



## THE TEACHER IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

*Jon Deak, for more than three decades the associate principal bassist of the New York Philharmonic and a lifelong composer, says he never liked teaching and that the very word "education" kind of turns him off.*

*Yet he left his beloved orchestra job a year ago in order to devote himself to teaching composition to—he might prefer to say "eliciting original music from"—young children.*

*He remains active in the Very Young Composers program, which started with the Colorado Symphony and is now based at New York Philharmonic, and in the Westchester Chamber Orchestra's Composers of the Future program. Inspired by a recent visit to El Sistema in Venezuela, Deak is now developing a project called The Bridge, in which more advanced music students help younger kids notate their musical ideas.*

*In late June, Chamber Music talked with Jon Deak about his life and work.*

Jon Deak and participants in the Composers of the Future program listen to a violinist from the Westchester Chamber Orchestra interpret some musical ideas.





Deak with one of the New York Philharmonic's young composers

### What got you started in music?

I grew up on the Indiana sand dunes and was sensitive to sounds—the grasses shifting over the sands, and the cottonwood trees, the lacy kind of sound they make in the wind. And, of course, in the winter, the ice cracking on Lake Michigan. An awesome, symphonic array of sounds.

And then at age 6 or 7, an uncle of mine from the old country took me to hear the Chicago Symphony with Rafael Kubelik. I heard the Emperor Concerto and Janáček's Sinfonietta. That did it. This was the greatest

thing ever—and I knew this was what I was going to do with my life.

### What led to composing?

I begged my parents for a piano. Being artists—my father was a sculptor and my mother a painter—they were very poor, so we got a used old piano, and I took lessons. Fortunately, there was a teacher who, when I would take the little John Thompson pieces and arrange them and change them, would clap her hands with delight. As opposed to my next teacher, when I was twelve years old: she would say, "That's not the way it was written"—and I stopped composing like that!

### And why the double bass?

We moved to Oak Park, Illinois; the town had a wonderful high school orchestra. I want to be in it, but they already had a pianist—who was better than I was. The director, Dr. Harold Little, said they needed a bass, and told me to come to the next rehearsal. When he said, "Draw the bow this way," I could feel the warm sound next to my body, and it was love at first sight. I was not very good, but I

played in a jazz band and learned to pick out the bass parts. I had a jazz teacher; he eventually sent me to a Chicago Symphony member—who was not nearly as good a teacher as he was.

### After your second piano teacher squelched your creative impulses, how long did it take to get back to composing?

It was in the late '50s and early '60s [in his late teens]. If you didn't write 12-tone in those days, you weren't a serious composer; I studied Schoenberg and Prokofiev and Stravinsky techniques on my own and wrote a bunch of pieces, but at Oberlin I again felt discouraged about composing. After teaching at Interlochen, I got a Fulbright to Rome. That was wonderful.

I came back and studied at the University of Illinois because John Cage was there. Harry Partch left while I was there, but I was in love with him. It was a real hotbed in the 1960s—and that got me back into composing. I studied orchestration on my own.

### What kind of thing did you write?

I was enamored of George Crumb and of Eastern music, Japanese kabuki, Indian music, and so on. I was very interested in tone colors; you learn how to treat each instrument of the orchestra expressively.

Then I joined the Phil, which I thought would last one or two years while I paid off my debts. But I never paid off my debts, and the more I played in this orchestra, the better I liked it.

### Why didn't you consider teaching earlier in your career?

I never liked the word *teaching*; I don't like the word *education*. I was infected with the idea that if you play your instrument really well, you go on to become a soloist or professional or join a great orchestra—if you were not quite so good, you went into music education.



Also, I couldn't imagine myself getting into the real *guts* of music, only saying things like, "Piccolos, you're half a beat behind."

### **So, what changed that?**

Bernstein's Young People's Concerts [YPCs] were totally inspiring. My moment with him was when he played the first 12 bars of Beethoven's Fifth. He talked lovingly about it—and then said, "You know what? Let's change it." He taught me that music was a living thing and not something stuck on a wall.

When I joined the Philharmonic, LB was still here. I saw how he put the YPCs together. I was shy of him, but I followed him around like a little dog. I saw how he put a script together, how much staff he had, and how seriously he took it.

### **Do you write music for children?**

I have written over 300 pieces now—and not one of them is a children's piece. Kids like them. But I don't write a piece *to* children; there's no such thing. People say, "Oh come on, Deak, you write *The Ugly Duckling*, and you say it's not a children's piece?" I say "No; I took it very seriously." And my next piece was *Lady Chatterley's Dream*—same thing! I really can't make a distinction and I don't want to.

### **When did you get the idea that kids can compose?**

One time when I was working with Marin Also doing a music activity in Bed-Stuy [the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant], I was walking down the corridors of this rundown school—and the halls were filled with art by kids six, seven, eight years old. I thought, "This could be Picasso! This could look like Jean DuBuffet! This looked like a Paul Klee!"

I said to Marin: "Kids can paint. So where is children's music? We don't let kids write music."

### **You were a full-time orchestra player, how did you get time to develop that idea?**

John Duffy [founder of Meet The Composer] helped me. I told him that I had a crazy idea about education, that even though I'd had only one teaching job in my life and didn't like it—teaching bass and theory at Interlochen—I had an idea that little kids can write music for ensembles and orchestra. That's why I was applying for a three-year composer-in-residence fellowship with Marin and the Colorado Symphony. He managed to make it happen without my losing my job at the Phil.

Marin was very benevolent. As composer-in-residence, I was expected to come up with pieces. It was a very prolific time—but I was also experiencing these children [in the Denver Public Schools, the symphony's community partner]. First I would arrange the pieces for them; I would do the orchestration. But it still wasn't children's music—so I said, "Look, I am not a purist, but on the other hand, if I am going to present something as a child's piece of music, that child is going to have to make all the musical decisions."

It took three years to figure out the basics. But the idea was to bring the child into a concert hall as a serious collaborator. People say it's "radical." People say it's a "blank slate method." I say if the kid doesn't write it, it doesn't get done.

### **So how did you get past the kids' inhibitions—and stop composing and arranging for the kids?**

One of the breakthroughs in Colorado was when we had some kids with a lot of family problems. A couple of kids were just sitting there—like, "I'm not doing this; I'm not doing anything." One kid was intelligent and trying to play cello and some piano, but wouldn't do anything. It was near the end of our time with that school.

I asked, "Did you write anything?"

"Yes, but you're not going to like it."

"Give me a chance," I said.

So he goes to the piano and hits the keys as hard as he can, and goes to the cello and does the same sort of thing.

So I said, "What's the next note?"

He wrote the most beautiful piece. He'd never heard of the Beethoven G-major piano concerto, with its Orpheus taming the wild beasts sort of thing, but he did a piece that was more or less like that—and the violins played this beautiful little melody that he composed, and in the end it came together and it was beautiful.

It's God's work. And we have it again and again and again.

### **In your workshops, you have New York Philharmonic musicians and other professionals play the children's compositions. Is that difficult?**

We tell them, "All you have to do is be patient and respectful, as if it were Joseph Schwantner coming in and teaching you about his new piece."

### **And composers?**

I can sit a composer down—someone who has a burgeoning career, getting commissions—and say, "Do you want to work in the NYC program? I have to tell you we are not interested in your music or your style, you are to be transparent in the classroom."

### **What about the future?**

I believe we, over the last fifteen years, have gotten over a thousand kids to produce and orchestrate their own works of chamber music—the children have gone on to fully orchestrate 51 of these works for the New York Phil. The main point is that a new repertoire already exists. I'm at the point where I could use a full staff and dozens of professional composer-teaching artists. But with all these budget cuts, yikes! ■