Canadian Music in Education

Teachers’ Experiences as Composers and Arrangers

By Patricia Shand

In my Spring 2009 column, I discussed the valuable work being done by teachers who compose and arrange music for and with their students. I invited readers to share their own experiences as teacher-composers, and I was gratified with the response. I am pleased to include below comments from three of the teachers who responded to my invitation.

Susan Phillips from Whitehorse, Yukon, sent these comments: “I write songs for myself, and have done for over 20 years, but I’ve also used songwriting in my previous profession as music therapist and currently as elementary music teacher at Whitehorse Elementary School. I believe that the songwriting process offers many rewards to the songwriter, including expression, validation, and the satisfaction of creating something new and beautiful that can be shared. I’ve also found that group songwriting can have a bonding effect on those involved.

Some of my students recently performed for the spring concert, singing songs they wrote the lyrics for and choreographed themselves as a class. We began with a brainstorm and a popular vote for a topic, and then went from there, dividing into groups to write the verses. We went through peer editing, a painful process for some, who didn’t like their ideas changed by others. But I explained that compromise was necessary in group creativity. Later they would get to write a song by themselves. In the meantime we had to work together and hopefully agree on each decision about the song. Four classes completed the lyrics and choreographed them well enough to present them at the spring concert. Though I had very little to do with editing the lyrics, I did compose the music for each song, consulting with students first about what style, tempo, and dynamics they thought would fit. The results were exciting. Students accepted the music as fitting the words, memorizing the songs and the actions to go along with them. After the concert a parent emailed me and thanked me for ‘showing the students how a song is born.’ That was a huge compliment.

I’ll never forget the thrill of writing my first song, feeling there was something new in the world that captured what I felt, believed, yearned for. It was a powerful moment, and one that I am happy to attempt to inspire in my students. I heard someone on CBC yesterday who said that the best songs are written by 12-year-olds. In that case I’m way over the hill, but it does spur me on to encourage my students to create in music class. The next step is to have them compose the music themselves.”

Kim Soleski Ward wrote: “I am an elementary music teacher in Acton, Massachusetts. I grew up in Canada and do a lot of Canadian music in my classes. I have been writing music for my students for the past 15 years. The main reason that I started composing was to coordinate the music class with certain curriculum topics that the students were learning in the regular classroom. For example, the second grade classes hatch mealworms each spring as part of their science studies. I composed a song about mealworms that describes their life cycle. Similarly, I composed a song about the frog and caterpillar life cycles.

Over the past few years, I have been putting the songs together in topic-specific songbooks that include related written activities. I just recently published a book called “Sing a Song of Canada” which has 22 original songs that teach facts about Canadian history, geography and culture. That book is available through Leslie Music Supply in Oakville (www.lesleimusic supply.com). In Massachusetts, the Grade 4 students study Canada as part of their social studies curriculum. This book has been used by the music teachers and classroom teachers in my school district.

I think that there must be many other music teachers in the elementary grades who have composed songs that can be integrated into the regular classroom curriculum. It only makes sense to use the amazing power of music to teach other subjects as well. And while the students are learning the provinces and their capitals (in my song “Can Can Canada”), they are learning to sing on pitch, they are performing in an ensemble, and honing many other musical skills.”

Alison Temple offered this description of her experiences as a teacher-composer: “I have been composing since my teens (apart from a little piano piece when I was about eight), but became more prolific after emigrating from Scotland to Saskatchewan, forced by the lack of worthwhile resources for K-8 classes, and even more so since moving to BC and teaching K-7 music with practically nothing on the shelves.

My primary motivation now, twenty years later, is, like many of your respondents, that of providing accessible music for my students to play, that will make them sound good, and therefore excite them, whatever their academic strengths (not to mention their musical ones). However, writing my own music means that I can also teach them how music is ‘put together,’ and I have
found out, when teaching songs by rote, in class and in choir, that having the language of musical composition at their finger-tips makes it easy for the students to hear scale passages, repeated notes, octave jumps, sequences, dynamic and key changes, etc., and so learn a song quickly and with melodic accuracy and understanding. This is an added bonus for me, when given a time frame of 30 minutes for music periods and choir practices. Teachers who have used some of my pieces will often tell me that they 'can see why I wrote it the way I did.' (That's encouraging, as I always do write with further education in mind!)

I have written several songs, but find that I write mostly, on a school-yearly basis, for Grade 4 - 7 recorder groups and general elementary instrumental class groups. One beginner recorder repertoire book and two volumes of general instrumental pieces (the latter with reproducible parts) were published in 1997 and 1998. I workshopped these at our annual BCMEA conferences, and they are still used by many teachers who tell me 'how good their kids sound,' even when they are at a rudimentary level. However, my publisher has since sold his business to a publisher of brass music, and so most of what I have written every year since then, for my own classes, has merely been workshopped at provincial and district conferences and shared with my colleagues. Especially at an elementary level, there is little money available to music educators for resources, especially ones that put musical scores into kids' hands. So I have learned that not only is it easier (though of course very time-consuming) to write or arrange the music myself to suit them, but it also makes it legal to copy parts for them to have to themselves! How can anyone learn to read without books, or learn to read music without seeing it?

Another aspect of being able to write for specific groups of abilities and ages is that, when the kids are motivated to want to perform, and then do so with such eagerness and attention to detail — even when educationally challenged in so many different ways — the rest of the staff in a school is 'wowed' by their efforts, and so the music program becomes more and more valued. And we all know how important THAT is, in these days of ever-increasing fiscal restraint."

I am grateful to these three teachers for sharing their experiences, and I would very much appreciate hearing from other teachers who have been involved in composing and arranging. Please add your voices to the growing chorus. CME

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