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Getting Rhythmic Movement “Dun” with Kid-Friendly Music Story Concerts

1. The Problem

- a. To most children (and adults) going to a concert usually means three things: I have to sit, I have to be quiet, and I have to listen to music I may or may not like or know for an hour or more. Exposing music to children in this manner will most likely damage their initial music experiences causing them to grow up into adults who think that concerts, classical music, and concert-going is stuffy, a waste of time and money, and boring.

- b. What if we turned the definition of concert-going and the stigma of the accompanying music on its head? What if we treated music as it was supposed to be treated – as a story? Everyone loves a good story, but not everyone realizes that every piece of music has a living, breathing storyline of its own. What I propose is the creation of Music Story Concerts. These concerts will feature a plethora of diverse genres such as Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Pop, Jazz, and Blues where kids can dance, groove, connect with the music on a deeper level, see that music can have different characters and emotions, and come away with excitement about music that will last a lifetime. Music Story Concerts have the potential to not only get our kids moving, but also expose them to general music education, and get kids (and adults) to not just listen to music but to love it.

2. How do we do run a Music Story Concert?

- a. A Music Story Concert should be performed by musicians and be accompanied by the storyteller or movement director. This could look like a single instrumentalist, a small chamber group, or an orchestra with a storyteller. The storyteller or movement director's role will be to tell the story and to help guide the rhythmic movement during the pieces. At the beginning of each piece, the storyteller should excite the children's imagination with an engaging story that matches the piece's character; should have the instrumentalists play short selections that exhibit musical concepts such as contrasting dynamics, changing tempos, and repeated portions, (although these terms would be simplified using words such as loud and quiet and fast and slow) for the children to listen for; and should later guide the rhythmic movement.

3. Examples

- a. The three examples I have selected are from Tan Dun's *Eight Memories in Watercolor*, which is a set of eight short programmatic piano pieces. Although programmatic pieces are not required for a successful Music Story Concert, I selected these particular pieces because of the short lengths and contrasting characters of the pieces.

- b. The first piece, *Missing Moon or Missing Family* tells of the heartbreaking pain of homesickness. The storyteller might begin connecting children to the music by asking the children if they have ever missed someone in their family like their mom, dad, or grandparents. He or she might then tell of Tan Dun, the composer, and his loneliness when he went away from his family for the first time. The storyteller could have the listener listen to the pianist play certain selections of the piece for the children to listen for and show them the accompanying movements for that portion. During the performance, the storyteller would guide children in pretending to be the nighttime wind and to wave their scarves in high or low waves for varying registers, in big and small waves for changing dynamics, or to toss the scarves in the air to mimic the reoccurring downward arpeggios in the piece.
- c. The second piece *Staccato Beans* is a story about the unending energy of children. The storyteller could begin by explaining that the word “staccato” means “to jump” and could ask the children to show how they jump. He could continue the story by telling of young Tan Dun jumping and playing with his friends as a child. For this piece, the storyteller could give each child a different colored “bean spot” on the floor for the children to jump on. During the piece, the students can jump faster or slower according to the fluctuating tempo or higher or lower depending on the dynamic levels.
- d. *Sunrain or Happiness* opens with four gong-like chords that begin the annual Water Splashing Festival in China. To connect the children to this piece, the storyteller could ask the children if they like playing with water in the summer. This piece exhibits fluctuating tempos, dynamics, and registers. To aid with listening, the storyteller can ask the children if they can hear the fast and the slow in the opening line of the piece. The storyteller can then guide the children to use the slower moments to sneak up on friends with

imaginary squirt guns, the loud moments to throw their make-believe

buckets of water at their friends and bang on imaginary gongs with the piano.

4. In conclusion, Music Story Concerts have great potential in connecting our children to music by using all their senses, helping our children learn to listen by having them listen to a variety of music genres and learning to identify musical concepts such as dynamics and tempos,