

Improvisation: *Carpe Diem*
By Julie Scott

In the introduction to his book, *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink writes: “High concept involves the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new.”¹ According to Pink, “the defining skills of the previous era—the ‘left brain’ capabilities that powered the information age—are necessary but no longer sufficient.”²

Children are born with the desire to improvise, imagine, and create. They uninhibitedly dance to music, sing improvised songs, and invent creative stories as they play with their toys. When they are very small, it is considered cute. Somewhere along the way, however, society teaches them to stifle that urge and just memorize the facts so they can do well on standardized tests.

In the current age, which Pink argues belongs to “creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers,” the creative, imaginative, cooperative approach of Orff Schulwerk has never been more important. We live in a time when people frequently accept information at face value, rather than questioning it. Our mode of communication with other human beings takes place increasingly by sending electronic messages, rather than meeting face-to-face for a conversation. Nowadays, it is often more acceptable to look and think alike than to have a unique idea.

By its very nature, Orff Schulwerk encourages students to try out their ideas and to examine and question many possibilities before settling on an answer. It encourages human contact and cooperative learning. In addition, Orff Schulwerk allows teachers opportunities to guide their students as they arrive at solutions that even the teacher never dreamed were possible.

Working together to solve problems creatively is of great value, but so is individual expression. Sometimes we solve problems collectively, and other times we solve them on our own. If we teach Orff Schulwerk in its purest form, we provide opportunities for both styles of problem solving. Which means that, in addition to facilitating group work, we provide opportunities for a lot of individual improvisation. We talk about it, we learn to do it in levels courses, but in reality, many of us don’t take the time to improvise; and without improvisation, we really aren’t teaching Orff Schulwerk. Carl Orff made the point very clearly:

Unfortunately, the “Rhythmische-melodische Übung” [the first publication of Orff Schulwerk], offering sample material as it did, was widely misunderstood, since it is possible to practice and perform each piece as it stands. To do this would mean a total failure to recognize the purpose of this book. It is not the playing from notation but the free making of music in improvisation that is meant and demanded, for which the printed examples give information and stimulus.³

I know, I know! There is so much to do that sometimes there just isn't enough time to improvise. Consider this. Each time you teach a piece (a model for improvisation) by Orff, Keetman, or someone else, spend the next lesson on a quick review of the piece, followed by a lengthy improvisation session. This might mean that we present fewer models, so that the students have more time to create. But then, isn't it supposed to be their show, rather our show, anyway?

If we are true to its ideals, Orff Schulwerk can be the music education approach that leads the way to facilitating students' creativity and their "high concept" aptitude. Improvise and create more this week than you did last. And, in the words of Daniel Pink, "Good luck in the age of art and heart."⁴ It's our time!

¹ Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (2006): 2.

² Ibid: 1.

³ Carl Orff, *The Schulwerk* (1978): 131.

⁴ Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (2006): 247.