

EDUCATION Awaking the Muse

SPOLETO

by Jonathan Sanchez



It's been said that composer

Johannes Brahms did things other people only wished they could do, like fall asleep while Liszt was playing for him, or try and cheer up the ever-gloomy Tchaikovsky.

Spoletto offers some opportunities to act Brahms-like—like maybe napping on the lawn at Middleton Plantation as the Spoleto Festival Orchestra serenaded you. Or pulling out a pad and writing a poem during Chamber Music, which, assuming you didn't click your pen or mutter to yourself as you searched for the right word, might be more flattering to the musicians than falling asleep.

For the past three festivals, I've taken kids into the Dock Street Theatre and we've written poems together, trying to reflect the musicians' brilliance back at them. While the Chamber Music series is very stimulating, there is still no narrative or visual component. So awaking the muse in kids who generally don't listen to classical music or write poetry takes a little prep work.

I like to meet with them a week before, in a classroom, and talk about poetry and music. I discourage rhyming because I think it stifles creativity. I get them to maybe, just maybe admit that centuries of classical music, with its history of riot (*The Rite of Spring's* premiere) and war (*The 1812 Overture*), its requiems and Odes to Joy, is not necessarily boring when compared to three-chord-and-drum-machine tunes.

I have a grab-bag of exercises. A favorite is the "Delight Song," based on a poem by N. Scott Momaday, a Native American. The idea is to take elements of a place you find stimulating and say that you "are" each of them. For example, a delight song about the Market could be: "I am the sticky pralines and fudge samples. I am the Gullah spices for sale. I am the pungent clop of the horse carriages."

Next I play a Rachmaninoff CD and ask the kids to write a story they hear in the music. I ask leading questions to get them going. "Where is this taking place? What's the weather like? Maybe this piano represents a person —

what's her name? What does she want more than anything in the world?"

The day of the concert I just try and get them to relax. It can be intimidating. Everyone there is older than them. Most are older than me too, I tell them, and I don't get all of Charles Wadsworth's references to movie stars from the Forties. (Fortunately his charm is pretty ageless.)

I hand out a worksheet of prompts for poems: "What other sounds do you hear? People coughing, pages being turned? What other things does the music sound like? Ferris wheels? Accordions? What is the viola player thinking about?" There is a lot to see at Chamber Music. One year clarinetist Todd Palmer played a piece with a bouncy tropical feel to it. He wore a straw hat, and when he had a few bars to rest, pulled a pink drink out of the inside of the piano and took a sip.

"The first violin calls his violin Fearless," one of the students wrote. "The girl's nickname is Squirrel and the boy's nickname is Gorilla. He was drinking a smoothie."

This year's participants are from the YWCA Summer Enrichment Program. In past years, students from the Tri-County Home for Girls, the Pinkhouse Shelter, and the St. Matthew's Community Outreach Center have composed to Poulenc, Chopin, Mozart and more. Here are more samples of their work.

"The song is like a newborn baby. The song is like when a kid sees himself getting up on his bike and falls off and he cries for his mother."

"It was like a car riding on a bumpy road...It was like a sunny day that all of a sudden got cloudy."

Tchaikovsky couldn't have said it better. ■

Jonathan Sanchez has been writer-in-residence at the Jack Kerouac House in Orlando and runs writing camps and workshops for children. He is the author of Bandit, a collection of stories about the Cooper River Bridge Run.

Reinforcing the vital role of the arts in the classroom and beyond, Spoleto Festival USA's multifaceted arts education initiative, *educationSPOLETO*, offers schoolchildren from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to encounter world-class artists through innovative programs that challenge and inspire. At the same time, *educationSPOLETO* promotes the arts as an integral component of the basic curriculum, empowering educators to apply the arts in teaching other disciplines. The 2005 edition of *educationSPOLETO* promises to be another exceptional opportunity for South Carolina youth and educators alike to become immersed in the rich cultural offerings of the Festival.

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Above: Jonathan Sanchez and two young poets (2004), photo by Emily Kracht