

Making Colorful Variations

An Interview with Jon Deak

Sarah Johnson, an oboist and writer, interviewed Jon Deak, the New York Philharmonic's Associate Principal Bass and a composer, about his work in helping young kids (ages 8-11) write music for the orchestra. In 1999, Jon's work with students at P.S. 199, a New York City public school, led to a performance of their "Colorful Variations" by the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall. A recording of the performance and an article by the students who wrote the piece can be accessed on the New York Philharmonic's Kidzone magazine "Front Row, Center!" Just click on: <http://www.nyphilkids.org/newsstand/index.html>



(left to right) Thomas V. Smith, Jasmine (student), Jon Deak, Howard Wall at PS 199

Sarah Johnson (SJ): *Do you think that music literacy is important when you work on a composition project with kids? Do they need to know how to read music, play instruments, etc?*

Jon Deak (JD): In a program like this, where creativity is by far the most important aspect of what we do, I find that being musically literate, while it does facilitate things, of course, is not necessary. I have worked with kids who don't have a lot of musical experience, and then it becomes a kind of contest or game trying to find the magic way for the child to communicate his or her conception to me, the scribe.

SJ: *So do you do the notation?*

JD: Yes. I find the one difference between a kid with a paintbrush and a blank wall, and a kid beginning to write music, is that the child can wield the paintbrush and the paint. All you have to do is give him a smock and the blank wall and let him go. A child cannot wield a symphony orchestra or a jazz band, or any part thereof. I suppose if they play an instrument they could write for themselves, but it isn't really encouraged or studied that much.

SJ: *I'm interested in some of the ways that you begin composing with kids. What are some of the tools you use to focus them, and to help them to start coming up with ideas?*

JD: Children are, I find, much less prone to writer's block or stage fright when presented with a blank sheet of music paper, or if they are musically inexperienced, a blank piece of paper. I find that for stimulation it is usually enough to bring in, hopefully, professionals, to demonstrate the instruments. They introduce the instrument, depending on the level of the students. (This is a violin, it has four strings, this is a bow, this is what the violin sounds like.) You can start the orchestration lesson, literally, with that elementary a tool. I find this to be incredible, because it's wide open. It doesn't have any preconceptions. Up to a fairly advanced age, even though they are used to listening to pop music of a certain style on the radio, I find that when kids begin to compose, they seem to write in their own language, (like children of a much earlier age will paint in their own language.)

If their first efforts are encouraged, they will usually just keep going. As soon as this happens, I describe myself, or what I hope a mentor would be, rather than a teacher, as #1 a cheerleader, and #2 a scribe. I always make the analogy to visual art; when the child starts drawing things and begins to transfer out of the mind, and into what he or she sees, it must be applauded. If you tell a child that in his drawing of a turkey the feathers are all going the wrong way, and the color is wrong, the child only hears that it is wrong. This can result in the child putting down the crayon, sometimes forever. When a child comes up with something from his mind, an image, to me it is a precious jewel. I see it this way even if the child laughs at it, and maybe especially if it is produced out of anger or frustration, because the validation of that idea shows the child that every emotion is acceptable.

SJ: *You frequently use instrument demonstration as one of the first things that you do. Do you then have the kids go home and write something for that instrument as a starting point?*

JD: I find that if a friendly and kindly disposed professional comes in, it makes such an impression of seriousness on the student. The week before I tell them that this person is coming into the class. I tell them the instrument that he or she plays, and I play some recordings. (This is the only time when I use recordings.) I want to demonstrate what the instrument sounds like in the context of an orchestra, and how it sounds solo. Hopefully I play two or three examples, including one that is stylistically different. (Maybe some country fiddle or something.) Then I give the assignment to write two or four notes, or one measure, for that instrument. I also say that if they can't come up with something, if they can't figure it out, they should still come to class.

The violist, for example, then comes to the class, and shows them the instrument, face to face, plays for them, and, when possible, lets them touch the instrument. Then each student comes up and gives the player his or her composition, and tries to communicate it to this person. The fun part of it is deciphering the "score." (This squiggle looks kind of like a mountain. Does this mean I play higher, or that I play louder?) This is a very important part of the class. It is wonderful for the students to see their work come alive in the hands of a professional.

SJ: *Do you have any specific guidelines when working with the actual composition process in the classroom?*

JD: If a child does not know how to notate, or to play a keyboard, recorder, etc, but they have specific sound ideas, if they play, sing, write, hum, or sigh the same way three times in a row, then I'll write it down. They'll do something three times in a row, because they know that Deak won't write anything down unless they're serious about it.

SJ: *And do they know that is one of your rules?*

JD: Yes. I try to be as specific as I can. This is especially because people come up to me after a concert, thinking that the kids write the tunes and I arrange them. This way I can say, no, my musicians and I are really the paintbrushes here. The students tell us what to do. They tell us how long, how low, high, fast, what instruments are playing, what they are doubling, is there a repeat, etc. Everything is decided by the young composers.

SJ: *When you've done these projects, what has the instrumentation usually been? Solo voices and ensembles? I know that you did at least one project with orchestra....*

JD: You can do it for anything, solo instrument to orchestra. It is also wonderful for students to be involved in the performance, to play along with professional musicians. If they play instruments they can also write for each other.

SJ: *Tell me about another approach you have taken to composing with kids.*

JD: I had one really good teacher whose kindergarten and first graders were writing haiku. It was amazing. When I went in there, I had the kids start singing their haiku. Almost none of these students had keyboard or any other instrumental skills. They didn't even realize that they were singing pitches. They sang the haiku over and over, and I matched the pitches on a little keyboard that I had there. Again, when they sang them three times the same way I wrote them down, and it became a little book, and there was an assembly program where they got together and sang each other's haiku. One kid played the harmonica really well, and he played along – it was just incredible. It's important to remember that it's all flexible.

SJ: *How long did that project take?*

JD: I went to the class once a week for five weeks. We could have done it more quickly if I had been there more, but I could only do it once a week. Much of the time was spent in kids learning each other's tunes, and getting ready to perform.

SJ: *Tell me a little about the "Colorful Variations" project you did with students from PS 199. You got those students to write a theme and variations piece for full orchestra. How did you go about it?*

JD: The class was made up of third to fifth graders, and I would say that well over half of them were literate enough to write down an intelligible melody. Some of them actually wrote down note names; they could do that, but they couldn't notate them on music paper.

We had various instrumentalists come in, three or four string players, two or three winds and percussion. As they would come, the kids had the assignment to write a little melody. It could be as little as four notes. We had fourteen kids in the class, and by the time the six or seven instrumentalists had come through, we had close to thirty viable melodies. Some of the kids used almost the same melody for each instrument, which I said was all right. (It was a way for them to explore how the same melody sounds different on a different instrument.) Some of them chose different melodies, and it was wonderful because they would change the character – they really wrote for the character of the instrument. (That warmed my heart, because I could tell that they were listening to and absorbing the characters of the instruments when they came in to play.)

SJ: *How did you choose one theme?*

JD: We voted. In previous years, with some of the other classes, I had more or less decided, with some help from the class, which of the children's themes the class would write variations on. I had also said, in other classes, that if students didn't want to write variations on the chosen theme, that it was ok. Half of them wouldn't, which was fine with me. But in this program we had to, because the theme of the Philharmonic program on which this piece was performed was *Theme and Variations*. I told them that I hated to be exclusive about it, but they had to write something based on the theme that we chose. It took us a week and a half, the most difficult period of the class, to decide. Finally, Leo's melody won by a vote of nine to six, and we worked with that as the theme.

I have to tell you about one amazing thing that happened in this process. One girl didn't like the chosen theme (Leo's melody.) She said that she thought that her melody was much better, and she didn't like Leo's melody at all. (Leo was not offended by this.) She also said that she wasn't going to write a variation on it. I said that it was too bad, because it would be nice if she were in on the whole project. So the next time she came to the class she went up to the piano, and said "here is my beautiful melody for flute," and she played her melody. Then she said, "and here is Leo's melody." She played the theme very purposefully ugly, in the low register. I said, "That's great. Which instruments do you want to play that?" She responded that it sounded like a trombone when he did that thing with the mute that made the sound really nasal. I asked her what else she heard going with it, and she said that the bass could play along too, so it was really low, and smashy and ugly. It was a miracle – the variation was basically complete. When she played it, all of a sudden she would interrupt her melody, and Leo's melody would come in. She kept playing it, with both melodies coming back, and Leo's melody got softer and nicer, and at the end they kind of met. It was amazing.

SJ: *I guess that teaches us that you have to keep listening to the kids all the time, because you never know when they are going to say something that they will be able to use.*

JD: That's the only real principle of this kind of work. You need to be very flexible. I recently did a project in Vermont. We had from Wednesday to Saturday to create this piece. On Tuesday, I got the story together, with a few second grade boys. I gave them several sentences to choose from to begin the story. They could either have, "I got off my rocket ship and I landed on this planet, and I saw..." or "I woke up one morning and I saw..." or "I crawled out of my sleeping bag, and standing before me was..." So they started with the sleeping bag one, and they created this crazy, silly fantasy story. I thought that the sixth grade composers would write a piece, incorporating some of the story, but I was worried that they might turn their noses up at it a bit. They ended up writing pieces, not background music, but pieces on the theme of the story. It was labor intensive, but we got the whole thing together in four days.

SJ: *What did the end piece sound like? Did it go along with the story, or were the two things separate, or was the story no longer a part of the performance?*

JD: The director of the festival read the story. She read a few sentences, and then we played a little tiny piece, that described that part of the story musically. It was very successful.

SJ: *Do you have any last additional tips for a teacher in a classroom situation trying to work on composition with kids? I know it's very different working in a larger group, as opposed to a smaller group, but are there any tips or rules of thumb to keep in mind?*

JD: If a teacher is going to do a section on composing, I think that there are really two parts of the class. The first section, which is really a classroom thing, involves learning some notational skills, some ear skills (which are really fun – learning about chords, as opposed to unisons or solo voices.) I'll just briefly describe the way I go about that. I play four or five of the principal chords (major, minor, augmented, diminished, and maybe dominant seventh,) not so much with their function, but their actual color in mind. I challenge the students, and it becomes a wonderful game, to come up with an image, (what does this chord make you think of?) I play a specific chord (a diminished chord, for example,) in several keys, so that they know that I'm not talking about higher or lower, but the quality of the chord. A kid might respond with something like, "when you play that chord it sounds like my cat scratching the furniture." Then I play the same chord, in a lower register, and ask how it is different. The kid might then respond with, "well, it still sounds like my cat scratching, but now he's scratching the carpet." That shows me that the student has internalized that chord, and then I might teach him that it is called a diminished chord. The name is often a barrier, just as I find the notation often to be a barrier, at a certain point.

SJ: *How would you describe part two of this composition class?*

JD: Other parts of the class would include the professionals coming in and demonstrating, and each student getting up to have his/her piece performed. It really helps to have an assistant sometimes, if it is a bigger class.

Another important thing: all students are required to listen to each other's pieces, and to applaud afterwards. Just make that a rule, and if someone makes fun of someone else's piece, or makes a snide remark, he or she gets a warning. If they do it again, you have to do some classroom management, because that is one of the biggest disruptions to this kind of work. There are kids who are unsure enough as it is, and a classmate's negative comment might be enough to make that kid crawl right back into his or her shell.

SJ: *So you find that lots of encouragement is important.*

JD: Encouragement is sort of the mantra of working on composition with kids. As an aside, I have to say that I have an ulterior motive in this whole thing. I really am very concerned that there aren't enough young people creating for these wonderful instrumental combinations. When I ask what music is, I often get a shrug of the shoulders, and "music is what comes out of the radio." So I want these kids to have access to the orchestra. When those fourteen kids from the *Colorful Variations* sat with their legs dangling off the stage at the Philharmonic, and they were no older than the kids in the audience, there had to be a connection that happened. The message is that it is not some genius kid up there; these kids are just like you. The only difference is that they signed up for the class. I don't mean to downplay their efforts, because these kids really put in a lot of effort, but still, theoretically, anybody could do it.

[Below: Jon Deak takes a question from the class as Thomas V. Smith, Jasmine and Howard Wall look on.]



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