

Call and Response

by Steve Swell

I am in my second year as a member of a program funded by the Federal Department of Education. This program sends active, working musicians into the New York City Public School System. The prime directive of the grant is to send musicians to teach composition to some very lucky students for twelve sessions. Hopefully, these visits will culminate in an original piece of music composed by the students as a group.

The powers that be, probably thinking that this is a borderline activity at best, give grants out only on the basis that our work will be connected with the most marginalized populations of students. It is assumed that the mainstream students in the city don't need this as a part of their education. It is still not understood by many educators how music, and the arts in general, increase efficiency of learning in other areas such as math and language, not to mention the importance of artistic creativity to the culture as a whole. Those who do understand the value of art and creativity seem to be fighting an uphill battle. Given the many problems of the NYC school system, its somewhat vitriolic politics and the heavy demands from all quarters for getting a huge population of students to be able to read and write, arts activities become more marginalized than they deserve to be. These attitudes, in turn, give more weight to the marginality of the arts and may further alienate the student population who were selected to participate in this program from the rest of the school.

The designation for all of these so-called "marginalized" students is "District 75." "District 75" sounds like one place, one area of the school system, when in fact it is many people in different places throughout the system. It is the designation given to those students who have a variety of "disfunctions", ranging from overly aggressive and even violent tendencies to kids deemed to be "what used to be called" "mentally retarded" or "autistic," but those names are supposedly no longer in use. They have also recently done away with the designations "Psy 3" or "Psy 7" which was the bureaucratic way of saying "mentally retarded" or "violent." Many of these students are housed on the upper floors of "normal" schools, and sometimes the upper floors are even attached to hospitals so the "meds" are within easy reach. Occasionally students are escorted from the middle of class to have their "meds" administered to them and then they are brought back to the class.

I am an experienced workshop teacher: I taught a master class at New England Conservatory, ran a three day workshop at the Hochschule für Musik in Dresden, have put in some time being an active, performing and recording musician. This school work, however, was an entirely new challenge for me. All the techniques, exercises and game pieces I use had to be thoroughly rethought and reconfigured to adapt to this population. I have had to face a variety of situations thus far, not only the different types of "disfunctions" I encounter, but also adapting to the variable availability of musical instruments at different schools, which, of course, is key to teaching music.

One school I went to last year in Brooklyn was lucky enough to have a number of trumpets, trombones and clarinets on hand. The teacher there, being in his second year and a recent immigrant to this country, was very worried about giving out the instruments for fear of damage to them. These kids were what used to be called "Psy 7s" (aggressive, violent tendencies), ages 9-11. On top of that, he had been promising all year that they

would play an instrument one day, as if an instrument were a carrot on a stick to be used as a reward or withheld as punishment. When I first started in this school and found out about the instruments it took me almost a month before I finally convinced him to hand them out.

When we did, you can't imagine the excitement of those kids. Holding a trumpet for the first time, the feel of it, the action of the valves, the look of the shiny brass. Heady stuff for a 10 year old who is constantly being told to sit still all day long. But what would I do with all this energy? How could I focus it? Since I'm not going to be able to turn all these kids into Miles Davis' in 12 classes, I thought that focusing their energy into making some sounds, whether they be musical or not, would be an invaluable experience for them. This being their first time playing real instruments, I thought it would be best to start out with the "fun factor" and work on fingerings and notes later. So I explained to this group of new musicians a few things about improvising and the easiness of call and response. I had the teacher play a very easy rock rhythm in Eb on the keyboard and then, as an example, I played a few licks on my trombone. With the steady beat continuing, I started going around the class, pointing at different kids to play. I told them to play whatever they wanted to, not to worry about how it sounded, but just make some sound and play with the beat if they felt it. I really didn't have to prod them much. There wasn't a single shy kid in this bunch. They all took their turns and everyone, including the three classroom teachers and para-professionals, were all smiles. I then did the call and response with them. I played something very simple and as best they could, as a class, or should I say as a band, they played it back. We did this a number of times. I then had one of the kids come up and lead the class in a call and response. Every one of the eleven kids in this class came up to lead a call and response. Only one of these kids, I found out later, had any experience at all playing an instrument, yet they all participated and were all focused on the activity. Some might not call what was played "music" but there was a very focused outpouring of joy and energy coming out of those instruments.

In the classes after that one, and most of the other classes I teach, this has become an important technique and I use it as a "warmup," but it is really more than that. There is discipline and self expression here: discipline in that they had to wait their turn, try to figure out how to make the sound just heard, create something new for the class to repeat. Self expression is self evident. In the following weeks they learned some fingerings and what written music looked like, tried some scales and we even learned how to play Herbie Hancock's 'Watermelon Man'. All of this was done in conjunction with call and response as a warmup, as well as a balance between some hard work on their instruments and pure fun.

At another school last year, this time in the Bronx, I had "Psy 3" kids, "autistic", "nonverbal", some "hyper" (wearing helmets so as not hurt themselves) and some wheelchair bound; "low functioning" kids, ages 4-10. I consider myself lucky in the sense that I don't know enough about the names of their disorders, or how hopeless it must get for the dedicated people who work with these kids day in and day out. 99% of the teachers, para-professionals, principals and vice principals that I've met and worked with are very committed to these children and are heroes in the truest sense of the word. Towards the end of June last year, all the kids at this school were working on their graduation assembly, and I was a part of it, bringing my two classes there to rehearse. One day there was some extra time and three other classes which had been working on

the assembly program had nothing to do. The teacher and I decided to do some call and response with them. Now these kids had no instruments, plenty of "Psy 3" problems and difficulties, many of them in wheel chairs. While the teacher played the drums, I riffed some simple, funky lines to them on the trombone. We asked volunteers to come up to the microphone and sing back what I played. A lot of them had very low verbal skills and they kind of mumbled some things back, but, I noticed that their responses were always in time and in the appropriate spot to do it. They could get better at it. I would also, on an individual basis, have them lead a call and response with me. I think it's important for each child to learn both sides of this two-way street.

One standout was a girl named Ashley. I don't know what her specific problems were, she was not one of my regular students. She was wheel chair bound and seemed to me to be "slightly retarded" -- if that is correct to say, I don't know. Well, she blew us all away. Every line I played, she sang back note for note, perfectly. I tried to make it a little more difficult as we got into it but she stayed right with me. Her pitch and rhythm were right on. Even if I flubbed a bit, mostly because I was so knocked out by her, she dubbed my flub, sang it right back to me! Among jazz players this is a sign of genius, when someone copies your mistake and makes you sound like you did it on purpose.

Some people might say with this population that these kids are just imitating you and doing what they think you want from them without really thinking for themselves. This may be true in some cases but you can always tell when a kid is doing this from a real place inside them or not. I also find that with the repetition of this activity from week to week there is ever more focused attention on what they do in their responses, and even more energy and attention when it is their turn to lead a call. There is a difference. I came back to that school about two weeks later and saw Ashley in the hallway. I said "Hi Ashley, how are you?" and the para-professional who was wheeling her said, "she won't remember you." I thought, wow, that's a drag, but I asked Ashley anyway if she remembered me and she looked up at me and said "Yes, of course -- Mr. Trombone."

Another school in Brooklyn last year: "Psy 7" high school kids who actually had a band class with instruments and an amazing teacher, Ron Gronski. I did call and response on a funk rhythm in Eb again. These kids, who had been playing their instruments anywhere from one month to two years, really loved it. This school has metal detectors and about five cops at the entrance to the school. These were some of the most troubled kids I've seen. They have to maintain a certain standard of good behavior to be admitted into this class. Ron Gronski has done a great job of getting them to play their instruments and they perform at different schools. I just added the element of improvisation; they were starved for it.

This class had about 25 kids in it and by the end of the year the shyest kids, one female flautist in particular, were improvising and enjoying it. It really is both an outlet and a discipline for them to make choices, think for themselves, express themselves, something which they are discouraged from doing most of the day. I tried doing a "conduction" (prearranged hand gestures signaling different kinds of improvisation) one time with them; it was a little too far away from the funk, R & B, rock and rap realms and it did not work at all. I did manage to do something experimental: during a class call and response, while the rock rhythm and Eb chord was being vamped on, I did some riffs that

were completely “out” and not related to the music. I was sneaking some other musical sensibility in there and they responded to it, played it back without really knowing how “out” it was. I think, with some planning, it is possible to move toward "classical music" or "traditional avantgarde" musical procedures using call and response techniques.

Back in the Bronx this year, at a different school, I have some low functioning 13, 14 year-olds who the teacher has gotten to play some salsa. I did call and response with these kids and realized I had never done this on a salsa form before, so it took some getting used to for me. I found also that it was difficult for the percussionists to break off of their time and jump out of it to play something on top of the time. I guess they are used to being timekeepers and are hesitant to break away from that. One of the keyboardists, Chris, really got it. He’s very big, kind of slow, a never-smiling kind of kid, but during a couple of sessions when we have played back and forth with each other, he gets this big grin and realizes, I think, something “neat” is happening. He then stops after about six times, and laughs, and then puts his head down on the keyboard. I always make sure to thank him at the end, even though I’ve yet to hear him say anything at anytime.

I feel privileged to have shared some of the different worlds these kids inhabit. I believe that call and response is the quickest, easiest route to make a connection musically and socially with them, especially when time may be limited. And its more than that . We listen and enjoy music because the performers are playing something that speaks to each of us, and performing it is a means to reach out and connect to those who are listening. Call and response is a surefire way to make these connections while the music is going on and, even if its only a brief space in time, we are able to all be on the same wavelength. I wish, as in Huxley’s “Island”, all people from all walks of life could get to spend time teaching, or functioning in some other line of work than their main discipline. I think that way we “normal folk” may be granted the experience of entering a world like Fabrina’s, one of my Psy 3 kids in the Bronx this year, where purple potatoes and green jelly exist. Who knows what other fabulous images or sounds they may be experiencing.

Start out with the fun factor.

Self expression is self evident.

Call. And Respond.

Pat Campbell:

Music is an amazing force in "District 75." It is always heartening to know of the stimulation of general creativity, the deepening comaraderie, the honing of academic and social skills that result from musical engagement .

I am reminded of the volunteer program we developed for residents who lived in dorms and cottages on the campus of an old 19th Century hospital on the Ohio River. The hospital had once been a treatment center for tuberculosis patients and had been converted into a campus for adults and children diagnosed as severely and profoundly

retarded, with several cottages set aside for the multiply handicapped—those who were blind and/or deaf and/or physically disabled and retarded. We would spend our weekends going from dorm to dorm with our cart of guitars and autoharps, drums and tambourines, boxes of small percussion instruments, and a few brass instruments that belonged to members of our volunteer team—an hour in one dorm after another all the day long. We were striving to bring leisure activities to the residents, and a means through music for improving their social and emotional behaviors, communication skills, and motor skills. We sang action songs, played singing games, and worked at basic beat-keeping and ostinati patterns for the music we played for them. For ambulatory residents, we were circling and snaking in a variety of dances, and for those in wheel chairs and confined to beds, we clapped their hands, touched their shoulders, and moved their arms forward and back at the elbows. I recall how 16-year-old Analisa smiled her enthusiasm on our arrival, anticipated my taps and pats, and one day began to clap my hands together to the beat. She reversed roles on the woodblock, too, putting the mallet in my hand and guiding it to playing the pattern that I had taught her. It was remarkable to us volunteers, but even more so to clinical staff, that by four months of weekly sessions, Analisa was developing functional speech, using the words of songs we were singing to express her feelings and needs. It occurred to me that we were calling to Analisa in musical ways that had not been present prior to our visits, and she was responding in deeply human ways. Music was an inroad, a pathway for awakening the potential to communicate, to socialize in new ways, to develop motor skills, and to bring emotional satisfaction to Analisa and her community there at the hospital campus on the Ohio River. The music is in motion in "District 75," and is a great biosocial strategy for so many more situations.

Charlie Keil: I so appreciate having this report from Steve Swell and the confirmation of what Pat remembers doing along the Ohio River. It reminds me that call and response, moving and grooving, are very close to the minimum but basic core of what it means to be human. Since it is the core of us all, shouldn't we prioritize it in the 'bringing out' called education? If we educate for groove and grace and flow-like-the-old-Ohio, in the first weeks, months and years of life won't we help all children (including the disabled or retarded or Psy 7s) the most? Educating with rhythm, with timing, with synchronicity, with call & response, with motor-mimesis, with action-attraction is the path to finding out what each of us is capable of doing and being.

Ken Aigen's instant classic on the groovology shelf, "playin' in the band" (Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy 2002) is a great case in point. What if Lloyd were playin' in the band at age 2 or 3 or 4? Can people with serious limitations play in the band with each other if they start young enough?

There are so many questions unanswered after all these years that I hope readers will tolerate the repetitions of Born to Groove themes as we explore What is To Be Done in Section 8.