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PEDAGOGICAL TOPICS

JON BURGESS, COLUMN EDITOR

CULTIVATING CREATIVITY IN THE TRUMPET STUDIO

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PEDAGOGICAL TOPICS

JON BURGESS, COLUMN EDITOR

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CULTIVATING CREATIVITY IN THE TRUMPET STUDIO

BY DOUGLAS LINDSEY

I can remember the first time I saw Bobby McFerrin. Most poignantly, I recall a feeling of complete wonder, juxtaposed with total terror, driven by the fear that he would call me out and ask me to sing along with him. He was in town for a show and had agreed to come to my undergraduate institution to do a talk/masterclass. Little did I know that this “talk” would turn out to be a singing jam session, on the magnitude of which only Bobby McFerrin could create. I was convinced that the very act of singing or playing in front of this improvisatory dynamo would end in my complete and utter personal embarrassment. When I look back on that day, I kick myself for not participating more actively in that really special experience. I was too scared, too hampered by self-doubt, and I didn’t have the “language” to communicate on that level. Instead of singing and cooing along with McFerrin’s ethereal sounds, I was stuck in “Oh, crap!” mode.

“I was stuck in ‘Oh, crap!’ mode.”

How could I have been better prepared to approach this situation? How might students be better prepared to approach any aspect of our incredibly spontaneous craft?

My project for the last year has been the exploration of this topic and how it can be applied to create more dynamic music making in the trumpet studio. Through what has been very enjoyable trial and error, I have devised some fun ways to get students participating in the creative conversation.

First, identify an etude, solo, or other piece of music that you think would evoke a strong emotion or story line. “A sad, old, and widowed turtle that laments the loss of his long-time

partner” was one of my favorite student responses, elicited by the first phrase of the first etude in Phil Snedecor’s *Lyrical Etudes for Trumpet*. Snedecor’s book works very well for this exercise, as it is full of fantastic phrases that just drip with musicality. Once you have decided on your excerpt, you will then need to assign your students to various creative tasks. You can accomplish this in a number of ways, but I find it works best if you can divide them into small teams with three to five students each. Once you have created your teams, assign one or two students from each of the groups to be in charge of thinking of one of three different categories: character, setting, and action. I like to have the students in each group keep their answers secret from one another until the end; the results are remarkable.

Using Snedecor’s first etude as our guide, let’s look at this game in action. Now that the students have been assigned roles, I begin the activity by playing the first phrase for them (see Example 1).¹

After I play, I give the students time to reflect on what they have heard. Every time I do this exercise, there is a huge amount of energy, arguing, and laughter. Let it happen—you are not only nurturing team building, but also allowing students to express themselves freely. There is a plethora of research on the cultivation of creativity in the classroom, a large majority of which reinforces the notion of establishing a safe environment for nurturing creative activities. Further, there exists much research supporting the importance and primacy of improvisational teaching within this safe environment.² Your students should feel as though they can express their creativity without any fear of failing.

Andante - with freedom ♩=80 Phil Snedecor

Example 1. Etude No. 1 from Phil Snedecor’s *Lyrical Etudes for Trumpet*, measures 1 – 8

Without revealing your interpretation, ask the groups to write down their stories or scenes and then move to the next phrase. Surprisingly, I often encounter underwater imagery in addition to thoughts of loss and pain in the students' responses to this first phrase. Continue this process for the remainder of the etude and then have the students reveal their answers. You will find an infinite variety of stories among the students, from the most silly and abstract to some very heartfelt narratives. At the point when everyone has laughed themselves silly, I like to begin a conversation that revolves around the language of music. For instance, what about the first phrase makes us think of sorrow or pain? The assumptions we make about music and the inherent imagery associated with certain sounds or affective gestures always makes for lively debate and helps to develop a deeper understanding of the language we use to describe music.

Another game that I enjoy is directly influenced by the improvisatory genius of Bobby McFerrin. As I mentioned earlier, as a young musician I was terrified of "messing up" or making a fool of myself. I didn't feel comfortable failing, and I wasn't prepared to create openly and take a risk. I have found that this exercise is especially good for allowing students to experiment and "mess up" in a safe environment.

Begin by asking the students to sit with their instruments in a circle. The improvisation will center on the pentatonic scale. If the students play notes in that scale, they literally cannot play a wrong note. It may be helpful to review the pentatonic scale; for a fantastic demonstration of the power of this ever-ubiquitous scale, watch Bobby McFerrin in a lecture from "Notes & Neurons: In Search of the Common Chorus"³

I like to create four or five ostinato patterns in a 4/4 meter. At first, you will likely have to make the patterns up for your students. However, as the confidence levels increase, you will find that they will jump at the chance to create! Once the ostinato pattern is set, ask for volunteers or just choose the first player. I like to give the solo player eight to sixteen bars of 4/4 time, over which to improvise a melody. In my experience, the first few players are generally timid, and the ideas tend to be vague. Continue to encourage them by playing along and shaping their concepts. I cannot stress enough the importance of nurturing at this point; create that safe environment and let them make mistakes in order to grow! Once the students acquire the "hang of it," try encouraging them to create phrases through their improvisations. This can be an excellent way to explore cadences, phrase shapes, and musical narratives; perhaps tie in the narratives that the students conceived in the previous exercise. After each of the players has had a shot at both creating an ostinato and taking a solo, you should encourage collaborative improvisation. Put two or three players in the solo "hot-seat," and ask them to trade phrases and alternate ideas back and forth with each another. This is a great time to jump in and also throw the students some curveballs by playing something with challenging leaps and hard-to-follow phrases.

Once the students feel confident with the pentatonic scale, try using a twelve-bar blues pattern. The goal is to make them

comfortable with spontaneously creating in any setting. You can make this as easy or as difficult as you see fit; track the students' progress by recording them three or four times over the course of the semester. The amount of growth both in confidence and fluency will surely be quite evident.

The joy of cultivating a creative environment is something that takes time; you have to build trust and nurture self-confidence. These are just a few games you can play with your students to try to foster that creative spark. If you have ideas on how to promote creativity in your studio, try them; the process is enriching and fun!

I know that if I ever have the opportunity to collaborate with a world-class artist like Bobby McFerrin in the future, I will have the self-confidence and faith that even if I fail, I will grow and evolve as a performing artist. It is my hope that I can give my students that same feeling of confidence and freedom in their musical lives. Creativity empowers us; get out there and cultivate creative learners!

About the author: Dr. Douglas Lindsey joined the faculty at Kennesaw State University in 2012 and is already very active all over the Atlanta area. Recently as a soloist, he has been a featured artist with the Kennesaw State Wind Ensemble, the Georgia Brass Band, the Atlanta Trumpet Festival, and the Trumpet Festival of the Southeast. Before earning his DMA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Lindsey earned his MM degree at Yale with Allan Dean and his BM degree with Richard Rulli at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. Lindsey is a Schilke trumpet and Facet Mutes performing artist. This article was made possible in part by generous funding from the Kennesaw State University Center for Teaching and Learning.

Endnotes

- 1 Phil Snedecor, *Lyrical Etudes for Trumpet* (Alphonse-Leduc).
- 2 R. Keith Sawyer, "Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 2 (March 2004), 12–20.
- 3 Bobby McFerrin, "Notes and Neurons: In Search of the Common Chorus," *World Science Festival*: June 12, 2009.

