



Ministers of Delight

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Abstract: The author contemplates the notion of ‘delight’ and ponders how music educators might enhance teaching and learning by recognizing, promoting and provoking moments of delight.

The other day, driving home from work, I slowed my vehicle as the highway entered the town, and farmers’ fields gave way to a residential neighbourhood. I was listening to the radio. Outside my mobile bubble I noticed a young girl, about nine years old, walking a small dog along the sidewalk. Back inside my car, the radio program shifted from talking to music. Suddenly, at that *exact moment*, the girl on the sidewalk broke into dance – a skip and a twirl and I was past her – as though she had somehow heard the music in my car and was moved to respond in dance. An instance of accidental serendipitous synchronicity. For me, a small moment of delight.

For some reason I have been thinking a lot about delight lately. It’s a nice thing to think about. I’ve been trying to figure out what is involved. Dictionary definitions suggest constituent elements such as happiness, joy, pleasure and satisfaction. There are etymological relationships with the words delicate and delicious.

It seems to me that multiple elements of an experience are at play in order for it to evoke a response of delight. There has to be something about the experience that is pleasing, but pleasing-ness is not enough. The experience must also have that little something, that twist, that causes one to come alive. I believe an experience has an increased chance of being delightful if it is novel, unsuspected, or surprising. But only to a certain point; past that threshold the experience becomes bizarre, shocking, discomforting or even distasteful. Not delicious at all! The experience must resonate as somehow appropriate. It has to ‘fit.’ When something pleasing suddenly ‘fits,’ it is delightful. For example:

- realizing how to turn the final puzzle piece the right way, and easing it into place;
- choosing from the cupboard, despite the odds, exactly the right size Tupperware for the leftover soup;
- meeting someone with whom you ‘click;’
- picking up the phone to call a friend and, instead of a dial tone, hearing that friend’s voice because s/he has called *you*;
- a piece of music ending on a *tierce de Picardie*;
- a chord resolving not on the first, but on the *second* beat of the bar;
- a learner suddenly stumbling into understanding.

These are wonderful moments.

It occurs to me that, as music educators, we are extremely well positioned to bring such moments to our students. Both music and education offer limitless potential for delight. But how might we go about *realizing* this potential? How might we be *ministers of delight*?

I remember with appreciation those music educators who, when working with us in the rehearsal hall or classroom, took time to point out the bits in the music that they loved, and helped us understand why. “Listen to the way the composer adds a suspended second in this chord – doesn’t it sound so *tasty*?”

One of the ways we can bring delight to our students is by sharing with them where and how we find and take delight in music.

Benjamin Britten’s final fugue in the *Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* delights me in the way so many unique and distinct rhythmic and melodic ideas are layered on top of each other with such a satisfying and exciting sense of *fit*. The return of the main theme, delivered with such magnificent gravitas by the low brass, enters the piece like a king or queen in full ceremonial regalia amidst the dancing woodwinds and swirling strings. It is just so *exciting*.

I also take great delight in the way Johnny Cash re-envisioned and delivers the song *Hurt* by Nine Inch Nails with such profound and mesmerizing pathos. Towards the end of the song all instruments slowly crescendo as they cycle through the chord progression, raising the tension and emotion while the right hand piano inexorably pulses a repeated pitch in octaves. Then, suddenly, the sound all melts away to nothing but Johnny Cash’s voice and arpeggiated acoustic guitar chords for the final musical gesture. Magic.

When I am performing, I find delight locking into a shimmering tight harmony – a major or minor second. I take delight in moving in rhythmic precision, and in shaping a phrase until it feels like an elegant dance gesture. I find delight when I suddenly hear a voice sing out above the others, and I have a chance to notice how the voice *sounds*. In terms of composing, I take delight in the guilty pleasure I feel when suddenly I see how I might carve out a block of time to dive into work that is so utterly engaging for me. When I am conducting or directing, I find great delight in stumbling across words or gestures that evoke within the musicians the understandings and sounds I hope for. When I attend a performance as an audience member I take delight in closely watching the face of a chosen performer, as she

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or he focuses energy and skill, with such intensity, to artfully contribute the right notes at the right time.

I believe, for many, it is the nuances of music that bring delight. I love working intensely in rehearsal on just one small moment. Although it seems madness to spend so much time and energy on a few beats of music, given the inevitable mountain of under-rehearsed repertoire to prepare, I have found time and again that that attention to detail, that passionate care, ripples out to the rest of the piece and changes everything.

Elliott Eisner writes: “musicians live in their nuances” (2009, p. 7). This statement brings to my mind’s ear a Chopin waltz, and the ever-so-precise use of rubato necessary to make it feel *right*. Eisner points out that the recognition that nuance matters is a valuable lesson education can learn from the arts. “To the extent to which teaching is an art, attention to nuance is critical...how a word is spoken, how a gesture is made” (p. 7). Just as nuance can make all the difference in music, so too can it transform teaching and learning.

Eisner identifies also that his work in the arts enables him to see the value of surprise: “No surprise, no discovery; no discovery, no progress. Educators should not resist surprise, but create the conditions to make it happen” (p. 7). It is the surprises in a piece of music that cause us to sit up and pay attention. They also cause us to notice and consider unanticipated possibilities – to broaden our thinking.

Similarly, Eisner identifies the value of slowing down, of making time to smell the roses. He offers: “slowing down is the most promising way to see what is actually there” (p. 7). A composer has the power to slow down perception merely by inserting a fermata, a conductor by changing the tempo. Can a teacher do the same?

I agree whole-heartedly that education can benefit from these artful lessons (valuing nuance, welcoming surprise and slowing down). I believe also that one of the reasons these approaches to engaging with learning are so effective and important, is that they set the conditions and build capacity for delight.

Scott Hughes’ research examined how teachers cultivate happy classrooms. Hughes identified and labelled one of the facets: “*Romancing Children into Delight*...the gestures and choices that teachers make to capture and delight children’s imaginations and spirits” (2013, p. 135). A teacher who participated in the study described

freezing icicle ornaments in small yogurt containers with glittery pipe-cleaner hooks and then hanging the ornaments on the trees outside his classroom window, each ornament coloured by a brilliant shot of food colouring. (p. 214)

Another teacher explained that on the first day of school she would blow bubbles on the schoolyard so the new arrivals would know she was the Kindergarten teacher.

Hughes points out that as educators, we have the opportunity to experience delight ourselves. “Romancing children into delight is also about the ways in which we romance ourselves,

as teachers, into the delights of being a child, and into the delights of living, learning, and working with children” (p. 226). One of Hughes’ research participants described a child figuring out how to open a lock, and the teacher’s own delight in observing this moment of learning:

To see the light in a child’s eyes when they put the key in the lock for the first time...and it turns...and it opens! And if you catch them, and they are looking at you, they just... It’s fantastic to witness this magic of learning. (p. 226)

Our students delight us constantly, in so many ways.

You may have heard of the term ‘earworm’ – a piece of music that worms its way into your mind and plays unbidden, in your mind’s ear, over and over again. Well I have an earworm that is more of a video than a song, and I’d like to play it for you. The memory comes to me often and unbidden and I have no desire for it to ever go away – it is always a welcome guest, because it reminds me of how much I love and how grateful I am to have the privilege to work in a profession that brings music to children.

Thirty-eight grade ones are sitting on the floor in front of me, arranged with parade-ground precision, each occupying her or his designated spot on the grid. They are as far apart from each other as possible in the limited space, so that hands may be kept to selves. (That’s the idea, in any case.) I sit at the front of the room on a small chair, looking out from my vantage point into the squirmy throng. I’m excited; I have a new song. I learned it the night before in the final throes of a dinner party. What a coup! Socializing and professional development rolled into one. I launch into the Pumpkin Song.

The response is lukewarm. I search the faces...I’m losing them. The song is not enough. In desperation I begin clapping my hands on the beat. Some of the faces perk up as they join in – but for the most part, the response remains tepid at best. Then, thankfully, I catch sight of Cleo, row three, just left of centre. She is clapping and singing with such joy and abandon that she is in danger of violating the hands-to-self rule. She cannot contain her exuberance. (The children on either side cautiously give her a few extra inches.) For some reason, at this particular moment in her day, this song is exactly what Cleo needs. It all clicks into place. Her eyes are alight. Her smile is so radiant it could trip a circuit breaker. Later her hands will surely smart, but for now she pounds them together with all the power her little arms can muster. Her voice is clear and bright. Very bright. Cleo has jumped an octave in her excitement; she has entered the stratosphere. Her peers turn to look in wonder and amazement. Cleo remains blissfully unaware. Eyes locked on mine, she sings and claps right through to the very last beat, then smiles as though she would burst.

I remember this moment often and very, very fondly.

Bringing music to those who need and value it most – what a privilege.

What a delight.

References

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- Hughes, Scott. (2013). *Romancing children into delight: Promoting children’s happiness in the early primary grades*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Queen’s University, Kingston.