Focus on the Unconventional

Sound, Symbol, Composition, and Performance in a Fourth-Grade General Music Class

As part of a course called "Elementary School Music Methods" that I took at Northern Illinois University, I was required to teach a fourth-grade music class. Since the school employed no music teacher, I had to determine the content of the nine thirty-minute periods. Before I met with the students, I decided on four experiences that I wanted them to have—listening to unusual sounds (generated either by electronic devices or by conventional instruments), viewing unconventional as well as what they would consider conventional notation, composing, and performing.

Among compositions that I played for the students to introduce them to unconventional contemporary sounds were Futility, 1964 by Herbert Brun, which contains sounds generated by one speaker and one electronic studio; Quartet by Witold Lutoslawski, in which a string quartet produces unusual sounds; and a realization of Morton Feldman's King of Denmark, a percussion solo. I also explained some contemporary scores to the students, including those of the Lutoslawski Quartet (notation—a five-line staff for each instrument that is broken into phrases and placed inside rectangles), Feldman's King of Denmark (notation—a series of rectangles in which symbols representing percussion instruments have been placed), Brun's Mutatis Mutandis (notation—a computer drawing), my own Computer Study No. 3 (notation—conventional, drawn by a computer), and David Rosenboom's To That Predestined Dancing Place (notation—individual measures in which symbols representing percussion instruments have been placed).

After five class periods had been used to introduce contemporary sounds and notations, we decided to compose and perform a single piece of music. The class was divided into six groups of six or seven members each. I supplied the class with thirty-six consecutively numbered sheets of used computer paper and gave six pages to each group to be worked on collectively. I used computer paper because the pages were large, completely blank on one side, and available in quantity.

After I had explained the method of composing, we established a notation system that was compatible with the abilities of the members of the class, some of whom had had more experience with music than others. We decided to notate the composition unconventionally, with a particular type of note representing each instrument. I asked that the composition be written for instruments played by members of the class. Figure 1

The author is working on a master's degree in theory and composition at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb.
shows the notes that the class decided to use.

The placement of a note on a page determined the dynamics and order of execution. (A note placed at the top of the page was to be performed louder than one placed at the bottom, and a note at the left of the page was to be executed before one at the right.) An established duration of three seconds per page determined the length of the piece. Durations of notes were represented by a broken line following the note, as shown in Figure 2.

Decisions about what to say in the speaking chorus part, what to play in the percussion part, and what note to play on an instrument were to be decided by each individual performer, unless the manuscript stipulated a word, instrument, or pitch. For example, if the decision as to what to play was left up to the percussionist, it was notated like this:

However, if the composer had decided what the percussionist should play, the notation looked like this:

After two sessions of composition and discussion, the class completed its piece of music. I asked the members of the class to bring their instruments to the next meeting, when we would perform and record the piece. (The complete composition is shown in Figure 3.)

Between classes, I put the pages in order from one to thirty-six and copied the individual parts. During the next class, we organized the instrumentalists and the speaking chorus and recorded the performance. Since the performers were inexperienced musicians (only three admitted having performed in a group before), we could play only three or four pages at a time. I took the recorded tape, extracted my rehearsal comments, and spliced together the tape of their performance.

During the last of the nine classes, I played the tape, and the students gave numerous comments about the composition—both supportive and nonsupportive. One supportive statement from a class member remains in my mind. He said, "I like it because we did it." More, of course, could be said about what the students learned through this project about contemporary music, sound sources, timbre, the compositional process, notation, and performance, but the important point is what their teacher learned: As that student suggested, active, creative, personal involvement in music makes learning all the more meaningful.