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Imprisoning Musical Creativity

by Jennifer Warren-Baker

I am a composer. Since the age of 12, I have been painting canvases of sound at the piano. But my teachers never cared. In fact, my type of talent was deemed worthless by the government's public-school system. Growing up in the D.C. area, I didn't have any real models to follow. In the shadow of the nation's capital, suburban neighborhoods were saturated with military personnel and other government employees and contractors. All around me, stiff-lipped people were following code and dressing in uniform. The *Washington Post* employment ads bubbled with words such as "systems analyst," "database administrator," and "defense contractor." All along, it didn't seem as though my type of ability could provide a viable livelihood. What creative models did I have? Where did I fit into this culture of soldiers, bureaucrats, and subcontractors?

The feeling of not fitting in was perhaps most strong in the public-school system. Being a composer in a public-school system was analogous to placing a penguin in the hot desert. My creative spirit would quickly melt in the oppressive heat of the system's incompatible and unsupportive environment. My question today is: Are other creative abilities falling through the cracks of public education, going unnoticed and fading into oblivion? Would someone with the musical intelligence of Mozart be suppressed to the point of disappearing? To understand why my answer is yes, you must first understand my story.

Before I was composing, I was a pianist. From the age of 9, I played the piano for hours every day. But I would quickly learn that my ability at piano, and later, my talent for musical composition, would not be rewarded. No. I was rewarded for spelling words correctly. For making perfectly formed letters. I received stickers for following directions, for coloring in the lines, and for doing what I was told.

Becoming a model student

My parents went along with my compulsory government education. They didn't know that the school system was slowly eroding my self-worth by imprisoning my musical ability. In the third grade, I remember getting a C in behavior and work habits. Apparently I was too talkative

and disruptive. And as with most creative people, I was disorganized and I didn't finish my work on time. I did not fit the mold. Something about my temperament was awry. So I made a conscious decision, which I remember very well, to change my personality and shape myself to the system's standards. At that point, I buried who I was, and became someone who would please the teacher and get A's. The system had decided what I should be good at, and musical composition and piano were not on the list.

I became a fill-in-the-blank machine, regurgitating the answer bolded in the textbook. This compliant and unimaginative behavior carried over into my private piano lessons, where I spent my time playing exactly what was on the page and treating the piano more like a typewriter than a musical instrument. In the classroom, I paid attention and sat in the front row. I followed procedures and routines. I was quiet. But I was a robot. My inner passion was tranquilized, subdued. Except for the rare creative writing assignment, I had little opportunity to speak of my interests, my questions about the world, or my passions. And I definitely didn't share my piano talent with anyone in the "system."

As I became the model student, I was selected to take a standardized test for high achievers. For a moment, I felt special. The test was supposed to identify gifted and talented students so they could participate in the gifted-and-talented program. My brother passed it, but I failed. The same scenario repeated itself year after year, and year after year my score was not high enough to be recognized as a "gifted and talented" child. But my musical and creative abilities were not assessed on that test. Had my musical ability been assessed, perhaps I would have been labeled as talented. But no. Once again, the message was clear: even though I might compose music and play the piano beautifully, I was not talented and gifted.

My experiences with music in school were limited to reading sheet music and reciting other peoples' musical ideas. In my 13 years of public education, I can remember only one time when a public-school teacher asked me to play the piano. In the fourth or fifth grade, my music teacher handed me a copy of "America the Beautiful." She did not ask me what I wanted to play, or what I had to say musically. So desperate to share my gift with the world, I went along with her agenda. As in all the other school subjects, I submitted to the teacher. I followed directions and played what *she* wanted me to play. I put no artistic stamp on that piece. The words were not my own, and I was just decoding someone else's notation. I had no feeling of ownership or pride in "America the Beautiful." A lesson was learned: once in a while, I could play the piano, but the teacher would choose when I played and what I played, and she wouldn't ask anyone to share his skills very often. In fact, I was never asked again.

Reading, not making, music

When the opportunity came in fifth grade to take up an instrument, piano wasn't one of the options. That was unfortunate, since the piano is the primary vehicle for musical composition, offering the whole orchestra at one's fingertips. If I wanted to receive school-sanctioned instruction in music, it had to be on school-sanctioned instruments such as flute or clarinet. Stringed instruments were out because the system couldn't afford to implement a strings program. And for some reason there was no avenue for studying piano. Anyone interested in musical composition, as I was, could forget it. I would have to wait until college to find coursework in composition.

So I took up the clarinet, eager to embrace the opportunity, even though it wasn't my instrument of choice. Unfortunately, the clarinet was not my passion, and I failed. High school was more of the same boxy agenda — one could take band, chorus, or orchestra. Outside of that box, one just didn't fit in. I had absorbed a discouraging message: I could play an instrument, but others would decide what instruments I would play, and if I failed one of those instruments, then I must not be a very good musician. Furthermore, the school wouldn't perform any original works by students. They wanted us reading music, not making music.

About five more years passed before I was asked to play the piano in public school again, but when I was asked, I must point out that the opportunity arose from outside of the classroom. I was the audition pianist for *Grease*. This was an after-school activity. It is well known that in most school systems, musical-theater productions are considered extra-curricular in nature, and rely on teachers willing to volunteer extra time for a small stipend.

At the auditions, I spewed out the same hackneyed tune 30 or 40 times in a row as each student took his turn singing. I knew I was playing only because their pianist hadn't shown up, so I already felt like a default player rather than a chosen one. I was soaked with sweat and felt as though my playing was barely adequate, as though all eyes were on me, listening to every wrong note. After the auditions, I was not asked to play again.

Not even my private piano teachers encouraged my ability to compose. That's because they were trained by the same cookie-cutter school system I was in. They clung to the curriculum, didn't compose music themselves, and made me play other people's music. I wasn't even allowed to improvise. There was no model of creative musicianship. It was another case of marching in line, of making carbon copies of other people's ideas. When I came up with my own musical ideas, my classical, old-school piano teacher threw up her hands and said, "Well, I can't help you there. I know nothing about composition."

The creative soul in me stifled and devalued, I turned inward and lost confidence. I had so much to say musically, but nobody in the system wanted to hear what I had to say. Society and the school system obviously thought my talent was worthless. Had the school system offered a song-writing class or a composers' club, I might have received more encouragement. I might have

thought that I was worth something to the world. Instead, I thought I was so worthless that I became painfully shy and stopped talking to people.

In sixth grade, my music teacher called my mother to see whether something was wrong with me. I was so quiet that she was worried about me. By the age of 12, the formerly garrulous, ebullient girl had gone mute. It is no coincidence that I shut down verbally right about the time that my composing talent was emerging. I knew that nothing I was saying had any value, so why talk at all?

Breakthrough

Knowing that it was not okay to compose music, and convinced by the system that I would never make money doing that, I went to college with no sense of direction. I continued to bury my secret self and hide out in the practice rooms, composing music and playing piano to myself for hours at a time. Looking back, I realize that this was learned suppression. I had learned, by the public school's omissions, that my talent was better off locked up in a cage. As the chasm between what I wanted to do and what I was doing became an ever-widening abyss, I sank into a deep depression. For part-time work, I tried office work and waiting tables, but I was completely unsuited to both. By the age of 20, I had hit my lowest point. I had an emotional breakdown and my parents put me on medication.

Shortly after that, I got a self-help book at the library called *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow*. Later, I met several people who recognized my talent and began encouraging me. I found a mentor and teacher who was a respected composer himself, and who was the model of who I wanted to be. He validated the worth of my compositions and said I was extremely gifted. I also met my husband, who became the champion of my work and my best salesman. I took myself off the medication and began pursuing a music degree and composing enthusiastically.

Today, I maintain a large studio of private piano students. I receive no funding from other sources, so I am free to teach music in my own way. I see my mission as filling a void in the public-school system. I encourage my students to share the music of their hearts, to find their own musical voice, and to create new music. It has been no surprise to me that once children are de-programmed from the idea that it is acceptable only to recite others' ideas, and once they are encouraged to experiment with music, most children are quite capable of composing music.

So I often wonder: If Mozart were alive today, would his genius have developed through the conventional channels of compulsory public education, or would his musical potential have been impeded? Would he have been molded and shaped and pushed in a direction unsuited to his genius? Or worse, would he have become suicidal and felt that it was his only choice to check out of a system that labeled him as untalented?

Given its structure of conformity and regimentation, the public-school system is inherently defective. The system suppresses imagination and overlooks genius. I want no part of it. That is

why my own children are not participating in the public-school system. I am raising them by supporting their interests and nurturing their imaginations.

As John F. Kennedy said so appropriately, “If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.” By its very nature, the public-school system is incapable of setting the artist free. It is instead transforming our populace into a nation of unfeeling automatons.

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