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Editorial

Let's Call a C a C

By Benjamin Bolden, Associate Editor

Every now and again I long for a magic wand.

Within the field of music education, there are a few things I'd like to have the power to change. I wish, for example, that young people were not so often socialized away from singing. I wish that tyrannical behaviour from music directors was really and truly a relic of the past. I wish there was no longer any such thing as either alto or tenor clef. And I passionately wish we could overthrow the oppression of transposing instruments.

I will never forget walking into my music room one morning

recess to find two grade seven students excitedly employing their brand new instrument-playing and note-reading skills to make music *together*. And not just the stuff from class! Kate, a clarinetist, had brought a favourite Christmas carol from home to share with her new friend Soon-Mi, who played flute.

The earnest students bravely tucked in and made it all the way to “one horse open sleigh” before they realized something wasn't quite right. Not a pair to give up easily, Kate and Soon-Mi determined to fix the problem, and hunkered down to figure it out.

the prelude

editorial

Sadly, no amount of careful checking of fingerings or note names could fix the disappointing dissonance that resulted when the duo played together. Each instrument sounded fine alone, but together...disaster!

"I'm sorry," I explained, "But flute music is *different* from clarinet music...these two instruments don't play in the same key—you're actually playing in parallel major seconds. That's why it sounds so...wrong. Although the flute plays in concert pitch, the clarinet is a *transposing* instrument."

"But *why*?" asked Kate, in frustration.

"Well..." I replied, "Because...because..."

Of course I hadn't a clue why the clarinet had to be a transposing instrument. Yet again, stumped by a twelve-year-old. Why indeed? Why *does* the music and music education industry insist on calling Bb's C's, and C's D's? Why must we have 'transposing' instruments? What's the purpose? What's the point?

Safely back home with my Oxford Dictionary of Music, I learned that (historically) instruments, such as the clarinet, were manufactured in different sizes to cover different ranges. In order that players would not have to learn new fingerings when switching between instruments of the same family, the composers simply looked after the transposing and let the players stick with one set of fingerings.

Fair enough. Transposing instruments *used to* make sense—when players shifted frequently between different members of the same instrument family. However, with the exception of the saxophone clan, this does not happen very often in school ensembles. For the most part a clarinetist will play a Bb clarinet, a trumpeter will play a Bb trumpet, a horn player will play an F horn, and that's it.

So...why *does* the industry insist on perpetuating the annoying habit of transposing? Why not simply teach the players the names and fingerings of the notes they're *really* playing? When a clarinetist removes all fingers and blows, and a concert F pitch sounds, why not *call* that note an F, and notate it accordingly? Why insist on asking the clarinetist to call it a G? Why not call a 'C' a 'C'?

Of course, if players are to be thought of as mere cogs in the large ensemble machinery, and efficiency is paramount, it doesn't matter if the musicians know what notes they're playing. In fact, it's probably preferable that they don't. Their job is to produce the desired sounds at the desired moments—not to know, to think, or to make decisions. That's the military mindset that large musical ensembles carry with them from their heyday amongst the class-ridden oligarchic societies of nineteenth century Europe.

If, however, a teacher should want to explore a more modern—more *democratic*—approach to music-making, perhaps by inviting her students to gather in small groups to create and play a melody or chord progression together...problems of transposition will arise. Similarly, whenever students wish to understand their role in a chord, or take over the part of another instrument,

or get together with a friend away from school and play through a book of Christmas carols, transposing is an annoyance that gets in the way. If a student decides to pull out his horn at an after-school jam session, communication amongst the jammers will be severely hampered by the need to understand how each instrument transposes.

In brief, when students attempt to take on more musical independence and ownership and to develop a richer understanding of their own music making and learning, transposing instruments are a royal pain in the tuba.

In fact, I believe the continued use of transposing instruments is akin to a form of hegemony. The practice results in the little people—the performers—rarely having a significant understanding of their own role within the music they help to bring to life. Without the facility to perform rapid-fire mathematical calculations, most players will not know what pitches they are actually producing. Only a few key stakeholders (the composers and their proxies: conductors) control the knowledge of what is actually going on in any given piece of music. And, as Francis Bacon pointed out, "knowledge and human power are synonymous." The gap, both in knowledge and power, between the players and those exalted to the heights of conductor or composer status is made much broader by the use of transposing instruments.

The knowledge required to *become* a composer, when transposing instruments are involved, is hard to teach and hard to learn. As a result, composing happens less, and by fewer people. It is so complicated and frustrating to arrange or compose anything for transposing instruments, that students (and teachers) often simply give up or don't bother in the first place. Accordingly, the decision-making and music creating stays in the control of publisher-sanctioned composers like Robert W. Smith. The knowledge—and therefore the power—stays with a privileged minority. When the music played in classrooms is produced solely by those from *outside* the classroom, students are denied a valuable and significant opportunity to play a key role in their own musical learning. The continued use of transposing instruments in classrooms perpetuates the lack of ownership that students have over the musical experiences they encounter.

So. The bigger picture...moving beyond my own (probably unhealthy) obsession with the oppression of transposing instruments... What are the practices or structures that we, teachers in music education, are perpetuating? Are we perpetuating practices or structures that really ought to be changed?

As Socrates pointed out to the court of Athens in 399 BCE: "The unexamined life is not worth living." So what are *your* concerns? If you could wave a magic wand, what would *you* change in your classroom, school, community, or profession?

And might it be possible to make the change without the wand? ☹

Send your messages to my email, benbolden@gmail.com