Harmony™
Forum of the Symphony Orchestra Institute
Number 12 • April 2001

But Who Will Make Their Tea?

by

Peter Wiegold

The Guysborough Experience

To subscribe to *Harmony* or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute
1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318
Evanston, IL 60201
Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460
e-mail: information@soi.org
www.soi.org

Editor's Digest

But Who Will Make Their Tea?

The first seven paragraphs of author Peter Wiegold's essay conjure up a vivid picture of one of his workshops. We encourage you to read them twice and to imagine yourself standing in that circle.

Wiegold shares with readers the personal artistic journey that convinced him that a musical dialogue can, indeed, trigger the imaginations of composers, conductors, and players. He then posits that this same type of dialogue can be used to engage entire orchestra organizations.

Suggesting that musical practice will always reflect its time and place, he writes that today's world is "plural and changing fast," concluding that orchestras must work to attain flexible musical cultures.

Journey to Guysborough

Our author moves ahead by sharing the compelling story of his work with students in Guysborough, Nova Scotia, as part of a project he undertook with Symphony Nova Scotia. He concludes that orchestra organizations must work to remake and remodel the relationships among composers, conductors, players, management, and audience to generate unique musical occasions and, at the same time, retain the orchestra's heritage.

The Institute was intrigued by the story of the author's experiences in Nova Scotia. In a "postlude" that follows his essay, readers have the opportunity to hear the Guysborough story from the participants' perspectives.

Peter Wiegold

But Who Will Make Their Tea?

Twenty London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) musicians stood with me in a circle—no instruments.

They looked like columns of stone—cold, unmoving. I thought, "My God, this is what it must feel like to conduct them for the first time."

The only thing to do was to get my head down and go for it, so I began the workshop. First, simple communication exercises: learning names, passing around vocal sounds, copying, parodying one another, going for faster and faster reactions. The atmosphere warmed up.

"Everybody helped themselves to tea and biscuits and there was a real buzz. Someone said, 'Now I remember why I took up music.'"

We moved to instruments. (No music!) I played a simple figure and repeated it over and over, inviting each person in turn to join in with their own. Eventually we had a fine bubbling texture. A viola was playing a striking pizzicato rhythm, so I dropped to that, then rebuilt into a Steve Reich-like web of pizzicato. I asked for a solo. The clarinetist looked as though he'd have a go.

The music calmed and became floating and spacious, I added some revolving harmonies on my keyboard, and gradually we progressed towards a swooping free improvisation. After a stillness, a new riff from the trombonist, strong and funky; add everybody in, and onto a rousing end. Time for a break and retreat to the kitchen.

Everybody helped themselves to tea and biscuits and there was a real buzz. Someone said, "Now I remember why I took up music."

In those simple exercises we had broken through to a direct and heartfelt communication through sound—imaginative, inventive, and belonging to us. And chatting together we began to become friends. Then I remembered what they'd said in the LSO office the day before: "But who will make their tea?"

The Genesis of Musical Dialogues

My musical dialogues began at the age of nine when I began lessons with the

village organist. He had taught himself and never had a pupil, and so we worked together on what I should do. After this, I had two years with no lessons, then four with just piano lessons. In this period I taught myself harmony and began to compose.

> *"So when I was invited to be a composer-in-residence in an arts center, I resolved that I would have workshops where children could get directly involved in making sound and in creating music."*

At school at this time, my memory of class music lessons is of a teacher, Mrs. Butcher, who would make all 30 of us stand in turn and sing a folk song, after which she would give us a mark on a scale of ten. This took the whole class. A low mark resulted in having to copy the text out after school.

Eventually I caught up academically, went to university, wrote Bach fugues, analyzed Wagner, discovered modern music, and, after eight years and armed with three degrees, began professional musical life. But something in me would never let go of those early days of musical discovery and musical self-sufficiency, or of the later days of playing in university rock bands and jazz bands for hours.

So when I was invited to be a composer-in-residence in an arts center, I resolved that I would have workshops where children could get directly involved in making sound and in creating music.

During my first workshop, I was so excited by the wealth of ideas emerging from a group of ten-year-old children that it was two and a half hours later when their teacher finally said, "Could we just stop for a moment so they can go to the toilet?"

In the evenings, I conducted workshops for adults and gradually learned and developed many techniques for quickly engaging anyone who came into the room in a music-making process through name games, theater games, rhythm games, and so on, always moving towards creating a new piece, something that would belong especially to that group of people.

The Chemistry of Composers and Players

My own professional artistic life continued to be more conventional. I conducted my own ensemble and composed. I had many good commissions, but was sometimes frustrated by my rather rigid relationship with the players. Perhaps I missed the jazz bands. I began to wonder if it was possible to involve my players more in the creative process and eventually put the composing on hold.

I studied and traveled widely, including a trip to Java to study gamelan music. At the end of my stay there, the head of the conservatory in Surakarta asked me to write a piece for the main gamelan. This I did, using their number-based notation.

I took the composition into the rehearsal room, and an extraordinary thing happened. It immediately ceased to be "my" piece and now belonged to everyone. They said, "Lets put this at the beginning," or "Lets add a solo here." The music naturally belonged to all present, with no hesitant, standoffish relation between composer and performers.

This experience strengthened my resolve to find new ways of working with my musicians back home.

Years of research followed. I was fortunate to be artistic director of the Performance and Communication Skills Department of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Working closely with the department head, Peter Renshaw, I led a postgraduate ensemble of 15 for a year at a time and was able make my own curriculum. We included Tai-Chi, African drumming, voice, and body work, as well as many kinds of improvisation and composition. It was a wonderful opportunity to test starting from scratch. Just what is it to "make music" and be a real performer?

It was easy for the experiments to go wrong. There is, for example, a very fine line between opening up imaginative space and maintaining artistic focus. But after those 11 years, I now feel comfortable in my dialogue with musicians and able to incorporate their imaginations, in smaller or greater ways, in my own work.

"It was easy for the experiments to go wrong. There is, for example, a very fine line between opening up imaginative space and maintaining artistic focus."

The Creative Orchestra

I've worked recently with Sharp Edge, the new-music group of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO). Formed from a group for which I led the initial training six years ago, they have had a fascinating history of working in schools; with African, reggae, and rap musicians; and commissioning pieces on which the players worked collaboratively with the composers. Sharp Edge manager Judith Webster has guided the evolution of the group, always with close consultation with the musicians.

I directed a performance last November in the "Cutting Edge" series in London and consciously presented a three-layer program that included classic contemporary works by masters Boulez and Birtwistle, a new commission of mine (95-percent notated), and six "one-pagers." I asked six leading British composers to supply us with just one page of material that we could elaborate into whole pieces, and composers, players, and I worked together, very much as a jazz band would.

It was a thrilling concert—fine orchestral musicians playing new music and an air of danger and surprise—because nobody (including the players at times) knew what was going to happen in the one-pagers.

There were many lovely moments: a yodeling, improvised high-trumpet solo over rich chords provided by Sam Haydn; funky rhythms from two trombones with "trixie-dixie" mutes under a wild, highly decorated wind tune from Morgan Hayes (sounding like a cross between Frank Zappa and Korean music); and subtle, low-string effects in Tansy Davies' haiku-like piece.

The players were thoroughly engaged—one said afterwards that it was the best concert of her life—and it revealed once again the immense resource and imagination locked up in orchestral players.

For me, the key to this concert was the chemistry, the alchemy, of the formal and the free—and the many stages in between—in the same event; the dialogue between spirited player inventiveness and careful composer preparation.

Boundaries Are Not Rigid

There is a simplistic view that music is either written or improvised. If it is written, the composer controls all; if it is improvised, you need Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, or don't bother. But there are a thousand worlds in between. It is often in the smaller things that players' imaginative responses can really count. For example, take a high clarinet trill. Ask the players to make it "penetrate." Ask them to slightly vary the pitch, change the fingering, add another trill occasionally when it feels right, finish with a flourish.

"There is a simplistic view that music is either written or improvised. If it is written, the composer controls all; if it is improvised, you need Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, or don't bother."

There are no rigid boundaries among composers', conductors', and players' imaginations. One must simply find the right trigger for the right imagination at the right time.

There are things composers do on paper that can be done no other way. There are things players can do within their instruments that are impossible to notate. The joy and the excitement is in the alchemy between those two points.

I have long reflected on the "third way" (even before I heard of it from Tony Blair and Bill Clinton).

If the first way is like a box, rigidly containing and restricting, the second way is an open space, the way of the 1960s—let it all hang out, or maybe a completely flat democracy. The third way is, for me, a strong center, but one which can invite many spirals around it and, as it moves into the future, can bend and respond.

When I'm directing a one-pager, there are three kinds of instruction I can give to the players: "do this," "do something like this," "do whatever you want." Each is a vital part of the mix. And, of course, the middle one is fascinating. How do you trigger someone's imagination, and also contain it in just the right way,

so it comes swooping back into the mainstream four bars later?

Much of my research has been about this critical balance. What frees musicians while maintaining integrity and purpose in the music?

Translating the Concept to Other Worlds

The musical research has many parallels with contemporary thinking in other worlds. The empowerment of the individual, the unlocking of creative resources, the managing of creative teams are concepts which are regularly explored in industry. Clearly, we live in times when individual fulfillment is increasingly recognized as making the whole "product" better. Behind us are the times of rigid hierarchies and slavish workforces.

"Clearly, we live in times when individual fulfillment is increasingly recognized as making the whole 'product' better. Behind us are the times of rigid hierarchies and slavish workforces."

Much can be learned from the best of contemporary business culture, especially as so much of classical-music culture is locked in middle-Europe in the mid-19th century. But those in business want to learn from us, too.

I have recently worked for Ericsson in Sweden, training executives in communication and presentation. They were generally clear about the information they wanted to convey, but not as good at getting life and color into their messages.

I began by focusing on listening and communicating, asking the participants to practice judging response according to the weight and color of the stimulus, much like musical phrasing. I worked with pulses. Every presentation has a pulse, and every pulse has a quality: buzzy, thoughtful, questioning, entrancing.

I worked with each person in turn, asking them to hold a pulse while telling their stories, keeping the audience connected to their rhythm. Then I began to challenge habitual pulses. For example, one person who was fast, snappy, and clever revealed much more emotion and feeling at a more grounded tempo.

Later I worked with the executives to present their current issues using the form of the opening of a classical symphony: grab the audience's attention, state the essence of the key, begin to let the thought unfold. By the end of the workshops it was wonderful to see that they had become interested in the secrets locked in the artistic world: how to color a word, how to shape a performance, how to evoke magic rather than describe facts.

I think it could be very interesting to run workshops with orchestra sponsors and donors. Such workshops would give musicians an opportunity to return to the sponsors something of immediate value in their own world. So often, orchestras are the safe, pretty china on the shelf for sponsors. Is it not preferable to have an adult relationship, a real dialogue, between worlds?

Engaging Our Symphony Orchestra Organizations

In the corporate workshops, I began from the idea that in the arts, the goal is always to bring something alive: the sound of the instrument, the unfolding of the story, a spirit in the room. It is also vital that the culture within orchestras is kept alive.

Orchestras can be dangerous! Locked in the musicians is so much desire, an unconditional love of music, so much imagination. No wonder musicians get frustrated if the music does not work for them. They are passionate about music; they live for the moments when it works.

"Just as players appreciate being engaged in how music is made, they appreciate being engaged in the everyday organizing of the orchestra. In the same way, orchestra administrators need to be engaged with the players, in a process that is as close to the art-making process as possible."

After the RPO concert, one of the players, who had never been involved in this kind of creative work before, said to me about one of the one-pagers: "That shouldn't be eight minutes long. Its natural length would be 40 minutes." When did you last hear an orchestral player asking for a new piece to be expanded to 40 minutes? But when a player feels part of the imagining of something, it is natural that his or her own fascination and musical intelligence comes through.

Just as players appreciate being engaged in how music is made, they appreciate being engaged in the everyday organizing of the orchestra. In the same way, orchestra administrators need to be engaged with the players, in a process that is as close to the art-making process as possible. (Administrators have imaginations, too!)

I have led workshops for orchestra administrators and orchestra players together, to share one another's worlds. There is a fear that musician and nonmusician cannot work together, but I always begin by setting a ground of which everybody can be part and can join in. This might involve setting up parallel riffs in concentric circles so that some layers are very easy, yet central, and other layers are more playful and decorative, or virtuosic.

Early in the session we stop for discussion, and the openness of the process naturally encourages the conversation to turn to "life skills" common to musicians and nonmusicians alike. The comments come in a torrent: "I always rush in." "It's important to listen before responding." "I learned to stay with what I was able to do." "Repetition consolidates." "Begin and end with a summary."

The workshops always close with some sort of performance: the moment of no return, the moment of shared celebration.

There are many things within music that can teach us about how to run organizations. For example, a primary musical rule, whether in Bach counterpoint or in Ravel orchestration, is that things work well together when they are also strong and autonomous in themselves—an interesting model for partnerships and collaboration.

Music also teaches the importance of roles, of each element having its moment and time to establish itself, and of the value of surprise, daring, turning things upside down, for a moment or forever. That's excitement.

I began this essay writing about changes in musical practice, looking at changing roles for composers, conductors, and players. The way we practice our art in today's world must give a key as to how to develop overall philosophy and practice within the orchestral culture. Musical practice will always reflect its time and place. Consider some very different examples:

- the solo sitar player, religious celebrant as well as musician;
- the carnival drummer driving the crowd to dance and party;
- the elegant chamber music of an 18th-century drawing room;
- the proud symphonic music of the imperial 19th century;
- the modernist 1960s and 1970s, with composers breaking down language into its prime constituents.

No matter in what way orchestral culture develops, it must reflect its times. Otherwise, its back will break as it refuses to bend into the wind.

Developing Orchestral Culture

What does contemporary culture say to us? What kind of world are we living in? Foremost, it is plural, and changing fast. In every industry, in so many everyday situations, a simple, single, traditional answer will not suffice.

This might be frightening to some. Yet, the very volatility opens up enormous potential. Every year, I work with the National Youth Orchestra whose young people are just as comfortable playing the french horn in Brahms as dancing to (or playing) the latest hard-edged club music. They are very exciting musicians with whom to work!

We need an orchestral culture that is flexible, one that can relate to different musics and different audiences. The orchestra must be seen as a flexible community resource: performing, teaching, playing chamber music, running creative projects, always inventing concerts and projects that are unique, yet which keep a base in the timeless repertoire that they have inherited, maintaining a chemistry between the timeless and the spontaneous, between something that could happen any day, anywhere, and something that is absolutely special to that town, that community, those musicians.

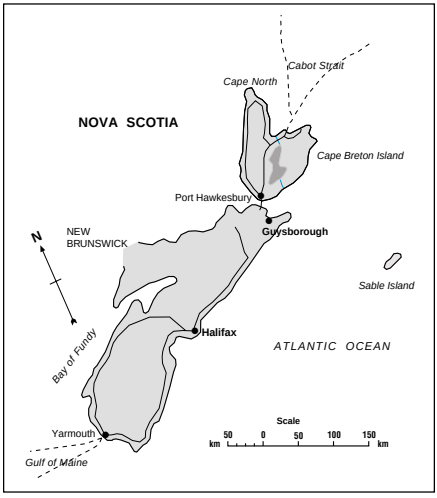
One undoubted feature of the contemporary world that orchestras confront

is the availability of music through technology. CDs bring music from every part of the world at the touch of a button. Wide-screen stereo concerts on DVD come close to reproducing live orchestra concerts. The Internet offers information and contact in a new public forum (although the experience is often private).

Yet, as musicians, we have one ace up our sleeve. The sense of occasion. The unique moment that could only happen there and then, in that hall, in that community, between those people.

Journey to Guysborough

Last year, I was invited to lead a project for Symphony Nova Scotia in Guysborough, a town in a fairly remote part of Nova Scotia. A gas company wanted to sponsor a project in the area where it was working.



The orchestra had not visited Guysborough in 25 years. So the idea was for children from Guysborough to write music for the orchestra, and then not only hear their music played, but also perform with the orchestra.

Three composers and three players from Symphony Nova Scotia spent two days working with students in the high school. The theme was "New Energy," acknowledging the new energy being brought by the gas company.

We began with communication warmups, then some improvising so that it began to feel as though we were playing in a band together. I introduced the theme, then set about finding a "hook line" for the piece. After much fun we came up with "In the Heat of the Moment." Then I said, "Let's find the musical line for this."

The room was full of quiet humming and vocalizing. Suddenly someone cried "That's it!" to the person next to her. I stopped everyone and we listened. There it was: a natural, elegant musical line. From this came a song, which spawned four other movements. We then recorded what we had.

The next step was for the three composers to score these movements out. A couple of months later, we returned to Guysborough with the full orchestra and presented the new 20-minute work with the school choir.

There was a buzz. The hall was packed. The first half consisted of familiar classical pieces. Then came the new piece. The children gave their all and received a standing ovation. Then the orchestra played a piece of mine, and that got a standing ovation as well (not what I would normally expect!).

It was a most rewarding project. We had managed to connect professional and school music artistically, to bring orchestral and classical music to a community, to introduce a community to some contemporary sounds, and, on the way, to use a theme that paid due respect to the sponsor.

This is only one way of making a concert, but I feel the principle is a good one: look to make an occasion unique and special while keeping a firm link to the heritage of the orchestra.

Only Connect

Connect player to conductor to composer to student to audience. Connect traditional to new. And keep the relationships fresh by being willing to remake and remodel them.

Keep exploring the relationships among composer, conductor, players, management, audience so that they continually meet and confront one another on a human level. So the composer can see that a certain player plays a trill with a unique color. So that the player can stir the composer into bringing his or her vision to life. So orchestra members can join artistic planners and share their imaginations—and their constraints, too. So that audience members can identify with their children singing with the orchestra. So that sponsors can partake of artistic practice and know that they and their work are valued.

"Keep exploring the relationships among composer, conductor, players, management, audience so that they continually meet and confront one another on a human level."

One last example: As I write this essay, I am preparing a concert with the London Sinfonietta. Their heritage is of the finest new-music playing, but in this case, before we commit to paper, I'm leading some workshops to bring players and four young composers to experiment "live" and interactively. As the days progress, it is almost as if the composers can now breathe the air of live music making and really get their music off the page.

When audiences sense that something is alive, when what is happening in front of them is daring, personal, committed, and belongs to them, they want to stay in the thrill of that circus. They want to identify with the story that is unfolding before them.

When players are truly engaged in their playing, they know absolutely why they would give and have given everything to be musicians. You never know, they might even make their own tea.

Peter Wiegold is a composer, conductor, and creative workshop leader based in London. He holds B.Mus. and M.Mus. degrees from the University College of Wales and a Ph.D. in composition from Durham University.

The Guysborough Experience

Guysborough, Nova Scotia, is a tiny Canadian hamlet situated a few miles inland from the Atlantic coast, northeast of Halifax, on a parallel slightly north of Bangor, Maine.

This may seem an unusual location in which to apply forward-looking ideas about the creation of new music, but Guysborough is not a haven of musical illiterates. Its public grade school employs a talented music teacher, Ursula Ryan, who teaches grades one through eight at Chedabucto Education Center. "It's basically a general classroom music program," she explains. "All the elements of music are combined." And lest we picture a one-room schoolhouse, she adds that, "Guysborough is one of the largest counties in Nova Scotia. Most students are bused in and have an hour's bus ride. It's a geographically vast area."

Guysborough also has a powerful benefactor, Sable Offshore Energy, Incorporated. Guysborough County as a whole is the center of 37-trillion cubic feet of natural-gas reserves, some of them under the Atlantic on the Scotian shelves. Sable has constructed a natural-gas processing plant in Guysborough County. While launching a full-scale industrial overhaul of the region, Sable also gave due attention to the importance of cultural forces by becoming the sponsor of Peter Wiegold and Symphony Nova Scotia's visits to Guysborough.

Peter's impact on the community may have been just as profound as Sable Energy's was on the economy of Guysborough County, not commensurately measurable in dollars and cents, but in creativity, joy, and enthusiasm. "It was unbelievable," asserts 15-year-old Genevieve Foley, a former Chedabucto student and a singer who now attends the music program at St. Mary's Academy in Nova Scotia.

"While launching a full-scale industrial overhaul of the region, Sable also gave due attention to the importance of cultural forces by becoming the sponsor of Peter Wiegold and Symphony Nova Scotia's visits to Guysborough."

Betty Webster, the executive director of Orchestras Canada, who has been a friend of Peter's for decades, explains the importance of his Changing Arts Practice workshops from the symphonies' perspective. "The orchestras realize they have to undertake community outreach work, to be more relevant to their communities. But the musicians are trained as players, not talkers or teachers. Wiegold's process frees symphony musicians from their strict training. It's absolutely amazing to see the results of several days of musicians working with him."

Symphony Nova Scotia (SNS) principal oboist Suzanne Lemieux agrees. Since taking Peter's workshop, she has become enthusiastic about his techniques and has practiced them in her own workshop sessions with students in the Halifax schools. "I find that Peter has showed me his skill in bringing attention to people so they all work together," she says. "To me that's the most interesting thing that I've learned from my experiences with him. It just puts the students' heads in a good place. Once they've been able to do things they want to do, there's a respect for the instrument. Then when they hear the symphony, they know what we're doing."

"'Wiegold's process frees symphony musicians from their strict training. It's absolutely amazing to see the results of several days of musicians working with him.'"

On Peter's first trip to Guysborough, he was accompanied by Suzanne Lemieux and five additional musicians: violinist Celeste Jankowski; principal cellist Norman Adams; professional singer and SNS board member Linda Carvery; improvisational music group, Upstream, composer Sandy Moore; and SNS composer-in-residence Alasdair MacLean. They met with a group of band and choir students hand-picked by teacher Ursula Ryan.

"Peter gave us the theme—New Energy—and another one of the students, Bonnie Skinner, came up with the hook line 'In the Heat of the Moment,'" Genevieve Foley recalls. "Then he asked for a tune, and a friend near me hummed something, which made me think of something, and I sang it out. Peter stopped everything and said, 'That's it!'" Then, says Genevieve, "Bonnie came up with the entire lyric, and I sang the melody. Peter said it was extremely complicated but that I was determined to have it the way I wanted it, which was true." She adds, "He created an atmosphere that allowed you to release your natural musical talents and nurtured them in a way you would not find in a typical classroom. It was as though I was an equal to Peter. I wasn't a student; I was a musician. It was relieving. You don't often have the opportunity to unleash that."

Ursula Ryan describes the process that went on behind the scenes after the students had done their work. "Peter Wiegold made a recording of the sounds and melodies that the kids came up with. Then he had them orchestrated for the symphony and sent a copy of the score to me, with vocal parts for my choir. And he rehearsed the score with Symphony Nova Scotia." As Peter vividly describes in his essay, the New Energy concert that Symphony Nova Scotia and the students performed in Guysborough was well received.

Last May, the music created at Guysborough was performed in Montreal at the Orchestras Canada conference. Bonnie Skinner, Genevieve Foley, Ursula Ryan, and Linda Carvery sang two pieces, "In the Heat of the Moment" and "Sparks," accompanied by SNS musicians, with Sandy Moore on accordion and Alasdair MacLean on piano. Peter Wiegold served as artistic director.

"Their program was very moving," says Ninette Babineau, chair-elect of Orchestras Canada. "The reaction of the audience was one of amazement at the level and quality of the work. And they were very moved by the students' comments."

At the end of a performance that Babineau describes as "electrifying," Bonnie Skinner grabbed the microphone and began to tell the audience what the experience had meant to her, to the school, to the entire Guysborough community. "We live out in the middle of nowhere," she said. "And this is the symphony. These professional musicians listened to us and used our ideas. This is our music. These are our words."