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HOW COMPOSERS COMPOSE: IN SEARCH OF THE QUESTIONS

Bernard W. Andrews
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

b.w.andrews@uottawa.ca

INTRODUCTION

The Missing Link

Music educators have been able to develop a variety of educational activities to stimulate creativity in their classrooms, but as John Kratus notes "what has largely been lacking is a scheme for bringing structure and sequence to the learning that occurs" (1990, p. 33). Most instruction is focused on acquiring the technical skills of performing and not on improvising or composing. Unfortunately, the music profession does not fully understand the nature of musical creativity, and consequently it is not a vibrant component of music education. Lyle Davidson and Larry Scripp (1988) summarize the essence of the problem when they state:

> Performance ability alone is taken as the index of musical ability. Unlike language, mastery of the written form of music is neither viewed as necessary for musical ability, nor as an index of musical understanding. However, in music, as in language, the ability to represent relationships among elements in various ways is a more powerful measure of understanding than relying on performance or speech alone. (p. 195)

Music teachers rarely nurture an environment where students compose their own music, primarily because the composing is so unfamiliar to them. "There remains an illusiveness about composing that causes many persons, and especially teachers, to avoid stepping into what they deem as uncharted waters" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 177). Teachers seldom possess the skills necessary to promote music composition in their classrooms. Consequently, "many teachers do little or no creative work with their students once they begin teaching" (Cohen, 2002, p. 220). For this reason, it is essential that the research community examine more fully the nature of musical

creativity, and more specifically, the generative processes of musical composition. As Benjamin Bolden (2004), a composer and music researcher, notes:

> The responsibility of music education researchers is clear: we need to learn more about the experience of composing, in order to inform and assist teachers in designing music programs that successfully foster student composition. (p. 20)

To develop an in-depth understanding of musical creativity, an investigation of music composition, entitled the Genesis Project, was initiated by this writer. This multi-phase study is based on the belief that an understanding of musical creativity for North American education is best achieved by collaborating with those individuals currently composing new music. Moreover, it is based on the assumption that understanding musical creativity requires examining a complex and multi-faceted artistic phenomenon involving four dimensions; that is, understanding the *person*, the compositional *process*, the *pre-requisite* training, emotions and context, and the musical *piece* itself (Andrews, 2004a). Roger Reynolds (2002) explains:

> A musical work is achieved gradually over time in a manner that doubtless varies for each composer: part discovery, part construction, even admittedly, part contrivance and ... also part sheer undirected bumbling ... There is a necessary (though by no means uniform) *staging* involved in the process of completing a musical composition. We can thus inquire into the process recognizing it as a multileveled search for ultimate integration rather than the unrolling of a scroll upon which has been inscribed an already, mystical completed continuity that one needs only to receive. (p. 4)

The Genesis Project is funded by the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa and the Canadian Music Centre.[i] To date, the project involves six phases:

- Phase 1: How Composers Compose: In Search of the Questions (This inquiry, reported herein, set out to identify appropriate questions to ask composers about music composition as a foundational basis for understanding musical creativity and assisting teachers to foster music composition in their classrooms.);
- Phase 2: New Music for Young Musicians (This study involves an examination of the process of composing new music for students in elementary and secondary settings, and in private studios – refer to Andrews, 2004b, c);
- Phase 3: Reflections on a Composing Life (This phase involves in-depth interviews with Canada's most senior men and women composers);
- Phase 4: Composing for a living: Living for composing (This research involves a comprehensive examination of active professional composers' experiences employing the Knowledge Accessing Mode Inventory (KAMI) via the internet

(person), a questionnaire on training, upbringing and support system (pre-requisites), a reflective journal undertaken during the writing of new music (process), and a self-analysis of the composition by each composer-participant (piece);

- Phase 5: Dream Catchers (This inquiry will focus on the oral process of musical composition through participant-observation of Canada's First Nations' rituals);

- Phase 6: Third encounters of the Close Kind (This research will involve an investigation of music composition in the electronic media involving KAMI (person), peer reports (process), questionnaire (pre-requisites), and waveform analysis (piece).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to devise a set of questions to ask composers about music composition as a foundational basis for understanding musical creativity and assisting teachers to foster music composition in their classrooms. These questions will be used in Phase 3 of the Genesis Project in investigating the life reflections of Canada's senior composers, as well as in a comprehensive examination of active professional composers' experiences within Phase 4 of the project.

RELATED LITERATURE

Compositional Process

Studies by music theorists and researchers of the compositional process predominantly focus on the analysis of recordings, scores and sketch books (i.e., the musical *piece*). Complex schemas, including linguistic and computational models, have been developed to explain the nature of a musical work (cited in Lerdahl, 1988 and Krumhasl, 1991). Also, there has been speculation on the processes of well-known creative individuals (e.g., Gardner, 1993). Although composers themselves have described the considerable challenge of creating new music, few studies examine composition in collaboration with the creators themselves. George Rochberg (1988) describes the challenge when he states:

> In order to compose, to create aural fiction, sounds and their movement must be internalized. They must happen inside the composer's mind and take fire from the imagination ...The most difficult problem for the composer is to create a continuous, unfolding succession of musical events which is varied yet unified, constantly changing its character and quality, yet coherent. (p. 186)

Early research with composers suggests that there are essentially working (craft approach) and inspirational types (Bahle, 1934). Wallas (1926) identified the four basic stages of creativity – preparation, incubation, illumination and verification, which Graf (1947) applied to composing music—productive mood (preparation),

musical conception (incubation), sketching (illumination), and composition (verification). These stages have also been referred to by a variety of twentieth-century composers, such as Igor Stravinsky (1947), Roger Sessions (1970), Pierre Boulez (1975), Morton Feldman (1984) and Elliot Carter (1946/1994). Bennett (1976) interviewed eight composers and elaborated on Graf's categories by shifting the focus from feelings (productive mood) and thoughts (musical conception) as categories to the writing process itself (i.e., sketches and drafts). He suggested that composing involves a process of discovering a *germinal idea* (preparation), a *brief sketch* (incubation), elaboration and refinement of a *first draft* (illumination), and revisions to a *final copy* (verification). Sloboda (1988) identified both conscious and unconscious operations throughout the inspiration and execution of writing new music. Fulmer (1995), cited in Bolden (2004), studied twelve composers' approaches and concluded, in contrast to previous researchers, that composers utilize a variety of strategies, some more than others, instead of following set stages. Hung (1998) examined the creative process of sixteen composers and also concluded that composers do not follow a standard procedure and oscillate between stages. Perhaps, Pierre Boulez said it best when he commented that composing is like planting a seed and "suddenly it begins to proliferate like a weed. Then you have to thin it out ... to reduce, to thin out the possibilities ... to create an evolution in time and not a superposition that would have been too compact." (1975, p. 15) Feelings of tranquility and security and a relaxed atmosphere appear to foster compositional activity; blocks of two or three hours and sometimes longer are often preferred; and compositions are often written in chunks of fifty, one hundred or three hundred bars or more (Bennett, 1976). As Morton Feldman (1984) explains:

> I work everyday more in terms of feeling that I have done a day's work. Now, it could be two hours, it could be sixteen hours, it could be two days going into each other without sleep ... I'm not counting how much work I do, I just psychologically feel that I have to do a day's work. (p. 146)

Compositional Training

In university music departments/schools/faculties and conservatories of music, there are several textbooks that have been used to teach composition during the past several decades. In these texts, the authors analyze the scores of well-known composers and synthesize their works to develop highly technical rules for writing music. This approach occurs in both music of the classical tradition (e.g., Kennan, 1959; Markand, 1990; Ottman, 1992; Sulzer & Schachter, 1989; Szonyi, 1974; Warburton, 1982), and music in popular genres (e.g., Baker, 1974; Cacavas, 1975; Coker, 1980; Dobbins, 1986; Mancini, 1973; Sorenson & Pearson, 1998). These writers did not develop rules by contacting composers and determining those factors that facilitate the writing of new music, such as motivation, emotions or compositional strategies. Instead, these rules reflect the highly structured socialization that musicians receive within institutional settings (Roberts, 1991). Such training appears to effectively increase one's understanding of twentieth century innovations, such as twelve-tone music (Frances, 1992), and to enable one to more accurately judge emotional states (Nilsonne & Sunberg, 1985). However, this approach to composition

can result in highly stilted and mechanical writing (Cage, 1949; Stravinsky, 1947).

Many gifted composers, such as Hector Berlioz, Alexander Borodin, Emanuel Chabrier, Edward Elgar and Hector Villa-Lobos, achieved a high level of artistic success without undergoing traditional compositional training; others had some limited exposure, such as Pierre Boulez, George Gershwin, Francis Poulenc and Modest Mussorgsky; and still others left the conservatory system disenchanted, such as Claude Débussy and Erik Satie, or were expelled, notably Hugo Wolf (Gammond, 1980). Indeed, the most respected traditionalists of the twentieth century, Edward Elgar and William Walton, and the greatest innovators, Igor Stravinsky (atonality) and Arnold Schoenberg (twelve-tone), were largely self-taught. Compositional training offers no guarantee that it will engender musical creativity. As Igor Stravinsky (1947) wryly noted:

> Harmony as it is taught in the schools today dictates rules that were not fixed until long after publication of the works upon which they were based, rules which were unknown to the composers of these works. In this manner, our harmonic treatises take as their point of departure Mozart and Haydn, neither of whom ever heard of harmonic treatises. (p. 38)

And John Cage (1949) commented:

> Schools teach the making of structures by means of classical harmony. Outside school, however, (e.g., Satie and Webern), a different and correct structural means reappears: one based on length of time. (p. 39)

National Identity

Interestingly, many of the *enfants terribles* of the composing world created national identities through their compositional styles. For example, Claude Debussy's use of flexible rhythm, vague tonality and fluid orchestral colors created the French Impressionistic School (Les Six); and Modest Mussorsky's use of bare harmonies, elliptical modulations and unorthodox orchestration gave rise to a Russian identity (The Russian Five) (Gammond, 1980). North American composers tend to study in Europe or in the Western European tradition—integrating these traditions into their music. In the United States, this has given rise to the evolutionary "American School" of composition characterized by the music of Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, in contrast to the revolutionary approaches developed by the Russian, Igor Stravinsky (atonality), and the German, Arnold Schoenberg (twelve-tone).

In Canada, the diversity of its composers' cultural backgrounds has mitigated against a distinctive national musical style. Indeed, John Beckwith, well-known composer, scholar, teacher and former dean of music at the University of Toronto asks: "What is it like, that music? Are there any generalizations one can make about it that might connect with the Canadian composer's search for a character?" (Beckwith, 1997, p. 55). Most well-known Canadian composers have tended to exhibit diverse

cultural influences. For example, one can detect the influence of Arnold Schoenberg in Istvan Anvalt's compositions, Paul Hindemith and Bela Bartok in Violet Archer's works, the sounds of Charles Ives, Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson in John Beckwith's compositions, the principles of Claude Débussy and Gabriel Fauré in the music of Claude Champagne, the influence of Ralph Vaughan Williams on Jean Coultard, and of Igor Stravinsky on Jean-Paul Courture, traits of Olivier Messiaen in the music of Talivaldis Kenins, and Anton Dvorak's influence in Oskar Morawetz's works (MacMillan & Beckwith, 1975).

Impact of Experiencee

Longevity is also a key factor in how composers develop, codify their practices, and view their place in musical history. Time provides the catalyst for acceptance, and those who live long enough benefit from the acceptance of experts who must recognize and validate musical innovations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Surprisingly, many composers come full circle and return to their roots. Composers, such as Olivier Messiaen, Paul Hindemith and Serge Prokofiev, ended their days as respectable members of the establishment as teachers, theorists and conductors, respectively. Moreover, many reverted to a conservatism reminiscent of the traditional conservatory approach, especially in their writings; for example, Paul Hindemith's harmonic treatise exemplified in the preludes and fugues of *Ludus Tonalis*. Another example is Arnold Schoenberg who introduced the twelve-tone method of composition. Completing his career as a well-known pedagogue at the University of California at Los Angeles, he is a good example of a composer-teacher who imposed a rigid discipline on his students, very much in the traditional style. As he commented:

> Whatever happens in a piece of music is nothing but the endless reshaping of a basic shape. Or, in other words, there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it, and can be traced back to it (quoted in Rosen, 1975, p. 1336).

Gender Equity

In the field of composition, men are published overwhelmingly more than their female peers. Indeed, in terms of visibility within the arts, there appears to be a lack of value placed on women's works of art, which has contributed to the denigration of their contributions. For example, the painting entitled Charlotte du Val d'Ognes was long thought to be a masterpiece by Jacques Louis David. The painting declined substantially in monetary value and critical esteem when it was discovered that it was the work of Marie Charpentier (Wolff, 1983). As a result of this devaluing process, there is a continuing lack of awareness of women's creative contributions to the visual and performing arts (Gates, 1994), and a need to actively promote women's musical works within the concert hall and classroom (Lindeman, 1992).

Women have a long and illustrious, although largely ignored history of musical composition (Jezic & Binder, 1987). Many of their works, unfortunately, are lost or destroyed, and those that are available need to be catalogued and annotated (Allen &

Keenan-Takagi, 1992; Palmquist & Payne, 1992). Feminist scholarship in the 1970's and 1980's led to a resurgence of interest and research in women's creative contributions. Researchers uncovered substantive discord between traditional musicological thinking, that is, the “great man—great works” approach, and the perspectives of women in music (Dawe, 2001; Lamb, 1994). Women composers challenge the emphasis on the cognitive in the Western tradition, acknowledge the physical response to music, link music with sexuality or pleasure more readily, and admit that physical experiences are significant to music's meaning (Peddle, 1991). They challenge gender differences not only within the musical vocabulary, but also in relation to the musical canon; that is, notions of musical genius, Western European musical superiority, and musical stereotypes related to gender (Edwards, 1997). Unfortunately, relatively few women composers have participated in research studies or had their works studied.

SEARCHING FOR THE QUESTIONS

Methodology

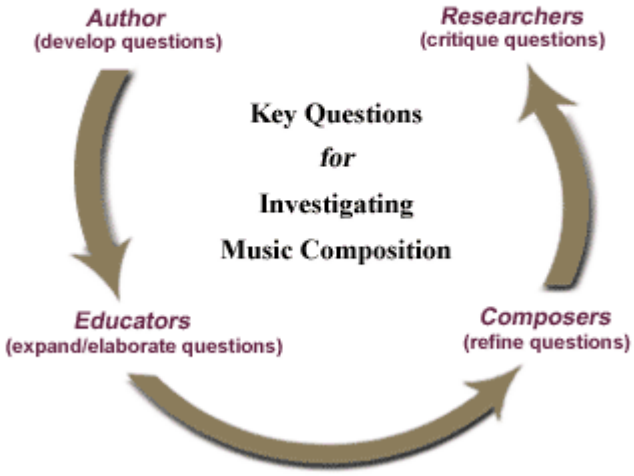
The first phase of the Genesis Project, outlined in this paper, focused on establishing the appropriate questions to ask professional composers for acquiring an in-depth understanding of musical creativity. Integrated Inquiry, a multiple measures method in the tradition of mixed methodologies (Cresswell, 2002), was employed (Andrews, 1993, 2004d). This approach involves obtaining different perspectives and blending data to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. The process is circular, as multiple data are used to develop, verify and refine the findings. The data sources may be nested within the same instrument (Andrews, 2002a), interdependent instruments within the same study (Andrews, 2001, 2002b, c), or a series of inter-related studies examining an issue over time (Andrews, 1999). The literature indicates the need for such an integrated approach (Johnson, 1991; Beutler, 1994; Posnac & Carey, 1997) as the combining of data in a cohesive manner can substantiate analyses and epistemological stances (Rossman & Wilson, 1985; Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Research Process

In this inquiry, questions on the four dimensions of music composition (i.e., person, process, pre-requisites and piece) were generated from the research literature, elaborated on by composers, refined by educators, and critiqued by researchers from the international community (Figure 1). Using an analysis of the literature and Bennett's (1976) seminal research as a starting point, a tentative set of questions was developed by this writer. This set was expanded and elaborated on by six composers and then refined by six educators. All of them were members of the Ontario Regional Council of the Canadian Music Centre, and all had agreed to participate in the study.[ii] The composers were professionals in mid or late career stages (from thirty-two to eighty-seven years of age), and the educators (with ten to thirty-five years of classroom experience) represented studio, elementary, secondary and post-secondary institutions. After input on the questions was provided by these

individuals on Council, the questions were then sent out to six researchers from Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, all of whom had published on musical creativity and composing music. These researchers critiqued the questions and refined them further.

Figure 1
Integrated Inquiry Research Process



Refining the Questions

The six composers examined the key questions, and elaborated and expanded them. They also expressed concern about the emphasis on process rather than *product*, which could potentially intrude on the creative act itself. Further, they raised the issue of *experience* as an important factor in understanding the compositional process. In contrast, the six educators welcomed a *process* emphasis as this information would likely provide the most potential for identifying concrete steps to composing music within the school curriculum. They refined the questions to raise the issue of *gender* as a contributing factor in composing music. For their part, the six researchers critiqued the questions and recommended organizing the questions around the four dimensions of creativity research; that is, *person* (characteristics, pre-dispositions, motivation), *process* (strategies, tactics, techniques), *environment* (place, conditions, circumstances) and *product* (design, structure, format) (Amabile & Tighe, 1993). This writer, in discussions with the composers, found the notion of environment and product in the creativity research too broad and subsequently re-conceptualized them more specifically for composing music; that is, *person, process, pre-requisites* (training, emotions and context) and musical *piece* (features, style and impact) in what may be described as P^4 (refer to Figure 2) (Andrews, 2004a). As a consequence of these deliberations, the questions were organized from a multi-faceted perspective without an undue focus on either process or product. This shift forged a consensus among the participants on a set of questions appropriate for investigating musical composition and for developing an in-depth understanding of how composers compose new music (refer to Table I).

Figure 2

Dimensions of Music Composition

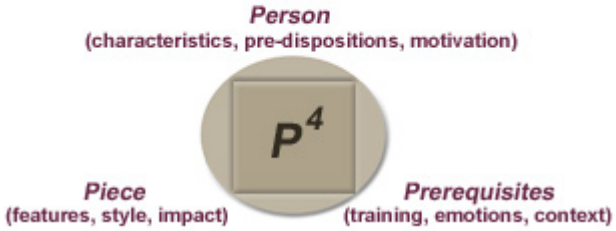


Table I

Questions on Music Composition

Person

1. Why do composers compose?
2. What motivates composers to write new music; for example, is it musical ideas (cognition), feelings (emotion), and/or experiences (environment)?
3. What early experiences facilitate a composer's musical creativity?
4. At what age do composers generally complete their first composition?
5. What progression can be identified in a composer's career?
6. What is the impact of age, gender and cultural background on the formative development and career progression of composers?

Process

7. Is composing new music predominately an experiential (environmental), logical-deductive (rational), or spontaneous (emotional) activity?
8. Through what stages do composers engage—from conception to completion of a new work?
9. Does composing involve a linear-sequential process from one stage to the next, or a spiral process oscillating between stages?
10. How do composers make musical decisions when developing a melody, modulating and orchestrating?
11. Are there differences in the compositional process based on age, gender and cultural background?

Pre-requisites

12. What emotional states are conducive to composing new music?
13. Are some emotional states more conducive to different stages of the composing process?
14. What environmental conditions are conducive to composing new music?
15. Are some environmental conditions more conducive to different stages of composing?

16. How does compositional training impact on different stages of the composing process?
17. Are there differences in the prerequisite conditions for composing based on age, gender and cultural background?

Product

18. How do composers describe the stylistic features of their work?
19. How do composers view the impact of their work on contemporary music?
20. How is the musical product influenced by age, gender and cultural background?

Origins of the Questions

Questions 7, 8, 9 and 10 represent key issues raised in the literature on musical creativity (Sarnoff & Cole, 1983; Davidson & Welch, 1988; Sloboda, 1988; Kratus, 1989; Krumhansl, 1991). Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 18 represent recommendations for further research from the literature on the emotional and environmental conditions of composing (Richardson, 1983; Kratus, 1990; Moore, 1990; Webster, 1990; Gardner, 1993; Wilson & Wales, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Andrews, 1998), including replication of some questions in Bennett's study (1976) requiring more in-depth study (i.e., questions 7, 12 and 14). Questions 1 and 19 represent final ones asked by Bennett (1976) but not analyzed. These two questions focus on the reasons for composing and perceptions of one's artistic contributions.

In the earlier studies on musical creativity, the predominant focus in research was on identifying the stages of composing and resolving the artist/craft dichotomy among composers (Bahle, 1934; Graf, 1947). Subsequently, additional themes emerged from studies in musical creativity; that is, the impact of compositional training and the influence of national identities on the composing process (Bennet, 1976; MacMillan & Beckwith, 1975). More recently, *experience* and *gender* have become major concerns as the composers and educators indicated during their participation in the study. These latter themes are embedded into Questions 6, 11, 17 and 20.

CODA

Significance of Questions

Although there are certainly coherent voices for the arts within the research sector (e.g., Eisner, 1991; Diamond & Mullen, 1999), the resolve for pursuing research among artists is far less than it is among scientists in the hard sciences. While one may question that such resolve is essential, there are advantages. Scientists work together, and they are willing to constantly evaluate and refine their approaches, promote their products, and convince governments, foundations and educational communities to support them in tangible ways (e.g., facilities, operational

and research funds). Moreover, they have ensured that “scientific thinking” is a core component of the school curriculum at elementary, secondary and postsecondary levels. For example, young people are expected to engage in mathematical and scientific learning over several years throughout their education. The same cannot be said for arts learning. In contrast to scientists, the artistic community is reluctant to delve into its own creativity, hesitant to collaborate, and reluctant to engage in policy-making and evaluation (Pankretz, 1989). This is most unfortunate as this situation contributes to the marginalization of artists in so many ways—in policy formulation, grant allocation, and income (Barresi & Olson, 1992). Consequently, it is important that research in music composition be systematically pursued, findings articulated and refined, and policies developed that will encourage musical creativity at all levels of the educational system.

In the arts, gender bias is intrinsically connected to our notions of Western European culture and our adherence to that tradition. Young women are seldom encouraged to assume leadership roles within the music profession, such as conductor or composer (Ericson, 1996; Hinley, 1984). Music texts routinely provide illustrations of successful male musicians but few examples of women (Kozac, 1992, 1994). In schools, most girls play woodwind and string instruments, and boys play the louder and more powerful brass and percussion instruments (Delzell & Leppla, 1992; Sinsel, Dixon & Blades-Zeller, 1997; Zervoudakes & Tanur, 1994). Young girls and young boys, however, create differently (Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1989). For example, there is evidence that young girls require more time when engaging in artistic activities and are more detail-oriented and reflective than young boys (Andrews, 1998). Consequently, identifying gender differences in composing music is important if we are to develop a more complete understanding of how composers compose. Moreover such understanding will assist educators and will provide an environment that could substantially increase women’s involvement in musical composition during the formative stages of their development.

Benefits

What are the benefits to understanding musical creativity? Why is it important to understand *how composers compose?* Understanding creativity will “enrich the culture and ... improve the quality of all our lives ... we may also learn from this knowledge how to make our own lives directly more interesting and productive." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 10) Research on the compositional process offers the potential for finding the missing link in music education; that is, the writing of music by students within the school curriculum. Employing the knowledge of “how composers compose” as the basis for creativity in the curriculum could have substantial benefits for a variety of stakeholders in music and the arts, although it must be recognized that further inquiry will be required to substantiate such benefits.

i. Composers often experience barriers, such as mental fatigue or anxiety, when composing new music (Feldman, 1984; Rochberg, 1988). An understanding of their own cognitive processes and emotional states, and of those contextual factors that facilitate the creative process could assist composers overcome

these obstacles (Reynolds, 2002).

ii. An in-depth understanding of music composition could assist music teachers in broadening current music education practice by including strategies that foster music writing in their classrooms to supplement the predominantly performance-based programs (Bolden, 2004; Webster, 1990).

iii. Students will have the opportunity to express themselves in a new way, that is, by writing their own music in a systematic way. Such involvement may deepen their understanding of musical relationships and how one articulates feelings through sounds beyond the rudimentary improvisational and creative activities currently available (Davidson & Scripp, 1990).

iv. Should the findings that emerge from posing the questions prove generalizable, society will benefit as the public will engage in a process within the educational system that in the long term could increase the overall creativity of the citizenry, heighten sensitivities to emotional development, and encourage the articulation of feelings in a coherent form (Pitman, 1998).

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[i] The University of Ottawa is Canada's national bilingual university (French/English). The Canadian Music Centre (CMC) is a not-for-profit national organization committed to the promotion and preservation of Canadian Music. The CMC consists of five regions: Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies and British Columbia, and there are 622 associate composers affiliated with the Centre (505 living and 117 deceased). There are 16,075 scores catalogued in CMC libraries, of these 3,775 are published. Details provided in an e-mail correspondance with Jason Van Eyk, Ontario Regoinal Director, August 25, 2004.

[ii] Each region of the Canadian Music Centre has a regional director and a Council comprised of representatives from various sectors of the music field (e.g., educators, performers, media personnel, etc.).

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