

Storytelling in the General Music Classroom

By B. J. Whitehouse

Rhode Island storyteller Marc Joel Leavitt once told me a story that went something like this: In a small village in Africa some years ago, anthropologists were interested in the impact of modern society on a remote tribe of people. The researchers decided to place a TV in the middle of the village and observe the tribe's reactions to it.

The villagers were amazed and were observed watching the TV almost all day and night. After a few weeks, though, the crowd became smaller and smaller until, after a month, hardly anyone stopped to watch the TV shows.

A researcher asked one of the villagers about it. The villager replied, "Oh, we like it just fine but we'd rather listen to the village storyteller."

"But," replied the researcher, "the TV has lots of stories from all over the world."

"Yes, that's true."

"Then why would you want to listen to the storyteller rather than watch the stories?"

The villager didn't hesitate in her reply: "Because the storyteller is talking to me."

Teachers have used the power of stories—parables, fables, and myths—as a teaching tool throughout history. We use them to illustrate concepts, stimulate discussions, and to enhance or humanize a story. Who hasn't told the story of Haydn's *Surprise Symphony* to classes of otherwise bored seventh graders? Then there's Beethoven walking in the fields and woods to draw inspiration from the sounds of nature—that is, until the onset of his deafness, which is another story. These stories humanize the stern portraits of the great composers and give dimension to their personalities. I use stories in a variety of ways:

- To provide points of departure for student composition
- To encourage excellent behavior (stories with morals or fables are best for this)
- To "wind down" an active class
- To pre-teach musical concepts (my favorite use)

Years ago I was teaching the concept of macrobeat to second graders. They moved around the room in different ways to a quarter note beat and then an eighth note beat. When I played the half note beat, they moved to the beat of their own internal drummer. They didn't get it. They couldn't seem to slow down unless I cued them. Simply put, they could not feel the beat.

After a few minutes I made up a story about two kids, brother and sister, who ate too much Slo-Mo cereal one morning. I exaggerated the siblings' ridiculously slow movements that eating too much "cereal that really slows you down" caused. Then I asked the class to run, laugh, jump, and throw a ball in slow motion. After that they walked in slow motion. As they walked, I began to play a beat on the drum to match their tempo until they were following the macrobeat that had eluded them just minutes before.

The change in lesson focus, along with hearing the story, enabled the children to empathize with the characters and move to the slow beat. The drumming and the "Slow down!" would have ended in confusion and frustration, whereas the story allowed the students to succeed through other means.

Since then I have told stories to demonstrate values and rhythmic games, to illustrate westward expansion and the Erie Canal with fifth graders, and to introduce myself to nervous kindergartners. I've also developed many stories to pre-teach musical concepts such as singing in parts, canon, ostinato, and oral tradition:

- A boy lives on a farm with his three special animals—a goat, a chicken, and a cow. He is very disappointed when his animals fail to win a ribbon at the county fair, but then he discovers that they can sing! After listening to me sing the triumphant and silly Barnyard Canon throughout the story, the children know it well and are so motivated that they can sing in canon after the story ends.
- While pre-teaching movement and role playing to first graders, I recounted my visit, at the age of six, to a toy store. The owner was so mean that my grandmother took me by the hand and we left. That night I dreamed I was a toy in that store. When the music box played the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy from the Nutcracker Suite, all the toys came to life. My class then pretended to be toys. When the music played, they moved. If the nasty old toymaker (me) saw them out of place, they had to sit out. Children love the story and game because, as one boy put it, "It lets us be whoever we want to be."

Recently, on the last day of the school year, with assignments done and grades closed, my eighth grade students asked me to tell them a story. "Come on, Mr. Whitehouse! You used to tell us stories all the time!"

I was sort of embarrassed to tell a class of urbane eighth graders a story, but I gave it a shot. One girl jumped up and turned out the lights (an essential part of the storytelling experience) and the others "got comfortable" (sitting on the floor or lying down).

I told them a story that led to a new game, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." It was perfect for eighth graders, and a fitting way to end nine years of music class with me. They sat and listened and were completely engaged in a silly story about a middle school boy who saw aliens taking over his schoolmates. He was not tricked, however, and developed an "alien repeller" in science class. My students giggled and listened as I told the story. No, actually, they listened as they put themselves into the story—just like the African villagers with the village storyteller.

We played the game, and then it was time for them to go. I realized as they filed out of the room that their music classes had begun nine years ago in kindergarten with a story about “Charlie Over the Water” and had just ended with another story—a beautiful moment for me.

When we hear a good story, we tend to place ourselves in it. We try to empathize with the characters. Perhaps that’s why I find radio more entertaining than TV. Much of the personal investment in listening to a story is the visual aspect. Our imaginations can run wild with the imagery created by a good story. With radio, we are not distracted by the visuals. I much prefer to listen to a baseball game on the radio than watch it on TV—Garrison Keillor’s stories on “Prairie Home Companion” have been a weekly tradition of mine for the past 30 years.

I love to imagine the characters and settings in a book and cringe when someone decides to make that book into a movie. Most anyone would agree that very few movies match the visual and personal images a good story evokes.

How many times in exasperation have we said to our classes, “I’m not going to tell each and every one of you,” or, “When I say stop talking to everyone I mean you!”? It is impossible for students to hear that message unless you do use each and every name. When you tell a story, though, you are talking to each and every one of them because their own imaginations create the scene. Stories allow them to listen and be present rather than hear and forget.

It is all about communication, entertainment, and learning. Stories create a safe, neutral setting for storyteller and listener to share. In that setting we can begin to teach before our students even know they are learning. And they embody the learning because they have already done it in the story.

Author Note

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