

## **'More than Music' – Susie Davies-Splitter**

A study of improvisation and life skills through an Orff based course for music teachers and therapists

“Improvisation gives me the greatest challenge and the greatest pleasure. I never know from moment to moment where I'll end up, and sometimes I'm scared to death. Yet, with all the risks, being on the edge is always the most fulfilling place to be” Bobby McFerrin<sup>1</sup>

As part of a Masters of Education degree at Melbourne University, I undertook a qualitative study that consisted of the design and implementation of a course of musical instruction based on the teachings of Carl Orff, specifically through an approach based on improvisation. In 2006, twenty six participants volunteered to take part in a 25 contact hour course run over seven weeks. All had at least a rudimentary knowledge of improvisation and all but one (a music therapist) were actively teaching music in a classroom or studio setting prior to the course.

The main aim of the course (now called 'The Joy of Jammin') was to instil a sense of confidence in the participants in relation to musical improvisation. It was not a jazz or piano based course and was 'More than Music', as it aimed to teach values and life skills as well as music skills. The course consisted of a series of activities that included practical music-making in small and large groups, discussion and reflection, and special guests that culminated in a recording studio experience.

Specifically, in regard to music, it aimed to provide an Orff Schulwerk based approach for teaching improvisation through speech, singing, movement, games, playing percussion instruments and the participants' instruments of choice. Activities were selected to include a range of music styles such as jazz, blues, gospel, Latin, Klezmer, African and other World musics. The repertoire was applicable to early childhood, primary, secondary, therapeutic and community settings and followed the sequence of scales and chord progressions from the Orff/Keetman 'Music for Children' series edited by Margaret Murray.

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<sup>1</sup> Neill, J. (1999). President's Message, *The Orff Echo*, Vol. 31, No. 4, p.5.

The range of activities was designed to involve participants in hearing, thinking, feeling and doing, activities that would allow them to remember and understand their experiences.

Data was collected through questionnaires, both pre-course and post-course, mid-course evaluations, reflective journals, interviews, video-tapes and photographs, and analysed for themes and content.

Following the collection of the pre-course questionnaires, the course aims were defined to help participants in the following:

- help overcome any fear of improvisation
- learn how to improvise over a range of musical structures
  - develop simple strategies for effective improvisation using pentatonic scales, modes, the blues scale and pieces with simple harmonic progressions
  - understand how to read simple lead sheets and chord symbols, understand the role and function of the rhythm section, learn bass riffs and the 12 bar blues
- learn how to arrange in an Orff style
- heighten or develop aural skills
- increase musical confidence and experience the joy of improvising in many styles and situations
- feel confident to help children and others create and express themselves through improvisation

### **The Orff Schulwerk approach**

In an inclusive and humanistic setting the Orff approach incorporates 'play', games, exploration in sound on the body and with voices, discovery of movement and playing percussion instruments. Most importantly it can teach values and life skills and provide a joyous connection with oneself and with others, uncovering our inner child.

Overall, participants in the course enjoyed the approach with its application for practical music making, group work, improvisation experiences, performance, discussion and reflection. As one participant JM commented: "I think the whole approach is brilliant and I saw people shy and timid break out, which was exciting".

An Orff classroom is rarely dull and often filled with joyous activity. Frazee<sup>2</sup> (2006:18) has described it as "a place where self expression is encouraged and valued, musical experiments are carried out and tolerance for differing views is practised". Such a classroom enables students to experiment with solutions to musical problems, fostering their creativity. It cultivates imagination through fantasy and play and engages the senses. As a result, she has noted, Orff teachers "have relished the gift and the challenge of drawing forth the innate musicality of their students for the purpose of expressing themselves in and enriching their lives through music." (p.5).

### **The development of values and skills for life through improvisation**

The concept of learning for life has become one that governments and education authorities world-wide are now espousing, although educators have been promoting this for many years. Snyder<sup>3</sup> has written that a strength of music is that it builds skills for lifelong learning in all disciplines. She has listed these as integrity, initiative, flexibility, perseverance, organization, a sense of humour, effort, common sense, problem solving, responsibility, patience, friendship, curiosity, co-operation and caring. She has noted that there is so much evidence that music and the arts are essential for human growth and normal development that "it is a wonder that decision makers still consider them to be 'frills'" (1999:48).

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<sup>2</sup> Frazee, J. (2006). *Orff Schulwerk Today – nurturing musical expression and understanding*, Schott, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Snyder, S. (1999). 'Is music important? How do you know?' in *Counterpoint*, Victorian Schools Music Association Magazine, Melbourne, June, pp. 45-49.

In 2005 the Australian government released the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools<sup>4</sup>. Nine values were identified on which to base a school's mission or ethos (p.3). I believe for successful learning to take place these values must be central to the ethos of any organised learning as well as being central to the core principles that all teachers and facilitators should hold.

These values are ideally modelled by the teacher/facilitator as a benchmark which the students may follow and include care and compassion, integrity, honesty and trustworthiness, doing one's best, respect, a 'fair go', understanding, tolerance and inclusion, responsibility and freedom [to be creative and expressive].

It could be argued that a teacher in a creative setting should be able to model these values and promote the learning of life skills that are 'More than Music' in a safe environment, where each contribution is valued, where participants feel brave and confident to take risks and extend beyond their comfort zones. Further, an environment where there is no judgement in regard to 'right and wrong' but there is encouragement to 'have a go' is paramount. These factors are at the core of any successful creative learning that includes improvisation.

## **Results**

Results of the investigation showed that most participants felt their confidence in improvising had increased with a 31% positive change recorded overall and that, following the completion of the course of instruction, most were using the Orff approach in their teaching.

Many participants commented that they had developed confidence and musical freedom as well as various 'life skills' through the course. This was made possible through opportunities to 'play' and explore, to take risks and

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<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training. (2005). *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*.

make mistakes in an encouraging and inclusive environment where there was no fear of being 'put on the spot'.

The course provided an opportunity for participants to move forward and learn more about themselves. Some people commented on the similarity between improvising and living one's life.

Participants also experienced moving from their heads to their hearts – from thinking to feeling and awakening their ears - to truly connecting with the music, so much so that the experience became overwhelmingly emotional for some.

Many participants commented on the improvement in their teaching through 'a freeing up' atmosphere in the class and being able to extend these newly learnt skills to their own ensembles. The skills to improvise, to 'wake up the ears', and pursue improvisation more seriously was greatly appreciated.

A further outcome of the course was the production of a teaching manual and three CDs that have been used in further courses of instruction.

### **The birth of the 'Joy of Jammin' courses**

After this course was presented in 2006 and due to its general success, I decided to present it in 2007 after modifying it based on participants' evaluation. The course has now become one of VOSA's<sup>5</sup> regular annual events and is accredited through ANCOS<sup>6</sup> as an enrichment course.

I recognised that the focus of the course would need to change to one that was less concerned with improvisation in musical learning and teaching to one of improvisation connected with health and well-being, thus, the brochure for the 2007 course read: 'Promoting self expression, joy, confidence and well being through musical improvisation. These courses cater for anyone who loves music or uses music in their workplace.'

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<sup>5</sup> VOSA – Victorian Orff Schulwerk Association – [www.vosa.org](http://www.vosa.org)

<sup>6</sup> ANCOS – Australian National Council of Orff Schulwerk - [www.ancos.org.au](http://www.ancos.org.au)

This course is now divided into two stages (1 & 2), each stage being 30 contact hours. Rather than just being for music teachers and therapists it has now been opened up to include:

- 1.Experienced and professional musicians who have lost the joy of making music in the rigorous discipline of their careers
- 2.Teachers and facilitators looking for new, accessible and empowering ways to use music with children or adults in their care
- 3.Therapists who have been drawn to the arts to evoke and process emotions
- 4.Students and adults who had previously denied themselves permission to make music, believing themselves to be tone deaf or 'unmusical'
- 5.Anyone who is looking for a creative outlet for self expression

Stage 2 is a course for people with a basic music background and the desire to improve their improvisation skills, musical knowledge and confidence – it will be run for the first time this year in July in Melbourne.

### **'Jam it up'**

I have discovered through this study that what the participants long for most is knowing how to connect more deeply with those in their charge. They long to express themselves, to provide more quality experiences for their students and clients and demonstrate more confidence and effectiveness as teachers and therapists.

In an email to me recently LD reflected on the 2006 course. "What the course did for me was to actually get me not to worry so much about keys etc, but just to use my ear and have the confidence to make mistakes, or to celebrate the discord!!!" Undoubtedly the more opportunities for playing informally there are, the better we become in developing our 'listening and hearing' and improving our confidence. This is one reason that I now offer improvisation workshops in Melbourne on a regular basis called 'Jam it up'. These are 'all in' jammin' sessions for all ages for those who love music.

## **Conclusion**

Musical improvisation can be a wonderfully freeing and cathartic experience for all people, allowing self expression, playfulness, spontaneity and joy to emerge. To get to the core of improvisation we must allow ourselves to 'let go' and connect to our hearts and the playful spirit of our inner child.

My great hope is for students to leave school or a course of instruction with a love of music and a sense of confidence and joy, and to be able to travel through life with an appreciation for music in all its variety.

It took many years before I had the confidence to participate in improvisation sessions. It is the knowledge gained from my tertiary training to professional gigs and jazz clinics that culminated in the discovery of Orff Schulwerk, the approach that inspired and informed my study. Through my experiences, my goal is to help people on their unique and wondrous journey to improvisation and self discovery, to help them uncover 'More than Music'.