

Sound Connections: Composing Educational Music

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Abstract

Due to the unfamiliarity by many composers with composing music for young musicians, the perception that such music is inferior to that written for professionals, and the paucity of educational commissions, there is a lack of Canadian music readily available for students enrolled in school music programs. *Sound Connections: Composing Educational Music*, a Trillium Foundation funded project, seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of how professional composers compose music appropriate for young musicians enrolled in school music programs and private music studios. The research examines the relationship of music composition to music learning, and it involves the commissioning of 15 composers to compose new music for young musicians through a partnership with the Canadian Music Centre, a not-for-profit organization that promotes the works of Canadian composers.

Keywords: Composing educational music, composing for young musicians, musical creativity.

Introduction

Due to the unfamiliarity by many composers with composing music for young musicians, the perception that such music is inferior to that written for professionals, and the paucity of educational commissions, there is a lack of Canadian music readily available for students enrolled in school music programs. The purpose of this study, entitled *Sound Connections: Composing Educational Music*, is to obtain an in-depth understanding of the relationship of music composition to music learning through the collaborative efforts of composers and teachers in creating new music for educational purposes. The principal overriding question is "What compositional techniques promote the musical development of young musicians?" The secondary questions are: i) What essential musical skills must young students acquire in school programs?; ii) How can compositional techniques develop these specific musical skills?; iii) What are the structural characteristics of an educational composition?; and iv) What do teachers and their students learn from collaboration with composers? The research partner is the Canadian Music Centre (CMC), a not-for-profit organization that promotes the works of Canadian composers.

The Context

Composers trained in conservatories and colleges learn sophisticated compositional techniques and create complex music that is only playable by professional musicians and

listened to by specialized audiences. Music as a consequence of post-secondary training has evolved to become “a mysterious thing and slightly holy in a way, something you don’t tamper with” (Harrison Birtwistle in Ross, 1995, p. 255). Consequently, the music of many contemporary composers is unplayable by young musicians and has no impact on their musical education. In general, composers do not know how to compose educational music and need to learn how to do so (Hatrik, 2002). Michael Colgrass (2004), a Pulitzer prize-winning Canadian composer, expresses the problem best when he stated:

I was stymied ... 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. (p. 19)

Dynamic changes in music during the twentieth century contributed to the complexity of contemporary music (Adorno, 1980; Viera de Carvalho, 1999; Walker, 1997). Atonality and serialism, a historical evolution of Western-European music beyond tonality, were introduced and became the canon of modern music. At the same time, mass media fostered access to world musics and introduced the intricate nuances of alternate modalities, vocalizations and tuning systems on a much broader scale. As a consequence of these developments, music became more complicated, difficult to understand, and more challenging to perform. Further, an alternative method of composing emerged with the advent of the electronic field; that is, electro-acoustic music with its own theory and practice (Frisius, 1981). Initially, *musique concrète*, electronic sounds and taped music were the approaches utilized. With technological advances, electro-acoustic composing now involves analog and digital synthesis, the use of multi-media computers, and the development of alternate forms of representation, such as graphic notation. It also enables composers to develop innovative ways of manipulating and conceptualizing sound, and offers new possibilities for integrating music with other art forms through multi-media (Williams, 2001).

Contemporary composers use acoustic (e.g., traditional instruments), environmental (e.g., natural sounds) and electronic (e.g., digital sampling) modes of composition. In their works, they employ a broad range of compositional techniques, for example tonal, atonal, and serial, and a variety of media, for example synthesizers and computers. With the notable exceptions of the European composers Bela Bartok, Paul Hindemith, Zoltan Kodaly and Carl Orff, few contemporary composers have written major educational works. Composer/educators have introduced alternative approaches to music composition in classrooms through the use of environmental sounds, peer assistance and group compositions, notably Murray Schafer in Canada (1977) and John Paynter (1982) in the UK. These approaches, however, have not been integrated into mainstream music education programs in any systematic way (Andrews, 2004a; Carruthers, 2000). Paul Hindemith’s and Bela Bartok’s educational compositions have been analysed to obtain insights into their success (Kim, 1995; Gillies, 1990). These studies provide useful information on the nature of these musical works, such as the sequencing of rhythmic patterns. Unfortunately, we do not learn how the composers conceptualize, compose and refine music for young musicians.

Related Research

Creating new music for students enrolled in elementary and secondary school music programs presents unique challenges because of the different ways that young musicians interpret sound and the varied levels of technical ability among them. Conventional methods alone, that is textbooks, score study and listening activities, cannot address these challenges: they require problem-solving and contact with young performers. This study will explore the creative solutions that composers implement in generating new music for young musicians. Successful engagement among composers, students and teachers in the creative process within

classrooms, studios and rehearsal halls is a necessary condition for the creation of high quality music appropriate for young people. This study will contribute to the Canadian repertoire for young people and provide valuable insights into improving the quality of educational music by examining the relationship of music composition to music learning within the context of a partnership.

When students' educational needs are the central focus, partners problem-solve, learn and change, and when there is strong leadership and consistent program development, advocacy, documentation and evaluation, partnerships thrive (Colley, 2008; Seidel & Eppel, 2001). When communication among partners is inadequate, time and funding are constrained, leadership is ineffective, and when there are substantive complicating factors, such as timetable conflicts which mitigate against artist/teacher collaboration, partnerships fail (Arts Education Partnership, 2001). The most successful partnerships actively engage students in learning (Meiners, Schiller & Orchard, 2004; Smithrim & Uptis, 2005), involve schools, universities and community organizations (Arts Education Partnership, 2002), allocate sufficient time and space (Wilkinson, 2000), provide a high level of administrative support (Doherty & Harland, 2001), and understand the unique nature of arts education (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 1999). Arts partnerships can be sustained within the educational community when they improve students' overall academic performance, enhance teacher expertise, and extend the influence of schools in improving their surrounding communities according to arts leaders (Arts Education Partnership, 2000).

We have limited knowledge of how composers actually compose (Bennet, 1976; Freund, 2011; Gardner, 2011; Hoover & Stanley, 2009; Krumhasl, 1991; Lerdahl, 1988; Phillips & Pierson, 1997; Reicher, 2000; Sloboda, 1988). Ironically, we know more about what children can achieve when improvising and writing simple melodies (Bolden, 2004; Burnard & Younker, 2008; Davidson & Scripp, 1988; Hall, 1998; Kratus, 1989; Robazza, Maculoso, & d'Urson, 1994; Ward-Steinman, 2006). However, there is a paucity of research on how composers compose educational music. The Canadian Music Centre has initiated several projects to promote Canadian music in classrooms. Cataloguing, grading and producing guidelists of Canadian music for young musicians was undertaken by members of the John Adaskin Project (e.g., MacInnis, 1991; Shand, 1993; Stublely, 1990; Walter, 1994). The ComPoster music education package is comprised of cassette recordings with an accompanying teacher's manual (Canadian Music Centre, 1992); *Creating Music in the Classroom* involves composers composing in schools (Washburn, 1960); The Norman Burgess Memorial Fund commissions new string music for young musicians (Canadian Music Centre, 2004); and *Composers in Electronic Residence* involves composers critiquing student compositions via the internet (Barwin, 1998). However, there are still very few compositions performed and studied in schools (Bartel, Dolloff & Shand, 1999; Shand & Bartel, 1998) and in post-secondary institutions (Andrews & Carruthers, 2004; Carruthers, 2000). CMC staff understand the need to promote its services to the education community, and they support research in educational music (e.g., Andrews, 2005).

Previous Research on Educational Music

New Music for Young Musicians, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and provincial arts councils and administered by the Canadian Music Centre, commissioned 98 composers across the country to compose new music for young musicians in school classrooms and private studios. An evaluation study was undertaken of participating Ontario and Atlantic composers which consisted of a questionnaire on the conceptualization of their new works, a response to emerging questions, and subsequently a reflective report on the refinements to their compositions in the field. Questionnaire findings indicated that they employed compositional techniques (e.g., short melodic phrases) to reinforce learning and to maintain attention, prior experiences with young people were invaluable to accurately gauge students'

technical abilities and developmental levels, and adjustments to their compositions were technical rather than stylistic (Andrews, 2004b). Responses to emerging questions indicated that pedagogical composing does not differ substantively from professional writing, a fluid musical form is often employed to adapt to student needs, and blending traditional and atonal idioms represents a post-modern rather than a pedagogical approach (Andrews, 2007). Findings from the reflective report indicated that the composers' experiences in the classroom with students helped them to confirm appropriate technical requirements (i.e., feasible note values, intervals, ranges), skill proficiency (i.e., melodic and rhythmic complexity, tempo), and interpretation (i.e., appropriate phrasing, dynamics and articulations) (Andrews, 2006a).

New Sounds of Learning: Composing for Young Musicians, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project, represented a follow-up research study to the *New Music Project* (Andrews, 2012). Eight composers with funds from the Ontario Arts Foundation were commissioned by the Canadian Music Centre to write new string works for young musicians in schools and studios. Eight composers were also commissioned by the Ottawa Catholic School Board to write new wind works (6 for concert band and 2 for jazz ensemble). During the study it was learned that there was not a consensus among music publishers on the levels of difficulty for composing and promoting educational music. Consequently, a Music Complexity Chart (MC²) was developed and validated to address this problem (Andrews, 2011). *New Sounds of Learning Project* findings indicate that compositional techniques can impact on music learning, such as short melodic units to obtain attention; pulsating rhythms to refine motor responses, and equality of parts to maintain interest (Andrews, 2009). The study also found that the key factors for composing educational music for strings are students' level of ability, their technical proficiency, pedagogical development, challenge, musical quality, and enjoyment (Andrews, 2013). The key factors for composing educational music for wind composers were technical proficiency, musical challenge, and enjoyment (Andrews & Giesbrecht, 2013).

Given the depth of the findings from the *New Music Project* and the *New Sounds of Learning Project* and the successful premieres of the new works in schools and local communities, the research team and personnel from the participating organizations - the Canadian Music Centre and the Ottawa Catholic School Board – determined that further research was needed. It was deemed essential to clearly identify those specific compositional techniques that promote the development of students' musical skills. Such knowledge would improve the pedagogical quality of compositions composed for young musicians, thereby increasing their educative value to the school curriculum. The Canadian Music Centre requested that the research partnership be extended and consequently, the proposed study entitled *Sound Connections: Composing Educational Music* was developed to examine the relationship of music composition to music learning.

Methodology

Integrated Inquiry, a multiple-perspectives method, is employed in this study (Andrews, 2008a). This holistic approach to research involves combining multiple data sources to develop an in-depth understanding of a problem and to generate potential solutions. The multiple perspectives may be obtained by using qualitative and/or quantitative protocols, and they may be nested within the same instrument (Andrews, 2002), independent instruments within the same study (Andrews, 2010), inter-related instruments from the same individuals (Andrews, 2008b) or different groups (Andrews & Carruthers, 2004), or a series of inter-related studies examining an issue over time (Andrews, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2006b). For field-based problems, such blending of multiple data sources is encouraged in the literature (e.g., Creswell, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Theoretical Framework

Creativity research focuses on four dimensions: environmental factors; the creative process; creative products; and creative persons (Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1989; Amabile & Tighe, 1993). These dimensions have been identified more specifically for music as the *pre-requisites* for composing (training, emotions, context), *person* (characteristics, pre-dispositions, motivation), compositional *process* (strategies, techniques, sequencing), and musical *piece* (features, style, impact) (Andrews, 2004c, d). This study addresses these four dimensions by nesting the secondary questions within the four dimensions of musical composition and by adopting different research protocols to answer these questions: *pre-requisites*: What essential musical skills must young students acquire in school programs? (teacher log); ii) *process*: How can compositional techniques develop these specific musical skills? (composer – journal record); iii) *piece*: What are the structural characteristics of an educational composition? (composer - compositional commentary); and iv) *person*: What do students and teachers learn from collaboration with composers? (teacher learning report).

Analysis/Interpretation

Pragmatism is the foundational basis of this project; that is, knowledge claims arise out of actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions (as in post positivism). What works and solving problems are the major concerns (Patton, 1990). In contrast to the method, it is the problem that is most important: multiple data sources are often employed to understand the problem (Rossman & Wilson, 1985; Creswell, 2011). The writings of Pierce, James, Mead and Dewey established pragmatism as a basis for knowledge claims (Cherryhomes, 1992). In this study, the data will be analyzed, patterns identified, and themes integrated using the constant comparison method (after Stake, 1998). This method is consistent with the pragmatic focus of the study; that is, to obtain an in-depth understanding of the relationship of music composition to music learning through the collaborative efforts of composers and teachers. By employing multiple data sources (triangulation) contiguous with the four dimensions of creativity (internal validity), trustworthiness will be achieved. Further, the composers and teachers will review the interpretation of data and provide input (member checks).

Participants

Fifteen composers and fifteen teachers in the Greater Toronto Area will participate in the *Sound Connections Project*. The relationship of compositional strategies to the development of musical knowledge and skills will be the focus of the protocols. A *teacher journal* and *teaching report* completed by teachers will identify essential musical skills and how they are developed throughout the new composition, respectively. The composers will undertake a *reflective report* which will emphasize a problem-solving approach to overcoming musical challenges, that is, how compositional techniques can be employed to develop musical skills. These individuals will also complete a *compositional review* which will outline their composition's structural characteristics.

The Canadian Music Centre's Ontario regional director will advertise a call for proposals to its composers and assign commissions through a juried process. CMC composers will be invited to participate in this study as they obtain membership as associates based on a juried process, thereby ensuring a similar level of expertise by all participants. The teachers also all have similar backgrounds in music and education. Those teaching in elementary and secondary schools require certification from the Ontario Teacher College (OTC), and those teaching in private studios are members of the Ontario Registered Music Teachers Association (ORMTA). The number of participants (15 composers + 15 teachers) is appropriate for a complex in-depth qualitative study of a pragmatic nature where there are

multiple measures submitted by participants (2 per composer/2 per associate teacher) (Denizen & Lincoln, 1998).

Research Team

The research group will consist of the principal investigator (PI), Ontario regional director (RD), and two doctoral research assistants (RA's). The PI will liaise with the partners, organize the study, supervise the RA's, and document the project on-site (notes, photographs, etc.). The RA's will assist with the study's organization, data-gathering, analysis/interpretation and writing up the findings. The RD will assist with administering the project within the CMC, liaise with the PI and RA's, and provide input into the analysis and interpretation of data.

Benefits:

Research outcomes for the *Sound Connections Project* include:

- increased participation by administrators and field personnel in the organization, administration and implementation of the research process;
- development of an in-depth understanding of the relationship between music composition and music learning; and
- a raised awareness by research assistants of the intellectual dimensions of music creativity and the skill to organize, collect data, analyze/interpret data, and write-up findings within an emerging arts partnership.

Social benefits of the research include:

- development of a formal research partnership emerging from previous participation in research projects by the Canadian Music Centre and school boards;
- the addition of 15 new works to the repertoire for young musicians for use by students and teachers; and
- the development of procedural knowledge to improve music composition instruction by teachers in schools, studios and post-secondary institution.

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