

PRINCIPAL THEMES

David Bourque



BEING ADOPTED BY 21 GRADE 4 STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS OF A TORONTO SYMPHONY MUSICIAN ON THE TSO'S ADOPT-A-PLAYER PROGRAMME

What is a 24-year veteran of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra doing in a Grade Four Classroom?

The Toronto Symphony's Adopt-A-Player Programme (AAP) has been in existence for twelve years. The AAP is modeled after similar programmes in the United Kingdom and, over its term, it has been continually modified and adapted to better fit the needs of the Toronto school system and the Toronto-based music student.

It is a very intensive, hands-on project including a series of five six visits to the classroom over a couple of months by the TSO musician who facilitates the class in creating and performing a group composition. The visits culminate with performances from a number of classes for teachers and parents, the *sharing concert*. As part of the creative experience, the students are brought to a TSO rehearsal at Roy Thomson Hall and have the opportunity to hear a concert as well. The concert contains the 'catalyst' piece for the class and is a launching platform for the group composition. In addition to the tangible results of writing a new work, students actualize their creative thinking, learn to organize and evaluate creative ideas, and learn to function creatively and cooperatively within the group.

Musicians must be, by nature, creative. In AAP, the musician utilizes his/her experience as a professional player and musician to spark the creative process and to provide musical information. The classroom teacher helps the musician by organizing the class into smaller groups in a way that his/her expertise and experience with the students dictate. The musician and the teacher also have the help and support of a TSO volunteer in the classroom. They encourage the creative process, support the students, teacher and musician as well as assist in documenting the process through photographs or video.

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It is important to note that the musician tries not to direct the class as to what and how to compose. He does encourage the class to seek out their own creativity and offer it in a group creative process. This is not a rehearsal-driven model of music education. Though there are things that will be rehearsed, it is the discovery and process envisaged through improvisation that drives the programme – what the students "compose" is what they will perform. The very nature of the improvisatory process in performance insists that the work is different every time – no "right" or "wrong" notes, no subjectively imposed standards. The

work is the work of the students, both in creation and in performance. The teacher and the musician facilitate the students' discovery of their own creative path and, as much as possible, allow the students to find their own way and set their own goals.

A good working relationship among the principal, classroom teacher and the musician must be the case. The musician has little or no expertise is how to manage and, if necessary, discipline a class of grade four students. The musician is dependent on the teacher to arrange for an appropriate large space in which to work and compose and to keep the energy up between sessions. I was very fortunate to have two remarkable professionals with whom to work, Principal Ron Lowe and teacher Janice Chang of Terry Fox Public School. The class to which I had been assigned was a "gifted" class, the only one in the school and the first in north Scarborough.



I chose to visit the class before the official start of the sessions in January in order to introduce myself and get the "lay of the land". The Terry Fox Public School community is largely made up of students with Asian and Muslim backgrounds. A number of students had some background in playing music – piano, guitar, recorder. The majority of the students in the class had already made some instruments: straws of different lengths taped together like a pan pipe, knives and forks hung from a coat hanger, elastic bands stretched between nails on a board, like guitar strings. The students' thirst for knowledge was palpable. There were some remarkable questions – my favourite was whether we would amplify the sounds. This astute question led us to a preliminary lesson in very careful listening as all of the above described instruments play very softly. The silence in that class of grade four students was deafening and the soft instruments were readily audible.

Day 1

We began the day with some warm-up exercises. I felt it important to attune the students' ears to the sounds around them, especially the soft sounds. We did some deep breathing and I asked them to identify all

of the sounds they heard. The sounds of chairs moving around upstairs, someone's sneaker squeaking on the floor, the steady but quiet whooshing of the air circulation system, the sound of clothing rustling as arms were raised were all identified. Some relaxation exercises followed such as rotating wrists and ankles, rolling the neck (some heard their neck cracking!).

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One of the simplest but most crucial concepts in making music in a chamber situation (i.e., no conductor), is sophisticated, non-verbal communication. We did some circle games that encouraged such communication through eye contact and body language. Though shy at first, they quickly learned to turn and face each other, making sure that the next in the circle knew their intentions, specifically, when the next person was going to be handed a continuous sound. We had a "follow the leader" session that involved clapping with one to five fingers (producing different dynamics). After I demonstrated an activity, the students took turns leading the group. The static quarter note pulse pattern I started with soon morphed into rhythmic patterns that the leader patterned and the class echoed. I had been in the room 25 minutes, and they were discovering major elements crucial to making music through their own interactions – listening, imitation, improvisation, employing dynamics! That was my goal for the day. I had 90 minutes to go and I was scared.

All of the students had made instruments. Some were very simple (some drinking straws of different lengths taped together) and others clearly had Dad The Handyman involved. We took about an hour to hear all of the instruments demonstrated by their makers. About half way through, I started to encourage the player to find other ways of making sounds on their instruments other than the designed sound. By the time I got part way around the room, some students had come up with eight or ten "non-designed" sounds from their instrument. They were excited and so was I. One student had elastic bands on a piece of cardboard. He had a moveable bridge to make different lengths on the elastic. These kids already knew "the shorter the string, the higher the sound." They also knew why. Boy, I am in big trouble.

Our society does not encourage listening, either to the thoughts and words or others, or to music. I find it difficult to battle society's practices, and with a grade four class it is no different. When the students were demonstrating their instruments, I asked that they make eye contact with everyone in the room and not start their "performance" until they had the attention and silence they needed. One student asked

another to put their instrument on the ground as he clearly found it distracting and a potential noise-maker during his performance. Fantastic! I pointed out that the performance-demonstrations were once-in-a-lifetime events. "We would *never* here these same sounds this way ever again. Listening is everything."

Some of the instruments made funny sounds, or the students found funny ways to make them play. It was great to have the students laugh while the playing was going on, and I encouraged it. The only sound that I asked to be excluded during performances was talking. Other sounds (rustling, shuffling chair noise and especially laughing!) are all considered part of the performance.

The last 15 minutes of the class were spent creating our first in-class composition. Like any great work, it needed a catchy name: "*Miss Chang Grade Four January 10.*" One student acted as a "clock", putting one arm above his head and slowly rotating it down and around as a clock. Each performer had one rotation to do what they wanted, and then another performer was cued to be "next". We ended up with a wonderful three-minute piece. All of the performers explored "non-design" or secondary sounds from their instruments.

I spent two hours with a great class, thirsty for knowledge. The symphony musician came home and had a very long nap.



The Rehearsal Visit

AAP students attend a TSO rehearsal and a concert as part of the programme. Music Director Peter Oundjian was conducting the TSO in an all Mozart programme. We began with a listening warmup much like the one we do in the classroom. Students listen very carefully to any sounds in the room (especially the soft to almost inaudible sounds) and identify them. The class listened to most of the rehearsal of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 with soloist Victoria Mullova. They were all completely captivated for five minutes, and then eyes started to wander and explore the vast interior of Roy Thomson Hall. We had a

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backstage tour, and Peter Oundjian conducted the students in an impromptu performance of a vocalization of "T - S - O" starting *pianissimo* moving to a grand finale at fortissimo, cutting off all completely together.

The Concert Visit

The TSO musicians choose a piece as an "Inspiration Piece" for the class. This piece can be used to demonstrate melody and how segments of the melody repeat to form the full theme, dynamics, rhythm (and rhythmic variants), short/long, high/low and overall form. Our Inspiration Piece was Mozart's *Symphony No. 1 in E Flat, K. 16*. Mozart wrote this work when he was eight years old, just a bit younger than the students in the class. The story goes that Mozart's father, Leopold, was quite ill and he asked Wolfgang to do something nice for him. Wolfgang asked what he could do for his father, so Leopold asked, "Why don't you write me a symphony?"

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The students again came to Roy Thomson Hall, this time for an afternoon concert. Often, AAP students come to evening concerts and leave as soon as their piece has been played so they can get home and to bed. The programme included the Mozart Symphony, the Bassoon Concerto K. 191, an adagio for english horn and orchestra and *Symphony No. 41* ("Jupiter") K. 551.

Day 2

I had the added welcome assistance of a TSO volunteer today. Janice Chang, the teacher, has been immensely helpful and supportive and with the addition of volunteer Ken McFarquhar, we would be able to divide into smaller supervised groups.

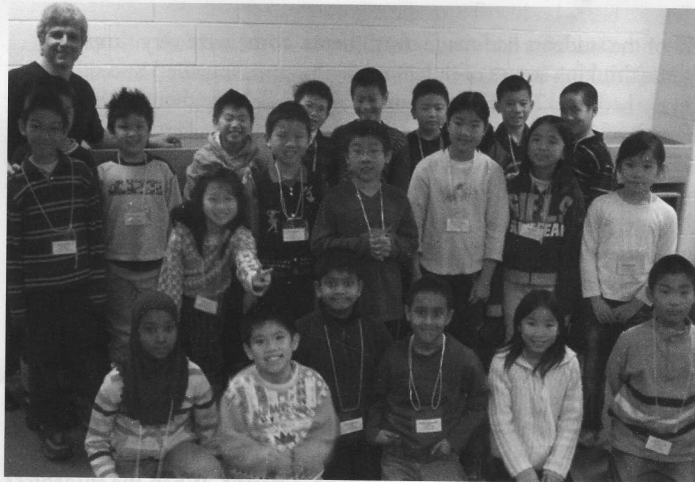
Our trademark warmup has become "raise the hands above the head while drawing in a deep breath." At the top, we attune the ears by listening to and identifying sounds that would normally be considered ambient or background sounds. The students were very excited today and doing the exercise brought giggles. We reinforced that laughing without being terribly silly was a welcome sound in the class and in our work. Non-verbal communication was reinforced by going around the circle using eyes and a nod to communicate and to pass on sounds or gestures in a circle group. I did not verbally introduce the exercises - I just began them and the students continued. One of the circle sounds was a "shh." In no time, the sound began to morph into variants - longer, shorter, softer, louder. One student interpreted the "shh" sound as a call for silence, so instead of "shh" she called out: "be

quiet." We discussed the interpretation - my "ssh" was not defined as a call for silence -- it was what it was. The creativity of the class made the sound into a series of variations, including variations using synonym. Gosh, I love creativity!

Another circle game was to pass an imaginary ball around the room. Interestingly, this more physical activity did not have as many variations as the vocal activity. I solicited other variants from the students and we made the circle again, and new ideas came forward.

The three main goals of this class was to a) introduce the element of form by showing the broader concept of recurring ideas, b) explore melody and c) start a catalogue of sounds the students liked when they heard others make them during the class. I approached form by introducing the first theme from their "Inspiration Piece", Mozart *Symphony No. 1*. I played it on an Orff xylophone and their eyes lit up - they recognized it as they had heard it a few days earlier at their TSO concert visit. We listened to part of the first movement and raised hands when the theme was heard.

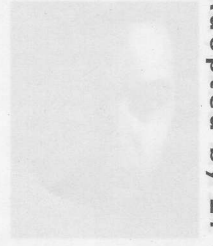
We had been very successful in Day 1 to create some wonderful free improvisational pieces without melody. I made a partial modal scale on the xylophone by removing keys and asked four students to sit around the xylophone and improvise melodies and sounds using materials that the previous player introduced. During the improvisation process, is difficult for any of us to step back from what we are planning to do when it comes to our turn and listen to and react to the sounds made by others previous to our entry. It took a while, but after two or three groups had their turn at the xylophone, elements of recurring melody began to appear. A particular gesture made up of quarter notes A-G was identified by one of the listening students. This simple recurring sound gave their improvisation some structure.



Toronto Symphony Conductor Peter Oundjian with Adopt a Player students.

We divided into groups and the class concluded with improvisations from four groups. Each group demonstrated varying degrees of struc-

Timothy Sullivan



This is the fourth article in a four-part series exploring creativity and its role in music education. Dr. Sullivan presents a foundation for the work presented in the documents supported by ready-to-use ideas for students in the document. Teachers are encouraged to adapt, modify, and re-think the content and questions presented in this series. Dr. Sullivan would be pleased to hear from readers. His bio and email are found at the end of the article. Readers can find appropriate bibliographies of research and music learning, compiled by Dr. Alan Walker of Northwestern University at the following address: <http://www.music.northwestern.edu/~walker/>

CREATIVITY IN THE CURRICULUM

ture in their improv. I played bass clarinet and facilitated the transfer from one group to the next. I took sounds that I heard in their improv. and passed it on to the next group. The result was a five-minute piece. During the piece, the students who were listening to the group performing at the time were to raise their hands when they heard a sound they liked. Janice Chang wrote them on a flip chart, and we reviewed them at the conclusion of the performance. In preparation for my next visit, Janice will continue to work with the class to explore and catalogue sounds, improvise melody and develop a visual vocabulary for sounds and notes so that we may follow a road map during our sharing concert if we decide to do so.

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Day 3
The goal for the day was to have the students start in earnest creating their piece. We began by introducing the concepts of form and movement. A simple clapping/vocalization piece in two parts served to introduce form. I wrote down the pattern on the board and asked the students to perform it with me. The students named the first section "People-Bop" and the second section "Ga Ga Ga Ga." We performed *People-Bop*, followed by *Ga Ga Ga Ga*, then a return to *People-Bop*. I suggested that another name for the first section might be "A" and the section might be called "B." The students then performed A-B-A and we added some repeats to A to bring the form closer to Sonata Form (less the Development).

We then went on a silent parade down the hall, with the students mimicking my actions as the leader of the line. We spoke about adding movement to our performance.

The students broke off into their four groups to implement utilizing form in their improvisations. Ken, Janice and I rotated among the four groups to facilitate their work. We have been using Orff xylophones since Day 2 with removed keys to form a pentatonic scale. One of the groups removed keys, but not the third and seventh. They had this marvelous tritone and semi-tone sounds in their scale! Two groups started their work with pattern sounds from the xylophone and each member of the group joined in, one a time, imitating and expanding on the sounds. Another group had players imitate and improvise on the original material presented by the xylophone one at a time. They would go around their group three times, expanding on the material. Another group developed a repeating rhythmic pattern that became more complicated and added instruments as time went on. The only difficulty with the improvisations is that the students tended to develop their material too quickly and the improvisation would be quite short. We solved the problem in the group that played one-a-time by having them go around the group three or four times. Each time they went around, their material developed and was varied. The other groups required a different solution.

The drama teacher at Terry Fox had worked with the students to incorporate sounds and movement. Visual and sound representations of "machines" were developed using percussion instruments, chairs and bodies. I was extremely impressed with these "machines" and Janice has undertaken to develop four new new machines using the personnel in our four groups.

After the break, I introduced the concept of the "conductor-clock." A student was selected to imitate the second hand of a clock by mirroring the motion of the second hand. We could then have the improvisation continue for at least one revolution of the second hand.

The grade four class at Terry Fox P.S. has students from many cultures. Before the second improv. of the morning, one of the students asked if she could use a chant in their performance! Fabulous! She got together with another student in her group and their "chant" was a schoolyard song about not wanting to go to school in the summer. Their group's performance started with the chant, in rhythmic unison, then melodic fragments were added followed by rhythmic imitation of the melody. We encouraged all the students to consider bringing parts of their culture to their performance.

The students have developed the sounds and structure in their improvisations over the past two weeks. Each new effort at improvisation results in more sophistication, more listening, more involvement and in some cases more structure to the improv.

Their composition is rapidly taking shape – the elements and tools are all in place and are becoming more refined each time they do an improv. I had planned to describe a scene in a wonderful poem Janice has in her classroom "The Sound Came Back." However, I think the students have a different plan, and as the adoptee, I think I will keep quiet and let them get on with it. They are, after all, the experts at play!

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Day 4
Today's goal was to further refine the listening skills of the players and have that reflect in what they played. We began the day with students leading the warm-ups. Our traditional "deep breath, listen to room sounds" fine-tuned the students' listening. I asked that they pass around sounds in the circle. I reinforced the main purpose of the circle game sound-passing, that is to listen to what the previous student did and imitate it or modify it. After a couple of times around the circle, the students had engrained the idea of taking the material which they

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were given, adding to it or modifying it into a different form, the essence of variation in composition and ensemble playing in performance.

The four groups had matured considerably in their improvisations -- I found them more sophisticated and they had moved from a free form improv to a more structured piece, but with the elements still improvised. Janice acted as the "clock" for each group. This gave a clear idea as to when to start and stop allowed the students to time their improvisation and develop it in a linear manner. The class gave a performance of their four-minute piece, about one minute per group. I then asked each group to play their section alone, and I asked the class to identify the components of the performance. In one group, there was an *ostinato* rhythm in two hand drums. An additional rhythmic gesture was used by two other students, a variation of the base rhythm. This rhythm was subdivided and it allowed these two players to control the tempo. I suggested that they do this, and the rest of the group followed along. The final component of this group's material was a pentatonic traditional Chinese melody on the Orff xylophone.

Another group had a steady pulse of sixteenth notes on two mallet keyboards with a very interesting polyrhythm in some finger cymbals. The pattern in the finger cymbals was sixteenth notes too, but the polyrhythm was created by the player leaving the cymbals touching together longer on random notes. When we broke down the overall sound of the group, it allowed the students to get their ears around perceived cacophony and listen to the structures in the improvisation.



One of the challenges in any improvisation is to recognize that the silence is at least as important as the sounds. One of the groups had very interesting sounds, but they tended to play them all at one time. We introduced a 'guide person' for this group, one who would listen and point to players in the group to play and 'wave them off' to ask them to be silent. This student reacted to what he heard and became part of the group's soundscape.

In the final part of the day was taken up with another performance of the full piece we doubled the length of each group's performance to make it two revolutions of the "clock." As it has been with every session, I suspect I will be completely amazed as to how the work develops over the next and final week of our sessions.

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Day 6 - Dress Rehearsal and The Sharing Concert

The class performance is in such good shape! The students are feeling more and more comfortable with exploring new sounds and improvising on these sounds. We rehearsed entrance, bows and exits from the stage and we ran the piece three times during this last session.

The sharing concert was held one evening at St. Bonaventure, another school participating in the programme. There were three pieces performed that night, one from each of three schools. Two of the performances were performance pieces and told a story; one was a four minute version of the opera Carmen with all the intrigue, love triangles and murders, another was a tale of two quarreling tribes that reconcile and come to work together at the end. The piece performed by the students of Terry Fox differed in that it was sound-based with definite structures. It was a free improvisation performance of a piece of music rather than a performance that used music as an integral part of a story.

This is a remarkable programme and it is extremely well administered by the Education Department at the TSO and its director, Roberta Smith and her assistant Heidi Sundwall. The students were remarkable in their ability to focus and grow over the five sessions and the result was an experience that neither they, nor I, will forget.

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