CREATIVE SYNERGY: STORY AND MUSIC

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between story and music has a long history. The nature of the relationship changes but the connection is there in the song Moses sang before all the people as reminder and personal commentary, in the ballads of the minstrels bringing news and entertainment, in medieval liturgical drama on hayracks educating the illiterate, in renaissance word painting musically illustrating elements of story, in early opera contrived to express subtle affect in Greek drama, in Baroque expressions of the ethos of an heroic story, in the restrained and refined musical delights of classical ballet, in the passion and pathos of romantic program music, in the stinging social commentary of musical theatre, in the emotional excesses of modern movies, and in the recent artistic fusion of rock videos. Where do we find that link in the education of children?

Language teachers have in a very limited way explored the connection as a reading response or creative writing "activity" with little understanding of its role in meaning-making or of the potential of story in music. Free musical creation inspired by composers and educators like R. Murray Schafer and Paynter & Aston faded with the 70's into the conservative 80's. With referentialism frowned on by aesthetic absolute expressionists, and practice-based performance preferred by the praxialists, music teachers have increasingly steered away from making the link to story. Unless they are studying historic examples where the story-music link already exists, teachers hesitate to facilitate the connection through the imagination of students. MIDI facilities and curricular changes have placed a new emphasis on creativity in music; however, improvisation instruction tends to be "musical practice" dominated and composition in junior and senior high schools too frequently leans only toward pop styles. A new driving force is needed for musical creativity that will allow the exploration of music as character, sound effect, illustration, moodscape, referent, or as personal response to story without regard for the strictures of musical practice.
In language instruction, the use of 'text-sets' (e.g., the RefleXions Series by Linda Cameron & Adrian Peetoom published by Scholastic Canada) has provided exceptionally rich learning contexts with great potential for webs of "integration." Reflections, connections, patterns and questions emerge as children engage in text and talk about text, responding to and composing their personal and shared understandings. Children's literature can provide a natural focus for the imagination, for meaning making, and consequently for musical creativity.

This literature, with the attendant psychological set of "play," serves as a release to creative energy in junior and senior high school students, as well as providing an "integrative opportunity" for elementary students. Whether the sound sources employed are MIDI or natural, there is no significant difference in the richness of the experience. Learnings are reciprocal -- musical perception and appreciation is enhanced by the stories' context, and the literacy achievement is expanded by the meaning context of the music. Seeing music as another text allows the discovery of many parallels between the processes of storying and musicng.

**ROLE OF MUSIC WITH STORY**

There are at least four different relationships between story and music. Perhaps the most basic is one where music simply carries the text which tells story without being directly expressive of the text. For example, folk songs like "The Cruel War," "Froggy Went A-courtin," or "Black Day in July" tell stories but the tune could just as well have any other set of words. This change of text to tune is often observable in hymns -- a one time folk tune becomes a hymn, e.g., "Greensleeves" becomes "What Child is this?" In a school context such a song can be illustrated, or an extended story created from it. Or you could take a story, re-write it as poetry and set it to music. There is no direct match there in terms of the reader's response to the text. For example, if the story is melancholy this music might not even be a referent to that mood. It is like an illustration that only decorates rather than illustrates what is known from the text not creating meaning on its own.

A different relationship exists where music carries the text but also contributes to the affect of the narrative as in the Schubert lied, "Der Erlkonig." Here the music changes as the characters in the poem change. The musical agitation contributes significantly to the suspense and fear expressed in the song. This relationship can become the focus of storying from musical expressions or musical sound manipulation to achieve dramatic effect. In both cases meaning is made beyond the surface levels of common understanding. The music is text on its own, it is meaning-full, a form of illustration.

A similar but differentiated relationship exists where the music does not carry the story nor attempt to portray it but directly enhances its dramatic effect or interprets its mood. The story is usually presented some other way, like motion picture, dance, or even spoken word. This relationship is perhaps most evident in silent movies where the music, usually improvised on piano or dramatic theatre organs, attempted to provide dialogue, sound effect, mood, and reaction. In the soap stories
of the 50's and 60's the music characteristically interpreted the melodramatic emotional excesses. In ballet the music is not immediately responsive to story; the dance provides the story and emotional expressiveness that would not be evident if heard only as music. Where spoken story is directly related to music as in Peter and the Wolf, the music is usually heard as a retelling of the story. In story tapes music may also function more as "movie music" and set soundscape and dramatic context.

In the previous relationship story was dominant and music was in a supportive role enhancing, elaborating, or extending the meaning. In traditional Romantic program music, music is dominant and the story is in a supportive role. In music like Symphonie Fantastique by Berlioz, Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks by Strauss, or The Moldau by Smetana the story (or maybe even a landscape painting) that informs the piece is primarily an interpretive layer. The music could be, and usually is, heard only as music and not as story. If however the intended story is known, the listener's imagination may provide rich detail from the musical events. With no story indicated listeners usually find it difficult to create a consistent story integrally and chronologically related to the music. To attempt to do that can become a considerable creative writing challenge as we found in our experimenting. We found that it appeared easier to create free verse or extended metaphor rather than narrative as a response to the music.

**SPECIFIC MUSIC FUNCTIONS IN STORY**

In examining the historic use of music with story and exploring possible connections, at least six functions seem evident. (1) **Music as character.** A particular timbre or musical fragment may represent a character, e.g., the various characters in Peter and the Wolf. Music may simply provide clues that the character has changed, e.g., strings surrounding the words of Christ in a Passion, or may directly and blatantly represent the presence and actions of a character. (2) **Music as sound effect.** Music may imitate real sounds such as bird sounds, e.g., the cuckoo in a Handel organ concerto, or a sigh or cannon or thunder and lightening. (3) **Music as dramatic illustration.** The music adds referential context links, expanding through elaboration and extension to a story. It provides the emotional enhancement to aspects of the story in a fairly direct referential manner. This is essentially what movie music does today. (4) **Music as moodscape.** This is similar to dramatic illustration but in a more general emotional manner. This may be best understood as a parallel to rich evocative visual illustration in a picture book. (5) **Music as referent.** In this function music is used that evokes effect because of existing referential links, e.g., national anthem of France, or hunting horns, or the theme from the William Tell Overture. (6) **Music as personal response to story.** This is perhaps most like the use of chorales in Bach's Passions - moments of personal reflection and response. It is music that would be most appropriate as a personal response to an experience or story.

These functions are activated through various musical connections we typically make in our culture. We list some here but there are many other possibilities. (1) We tend to connect musical tempo with speed - e.g., quick tempo music may remind us of running. (2) pitch level with size. We would be more likely to associate the sound of a tuba with an elephant that the sound of a piccolo. (3) texture with complexity and energy. We probably associate chaos with many instruments playing...
simultaneously and solitude with a single instrument. (4) tonality with general mood - minor is sad. This varies with other dimensions but tonality and modality have general "affect" associations in many cultures. (5) articulation with communicative tone. The same instrument can play the same pitches with the same tempo but sound angry on one hand, temperate on the other or impatient. Combinations of these and others can communicate strong meanings. Exploring these links in story to music creation can enhance both literary and musical meaning making.

**MUSIC - STORY FORMS**

The creative synergy between music and story takes various forms, each of which can become a curricular focus or specific learning activity. (1) **Drama using sound dialogue between two players.** Two students are given a particular scenario and appropriate expressive dialogue is then musically improvised, e.g., one person wants to go out Saturday night, the other wants to stay in. (2) **Musical illustration.** A portion of a story is selected and a sound composition, like a picture illustration, portrays the scene. This may be like the story telling music alternation of Peter and the Wolf where the story is retold musically. In another form the music is created as soundscape to illustrate the mood or atmosphere of the story. The music describes what is happening in the story. (3) **Story to graphic to music.** Elements of story can be visually portrayed and this in turn serves as stimulus for musical creation. An example of this is the Manitoba landscape in R. Murray Schafer's "When Words Sing." It could also be the contour of a car - one instrument follows the pitch of the rise and fall of the contour while another provides the bottom baseline and another the circularity of the wheels. (4) **Sound composition based on a visual collage metaphor as opposed to story.** Sound compositions do not have to have chronological literal event portrayal but may fragment and overlay like a visual collage - each piece evoked by some "story" idea. (5) **Interlude in story.** Here music may provide commentary or preparation for a story segment either retrospectively or in anticipation, e.g., music in the movie "Breaking the Waves." (6) **Narrative.** This is the most typical "program music" form where the music "tells" the story in event sequence. (7) **Personal story.** Music created to represent a portion of personal life course or to interpret an aspect of emotive life, of psychological reaction to an experience. This could be music created to respond to, "how did you feel when. . ."  

**SOUND RESOURCES**

There is also a synergy between the sound sources used, the story, and the music created. Learning possibilities change with the requirement to "find" sound within limitations such as allowing only body sounds or with the opportunity to select from a vast array of instrumental and other sound sources such as provided in a synthesizer. Possible sources are (1) body only - claps, patches, whistles, stomps; (2) voice only; (3) objects carried by the person - combs, pens; (4) found objects in the building or at home or wherever; (5) instruments created out of found objects (6) traditional instruments played in the usual way; (7) traditional instruments played in unusual ways; (8) electronic sources; (9) recorded sounds - noise - created, environmental. The sound sources stimulate ideas as well as limit ideas. This is particularly important to note with the prevalence of synthesizers and computers these days.
WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

The interactive workshop began with the presentation, demonstration, illustration, and discussion of the theoretical, pragmatic and experiential ideas discussed above using a 'wolfness' text set as the thematic context. Participants were invited to be involved from the outset in the demonstrations used to illustrate concepts: to listen to some musical fragments and compose story, to explore a children's 'wolf' book to find the 'music' in it using readers theatre techniques combined with musical characterizations, to listen to segments of stories with various forms of musical illustrations composed by faculty of music students, to view a video clip of an opera composed by elementary children to tell a child's story and to explore various possibilities of the synergy between story and music. The general theme of wolves helped tie some of the stories together and provided intertextual support to the meaning making. For example, once we heard some wolves howling in a piece of music and saw them in the story book, we were tuned to that context and set of images and sounds.

The second half of the session actively engaged the participants in 4 different creative composing strategies which were examples of possibilities already described and demonstrated. We formed four groups by describing the tasks and inviting participants to choose the one that intrigued them. An array of instruments was available in the room including recorders, glockenspiels, Autoharp, handbells, and untuned percussion. Participants were reminded that they could use their body, voice, found objects, or the instruments provided, and no limitation was given. An interesting aside: participants were invited to explore the instruments when they entered the room but no one took the invitation. Invitations to explore the literature text set also were given and webs developing the notions and concepts of creativity and synergy were begun on the blackboards around the room. Participants were obviously hesitant to 'play' initially but after the demonstrations and practice participated wholeheartedly. Why are we so afraid to explore, play, and be creative in so many contexts? Why is music making informally such an unlikely thing to do as music educators when the possibilities are there. Kids do it naturally...what has happened to us?

Invitations:

1. **Create a soundscape from a story poem.** We gave this group *Night in the Country*, story by Cynthia Rylant, pictures by Mary Szilagyi. The book begins, "There is no night so dark, so black as night in the country" and the reader is invited to listen and look and feel through the pages of the book and into their own melodious, mysterious, alive night which is framed by the colours of the day.

2. **Retell any folk tale.** We suggested this should involve a wolf and employ music and mime (e.g., Little Red Riding Hood, Gingerbread Man, Three Pigs)

3. **Create a story from the assigned music.** We provided a tape recording of an excerpt from Reconnaissance by Canadian composer James Montgomery. We felt the segment that was evocative of night and the country and imagination.
4. **Compose music to illustrate a story.** We gave this group *The Real True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. This book is a fractured tale of the three pigs retold from the perspective of the very allergic and apologetic B.B. Wolf. The text has some rather energetic parts to it that demand some passionate music composition. The main character is very complex and so the musical composition has many layers to portray. The dilemmas are demanding as well.

The groups worked on these compositions with enthusiasm and interest and through their engagement came up with some interesting performances in a short period of time. In the debriefing following the performances, the participants pointed out how some of the tasks were very complex and difficult.

**CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS**

**Music Curriculum.** Curriculum sensibilities today give greater place to "creativity" than ever before but finding ways to allow and encourage creativity is no easier. The story to music "activity" may be common and not new but the understanding of the role, possibilities, and learning values of engaging students in ideation, selection, criticism, interpretation, and performance of musical sounds as musical "story" is not adequately understood or utilized. The notion that this is "only an activity" devalues and marginalizes the process. What then counts as "creative" music making? Must the "creation" be within the bounds of established "theory" or must it be "dots on paper" or must it be within historic practice? We believe part of the problem in seeing the story to music creativity as being a "one shot activity" is that the real learning value within it is not understood nor is there a concept for its place in a sequential learning/performing curriculum. Such a sequence needs to be explored and established. If expectation of learning existing and established performing practices and repertoire is placed into a context that also values the child's own compositional attempts AND values "new" music, the story to music and music to story learning experiences can become part of a long series of related compositional efforts that will draw on music practice traditions, require technical music making development, encourage extensive exploration of the sonic environment, employ imaginative thought, refine critical thinking abilities, enhance meaning-making from all music, facilitate engagement (Bartel & Cameron, 1996), and honour and celebrate the child's distinctive musical insights. Such a curriculum does not now exist as written vision. Creating it in practice is a challenge worth the effort.

Although written prescriptions do not exist, examples of the potential are evident: improvisational opportunities in Orff classes often use story as motivators; the Toronto Symphony Adopt-a-Musician school composition projects mainly take their creative energy from the student's story ideas; the DAREArts/University of Toronto (96-97) Creating the Voices of the Future Together project had student composers work with story ideas generated by elementary school children; the Canadian Opera Company/Samuel Hearne School opera project was based on the students' own stories; ideas of Katz and Thomas (1992) R. Murray Schafer (1970), Hanson (1997), Paynter and Aston (1970), and Mendres (1975).
**Literature Curriculum.** One of the critical issues here is that we need to see music as another form of text and a potential source of meaning. It can be explored as literature is, to be heard or read and responded to, to construct meaning from. Music can also be used to respond to text as another modality or way of knowing. It can be used to demonstrate character development, plot patterns and disruptions of the probable, or to portray the setting, the dynamic context for the story. If you can use music to retell, illustrate or respond to the story, then comprehension is enhanced and demonstrated. "Feelings can be communicated by music that words simply cannot express," suggested Christianson (1995) in his research on the impact of music on youth. It was interesting to note the power of the Elton John's performance at Lady Diana's funeral, a musical tribute, a poem. Music, like drama, can extend, expand, elaborate and enrich story. It certainly does engage learners actively. Music can tell story. There is the reciprocal meaning making possible through the synergy and we have not even explored the possibilities of the narrative, oral performance of song or talked about how it helps to refine the listening modality and give another voice to speak with. Literacy involves reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing -- the purpose for all is to construct or compose meaning. Music and story together provide rich literate opportunities to take learners through to the flexible consolidated stage of literacy development...making meaning.

Recent literary theories such as deconstruction, postmodernism and cultural criticism espouse that texts are sites for the composition of multiple readings. Differences emerge from the structure of the text, the contexts of production and reception, and in the readers themselves. The sorts of invitations given in this workshop allow for the exploration and validation of these, practice that allows for the understanding that there is no fixed meaning, that provides for several possible meanings and production options, that allows for diversity of voice and opinion as well as that which supports the musical way of knowing.

**REFERENCES**


Cameron, Linda & Peetoom, Adrian. *Reflexions*, K-8 Series Toronto: Scholastic Canada


