

## **A School of Musical Possibilities**

By David Rosenboom

The Herb Alpert School of Music at CalArts is a healthy, fertile environment for the unfettered *evolution* of the global human enterprise we call *musicmaking*. It is a school in tune with the unprecedented stylistic egalitarianism of our age, a school that enables young musicians to recognize their original voices and develop them with skills on the highest level. It is a school that helps students build a frame around their creative profiles, focusing light on their emerging visions, so they may be clearly seen in the vast and varied, global cultural landscape. It is a school that fosters informed mobility among cultures and deepens the understanding necessary to be effective in co-creative situations. It is a school that offers tools to empower musical innovators in carving out unique, individual career pathways, which may not have existed before, in our unpredictable and rapidly changing professional milieu. It is a school that adapts flexibly to emerging forms of distribution and information sharing and to changes in what may be considered fundamental for music learning. It is a school that nurtures the tenacity new artistic visions may demand, the will to challenge society's predefinitions and presumptions when necessary, and the perseverance required for artists to manifest the profound gifts they may offer to their evolving cultures. It is a school that embraces a changing world as a world of possibilities.

Musical societies now require young musicians to be increasingly flexible, original and to have an ever-broadening set of skills. Each and every musician today should be focusing on developing her or his *original musical voice* as a *total musician* for the emerging world. Our awareness of profound cultural changes and rapidly transforming professional environments is broadening and deepening. In this school of musical possibilities our response to such evolution is not one of alarm or crisis. Rather, it is one of embrace of opportunity, of seizing this time of creative possibilities in a world where progressive, creative contributions are so needed by our global society.

Musicians must now move with conceptual and technical fluidity from one language to another, from classical to jazz, to networked and interactive, to improvisation and cross-cultural forms, to the experimental and unpredictable. Today's musicians create in, and draw inspiration from, any and all of the fields of earlier musical development. This open cross-pollination of traditions and

influences has given rise to a dense, lush arboretum of original sound: a fertile terrain in which to create and re-create anew.

Mastering the fundamentals of music learning requires insight into the essential elements and conditions under which musical evolution can progress. To the extent music can be taught, insightful and inspired music teaching is deeply informed by exploring these elements and conditions. The faculty in a school of possibilities is skilled at recognizing potential in students for things they might not even have envisioned in themselves. This also means recognizing the value of learning from and alongside students. Being so alert, learning becomes co-creative. Learning among students and faculty is shared discovery in infinite, not finite work and play; and teaching becomes an open process, ever being re-defined.

At the core of true musicmaking is a heart of spontaneity. Regardless of traditions, techniques, notations, or aural transmissions, the lifeblood of music emerges from the essence of each new and unpredictable moment, in which we might, as composer, Luciano Berio, has said, "...witness that miraculous spectacle of sound becoming sense." Music can be conceived, created and heard as *propositional*—as proposing whole new frameworks within which to perceive and interact in the world. A school of possibilities is a comfortable home for such experimentation, a place where even the *creative listener* is regarded as a substantial artist. In an environment that nurtures creative, critical responding, we learn, to quote Berio again, that, "Analysis, like music itself, makes sense when it confirms and celebrates an ongoing dialogue between the ear and the mind...the best analysis of a symphony is another symphony."

Spontaneous musicmaking—and creative listening is spontaneous musicmaking, too—draws on all areas in the matrix of music education: performance, composition, improvisation, technical skills development, research in new materials, preservation and history, theories of musical languages, cultural understanding and critical thinking. To become skilled in this *discipline*, to become *total musicians* students must be informed in all of them.

Spontaneous music making need not be stylistically or culturally delimited.

Similarly, music learning should not be culturally, temporally, stylistically, or historically limited by traditions. Referring specifically to European traditions, Berio comments, "We all know by

now that a pianist who claims to be a ‘specialist’ in the Classical or Romantic repertory, and who is playing Beethoven or Chopin without having had the need of experiencing the music of the twentieth century, is just as shallow as a pianist who claims to be a ‘specialist’ in contemporary music but whose hands and mind have never been traversed, on a profound level, by Beethoven or Chopin.”

Spontaneous musicmaking is the vehicle that transports the full spectrum of musical realization—from the realm of abstraction to that of actualization—with the full engagement of intellect, intuition, imagination, proprioception, and physical and psychological being. The total human becomes the total musician. That's how we learn. Spontaneous musicmaking requires a virtuosic fluidity moving among forms and traditions, honoring and mastering, but not being bound by them; to experience life between categories, to experience the deviant between the notes, wherein lies, to paraphrase Morton Feldman, “the wild beast.”

In a school of possibilities, it is not the equipment, the building, not even the curriculum that brings life to learning. These are merely artificial excuses to join together at the same place and the same time—mere flag posts helping us to gather in infinite play. Societies place boundaries around finite play. A school of possibilities chooses boundaries without attachment, as enablers of survival within societies. As James Carse writes in *Finite and Infinite Games*, “Schools are a species of finite play to the degree that they bestow ranked awards on those who win degrees from them.” These are illusory qualifications, tickets to enter into society’s bounded games of competition. Though we recognize the practical necessities required to help our students become effective contributors to culture within these societies, we must regard the curriculum as fluid and infinite, a configuration space of possibilities within which individuals choose their pathways. The curriculum is here to draw out the talents of the people who participate in it, not a game of limits to be conquered. In this way, we attempt to simultaneously honor and erase differentiations. A school of possibilities is about processes and ideas. Carse continues, “... heterogeneity and pluralism have to translate themselves into process and ideas, not into forms and manners—forms are often misleading, as they can be perceived independently of their meaning.” The simplest, primary universals of musicmaking are that they usually deal with sound and are most often a shared human activity. From these simple open roots, music can grow the power to help maintain fluidity among human associations, which is so essential for the healthy evolution of multiple cultures.

A positive, joyful deviancy lies at the core of culture. Carse writes, “Culture continues what Mozart and Rembrandt had themselves continued by way of their work: an original, or deviant shaping of the tradition they received, original enough that it does not invite duplication of itself by others, but invites the originality of others in response. ... Properly speaking, a culture does not have a tradition; it is a tradition.” To be effective cultural leaders, we must recognize that culture can have no spatial or temporal limits. Culture is endlessly open; and any open form involves joyous struggle. As Carse points out, “Culture...does not consider its works as the outcome of a struggle, but as moments in an ongoing struggle—the very struggle that is culture.” To enable actions taken on the possibility for positive evolution in the human struggle to be effective, organized societies must cease constraining that which emerges from culture. Rather, the boundaries of what we do together must be blurred, which is the authentic, emergent form of culture. In that sense, our school is a school for the truly open forward motion of culture.

### **Artists as Global Community**

In our time, forward motion in music must be global. In times when divided governments work against the forces of increasingly shared cultural information, it becomes an urgent priority that we educate students to be culturally mobile, informed, creative citizens of the world. Our great task must be to reduce ignorance and intolerance about cultural groups, to neutralize the pertinacious hoarders of opinions, paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, minds “...not gifted to discover truth but tenacious to hold it.”

The arts can help mitigate this, because they are about what we do with each other in fluid, creative spontaneity and collaboration, not in competition. In order to engage in competitiveness, conflict or war, we must first convince others, who we view as being different from us, to see us as their enemy. To begin with, the competitors with whom we want to engage may not recognize us as competitors until we persuade them to act that way. Cultural ignorance leads to the persuasion of others to be our enemies.

Because the global field of human imagination is infinitely pluralistic and non-concurrent, culture must come from co-creative emergence. Communication and language are co-creative agreements among peoples. Our school of possibilities is positively engaged in such agreements.

We take heart in and gain energy from our experiences of a global community of artists that recognizes differences in finding ways to survive societies, and is remarkably, necessarily and organically unified. The politics of difference, when based on tools of power and dominance, fails to divide this co-creative community of artists. In that, too, we take heart.

The Herb Alpert School of Music at CalArts is a school of possibilities. In it, we recognize our responsibility to be continuous learners. The structure of the budget, the tables of time and space and resources, must be driven by what we want and need to do—by how light shines on our priorities—by what we choose as potentially the most powerful and poignant gifts we can make to culture; on actions we can take to help society be more responsive—rather than our actions being subject to the structure of these tables. In our school of musical possibilities we also celebrate an open and hopeful horizon. We trust in our disciplined, tenacious, creative deviance as infinite possibility.

The success of this endeavor will be as great as the people in our programs are prepared to make it. No administrative or curricular structure will be effective if the spirit and expertise to put it into practice is lacking. What does it take? It takes whatever circumstances demand—devotion to mission. This is not a place for those afraid of the sometimes-unimaginable effort required.

What makes our Herb Alpert School of Music at CalArts a *great* school in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century cultural landscape? It is the collective expertise about musical possibilities and the will to realize them amassed among all those who participate with openness in our *community of artists*. It would be very difficult to match these possibilities anywhere else, indeed. How lucky we are!

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(Stuart Frolick provided editorial assistance.)