Words from Music: How Mozart and Mangione Inspire Writers
by
ROGER COREY

Like other writing teachers, I've tried just about every technique for generating story ideas with my eighth-grade students. In our class we've done everything from "a sentence in the box" to visiting a pre-Civil War cemetery and writing stories about the names and dates we found on the headstones. What, for example, do students make of the life of Susan Alexander, born 1820, died 1845? Incorporating what they have learned of those long ago days, what can they imagine of this woman's short life and untimely death?

But visiting a cemetery is not something a class can do more than once a year, and generating ideas for stories is something we do all the time. So one day when Sara came up to my desk with a finished story, we started to talk about how she had come upon the idea.

"The music gave me this sad feeling, so I took those feelings and put them into a character," she explained.

Sara was referring to the background music I usually play while the students are writing. I have always enjoyed listening to classical music playing softly in the background as I write, so one morning I tried it with my students. Now they have become so accustomed to music playing while they write that if I get busy and forget to turn it on, they ask, "Hey, where's the music?"

With my own writing I like to listen to Bach's Orchestral Suites in C and D, the Allegretto section from Beethoven's 7th Symphony, Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings, or Pachelbel's Canon in D. But I have to be careful when selecting music for my students. If I were to play Wagner's Parzifal Prelude, for example, though it is an absolutely beautiful piece of music, the students would be asleep in their seats within two minutes. So I try to walk a fine line, playing music that is neither too distracting, nor too somnolent. Mozart's piano concertos work well with the students, and so do movie soundtracks from Hook, Dances With Wolves, Last of the Mohicans, Glory, Out of Africa, The Mission, and Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves. Sometimes the soundtrack from Lion King works too, but the students have to be in the right mood, or they get carried away with Hakuna Matata. On another modern note, the students really enjoy the nuevo flamenco guitar sounds of Ottmar Liebert.

On the particular day that Sara began this story, I was playing the soundtrack from Out Of Africa. The opening theme has a slow, beautiful string movement. The music made Sara feel lonely; she thought about her older sister who had recently returned to college after a vacation. She wrote:

I sat on my sister's bed. I was in her room. The lights were off, but a bit of sun sifted through the window. The bed was made, and so was the other one across from me. To my left was a white wall with a closet. The closet's double doors were covered with pictures of Joelle's friends and classmates. Next to it was the door leading to the hall. The wall opposite me was almost totally covered with posters. Under the posters was the other bed, neatly made. On my left was the window and the desk.

My sister had left for college that morning. She'd come home for Christmas and spent a while at home. She'd given me a charm for my necklace. It was a silver pendant because I loved to draw and paint.

Well, she was gone, but as I sat there and looked around me, memories came back to me. There were lots that came to mind, like the time ...
When she explained that listening to the music had set the mood for her story, it gave me an idea. Why not try to come up with music that would create story ideas in the listeners’ imaginations? I ruled out anything familiar to the students, or anything that had understandable lyrics. I wanted music that would create an emotional response and not simply tell the listeners what to feel or think.

I, therefore, became a collector of eclectic bits of music. From Paul Simon, I took a wonderfully upbeat bridge of instrumental calypso music from his song Late In The Evening, and a driving guitar section from Hearts And Bones. On a trip to Paris, I recorded a variety of tunes from a French radio station — including songs by Edith Piaf. I also included a recording of African tribal music played with balaphones and drums, and the more modern sound of Sam Manguana from Zaire. From Chuck Mangione I got that terrifically raucous drum and brass intro on the Children of Sanchez album. In addition, I added a piece of sitar music from Ravi Shankar, and Puccini’s incredibly sad Nessun Dorma as sung by Pavarotti.

This music gave me a diverse selection of pieces to play for my eighth grade English class. I began by choosing only one or two pieces to play on the days we used music as a writing prompt. Each song or excerpt was one or two minutes in length. Without offering any explanation of the music, I would have the students listen to the piece one time through without talking or making notes.

“Simply listen to the music and try to imagine characters and a setting that go with the music.”

“What music is this?” a student would ask.
a great dancer. And anyway her partner, Ben, would be out there with her.

Where is Ben, anyway? Melissa thought frantically. The music and lights from the dance partners performing were overwhelming. She spotted Ben in the costume area backstage and rushed over to him.

“We’re next,” Melissa said.

“I know,” Ben replied, and they walked to the side of the stage.

Stacia pictured a dance recital. She could see a couple dancing on a stage, and she thought about how someone would feel who was waiting to perform. Stacia told her story through the eyes of a girl standing in the wings. She put the tenseness she felt in the music into the character of Melissa. “I tried to express the nervousness that she was feeling,” Stacia explained. “She was very scared at first, and then she found her partner and became less nervous.”

It is interesting to note the contrast between the stories written by Heidi and Stacia. They are influenced by the same music, but one student connects to the pleasurable melody, the other to the tense rhythm.

When William listened to a song from the French radio, he pictured a French nightclub singer. “He was on a stage,” William said. “His voice was off-tone, and there was a small band behind him.” The scene created images of spies and secret agents for William, characters who often seemed to meet in the back rooms of nightclubs. When he asked himself why these men were meeting in secret and what they were trying to discuss, William came up with the idea of industrial espionage. From there he created a story about seven businessmen and their struggle to build a better automobile engine, one that would propel a car at incredible speeds.

_The businessmen sat at a table in a French nightclub in Paris. They were discussing how to build a car that could break the sound barrier. The faint sound of the terrible singer in the club annoyed the men._

“How will we build an engine that will generate enough power?” Pierre asked the group of seven men.

Of course, writers will bring their own preferences and experiences to whatever music they hear.

Dezaree incorporated the same French music into her story also, but rather than imagining scenes of espionage, she thought of food first and then of romance. She could imagine the music playing softly in the background of a restaurant. She began to feel hungry. She pictured a young couple having dinner, and began to jot down their conversation as it came to her. Though the story idea begins with a thought of food, she focuses on the relationship of the characters:

_Stacey looked up at Jeff._

_“This restaurant is nice,” she said, smiling at him._

_“Yeah. Megan told me to take you here,” he said._

_“Oh, when did you talk to Megan?”_

_“A couple of days ago. I asked her where I should take you and she said this place was nice,” he answered._

_“Yeah, well I just wish I’d dressed a little fancier,” she said, looking down at her long white dress._

_“You look nice,” he said, smiling at her._

Over time, I have experimented with the most effective ways to use music to inspire writing. I have found that it is important to play the musical excerpt more than once, because on the first listening the students’ imaginations are inundated with images and feelings. By not writing the first time through, the students leave themselves open and are more receptive to the music. Once the music has played and they have an idea of what they want to write, a second hearing produces more specific details. “The images that go along with the melody come so fast that I can’t get them all organized,” Heidi explained. “Hearing the music a second or third time helps me put my thoughts in some kind of order.”

Stacia agrees. “The first time you just start to get an idea and the second time you can put it all together to make a good story.”

Once the students are writing, I turn off the music and give them about five minutes to begin their stories. Then I ask them to stop and exchange papers with a partner. I do not usually give them the full period to write, because this is a writing prompt and not meant
to be completed at this time unless the students feel inspired to carry on with the story they have begun.

Finally, I play the music briefly a third time and then ask for volunteers to read their opening paragraphs. Playing the music a third time gives the students a fresh hearing just before they begin to read their stories. As they do so, it is fun to discover what the students have imagined from the music.

As this is a writing activity and not an assignment, we then move into writing workshop and the students continue with their own work. About a third of the students usually go on to use the story ideas they come up with from the music. I expect this — no writing prompt that I have ever used has worked with all of the students all of the time, and that’s okay. Also, different types of music work with different students. The music of Chuck Mangione might stir up Jeff’s imagination, while Amber might be more touched by Puccini. Julie said the type of story she writes is often dependent on the rhythm of the music. When she listens to fast music, she generally imagines a story that involves a crime scene or a last minute victory of some sort. When the music is slow or has an orchestral accompaniment, she imagines a plot that is full of lonely characters or has more thought than action.

Some students are turned off by very loud music or heavy metal, because it keeps them from concentrating. When this happens, I see them gazing at me with a look of frustration and their papers are blank. I prefer to use music that is far removed from the students’ usual listening experience, but, beyond that, any style will do. Music has such depth and can touch such a wide variety of emotions that it cannot help but tap into a student’s creativity.

As Heidi put it, “Any music I hear gives me ideas for stories. I try not to set limits on my imagination.”

Roger Corey teaches eighth grade English at Spangdahlem Middle School in Spangdahlem AFB, Germany, and is a teacher consultant for the Brussels/Rhine Eifel District.