



## Editorial

# Dressed to Express

By Benjamin Bolden, Associate Editor

Recently I spent some time working with a teacher at a high school in Ottawa. As I drove in one morning, aiming for a second period class, the residential streets were quiet, the young people already bundled inside their classrooms.

Moments before I turned into the school parking lot, however, I spotted a boy, about 16, evidently just now on his way to class—a first period spare, perhaps, allowing him the pleasure of an extra hour of much-cherished teenage sleep. Despite the warmth of the sun-filled spring day, the youth was dressed from head to toe in black.

He wore a black hat—a fedora no less—a black long-sleeved dress shirt, and, most remarkably, huge, black, baggy jeans, festooned with masses of silver zippers. (As thin as the proverbial rake, he probably could have fit a few more people inside the pants.) He strutted lazily in the morning sunlight, admiring the glint of the sun on his shiny metal zippers, the jaunty angle of his fedora, and relishing how cool he felt within the careful symmetry and unremitting blackness of his getup.

I love this about teenagers: the pride taken in designing and sporting a completely outlandish outfit. Although most young people bend over backwards to fit in and be the same as everyone else, there are always a few courageous deviants who choose to look as unique as possible. Thank goodness. I admire them hugely for this. I *love* the fact some teenagers spend hours spiking their hair into improbable shapes, impaling themselves with metal jewelry, and offering their bodies as living canvases for tattoo artists. I think it's brilliant that they buy or dig up ridiculous clothes and design eccentric ensembles to proudly display on the eternal fashion catwalk of the local high school hallway. I have immense respect for this brave and brazen self-expression. I was always too self-conscious to wear anything even mildly unconventional. And too lazy.

What struck me about this boy dressed in black was his desire to express himself and be noticed as different from those around

him—to go out on a limb and make a personal statement. Through his attire, this young man was demanding that people consider what he had to say.

It occurs to me that through music, teachers can provide students with another potent vehicle to explore and express who they are. Through listening, students can seek, share, and revel in those moments of deeply personal resonance, when music speaks and imparts an intangible yet thunderously powerful truth. Through composing, students can distill their personal knowledge, interests, and experiences into musical utterances stamped with their unique individuality. Through performing, students can let it all out; they can broadcast to the world, infusing the music they perform with the essence of who they are.

The boy in black has found a way to richly and personally involve himself in his high school experience. He is a walking representation of his own individual expression in every classroom he enters. He can involve himself in math class simply by being there in his unique outfit; the math learning experience of everyone in the room includes this boy's personal expression through wardrobe choice. He could proudly express himself in any music class without ever making a sound.

Many students, however, do not have the courage, interest, or desire to express themselves through clothes—or through visual art, or physical activity, or writing, or dance. They do not have that outlet; they have not discovered a way to ensure their voice is heard. But they can make music. And perhaps through music they can fulfill their right to personal expression. In music class, students can share who they are through music.

But this is not a given. Engaging in music class does not guarantee self-expression. Many teaching and learning situations allow depressingly little opportunity for students to express themselves musically. I have personally experienced, observed, and to my embarrassment, taught music classes in which students had negligible opportunity for self-expression. *Perhaps* Sikeen was

expressing herself by playing Sousa marches on her saxophone...but I think she was, more accurately, a vehicle for the musical expression of Sousa, or perhaps her conductor.

Music educators need to program classroom activities that engage students in self-expressive musical opportunities. What are these activities? Analyzing and sharing music from a personal listening library? Composing a piece that features a favourite instrument? Performing repertoire that meaningfully connects to one's background, understandings, and experiences?

What do *you* do to enable your students to genuinely express themselves through music? And what could you do to make it happen more? CME

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## Corrections and Mea Culpas

### Music Monday

In Vol 49, No. 3, the report from the Coalition for Music Education in Canada intended for publication was substituted by copy that was not meant to be shared. CME/ACME apologizes for the oversight and congratulates the Coalition on the best ever Music Monday Celebrations on May 5, 2008.

### Catherine Robbins

Ms. Robbins' excellent article entitled *Learning to Listen: A Tale of Transformation* (49-3, pp 23-27) was not laid out according to her intentions. Her manuscript contained contrasting fonts separating the narrative passages from the descriptive. This resulted in some confusion for readers. CME/ACME apologizes.

### Andrew Mercer

This article appeared in the last issue of the *Canadian Music Educator/Musicien eeducateur au Canada* (49-3, Spring,2008). However, much to the embarrassment of the editors and the disappointment of the author, what actually appeared was a partially edited version that was in no way ready for publication. We apologize to Andrew Mercer and to our readers for the mistake. What follows is the final version of this valuable article in its entirety.

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