“Dave Brubeck on Music Education and Composing”
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Section: Interview
By F. S. Ponick

Composer/performer Dave Brubeck, who was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in 1996, is a legendary figure in contemporary jazz. He received the National Medal of the Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1994, and he was named a Jazz Master by the NEA in 1999. On March 7, 2000, just prior to the MENC National Conference in Washington, D.C., Brubeck received MENC's Fund for the Advancement of Music Education (FAME) award for his continued support and advocacy of music education.

Brubeck has been involved with jazz for more than a half century. The Dave Brubeck Quartet, with Paul Desmond on alto saxophone, was formed in 1951. Its distinctive harmonic approach and improvised contrapuntal choruses caused a stir in the jazz world, launching what later became known as "West Coast" or "Cool" jazz. In recent years, Brubeck has been increasingly recognized as a composer of orchestral works, oratorios, cantatas, ballets, and chamber music. A pioneer in combining jazz with symphony orchestras, Brubeck has appeared as composer-performer with most of the major orchestras in the United States and with prestigious choral groups performing his compositions. He has become a goodwill ambassador of music around the world.

As part of the MENC 2000 National Conference, Brubeck performed a suite from his composition "Hold Fast to Dreams" (based on poetry by Langston Hughes) on Friday, March 10, 2000, at the Washington National Cathedral. The concert also featured other Brubeck works, including a Mass, "To Hope! A Celebration," conducted by Russell Gloyd. This interview took place the day before that concert.

*Your sons are successful musicians in their own right. How did you introduce them to playing music when they were children?*

They didn't have a choice! Music was everywhere. I got it from my mother, who was a piano teacher, and my sons got it from me. My mother was a big believer in the prenatal influence of music, and she continued to give lessons during her pregnancies. After you were born, you were put in a crib next to the piano while she taught her students. Music was there most of the day. One of my earliest memories is falling asleep many nights while she played Chopin on the piano.

*There has been a steady flow of technological developments in computer-assisted composing over the past few years. Do you see any advantage for yourself in using the computer as an aid to composing?*

Not yet. One of my sons uses it, but I need to get more familiar with it. But we do use music software on the road. Sometimes I need to make a correction in a score and reprint it, or I get a different idea and change the music in some way Sometimes there is time for only one rehearsal of new music, and printing it out right there is the fastest way to get it to the players.

When you see a printed piece of music, it seems as if there is a very long distance between the composer and the performer. When you see the music come off the printer, and the composer is right there, maybe making more corrections on the printout, and you're singing it--why, then it has an immediacy that can't be replicated. The composer and the performers are right in it together.

*Critics differentiate between "popular" and "serious" music. Do you?*

There's a very fuzzy boundary there. Charles Ives used popular and patriotic tunes. Dvorak used folk tunes. All kinds of composers have written what I'd call popular tunes into their music. I think that talking about "popular" and "serious" music is a false distinction. It's really important to reach out to people, and a few familiar notes can sometimes help. At the same time, I don't want to write down to people.

*You've made good of adversity again and again in your life--for example, your back injury in Hawaii, your early work experiences with colleagues who exploited you somewhat, and the death of your nephew as a teenager--yet you do not express yourself about these subjects in ways that are off-putting to audiences. How has adversity influenced your composing?*

When his son died, I didn't know what to say to my brother. So I wrote "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled," and that's what got me started writing sacred music. The conductor Eric Kunzel came to my house to discuss a pops concert and saw the music on my piano. I told him I was writing some choral music on the temptations and teachings of Christ. He said, "Finish it, and we'll perform it with the Cincinnati Symphony." Eric Farmer, the president of Shawnee Press, somehow got hold of it and wanted to publish it. And that's how I got started writing this kind of music. I just try to put the best of what I have into the music I write.

*You've written and played quite a bit of music that relates to Mexico (La Fiesta de la Posada), African-Americans (Hold Fast to Dreams), and countries like Turkey (Blue Rondo a la Turk). What commonalities do you see in multicultural music that attract you as a performer and composer?*

Langston Hughes speaks to this generation of kids. I am so pleased that my work using Hughes's poems is being taught in college classrooms and played for students as part of their courses. There's a way that music brings people together, even when they don't understand the language they're singing in.

Two years ago, I was being filmed in Russia for a documentary. At the beginning of the project, one of the directors of the choir who was performing my music approached us on the steps of the Russian Orthodox church where a performance of my Mass was in rehearsal. What he said, with no pretense and totally sincerely, was, "I will take very good care of Mr. Brubeck's child." He really meant it! And later, it was amazing to see and hear the Russian choir singing "All My Hope" from the Mass so magnificently and with such feeling and depth. These people spoke no English. They just sang, and they put everything they had into it.

As part of composing, you often work with music educators and directors of children's choirs (as in the music that will be performed at the Washington National Cathedral). How is your creative process affected by your interactions with music educators and their singing groups?

My creativity is affected by collaboration quite a bit. My collaborators tell me if something's just not going to work. Some people object to the difficulty of some of my music. The "Magnificat" is challenging, and so is my "Alleluia." But Nancy Wade, who teaches ninth through twelfth grades at Soddy-Daisey High School in Chattanooga, and the music teachers at other schools have been terrific. I feel more confident when their students can perform my music. Because then I know it should be possible for professionals to perform it.

*Do you have any suggestions for music educators about how to go about developing relationships with composers local to their area? What work plans might be beneficial to all involved?*

MENC could probably help. But music teachers could also inquire into community music organizations like adult, church, high school, and junior high choruses and other performing groups. There are groups of composers in probably every state, as well as several national composers' organizations. Or a teacher could contact a state university. Universities have composers in residence and students studying composing.

Composers need to hear their works in progress performed. It's beneficial for all involved, because the students get to see a composer in action, and the composer benefits from the students' feedback. It makes a pipeline for creativity when they work together like that.

*What role should music education have in school programs today?*

Music is an awakening experience in young people's lives. Adults can spout platitudes and deliver speeches about the value of music in the schools, and it all may sound really good, but actually working with kids successfully is an astounding experience. I recently worked with a group in an inner-city neighborhood school in Trenton, New Jersey. One afternoon, we rehearsed for two-and-a-half hours nonstop. The students' effort required the discipline of any symphonic orchestra--and they did it.

Discipline makes the difference. When a student is assigned a task and does it, there is immediate cause and effect: you work, you benefit. When kids make an effort in music, they can experience results right away. Our job isn't necessarily to drive them. Our job is to help them benefit from our collective wisdom and experience-what we've picked up along the way. They may not like to believe it, but kids just don't have the life experience that a teacher does.

*Are there any topics you'd like to address that haven't been covered today?*

Music is a force for world peace, and we should be devoting more of our national resources to world music. I really believe that.

Dave Brubeck was interviewed by F S. Ponick, MENC staff

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Works Cited

Ponick, F. S. "Dave Brubeck on Music Education and Composing." *Teaching Music* 8.4 (2001): 48. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 25 Sept. 2011.