



Title: A Composer in the Schools

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It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

A Composer in the Schools

By Emma Lou Diemer
Santa Barbara, CA

In 1959, I was a doctoral student in Howard Hanson's composition class at Eastman. I heard about the Young Composers Project from Dr. Hanson when we were all gathered in his office one day. It was in the spring semester, I believe, and I remember thinking that sounded wonderful: to be a resident composer in a school system for a year or so! I applied, and in the summer learned that I was one of the 12 composers chosen for that first year of the project, and my destination was Arlington, Virginia.

Seen from the perspective the years have created, that happening so long ago has a glow about it. One tends to take for granted the steps in one's life when they occur, and retrospect can, of course, be deceptively positive. Looking back

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through the years, however, I can find no experience which taught me more or was more appropriate for what I thought my calling in life was to be. My calling—my goal—was to be a composer. Not a professor, not a writer of grant proposals, not a curriculum developer, not an administrator—A COMPOSER. Since then I have of course written many commissioned works for all kinds of groups, and combined composing with teaching and performing, but for a brief two-year period, one shining moment as they say in “Camelot,” I was actually employed as a full-time composer of music and recognized in the community as such. Pardon me if I become emotional about that.

It is not only the writing of music that I remember. There were the teachers who

became my friends, the choral directors, the orchestra directors, the music supervisors, and the students. I remember the audiences that came in large numbers to hear their children perform in gymnasiums, school auditoriums, churches, and outdoor pavilions. And I was there to hear the music I had written for them, sometimes playing the piano parts, sometimes just listening.

Of course there were excellent and not-so-excellent performances. There were, no doubt, students and teachers who didn't like my music or were indifferent to it, for the real world was right there in Arlington! I had to overcome a lot of shyness in order to visit the classes, talk about my music to community groups, attend rehearsals, and take bows. I remember that the first time I heard one of the junior high orchestras rehearsing in one of the schools, I was not altogether thrilled by the intonation. And the band that played my suite was less than inspired. But the 100-voice choir of Florence Booker! The 100-piece orchestra of Dorothy Baumle! The madrigal groups, the girls choruses. And the teachers eagerly, sometimes with trepidation, taking a new work written for them and starting to rehearse it!

No doubt one reason I was placed in Arlington was that two women, Florence Booker and Dorothy Baumle, were the vocal and instrumental music supervisors, respectively, of Arlington County. I remember Florence amusingly relating to me that she had been leery of having a resident composer, thinking that some wild eccentric would be descending on them. I have spent a lifetime trying to act and seem normal in every respect—except perhaps in the writing of music—so her fears were allayed.

The first time I played some of my choral music, previously composed, for

in during the two years in Arlington, and encouraged me in the natural eclecticism that my music writing has expressed. Believe it or not, however, almost everything I wrote for Arlington was considered quite modern, some of it quite dissonant, and of course it was new. That is how far removed even the finest school systems may be from the extremes of contemporary music.

The Washington newspapers took an interest in my presence in neighboring Arlington; of course a Ford Foundation/National Music Council-sponsored composer would arouse interest. And Arlington County had a fine reputation for its outstanding school music program. One of the first concerts in which one of the school choruses sang one of my works—in a Washington church—was reviewed, enthusiastically!

What good came out of this golden experience? The students and teachers learned a lot of new music, they learned that composers are not all dead, not all male, not all Europeans. I was able to reinforce a philosophy of mine, partly learned at Yale under the Hindemith influence, that writing music need not take place in a vacuum. It should not be written only to satisfy the aesthetics or mental exercises of a composer and his cohorts, nor to dazzle the givers of grants and fellowships. It should also be written to be listened to and finally understood and even enjoyed. My greatest pleasure is to write music that moves people, not that moves them out of the room!

Has CMP had an effect on the music profession during the past 25 or 30 years? It surely created a great deal of new, published repertoire. It was an important beginning for the careers of a number of successful composers. And what is the music profession but a result of music composed, then performed and heard? But the popularity that the "serious" composer might have enjoyed has been supplanted by truly popular music that is becoming increasingly attractive. Public relations aside, it is not a surprise that the Second Viennese School is not the accepted norm of music lovers everywhere.

How did the CMP experience affect my life after Arlington? I must confess that I was happy to return to writing more difficult music after I left Arlington, but since then I have written for both professional and nonprofessional performers. This spring, for example, I am working on a marimba concerto for an excellent professional orchestra and soloist, but I've also just finished an organ collection for the church musician and will soon write a choral work for a school south of Santa Barbara. For me, composing is not only about solving problems at a desk or piano, but about hearing the result and knowing that listeners, when hearing my music, feel some of the things that I felt when writing it. I believe that is called communication.

Thank you, CMP! ☐

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