Another Perspective
The Joyous Composer

Abstract: The value of joy in music education through composing (interrelated with performing, improvising, and listening) is proposed. Two types of joy experienced by the composer are discussed: cognitive emotion, or emotion in response to thought; and emotional cognition, or thought centered on emotion. While the Western classical tradition can effectively bridge to other musical traditions when approached joyously and ecumenically in whatever musical traditions teachers and students are immersed, composing constitutes a powerful means of knowing joy and a metaphor for music education.

Keywords: composing, composition, creating, creativity, joy, music-making, philosophy

Thinking about the power of composing in music education, I focus on joy, a value that undergirds our work as music teachers. Joy is among a group of related values that include happiness, pleasure, and celebration. In this writing, I deal only with joy—in particular, how it connects with composing as an aspect of creating music. Since joy is crucial for music and music education, I am interested in how joy is manifest to others through the act of composing and how the act of creating music brings joy to the creator. Although the notion of music-making as a joyous activity is an old idea, with all of the pressures on music teachers and our students today, it is easy to forget joy as a raison d’être of our musical work and play.

Professional composers often know joy in creating music, and they want music teachers and their students to experience composition as part of general music education. In my mind’s eye, I see David Ward-Steinman (1936–2015), an American composer (once student of Nadia Boulanger), a distinguished professor of composition, and a gifted pianist who taught at San Diego State University and later at Indiana University.¹ Those of

Creating, studying, performing, and enjoying music opens doors to both immediate pleasure and long-lasting joy.

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us who knew him remember his joyous spirit, his face glowing as he performed his compositions in concert or talked animatedly about the new pieces he was writing. He composed, performed, and taught to the end of his life, eagerly anticipating the next joyous experience in making music. He was among a group of leading academic composers to reflect on the role of composition in general music education in a special issue of the Philosophy of Music Education Review, in which composers shared the ideas that grounded their composing and spoke of the role it needs to play in school music.\(^2\) Nor is it surprising to see today's young classical pianists, such as Daniil Trifonov, following in the footsteps of notable pianist-composers of the past, such as Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt, and composing as well as performing.\(^3\) These musicians also know joy as they create and bring music to their listeners.

What is this joy? Among its qualities, joy sometimes comes unexpectedly when one is focused on doing something else, not in pursuit of it directly, and one can be surprised by its coming. In composing, the mind is intently focused on what one is creating, on the sounds and/or texts that one is designing, selecting, ordering, assembling, and synthesizing into what philosopher Susanne Langer aptly called a "living," "articulate," and "dynamic" whole piece.\(^4\) Working within the framework of rules and expectations that govern a particular musical tradition that one is imbibing or has made one's own, one is creating one's own music, whatever it be. The act of composing may involve working with acoustic or electronically generated sounds in creating a notated score or rendering one's musical intentions immediately during a performance. Practically speaking, the lines between composing and performing are often blurred even in notated traditions. Composers may work at a keyboard or another instrument. Performers may improvise and later either write down or otherwise record a performance that is subsequently refined into more permanent form as a notated score. Listening, whether imaginatively hearing sounds in a musical score or actually attending to a performance or a recording of a performance, is also an aspect of this dynamic weaving back and forth between composing, performing, and listening. So intertwined are these aspects that it is hard to imagine composing without also including performing and listening.\(^5\) All go together more or less inseparably. In the midst of this focus on making music, joy suddenly appears. We see it in the glow in a face, eyes alight and dancing, and utter absorption in creating this music. In a classroom, we know it in the buzz of animated engagement and activity, sometimes spilling out spontaneously in laughter and chatter, and in musical experiments that go well and go awry. We may not have consciously sought joy—it simply came when we caught the moment of delight in the midst of our creating and making music and felt and knew it was there. It sometimes came when we were most absorbed in the music and most un-self-conscious, when its coming seemed magical and had the effect of lightening our spirits and brightening our classrooms, rehearsal spaces, studios, or performance spaces. Afterward, these moments remained in our memories and made our efforts feel worthwhile. They seemed to validate our music-making and sufficed as a powerful reason for teaching, learning, and doing music.

I think of this quality of joy as an instance of what Harvard University philosophy professor Israel Scheffler calls a cognitive emotion.\(^6\) It accompanies thought and is often in response to it. The joy that comes in the midst of music-making that I have just described is of this sort. It is emotion in response to and about thought. Without the discipline of thought and the skills of music-making, it might not appear. For this reason, composing is necessarily about an intuitive grasp of an imagined whole, the honing of that vision into a cogent and articulated image that is so engrossing that it seems apart from and even transcendent to ordinary experience. The various elements are transformed into sounds and sometimes sights as an inspired and inspirational piece of music that is made for the joy of it, for the composer's sake as much as for others. Composition without listening and performance cannot satisfy, and it is important to perform compositions, record them, and have listeners respond to them—that is, to teach composition as an integral part of improving, performing, producing, and listening. When students see the fruits of their composing in the midst of performing, there is joy. I can never forget a visit I made to the St. George's School at Windsor Castle, England. After tea, a concert was held and one of the music masters performed a newly composed piece by one of the choristers. The boy had been unwell but was allowed to attend the concert dressed in his pajamas, dressing gown, and slipper to hear this performance of his piece. His teacher performed the boy's composition brilliantly. As the boy rose to acknowledge the thunderous applause by the other members of the school, his face glowed. Here was joy as the fruit of all of his effort. I do not know if joy came as he wrote his piece. He was hurried away to bed before the concert was over, and I could not ask him. Looking at his face, though, it must definitely have come afterward. Sometimes joy rewards persistence and effort when gratification is delayed, and this is one of life's important lessons.

Composers transform musical traditions and push their boundaries beyond the ideas and practices of the past. As they create new music, they also draw on the traditions in which they are heirs. I wonder if, as teachers, we focus our effort sufficiently and give the kind of attention over a sustained time to providing students with the skills they need to compose intelligently in a particular musical tradition. Composing is not easy and is often hard won, and one needs a knowledge of the requisite skills to make this possible. The prevailing educational emphasis is too
often on gratifying student impulses and achieving immediate results that can readily be assessed. As teachers, we may be tempted to seek quick results and bypass composing as a part of the music curriculum because it takes time and effort to develop these skills. Later twentieth-century approaches, such as the Comprehensive Musicianship Movement and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, sought to develop these skills and focused on composition as a crucial element of general music education. Still, these initiatives may have faltered not only because music teachers did not possess the musicianship, skills, or confidence to compose but because they became preoccupied with a mastery of the building blocks of music rather than experiencing the joy of composing with their students. If teachers could not compose themselves and did not know the joy of creating music, it is unlikely that they could lead others to do so. I recall a graduate music education class in which my fellow students were daunted by the prospect of composing a piece for their instruments and performing it for the class. These students rose to the challenge of a class assignment, and the occasion of our performances is burned in my memory. In that class and my subsequent teaching, I learned of the importance of and challenges in developing skills in young musicians that are the bedrock for confidence in making their own compositions while also keeping joy paramount in the process of music-making.

Another kind of joy can be thought of as what philosopher of education Iris Yob calls an emotional cognition. This experience of joy animates the thought and action connected to the emotion. In contrast to Scheffler’s view of emotion centered on thought, Yob thinks of thought centered on emotion. For her, music is an emotional cognition, where musical experience is focused on affect, and musical thinking and doing are an expression of and an embodiment of feeling. She finds support for her view in Langer’s description of music as an expression of feeling—felt life that defies expression through words or other discursive means and that can best be expressed and known through music among the other arts, ritual, myth, dreams, and the like. As a cellist and composer, Langer captures what it is like to compose and perform music. Composing puts us in touch with our deepest feelings, longings, beliefs, and convictions, as we employ our musical skills in ways that are expressed and grasped imaginatively by others. Music teachers are challenged to be able to develop these skills systematically as they guide learners from the simplest skills to those that are most sophisticated. One must do this carefully if all along the way one is to ensure that joy is preeminent. The instructional systems that teachers need to employ in this task are naturally grounded in the musical traditions they teach. If teachers are to be doers of this music, we need to know a tradition well, from the inside out as well as the outside in.

Classical music constitutes a remarkable bridge to other musics that enables students to move beyond it to other traditions. This great tradition has the benefit of being literate while also fostering oral skills. Students who learn it can enjoy classical, popular, and vernacular musics; film music; and other multimedia artistic endeavors and can confidently experiment with border crossings in world musics. We are at a point where music education could benefit by a renewed emphasis on Western classical music. This tradition has been embraced in the East, and it would be a pity to lose it in the West from lack of public education. Aside from its important marker of European heritage, it is now an international tradition, and its influence infuses and is infused by other musical traditions. Much hangs on how one teaches it. I see rich possibilities in developing compositional skills in this tradition while also approaching musical traditions ecumenically. Composition is a practical matter in which one learns as one does. This is evident in the farewell tour of the Grateful Dead, members of whom are now into their seventies. Half a century after the band’s formation, founding member Bill Kreutzmann speaks of joyfully linking sounds to universal vibrations in the cosmos in a manner that reprises the ancient speculative tradition of music. Irrespective of the musical traditions in which we choose to work, however, emphasizing the skills required to create music enables teachers and our students to better understand and express our innermost feeling. In so doing, our music programs are focused on joy. Music education that includes composing (and necessarily performing, improvising, producing, and listening) becomes about joy. That is to say, joy constitutes a means and an end of music education.

As a musician and teacher, I am in pursuit of joy as I am also surprised by it in the process of focusing on other things. This reality situates me in what Canadian philosopher of education Deanne Bogdan describes as the “eye of paradox.” The act of creating music is a precious means of being human and knowing self and others. The example of composers, such as David Ward-Steinman, inspires music teachers to have the courage to express our own musicianship in composing with our students; to hone our skills in helping our students develop as composers and improvisers, performers, and listeners; and to experience together the joy that comes in creating music. There is no better way to know this joy than to be immersed in music as active participants fully invested in the making and taking of music. Creating and doing music is a risky business, and music makers are often at the limits of their imagined possibilities and knowledge. Everything is on the line, and music-making is a public act that is seen, heard, and adjudicated by others. Nevertheless, we wish those who create and make music great success and joy in the doing and the accomplishment of music well done. True, this joy can be known in many subjects other than music and in all the musical traditions with which I am
acquainted. Still, it suffices that creating music prompts joy, and its coming is an important aspect of developing an educated human being. Music is one place where young and old can experience joy. This, for me, constitutes a compelling reason to embrace joy as an enduring musical value and aspect of composing music (along with other aspects of performing and listening to music) and to urge their place at the center of musical education and education generally. What better way to sum up music education than to evoke the joyous composer?

NOTES


3. For a performance of Daniil Trifonov’s Rachmaniana, see http://www.wqxr.org/#/story/watch-daniil-trifonov


7. See Warren Benson, Creative Projects in Musicianship: A Report of Pilot Projects Sponsored by the Contemporary Music Project at Ithaca College and Interlochen Arts Academy (Washington, DC: Contemporary Music Project, Music Educators National Conference, 1967); and Ronald B. Thomas, MMCP Synthesis: A Structure for Music Education (Elnora, NY: Media Inc., 1971). It is noted, “The MMCP Synthesis is one of the major products of the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program. From 1965 through 1970 this project was encouraged and sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Program of the United States Office of Education. USOE, V-008; USOE, 6-1999.”


9. This principle of antecedence is discussed in Jorgensen, The Art of Teaching Music, 155, 221.


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