

**Student Composers' Expressed Meaning of Composition with
Regard to Culture**

Burnard (2006) developed a model of the super-culture of children's musical creativity, based on earlier observations (Burnard, 1999, 2000, 2004), to help describe the influence of culture as an interrelated network of systems on composers and their compositions. The model provides a stimulating place to begin an examination of students' expressed meaning of composition as related to culture. In the center of Burnard's model is the "child"; that is to say that each composer is a part of their culture. For the purposes of this study, the working definition of culture will include all human relational context surrounding the life of the composer including their own beliefs about composing, which consequently influence others. An important question then, perhaps, is: what population of composers should be examined? The researcher works in a state that offers an honors composition competition, where students can send their work. If chosen, these students then are able to perform their work at the state music teachers' conference. It seemed appropriate that these students could inform teachers and teacher educators in this area of research. What can be learned from an examination of family lives of successful student composers? What contributions to these student composers' teachers make to their success as composers? What meaning does the teacher's contribution have on the work of the student composer? How does the student composer value music composition as a form of expression? The purpose of this study was to describe the creative cultures of participants of a state honors composition concert using Burnard's model as a place of entry.

Method

Participants of a state honors composition concert were invited by the

researcher to be a part of this study through a letter sent to their place of residence. Their original compositions were selected from among over 200 total entries, as the best in the state by a panel of expert judges. Each music teacher in the state was sent a flyer calling for submissions to the contest. Twenty-one original compositions were selected for inclusion in the state honors concert; which was held during the annual state music teacher conference. All participants were asked to complete an online researcher-devised survey.

The survey contained items addressing students' creative music cultures. These items were formulated by examining research in the area of children's creative social worlds (Burnard, 2006): in-school music contexts, out-of-school contexts, society, and culture (p. 368) were identified as being worthy of description. With this in mind, the researcher asked the: who, what, where, when, why, and how questions regarding each of the four areas of children's creative social worlds. Questions on the survey included: Why do you like to compose? How do you prefer to compose? When do you like to compose? What music do you prefer to compose, and what sorts of tools (piano, guitar, computer, etc.) do you use when composing? And where do you do your best composing? A complete list of survey questions can be found in Figure 1. Answers to these questions and others in light of Burnard's model (2006) guided the researcher's analysis of participants' responses by providing a framework for description. Members of the *Doctoral Colloquium at Michigan State University* were presented the findings of this study and then provided feedback to ensure that the researcher was not expressing a bias in the interpretation of results and in the discussion of research findings.

1. Background Information

- a. Age:
5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18
 - b. Gender:
Boy, Girl
 - c. List the in-school music activities that you are involved with:
 - d. List your out-of-school music (garageband, ethnic ensemble) contexts:
 - e. What is your greatest source of musical joy?
 - f. List your ethnicity and/or religion:
 - g. How important is your ethnicity/religion to your creative music making (1 being not important-5 being really important)?
1, 2, 3, 4, 5
 - h. Were either of your parents musicians either past or present?
Yes, No
 - i. How many of your parents are still musicians?
0, 1, 2
 - j. How close are you to your family (1 being the weakest-5 being the strongest)?
1, 2, 3, 4, 5
 - k. Do you take private lessons on an instrument or voice?
Yes, No
 - l. List the instruments you take private lessons on:
-

2. On Composition

- a. Describe you

Results

Sixteen of 21 participants completed the online researcher-devised questionnaire ($N=16$). The gender proportions represented those of the students in the honors composition concert. Of the 16, 4 were females and 12 were males. Participants ranged in age from 7 to 18 years.

In-school Music Involvement, Out-of-school Music Involvement, and Private Lessons

Student composers were representatives of a number of school music areas including band, choir, orchestra, and alternative ensemble. Instrumental ensembles indicated by survey responses include: concert band, jazz band, marching band, musical pit orchestra, and symphony orchestra; vocal music ensembles represented include: small and large ensemble choir as well as mixed and homogeneous choirs by gender; other offerings represented include general music, popular music ensemble, student conductor of women's choir, and independent music studies. Eight student composers indicated being exclusively instrumentalists, 2 indicated being exclusively vocalists, and 6 indicated being a combination of both. Students listed the following out-of-school music activities: composition lessons, director of various church ensembles, garage band, jam sessions, jazz combo, guitar ensemble, praise band, recording workshops, recording studio musician, rock band, string ensemble, and voice/lute duo.

Ten student composers indicated taking private lessons on at least one instrument. Instruments listed include: cello, drum-set, flute, guitar, organ, piano, viola, violin, and voice. Of the ten student composers indicating private lessons, nine indicated either guitar or piano. Six student composers took lessons on instruments that were offered in school.

Family and Ethnicity

Eight student composers indicated that ethnicity was not important to their creative music making. Of the other eight student composers indicating a moderate to high level of importance of ethnicity, all indicated being a Christian. Of those individuals indicating a low-level of importance of ethnicity, responses included: atheist, no religious affiliation, and Haitian/American. Nine participants indicated that at least one of their parents was a musician either in past or present. Five indicated that at least one parent was still a musician. Two indicated that both parents were still musicians. All participants indicated having a moderate to high level of closeness to their family.

The Creative Self

Nine of the 16 student composers indicated musical composition as their greatest source of musical joy. Other music experiences mentioned were: improvised harmonies sounding good, listening to the radio, live performance, playing in a group, playing the saxophone, praise music, and singing. A specific instrument was mentioned as a part of students' greatest source of musical joy in 4 of 16 responses.

In response to the question, "Why do you like to compose?" student composer varied regarding orientation towards intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (see Figure 2). Student responses were passionate, using expressive words such as: "freedom," "fulfilling," "life

When asked to describe themselves as composers, student composers responded in a variety of different ways. Responses could be categorized on a continuum of identity sameness to identity difference.

Two, V: Calm) and then I drew with pastels on paper what it would look like. I used blue for percussion, red for voice, orange for winds, and green for strings. It read from left to right as time, and bottom to top as volume. This allowed me to plan each entrance, dynamic, blend, etc. without the confinement that musical notation presents. I wrote (on staff paper) the notes, fitting into the framework I wrote/drew.

the surface, saying things like “that sounds really pretty,” “they dance and clap and tell me how good it sounds,” and they “always want to hear it again.” When parents listened, depending on their musical background, they offered comments similar to the extended family or “mom constructively criticizes ... dad just listens.” One participant wrote, “I don't care how they respond to it

Although there did not seem to be a pattern to how student composers indicated their sequence of compositional activity, each spoke fervently about their own process.

Regarding compositional tools, student composers indicated a number of tools that assist in the creation of their music. Eleven participants indicated using the computer as a tool for music creation. Seven out of 11 indicated using notation software; 4 indicated using sequencing software. Software notation applications specifically mentioned were *Finale* and *Sibelius*; sequencing applications mentioned were *GarageBand* and *Reason*.

Culture's Influence On Composing

When asked to identify who listened to their compositions, responses ranged from desiring “anyone” to hear their work to desiring “very few people” to hear their work. The most cited individuals were friends, family, teachers, extended family, college professors, and individuals who attended the honors composition concert. As for which individuals contributed most to their success in composing, 11 indicated teachers playing a role in their development; 7 indicated friends or peer musicians; 5 indicated family as playing a role. When asked how these individuals respond, participant responses followed general trends. Student composers indicated that when extended family listens, they listen on

really care about it, and it's hard but quite meaningful to answer those questions.

Student composer responses regarding teacher opinions seemed to be viewed as contributing most to the furtherance of each individual's learning in composition.

The student composers offered a variety of reasons for why they thought their audience enjoyed their music. Their responses included "My music has a fast tempo and fun riffs and rhythms." More elaborated reasons are quoted here:

Since music is a good reflection of one's personality, I think they like my music because they like me. I put some of

The best thing about composing is that it gives a purpose to my life.

The joy of playing it with others.

I earn a lot of pride and I feel proud of myself and I can praise God and know that He will be proud of me.

Hearing compositions live, performing them live or playing them for others.

The satisfaction of listening to it when it is finished

I can create something out of nothing.

The best thing about composing is the originality component. I like knowing that a song is mine, and that I can sing and play it however I want to. It's not something that's "graded" or formally criticized, generally.

The creativity and the way someone takes it in.

The fun you have, the trip it takes you on and you get to express your feelings all at the same time. Also by the recognition that it gives you, you feel more whole and complete as a person.

The spirit of discovery. The arousal of the heart and soul. The speaking of the heart through a pen or the instrument. The joy and happiness it brings to myself and others. Composing is art in its most celestial form.

Being able to express anything with the overpowering sensation of music.

The sense of accomplishment when a piece of music turns out just the way you wanted it to and when you can share it with others.

As I have said earlier, the best part about composing is the following TRUTH: it expresses LIFE.

The very best thing about composing is that I can show people who I am without talking to them. I can communicate my ideas without words. I can use sound waves to tell an intricate story. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a song is worth a million.

The sense of accomplishment.

The feeling that I accomplished a great piece of music.

Figure 3. Responses to “What is the best thing about composing?”

Discussion

While results of this descriptive study are not generalizable to other populations of students, the communication with the sample makes findings from this study relevant to music educators as they seek to foster environments where creativity in music is encouraged. Most of the

participants of this study were in —although some were only ock

judges. Having might be important to

remember that creative musicians outside of
the school-music realm did not have a
chance to enter their compositions or be

part of; a music education that is rewarding at a number of levels, and hard to put down. How different would school music involvement be if every student involved in school music could say “I have always had a strong connection with music and love it... it is a part of me and I enjoy having the freedom to create of myself something beautiful” as a participant of the honors composition concert did? Such a question might be a topic for the music education philosophers and curriculum reformers to ponder.

Solitude and the Composition Process

Most of the composers involved with this study preferred solitude while involved in the composition process and preferred to do their composing at a computer. A MIDI lab environment with headphones would allow each student to be free of other sounds and would allow self-directed creation. Another application of this study might include cubicle-like enclosures around each computer station to allow students the privacy and solitude that was preferred by some participants. Other composers did compose with and were inspired by other people, so allowing for this collaborative environment within the school music setting would be appropriate.

The Computer as a Composition Tool

Two distinct types of computer applications were indicated by participants as assisting their music creation: notation-based programs and sequencing-based programs. *Finale* (notation) and *Reason* (sequencing) were indicated as being

CHINESE ABSTRACT

中文摘要

作曲學生從文化角度看作曲的意義

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此研究的目的是描述美國的一個州榮譽作品音樂會的作曲者們在文化系統方面的特徵。21位作曲者中共有16位完成了研究者設計的網上問卷，包括年齡在7歲至18歲的4