

#### ABSTRACT

Middle school students compose and perform a major orchestral piece with a Teaching Artist, an Orchestra Director, and the Charlotte Civic Orchestra.

## The Charlotte Civic Orchestra's Composer-in-the-Schools Project: Teaching Artistry in the Middle School

### Background of the Project

The Composer-in-the-Schools Project, which represents a collaborative effort between the Charlotte Civic Orchestra, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and Charlotte Teaching Artist David Crowe, has just completed its second year. The project developed as a result of discussions held in 2003 between members of the string section of the Charlotte (NC) Civic Orchestra, CCO Music Director Alexander Kordzaia, and David Crowe. Among the group was violinist Judy Booth, who teaches orchestra at two local middle schools and laments the fact that it is difficult for orchestra teachers to adequately address music composition in the typical orchestra class, for as Ms. Booth explained:

*"Most instrumental music students do not get much experience with music composition because most music teachers do not feel prepared to do it. Although composition, along with improvisation, is one of the state and national music standards, it is probably the most neglected of the standards. Most music teachers will not teach something that they themselves are not experienced at doing."*

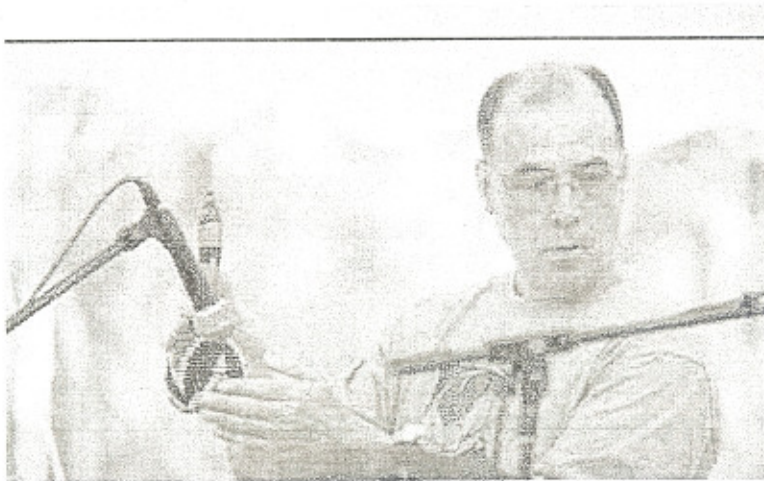
Add this reluctance to teach an unfamiliar subject to the pressures that music teachers often feel to produce strong performing groups, and the result is that composition rarely finds a secure place in most school music programs.



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Teaching Artist,  
Composer and  
Conductor David  
Crowe.

This discussion occurred at a time when the Charlotte Civic Orchestra, one of three orchestras in the city, was struggling to find an identity, one that would set it apart from the other orchestras in terms of mission and goals. In the past, the CCO had not had a well-developed education and outreach program, and several board members considered this area to be a priority. As a *civic* orchestra, the group needed to do more to reach out to all within the Charlotte community, especially to schoolchildren.

Board members felt that the CCO could contribute most effectively through a project that would help bolster the Charlotte-Mecklenburg middle school orchestra programs, which had had serious setbacks in recent years due to cuts in the elementary school strings programs that had provided students with a strong foundation in performance skills prior to their entering middle school. Board members also wanted to reach out to students who were generally underserved by other arts groups in the city, which fit the description of the two middle schools where Judy Booth was a teacher. Albemarle Road Middle School and Northeast Middle School both have highly diverse student populations in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parental education, and home environment. Both schools have a relatively high percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, and many students enrolled in the orchestra program do not have access to private lessons that could help prepare them to audition for the Charlotte Youth Orchestras, sponsored by the fully-professional Charlotte Symphony. The CCO board viewed this as an opportunity to forge a connection with these young players through first-hand involvement with a Teaching Artist and a volunteer community orchestra. It was their belief that CCO musicians, a group of volunteers who demonstrate the value of music in their own lives by contributing their talents each Sunday afternoon to rehearse and perform for Charlotte area audiences, could serve as real-life models and help students become aware that music can play an important role in everyone's life, whether as a vocation or an avocation.

### **David Crowe, Composer and Teaching Artist**

David Crowe, as a composer and Teaching Artist living in the Charlotte area, has had considerable experience in the schools working with children on composition projects. Mr.



CCO Music Director, Alexander Kordzaia.

Crowe is also a conductor, and has guest-conducted the Fort Wayne Symphony, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Charlotte Civic Orchestra, as well as serving as conductor and arranger for the touring orchestra of David Holt, storyteller and musician. He has been active for the past several years as a Teaching Artist for the Charlotte Symphony Education Program and the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Education Institute. Many of his orchestral compositions have been inspired by his work with children, especially through the Foundation for Art and Music in Elementary Education (FAME), in Fort Wayne, IN. Building on the idea behind the FAME project—featuring children's compositions on an orchestra concert—the CCO group decided to do something similar with middle school orchestra students, but to go one step further and showcase the students in a joint performance of their own composition on a Charlotte Civic Orchestra concert. This was an idea that the board felt was educationally sound, as well as unique among orchestras in the Carolinas, and so with the help of an Arts-in-Education grant from ArtsTeach, a Charlotte arts education funding group, the Composer-in-the-Schools Project was launched in the fall of 2004 at two Charlotte schools, Albemarle Road Middle School and Northeast Middle School. The project was expanded to include Alexander Graham Middle School in the fall of 2005. The teacher at AG is Jennifer Frisina, a cellist with the CCO.

### The Charlotte Civic Orchestra

The Charlotte Civic Orchestra is a 65-piece volunteer ensemble presently in its 20th season. The CCO provides six concerts each year, and takes pride in being able to provide orchestral music to audiences in the Charlotte area at low ticket prices. Known for championing new works for orchestra, as well as programming seldom heard symphonic music, the CCO is comprised of nonprofessional musicians who represent many occupations in the Charlotte region, including physicians, teachers, homemakers, university students, attorneys, business people, and various others. Most players in the orchestra have had extensive professional training on their instrument, and so the musical quality of the group is exceptionally high. The music director of the CCO is Alexander Kordzaia, a native of the Republic of Georgia, who is as effective working with middle school students as he is with

adults. Students greatly enjoyed having "that Russian guy" come to their school near the end of the project to rehearse them prior to the final dress rehearsal with the CCO.

### Composer-in-the-Schools Project Goals and Curriculum Standards

To qualify for the grant from ArtsTeach, the project had to be aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for Music, and so the goals are:

- To develop students' understanding of the process of music composition—translating ideas and emotions into sound—by drawing upon their own cultural backgrounds for musical ideas to be manipulated and formed into an original work for orchestra.
- To provide a rare opportunity for middle school orchestra students to experience a rehearsal and public performance of their own composition on a professional level with members of the Charlotte Civic Orchestra.

The project addressed and assessed the following North Carolina Standards for Music Education:

- Goal 2: Students will perform on instruments, alone and with others.
- Goal 3: Students will read and notate rhythmic and melodic patterns.
- Goal 5: Students will improvise, compose, and arrange music.
- Goal 6: Students will evaluate music.

### Students as Composers

The Composer-in-the-Schools project, during its first year, included approximately seventy 7th- and 8th-grade orchestra students, who met with David Crowe a total of 12 times, beginning in early October and concluding in May. This initial year provided an opportunity to work through many of the logistics of the program, including finding a way to put

some seventy young musician-composers and their instruments onstage with the full CCO at the final concert. When the anticipated organizational nightmare failed to materialize, and everything went smoothly, the project planning team felt more comfortable at the beginning of the second year and added the orchestra program at

*Using his own unique blend of humor, kindness, and mule-driving, Alexander quickly developed a rapport and mutual respect with these students, who recognized someone with an immigrant background similar to their own.*

Alexander Graham Middle School. To keep the numbers manageable on the stage, student composers were limited to 8th graders; introductory composition experiences were provided for 7th-grade students, with the intention that they would assume the role of composers when they entered 8th grade.

Initial lessons with David Crowe focused on how composers often get inspiration for their creative work from musical materials that are familiar to them, including familiar

songs or stories. Students were led through exploratory activities on how to organize sounds in different ways—inventing and performing from graphic notation, working with standard notation, and writing melodies or motifs that reflect specific moods or ideas. David then took the students' ideas and demonstrated how these can be varied and developed, and woven into a musical composition. All of this was done through David's computer and projector, so the students could get a snapshot of the composer's mind at work. His use of Finale notation software was a source of endless fascination for the students, especially one young violinist at Alexander Graham, who convinced his parents to buy him a set, which he quickly mastered and used to hone his own composition skills.

At the beginning of the second year, an organizing theme of Oral Histories Told Through Music was selected as a way to showcase the rich cultural diversity of the students and their families. As one of their class assignments, each student wrote a short description of his or her early life, and then conducted interviews of family members to gather additional oral history materials. Class discussions focused on looking at the oral histories from the perspective of emotional qualities suggested such as sadness, nostalgia, happiness, and so forth. Students then composed short musical motifs that in some way captured the emotional quality of a story or vignette. This was followed by small group sessions in which students experimented with ways to combine the motifs they had created into short ensemble pieces. David Crowe would often bring in stories or short descriptive phrases and have students create a musical background for the reading. In one class assignment, students were asked to compose a short melody or motif for their instrument that described something about themselves or their family. One of the bass players, a young African-American, wrote a fast-moving melody with wide leaps all over his instrument. When asked to explain why he wrote what he did, the student responded with perfect musical logic, "When I was young, we moved around a lot."

The family histories the students gathered were so interesting and engaging, it was a unanimous decision that the composition this year should feature a narration to go along with the music. Some examples of what they wrote:

- "I'm mixed with black, white, Spanish, German, Indian, and things I can't spell!"
- "My ancestors were sent to Siberia. That's where my grandpa was born. They had to survive the harsh winters of Siberia, but later they came back to Russia, where my mom was born, and me too."
- "My mom and dad were born in the mountains of Laos, far away from the city. They had to build their own house out of bamboo and whatever they could find."
- "I'm adopted from a tropical island in Asia."
- "Great-great-grandfather came from Florida, migrated to Liberia, West Africa, and raised several generations there."

As they became more knowledgeable and comfortable with the process of creating a new musical composition, students became more open and forthcoming in their suggestions for crafting and refining the work. Gradually, over several months, a new piece emerged and was scored for narrator and string orchestra. Organized into three movements, one from each participating school, the movements focused on different aspects of the oral histories: family origins; what family members did for a living before coming to America; and short vignettes describing what life was like "back then." Students gave their composition the fitting title of *Pangaea*, which, according to the continental drift theory,

was the name of the super-continent that began to break up about 225–200 million years ago, eventually fragmenting into the continents as we know them today. The narration, performed by two students from each of the schools, was set against a musical background composed of melodies and accompaniments contributed by the students themselves and woven together in a rich orchestral texture by David Crowe. The opening narration is worth quoting here:

*"Our families have come to Charlotte from many places around the world. From France, Laos, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, Liberia, Philadelphia, West Virginia, Colombia the country, Columbia the city, India, El Salvador, Kenya, Poland, and Puerto Rico—just to name a few. We are Mexican, Dutch, Cherokee, Dominican, Jamaican, Hmong, Portuguese, Navajo, Jewish, Ukrainian, Irish, Vietnamese. We are African-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, Asian-American. We—Are—American!"*

Final preparations for the concert took place during the months of April and May, with rehearsals at the schools with Alexander Kordzaia and special coaching sessions with CCO string players, who worked with the students in small groups or individually. Members of the Charlotte Symphony string section were also brought on board to help. Rehearsals with Alexander Kordzaia introduced the students to a whole new level of performance standards. A conductor who received his musical education in the Soviet Union, Maestro Kordzaia expected—and got—the very highest quality of playing the students could produce, and then some. Using his own unique blend of humor, kindness, and mule-driving, Alexander quickly developed a rapport and mutual respect with these students, who recognized someone with an immigrant background similar to their own. Thanks to the high standards he set for them, when these young 8th-grade string players joined with members of the CCO for the first time at the dress rehearsal, they held their own with confidence and pride.

The performance of *Pangaea* took place on April 30, 2006, when the students joined forces with the Charlotte Civic Orchestra onstage for the final concert of the season. Each school received 100 family tickets to the concert, and many proud parents, family members, and neighbors were there to celebrate the success of these young performers and composers. The standing ovation at the end of the piece was well earned, and an experience these middle-schoolers will carry with them throughout their lives.

## **Student Assessment and Evaluation of the Project**

Although it is difficult to capture the full impact of this project through the standard approaches to assessment and evaluation, the grant guidelines required that we collect data to demonstrate student achievement of the goals and objectives of the project. Student assessment was ongoing throughout the school year, and was managed by Elda Franklin, Project Director; with input on student learning from Judy Booth, Jennifer Frisina, and David Crowe and, of course, from the students themselves. The primary assessment tool was the following master rubric, used to assess each student's achievement of the NC standard course of study music goals. The rubric was administered by Ms. Booth, Ms Frisina, and Mr. Crowe at the conclusion of the project. The results shown below reflect the second-year evaluation:

## Charlotte Civic Orchestra Composer-in-the-Schools Project

Student Final Assessment Rubric for the Project

N = 70

<i>Project Goal</i>	<i>Exemplary 4 points</i>	<i>Competent 3 points</i>	<i>Progressing 2 points</i>	<i>Needs Work 1 point</i>	<i>Average Score</i>	
Instrumental Performance Skills	Student has developed consistently accurate pitch and rhythm, with characteristic tone quality. Can perform a variety of different bowings with relative ease.	Playing has become generally accurate in pitch and rhythm, with generally characteristic tone quality. Can perform some bowings with relative ease.	Playing has improved and is sometimes accurate in pitch and rhythm. Tone quality is developing; Can perform some bowings with teacher prompts.	Playing is still inconsistent with regard to pitch and rhythmic accuracy. Tone quality is poor and how is not quite under control.		
Whole Group Average	30%	35%	24%	11%	2.78	
Reading and notating music	Student has become comfortable with reading and notating music, using a variety of rhythm patterns in 4/4 and 3/4 time, in at least 3 major keys.	Student has become somewhat comfortable with reading and notating music, some rhythm patterns in either 4/4 or 3/4 time, in at least 2 major keys	Student has improved and is occasionally able to read and notate music, using a limited number of rhythm and tonal patterns.	Student still has difficulty reading and notating music.		
Whole Group Average	32%	37%	19%	11%	2.89	
Composing music	Able to construct melodic and rhythmic patterns that contain a variety of pitches and rhythms, and perform them on his/her instrument.	Can construct some melodic and rhythmic patterns with limited pitches and rhythms, and perform them on instrument.	Can construct either simple melodic or simple rhythm patterns, and can perform some of them on his/her instrument.	Has difficulty constructing either tonal or rhythmic patterns, but can play the patterns of others.		
Whole Group Average	29%	41%	25%	5%	2.9	
Evaluating music	Consistently functions independently in the ensemble to self-correct intonation and balance problems.	Sometimes functions independently in the ensemble to self-correct intonation and balance problems.	Can self-correct intonation and balance problems when prompted by the teacher.	Has difficulty determining nature of intonation and balance problems without specific assistance.		
Whole Group Average	26%	36%	28%	9%	2.81	

Student self-assessment was also done at the end of the project, using student responses/reflections to given prompts. The results were as follows:

**1. As I review everything I have done in the composition project up to now, I find that I have learned (name at least three things)**

- How to compose music – 92%
- Learning to play my instrument better – 100%
- Learning to work as a group – 38%
- Learning about family – 50%

**2. The best thing we did in the composition lessons was:**

- Learn how to put the composition together – 58%
- Learn a new piece that we created ourselves – 15%
- Learn more about how to play my instrument – 12%
- Playing in the concert – 19%

**3. I learned the most from doing:**

- Small group lessons on playing or music reading – 77%
- Working on the narration and the composition – 23%

**4. I am most proud of (some students gave more than one response):**

- The composition we wrote – 42%
- Playing in the concert – 35%
- Improving my playing – 50%

**5. If other students were to begin work on a composition project, I would tell them:**

- Do it! It's fun and rewarding – 54%
- Practice, practice, and go to the concert – 19%
- Write music from your heart, and be original – 8%
- Pay attention, try your best, and don't talk during class – 19%

## Summary and Conclusion

The Composer-in-the-Schools Project successfully launched the Charlotte Civic Orchestra's Education and Outreach Program in a meaningful way by providing a unique opportunity for many young middle school orchestra students. Students who participated in the project, their parents, school administrators, and Charlotte Civic Orchestra members are enthusiastic and supportive of the Composer-in-the-Schools Project. Nearly all students in the three school orchestras showed gains in meeting the North Carolina Standard Course of Study Goals for Music, as assessed by their teachers, Ms. Booth and Ms. Frisina, by Mr. Crowe, and by themselves. Their excellent preparation for the final performance and pride in themselves were evident to all who saw them at the concert, and comments from the student surveys indicate that this was a very special experience for all of them. Perhaps no one expressed it better than Migela Evans, a Northeast 8th-grade violinist, who sent this poem to Alexander Kordzaia:

**Because of You**

My love for music has grown  
Since the first day I met you.  
You showed me how I could  
Have fun in doing what I do.  
You directed such a beautiful piece for us  
That I thought that I should just  
Take the time to say THANK YOU!

Migela Evans  
(used with permission)

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