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TEACHING FOR CREATIVITY IN MUSIC PERFORMANCE

By allowing students to explore musical interpretation, not just tunings and fingerings, teachers encourage young musicians to realize creative possibilities.

BY DAVID GRAHAM

Traditionally, the focus of music education has been on performance, theory, and music history, with the dominant emphasis being on performance. Most of us probably spend the majority of our class time teaching techniques of performance. Are we, in the process, also teaching towards creativity in performance? Consider that when we ourselves attend a concert or listen to a recording, we usually comment not only on the technique of the performers, but on their creativity in interpretation. We expect our favorite performers to express their soul and speak to ours through their interpretation. But do we carry this focus into our classroom activities, or are we stifling the souls of our students by neglecting to help them explore their own creative potential of expression through interpretation?

Do we treat our students like ciphers, offering them only a “tape recorder” approach to performance where they must always mimic exactly what we want and remain unaware of the interpretive options open to performers. If so, we must change this. We must work towards a point where

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teachers and students spontaneously discuss interpretation and interpretive choices, rather than just tuning and fingerings. Then our students will more fully realize and explore the possibilities of creativity in performance. To pursue this goal effectively, we must become more aware of the roles and the balance of creativity and technique in performance.

Creativity in Music Performance

In music, one of the first questions to be asked in an examination of creativity is this: Are we acknowledging

creativity or technical mastery when we judge outstanding musicians as creative geniuses?¹ Delving into this question makes us realize that although music is an art of creation (that is, composers are creating when they compose), its performance is also an art of re-creation. Performers of music are involved in a process of interpretation, which is in essence an act of re-creating.² In this re-creation, the performers are taking the framework, the written score of music or, in some cases, their aural memory of a previous performance (this is especially so in folk music), and creating what is, in a sense, a new composition within the framework provided by the original composer.³ But, at what point in this act of interpretation does creativity become an aspect of this process?⁴

Tradition and Creativity

The performer carries within him or her an acquired accumulation of experience with the musical traditions on which any performance is based. These traditions create expectations for the performance. These expectations are also held by the listeners, relative to their experience with the music traditions. This ground of expectations for both the performer and the listener is complimentary and serves as the basis on which the performer makes interpretive decisions.

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Music has been described as a series of tension-relief events. The tension of a dissonance is relieved by its resolution to a more consonant sound, that is, to a harmony containing a relative absence of tension. A composer might place an unexpected chord in a phrase, creating a tension brought about by the element of surprise. A performer might, after establishing a tempo, create a tension of anticipation by hesitating momentarily before continuing in that tempo; then by continuing in the original tempo, he or she can cause the release of the tension that had been created by the digression from the expected pattern. However, to do this effectively, a musician must work from a comprehensive knowledge of the tradition on which the expectations are based.

If the musician constructs a composition or performance strictly according to tradition-based expectations, then the product can be said to be a result of technical mastery and experience. But when the musician deviates from the expectations, is this deviation based on a skill of judgment in the selection of the deviation and of its potential aesthetic consequence or can the process be called creative? There may be no final answer to this question as it is stated, but one must acknowledge that society, rightly or wrongly, judges the highest results of such a process to be a highly creative product, with the subsequent conclusion being made that the creator of the product is a highly creative individual.

Implications for Music Education

What bearing does this have for music education? In many schools, performance occupies as much as 95 percent of the time devoted to music. In performance, the students are producing music, but are they directed towards a creative experience? The answer is usually “no.”⁵ The focus in music education from elementary to post-secondary levels is the students’ assimilation of a traditional base, as it is understood by their teachers. Students are not trained to search for a spectrum of alternate approaches to the performance of a piece, a phrase, or even a single note. They are instead consistently directed in how to per-



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Teachers can encourage creativity by getting students to discuss expressive markings during rehearsal time.

form a selection in a manner selected by the teacher. The teacher’s paradigm of the composition is treated as the only possible option. This is not bad in itself, as an ensemble must have a common interpretation, just as the assimilation of a traditional base of interpretation is not bad in itself and, in fact, is highly desirable. What is unfortunate is that the students are not directed and encouraged to move beyond this singular base, to see the range of historical interpretations that already exist, and to attempt to create in their mind a range of possible alternatives.⁶

When surveying individuals regarded as leading musical performers, one notes that they each place a strong personal imprint on their interpretation of a work. It is this imprint, based on a solid technical base, that draws us to them, even when their interpretations are regarded as heretical. This personal imprint is dominant in our perception of their worth as performers, even beyond their technical skill. But often in classrooms (and teachers’ studios), teachers present only their interpretation of a selection for students to emulate. Students are not encouraged to strike out on their own. If students do so instinctively, they are probably not discouraged but neither

are they actively encouraged in this exploration. Consequently, we have a student artistic community primarily concerned with technique in its activities and conversation, showing little focus on interpretive alternatives. In essence then, many teachers cannot be said to be promoting creativity in the performance aspect of their program.

As discussed earlier, when our culture uses the term “creativity,” it usually infers that something has been produced that both exhibits newness to the society and stands out from the ordinary in an acclaimed direction; that is, society judges the product to have a high standard of value. But the value of newness to the individual—for example, a student creating a composition or other art work at his or her level of understanding and expertise—is important to the individual in itself, as well as to his or her continuing growth and understanding.⁷ This is equally applicable to the student as performer, beginning with the days of the student’s earliest performance experience. But too often students are not encouraged in this early experience.

An argument used in delaying the teaching towards creativity in music performance is that the students must first have a secure technical and theo-

retical foundation. While it can be conceded that a fuller foundation helps in achieving a higher level of creative product, this should not be used to deny the student a creative approach until that student has achieved the higher level of technical and theoretical expertise demanded by the teacher. Creativity should and can be incorporated at every level of music education, even in the “simple” music selections given to the beginning performer.

For example, a teacher can ask children in a primary class how many ways they can sing a favorite song (or a phrase within the song) and how each way may convey something different, even when the notes are unchanged (the song lyrics, of course, may somewhat restrict the interpretations). The students may listen to different artists’ interpretations, compare the interpretations, and then add interpretive ideas of their own. Even in the beginning year of instrumental instruction, a teacher can focus on differing emphases and tempi that may be applied to short examples from the method book. Most beginning instrumental method books also have short solos that the teacher can use. These short solos can be excellent vehicles to emphasize phrasing and other aspects of musicality.

Figure 1 summarizes the areas of the music curriculum that teachers can draw on when helping students develop creativity in performance.

Classroom Approaches

A number of strategies can help students focus on building awareness of the potential for creativity in performance. These strategies are best done not as lessons in themselves, but as threads woven into the continuing fabric of classroom activities and rehearsals.

Comparison of performed examples. One approach to increasing a focus on creative choices calls for students to compare different recorded interpretations of a work. They could be asked what elements they find common to the interpretations and how the interpretations differ. Students could discuss what attracts them in each interpretation and then attempt to verbal-

ize their impressions. For example, they might say that one interpretation brings out a certain element while another interpretation brings out a contrasting element.



Performers of music are involved in a process of interpretation, which is in essence an act of re-creating.



Students could describe their emotional response to the interpretations, and how each interpretation “draws them in.” They could be asked how they might differ in their own interpretations of the selection or how other interpretations might be made. The discussions could take place in small groups, allowing for even more active interchange of insights and responses to the interpretations. Examples from the pop field could also be used. Listening to recorded and live performances can also lead to insights and enriching discussions on musicality and stylistic tradition.

Encouragement of divergent thinking in approaching interpretive choice in performance. We can work from the perspective of the classical distinction between divergent and convergent thinking. For example, in instrumental music, students often only use a convergent approach, such as focusing on how best to finger a phrase. We should encourage students to broaden this to include a more divergent perspective, exploring a range of interpretive possibilities that could be brought to their performance.

A teacher might have several stu-

dents perform a short selection, especially one allowing a great deal of interpretive choice, and then have them and the class note aspects that show differing interpretations. This should not be a judgmental process, only a sharing of differing interpretive elements. Or one or more students could be directed to consciously perform an assigned phrase or selection in as many ways as possible.

In the article “Structuring the Music Curriculum for Creative Learning,” John Kratus suggests that beginning creative performance objectives require students to make performance decisions regarding a single musical element, such as tempo, dynamics, or rubato; then, as students become ready, several musical elements can be incorporated into one objective.⁸

Duets are also a valuable teaching tool. The students preparing a duet must discuss interpretive choices and come to agreement. They must actively listen to each other to stay together and to interact stylistically. Many duet groups can work at the same time in the rehearsal room, focusing only on their partner.

The principal goal of all such activities should be to show that interpretive options are available and to encourage students to seek and explore these. Too often students are unaware of the range of options open to performers at all levels, or of the fact that the effective use of these options is the essence of great artistry.

Inclusion in rehearsals. The teacher-conductor of student ensembles has an opportunity and a responsibility. He or she should attempt to become more aware of interpretive choices and then discuss these with the members of the group at points in the rehearsal. For the teacher-conductor, this can be threatening as well as time-consuming, but the rewards in student growth are worth the risk and the time. Such rehearsal-based activity should not be a one-shot interjection, but a continuing process.

For example, the teacher-conductor might say to the ensemble, “I have this range of options in approaching this phrase or section. I will use this option because I believe it brings out this aspect of the segment and also relates

to the other sections by building this effect." Many times it will be difficult to verbalize the rationale for an interpretive choice. And indeed, as the quote attributed to Goethe states: "Music begins where words end."



One approach to increasing a focus on creative choices calls for students to compare different recorded interpretations of a work.



The students could be asked to suggest interpretation options and to be prepared to present rationales for these. There could be cases where the teacher might incorporate some of these options in his or her own interpretation.

Creativity within the ensemble. Teachers and conductors must always be aware of the potential for creativity within the ensemble. If they try to recall their sense of excitement the first time they conducted, they will probably remember that what was happening was much fuller and more powerful than anything they might have imagined. This was because to their interpretation was added all members of the ensemble, each contributing his or her own musicality and personhood. Musicians are there because they too, not just the director, are expressing themselves through music. They must be recognized and given room for their contribution to the total expression within the parameters set by the conductor.

Phrasing. Students should become aware that notes do not exist by them-

selves but are part of a musical line or structure. Notes should be seen as relating to the larger phrase and composition. For example, in interpreting they should consider, "From what is this note emerging, where is it leading?" Students must think beyond just fingerings or placement. They should "think in sound," cultivating a practice of thinking of possible phrasings in their mind before playing or singing, while still maintaining a spontaneity that responds to each performance situation.⁹

Interpretation and understanding of tempo and other markings. Rehearsals can be a good opportunity to examine tempo markings and other terms and indications in the musical scores, discussing these within the context of the music and its interpretation.¹⁰ Rehearsal discussion would include the decisions taken in the interpretations of these indications by the conductor and performer. For example, "allegro" is not a hard and fast metronome indication, but can have numerous tempo implications depending on music and stylistic factors.¹¹ "Ritardando" or "rallentando" also bring with them a whole range of interpretive judgments.

Staccato markings are an especially fertile field for interpretive discussion. It can be illustrated that staccato playing is not, as so often defined, just shortening the performed value of the note by half. Using contrasting selections from their repertoire, students can see that a staccato marking can indicate a wide range of durations, from short to long (but still with a separation), and that the attack and release can range from crisp and sharp to gentle, depending on the selection being performed. All this and more with a "simple" staccato note.

Teaching towards a realization of the potential and limitations of music notation. It is tempting to post a sheet of "music" on the wall with the caption, "THIS is not music." What one hears and what one performs—that is music. To illustrate to students how little our notation system actually conveys and how much interpretive freedom it allows, we must first help them come to the realization that "music" is not what is printed on the paper in

front of them, even though we call it "music." These symbols are only a very rough graphing of the music heard in the composer's head.

The class can discuss what Western traditional notation does (and doesn't) indicate to us, that is, relative pitches, rough dynamics, and phrasings. It is a limited system, with all sorts of problems, but it is still the best we have devised. To help reinforce this and to further expand their thinking in this area, groups of students can be assigned to create their own notation system. They then can attempt to teach it to their classmates, having their classmates play from their notation. It should be emphasized that this is best done within a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.



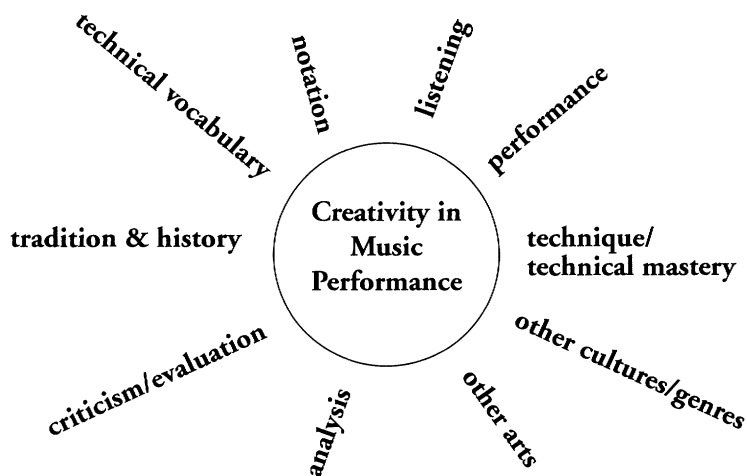
Staccato markings are an especially fertile field for interpretive discussion.



Later, students can examine notation and performance practice in jazz and other traditions, for example, the dotted eighth and sixteenth in jazz and the early two and late three in Viennese waltzes (a tradition that seems to be disappearing).¹²

Examining performance practices in music of diverse genres and cultures. Another fruitful direction for study is the role of the performer and the use of expressive devices, such as rubato and dynamics, in musics in diverse genres and cultures. Areas of focus might include Indian ragas, the Javanese gamelan, Gypsy music, the Appalachian folk song tradition, spirituals, and the blues. These are just a few suggested strategies, all aimed at expanding the student's awareness and understanding of the potential of

Figure 1. Areas of the music curriculum from which creativity in performance is drawn



interpretive choices. Some of these genres, of course, rely on devices other than those used in Western music.

Conclusion

A focus on creativity in performance and on activities to support it is essential if we wish our students to become musicians in the fullest sense—those who truly make music a vehicle of self-expression so that it reflects their individuality. It can enrich their performance and self-expression and can help make them not merely pawns, but intelligent, sensitive, and involved co-creators of music.

Unfortunately, few activities focusing on creativity in performance are taking place in our classrooms (or in the studios of private teachers). Too many of us are still failing our students in not promoting a creative process in performance, not to mention other important areas of creative expression. Consequently, in too many of our schools, we still have a music education system that does not promote the very element on which the art itself is based. This presents us with the paradox of a system that celebrates and uses the creative expressions of others, while effectively muffling the creative potential of its student

participants. We have made some progress, especially in areas such as improvisation and composition, as called for in standards 3 and 4 in the National Standards for Music Education. We must broaden our scope and expand our horizons further.

Notes

1. An exploration of this question is found in John Briggs, *Fire in the Crucible* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988). It is also discussed in Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 51–52.

2. This is also so in other performing arts, e.g., drama, dance.

3. Even composers themselves re-create. This was most effectively illustrated for me when in my university days, we were fortunate to have many leading composers come to conduct their works and to watch them reinterpret their own compositions.

4. For a discussion of this from a somewhat different perspective, see Peter Arnold, "Expression and Communication in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21, no. 1 (1991): 65–67.

5. However, a very promising direction in this area is outlined in Jeffrey Patchen, "Overview of Discipline-Based Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 83 (September 1996): 19–26.

6. A danger in slavishly following "tradition" is that one not only simply reproduces the work, but one further reinforces a tradition that in fact obscures the composer's original intent. The legendary conductor Toscanini is reputed to have said, "Tradition is one's faulty memory of the last poor performance."

7. There is a wide-ranging examination of this and other views of creativity and the creative process in Arthur J. Cropley, *More Ways Than One: Fostering Creativity* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1992).

8. This was one of several articles in the May 1990 special focus issue of the *Music Educators Journal*. For those who do not have access to this issue, these and other articles are reprinted in *Creativity in the Music Classroom: The Best of MEJ*, ed. Donald L. Hamann (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1992).

9. Peter R. Webster, "Creativity as Creative Thinking," *Music Educators Journal* 76 (May 1990), one of the other articles on this subject reprinted in *Creativity in the Music Classroom*.

10. I believe "theory" terms should be taught as much as possible from the music itself. The students will much more easily grasp their sense and potential from the music context rather than from unrelated, alphabetically arranged lists with inadequate definitions that only hint at the interpretive possibilities.

11. Even metronome indications may not be hard and fast. More often than not I have heard composers themselves varying from the very metronome markings they had placed in their scores.

12. In this tradition for Viennese waltzes, the first two pulsations of the underlying triple meter are performed almost as a shortened first and dotted second, much like a Scottish snap. This serves to give an initial, explosive "bounce" to the waltz and to those dancing the waltz. The feeling of delay for the third pulse serves to create a subsequent sense of floating between the early two and late three, much like that seen in leaps in ballet. Anyone who has danced a waltz to an ensemble familiar with the waltz tradition (including the best orchestras of Europe and America) will find this energizes his or her dancing and brings out the uniqueness of the waltz. Jazz, of course, also has a traditional sensed treatment of the basic pulse that gives jazz its uniqueness. Both of these traditions of alteration of the pulse are hard to adequately describe verbally, but are the essence of these two genres. ■