even before I completed the Denver residency, I'd begun to take the ideas of kids composing around to other locales and to New York, as was intended in the agreement with the Philharmonic. Back in Denver, the Colorado Symphony had performed at least one work by a very young composer each year. The citywide and critical reactions to this music were very warm (particularly those of Marc Shulgold of the *Rocky Mountain News*, a father himself).

But I don't think even I realized what was going on until October 16, 1999. On that date, on the stage of Avery Fisher Hall, during a New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert, 14 students from P.S. 199, ages 8 to 11, sat with their legs dangling off the downstage lip. They represented possibly the youngest composers in the 157-year history of the New York Philharmonic whose compositions were played by the orchestra.

Yes, there was Mozart, I said, but he never showed up for rehearsals. With the help of Polly Kahn and Tom Cabaniss of the Philharmonic, and the staff of P.S. 199, I mentored these students, as they wrote a theme-and-variations piece which they themselves entitled "The Colorful Variations." It was a lot of work. They supported each other, fought and cheered each other on, as a team. Yes, they wrote every note, and yet the look of awe and delight on each child's face

as he or she raised a hand when his or her variation was being played was something I later learned had moved many in the audience beyond the parents to tears. The symphony orchestra had suddenly been made accessible to these children, and to every child in that audience.

Jon Deak is a well-known composer, and associate principal bassist and creative education associate with the New York Philharmonic. He is also a member of the Symphony Orchestra Institute's Board of Advisors. Jon attended Oberlin College, holds a bachelor's degree from the Juilliard School, and a master's degree from the University of Illinois. As a Fulbright Scholar, he completed his graduate study at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome.