



Music Imagination Retreat

Curtis Institute of Music

January 9, 2017

***Participants***

**Paul Bryan**, Dean of Faculty and Students at the Curtis Institute; conductor; trombonist

**Dan Lerner**, Faculty at New York University

**Gloria dePasquale**, Cellist in the Philadelphia Orchestra

**Yumi Kendall**, Cellist in the Philadelphia Orchestra

**Georgia Shreve**, Composer and writer

**Gene Scheer**, Opera librettist

**Ashley Robillard**, Opera Student at Curtis Institute

**Elizabeth Hyde**, Research Specialist for the Imagination Institute

**Scott Barry Kaufman**, Scientific Director of the Imagination Institute

**Martin Seligman**, Executive Director of the Imagination Institute, Director of the Positive Psychology Center, and Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania

*Report prepared by Georgia Shreve*

*One of God's greatest gifts is the ability to communicate in a musical phrase.*

**Paul Bryan, citing Isaac Stern**

*Genius has to be founded on major talent but it adds a freshness and wildness of imagination, a raging ambition, an unusual gift for learning and growing, a depth and breadth of thought and spirit, an ability to make use of not only your strengths but also your weaknesses, an ability to astonish not only your audience but yourself.*

**Jan Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph***

### ***Mission***

At the outset, the Scientific Director of the Imagination Institute, Scott Barry Kaufman, outlined the mission of this retreat: to determine how creativity in music operates and how it differs from that in other fields, as well as possible similarities.

### ***Backgrounds of Participants***

To understand how creativity develops and functions in music, it is helpful to understand the backgrounds of the imaginative members of the panel and how music emerged and flourished in their lives and in the various pursuits they have chosen.

All of the participants received early exposure to music in school, in church or at home, if not from all of these sources, which nurtured their passion for music. Almost all of them grew up in an atmosphere in which music was honored (performed, listened to, practiced etc.) and that no doubt helped validate their participation in music while also nurturing it. Some had musicians, amateur or professional, in the family who nourished their musical development and served as role models, demonstrating the joys of music as well as the commitment to rigorous practice. All of them have reached high levels in the

music field, studying and teaching at distinguished schools as well as performing (or having their work performed) in prestigious venues.

All of them were drawn to music at a young age and many were already active in music at an early stage—two of them performing as children in musicals they wrote. A number of them were compelled to pursue it by an inspiring piece of music, musician, performance, or teacher. All of them are creatively active in more than one aspect of music—performing, conducting, teaching, writing, or composing in different genres. Many of them have chosen teaching along with performance and some have taken on administrative duties as well. Some of the participants had important mentors who challenged them to rise to high levels as well as providing the support, knowledge and skills to do so.

Many of the musicians are also actively working to share their gifts and knowledge of music with others, through teaching advanced music students or alternatively, working with underprivileged students to provide access to musical resources (or, in fact, on both of these paths). They all share a kind of grit—passion plus persistence along with courage, and intense commitment, in pursuing a career that can have its up and downs, and even downsides, in terms of remuneration, recognition, and competition for opportunities. Progress in music requires not just self-discipline but extreme patience and dedication, which all of them have demonstrated in abundance (along with a tolerance for solitude to withstand the endless hours of practicing along), as well as serving as exemplars for their students. It also requires expert and dedicated teachers to which all of them gained access through showing extreme prowess and effort.

All of this underlines the importance of early experience in music including mastering a kind of “grit” to get through the life of a musician and begins to answer the key question: *What does it take to become a creative musician?*

### *What is the nature of music?*

According to Gene Scheer it is the “language of feeling,” or, as Gloria dePasquale put it, “the thread of humanity that we all share.” Kaufman suggested that music “is actually a drive to connect with something deeper.”

### *What is imagination?*

Georgia Shreve ventured the definition, “Imagination is forming an image or an idea in your mind, or an image of an idea and seeking powerful new modes to express it.”

### *What then is imagination in music?*

Imagination in music is not one unitary thing but varies across the many facets of the field. It is different for the violinist than for the librettist. It varies from a conductor shaping the sound from a score to a composer creating the score, from a pianist performing a piece of music with expression to one improvising a cadenza. But underpinning it all is practice, discipline and the development of mastery—whether it means mastering the instrument, the orchestration for the composer, or, in the case of the librettist, the “language of opera”.

The panel was in agreement that music has both a technical side and an artistry side and the musician has to find a point at which technical mastery and artistic mastery are in

balance, when the technique is to simply serve the message, to serve something greater than itself. Paul Bryan said:

Being creative means having your own style...It's amazing to see people break out of the shell or the skeleton of constantly thinking technically and starting to be able to think, we say, musically, but I think it can be said creatively or imaginatively...[to learn the artistry part] you need the palate, you need vocabulary.

### ***Why music?***

Most of the panelists felt deeply compelled toward music early on. Many were drawn into it by a particular piece of music or musician or teacher and felt they absolutely had to pursue it as a career, even as a “calling.” Many of them had a sudden moment of epiphany in which they realized music was their chosen passion. One panelist had this awakening while listening to Handel’s oratorio, *Messiah*, in grade school and later went on to compose several oratorios. Bryan said it was playing the music of Gabrieli in the perfect space. Kaufman noted that it’s a combination of falling in love with it and also envisioning yourself doing it.

### ***What motivates musicians?***

None of the panelists appear to be driven mostly by extrinsic motives such as the promise of fame or fortune. In fact, they apparently accepted early the fact that in music these things might be quite modest. Rather, their motivation is intrinsic such as the pleasure of performing or the joy of music itself. This is in keeping with the fact that while they may operate at times in somewhat driven modes, it is fueled by what psychology researcher Bob Vallerand has termed “harmonious” passion (vs. obsessive passion) derived from the

internal rewards such as the satisfaction of mastery, entertaining, teaching and helping others. Daniel Lerner noted “what you are passionate about can make a huge difference in what you create, how you create it, and what the outcome is for everyone involved.”

***What is the nature of the creative process in music? How can you foster it?***

As Scheer put it: “There's an unexpected surprise moment where there's some sort of magnetic resonance that triggers and an idea emerges.” Kaufman asked Shreve about the creative process in composing:

It's a combination of spontaneous creativity and a lot of trial and error. You go through iterations and end up rejecting 90 percent. Then knowing the 10 percent to keep is the key...in a way, it's easier when you're setting words, because the words are speaking to you and they're telling you, "This is how I sound. This is what I want to be." They're creating this image in your mind, and I think when you're not using words, it gets very abstract. Then you're on your own to wander around and find where the music has to go.

Flow, or “optimal experience,” can definitely emerge in the performance mode as well. It can occur, as Scheer said, “when the audience is with you. Your colleagues are with you, and you're not thinking about what you're doing, you're just doing it.”

Scheer thinks part of the creative process is juxtaposing seemingly contrasting things. As he said, “Creating the soil from which something can grow...it's like a canvas, a magnetic pull between this color and that color, or this shape and that shape.”

***What is the nature of Creativity in Composition***

Bryan explained that the composition auditions at the Curtis Institute are the most fascinating due to the fact that each interview is different because everybody's music is

different. “When you look at six people whose personal styles of writing music are so incredibly different, who's the best?” Shreve and Bryan agreed that there has to be a very high level of technical mastery before you can compose. As she said, “I wanted to compose from childhood...I think the desire can start very early. You just need the equipment, the expertise.”

Shreve suggested that Bach’s music is great because it's inevitable yet surprising. In her own work, she strives for music that is also beautiful, moving, meaningful, and maybe even memorable—not just novel. She directed the discussion toward the question of what abstract aesthetic ideal a composer be aiming for. Scheer suggested it was authenticity—not trying to be everything to all people, and quoted Sondheim: "What do all great songs have in common? A sense of surprise."

Kendall said she would like the composer to have a message of “reflection on the culture, of pushing the envelope.” dePasquale noted, “It has to do with being able to recognize a plan and a structure in the music...there are new pathways and new plans.” She said she is looking for a kind of coherence. Shreve said that the composer wants to feel the audience is unified by the vision she is transmitting to them and that somehow they are connected.

Another way to look at a composition is in terms of what it brings out in the audience—is it evocative (generating a positive emotional response) or provocative (generating a negative one) or perhaps both? Robillard pointed out that the greatest compliment you can give her or any of her friends is to cry. In the end, the “alchemy” of it is obviously hard to define.

*Are there such things as naturals in music? How much can we teach or train creativity in music?*

**"I'm a human being first, a musician second, a cellist third."**

*Pablo Casals*

Yumi Kendall commented that our music “is innate to us as human beings. How we communicate that and connect with that is a long-term growth/talent/character/ability/development through life.” Bryan added, “A lot of us feel the ability to communicate the musical idea that we have is something that is natural.” He mentioned a base level conducting course that everybody at the Curtis Institute has to take at some point. “Some of them walk into conducting and it is so remarkably instinctive and they just walk out as remarkable conductors.” Shreve pointed out that passion can take you a long way, or, as Bryan put it, “it is the multiplier.” Or you could say that talent times effort creates results. Kaufman noted that the most creative people learn the pre-requisite expertise much quicker than anyone else, hurrying to get it over with because their real drive is to create. But everyone was in agreement, as Bryan noted, that natural talent is very dependent on reaching “technical clarity, acquiring the baseline everybody has to have, that vocabulary of techniques, to be able to communicate, or else we never truly understand what their ideas are.” Lerner pointed out, “you are all incredibly different, so don’t expect everything to work for you.”



### ***What makes a great conductor?***

The role of the conductor is to “create unity,” to “crystallize the score,” and “to bring out the best in the orchestra.” Kendall suggested that authenticity on the podium means being a servant of the score and being a servant for the musicians to bring that score alive. dePasquale thinks the best conductor can push them “to do even more than we think possible...finding the depths of what we can do.” Bryan notes:

The great conductors are those who understand when they're needed and when they're not. So less is oftentimes more and I especially think that when it comes to the flow of creativity. The more you try to control something, obviously the less room you have any side on which to be creative.

As dePasquale pointed out, with a talented conductor “individual musicians...will suddenly do something even more fantastic than they've ever done before...which causes you to respond in a similar way and that's the kind of magic that happens at that moment.”

Of course, you don't always need a conductor, as in chamber music in which the whole creative process is shared by the musicians who bring to it their own level of inspiration.

### ***Which cognitive elements relate to creativity?***

The group discussed various cognitive elements relating to music and creativity. Kaufman contrasted the task-positive executive attention network, which lights up when you are doing anagrams or arithmetic, with the default network, which is active when you are daydreaming. Seligman thinks of the default circuit as the imagination circuit. Panelists described creative inspiration in the following words:

“When I'm not trying, that's when the ideas come...”  
“Very spontaneous.”

“Something that we're not trying to focus or control”  
“Something very invisible and abstract.”  
“When I'm not trying, that's when the ideas come”

The panel also contrasted System 1 vs. System 2 thinking. Seligman said, “System 1 is intuitive, effortless, imagistic, non-draining, and System 2 is deliberation, rationality, thinking something through,” as well as automatic. Kaufman put it this way: “There's great fruits for great music that you draw from System 1. If you operate on a pure rationality model, you constantly would be inhibiting System 1, but I don't think that is the route to great music”.

### ***What is the role of collaboration?***

Music is a fundamentally collaborative field in which creativity often arises from joint efforts. Every musician is in some sense a collaborator, not just with his fellow musicians, but depending on the circumstances, with the composer, librettist, conductor and even audience, and that requires a certain capacity for cooperation and working with other experts and making that connection fruitful. Opera, for example, is a layering of such collaborations, including with the librettist, the director, the singers, not to mention costume and set designers, etc. As dePasquale put it: “We're all reliant on each other...[the] process of doing your part and learning to trust other people can lead to great creativity.” And, according to Scheer, when you are uncertain, “You find the answer in the eyes of the other people on stage.” Ashley Robillard put it this way: “You have the privilege of being dependent on each other...once people realize that, it becomes a much more inspiring thing because they know to be inspired by each other...It's creating something larger than yourself.”

***What creates transcendence in music?***

The group focused in depth on transcendence. Panelists cited various moments and elements in music that seemed to generate a feeling of transcendence. Kaufman commented that YoYo Ma appears to feel the same level of transcendence in Elgar's *Cello Concerto* no matter how many times he performs it. Shreve said there is transcendence in composing "when you realize you've hit the nail on the head. Nothing is going on but connecting to the music." Robillard described it as "the ultimate sensation of completely letting go and yet being completely in the moment."

Shreve said she experienced that transcendence when she heard her work being performed in a concert hall or church. "The first time it happened to me, I felt like I was rising to the sky. I felt like I'd never experienced that kind of euphoria before. It's an amazing feeling when it comes together, your vision and other people are experiencing it."

Gene described the transcendent experience as the feeling of time collapsing, as he feels in *the B Minor Mass*. "I have this feeling of transcendence that can be triggered by different experiences, so maybe there's a common denominator...it de-clutters your mind." And then he commented: "the transcendent moments are moments in which one loses one's ego...it's about feeling essentially human...music is just such an incredible way of getting there," and said that there is something spiritual and a sense of ineffable connection that accompanies it.

dePasquale associated transcendence with "the concert halls, which are really temples to the music or a space, spaces designed specifically for the reverential treatment of

musical pieces.” According to Kendall: “For me, the concert hall is very much a space where it's a shared experience, where the musicians are uniting in a message from the past.”

Shreve pointed out that music has a very powerful ability to evoke memory and memories can be very emotional. “It'll be a memory of a sound, of a fragrance, of a day, of a person, of an idea and it's incredibly evocative of that part of our brain.” dePasquale said she always feels a connection with people she doesn't know when performing. “It's an incredible privilege as a human being to be able to experience something that's otherworldly.” Kaufman suggested it was like a mystical experience: you feel as though some boundary of self has opened up. Lerner made a note in regards to the transcendent experience versus authenticity, “...I don't know if one could have a transcendent experience without it being authentic.”

### ***What is the role of the audience?***

The question of the audience is obviously central in music. Martin Seligman pointed out that the sense of the audience is now viewed as one of the three requisites of creativity (along with originality and “surprisingness”). It's partly a question of how to make music relevant today. Gene expressed a solution: “One of the ways to do that is to create projects that focus on, that imaginatively speak to parts, of the audience.” Recently there has been a movement in opera to create a whole new world of chamber opera featuring smaller scale pieces.

Seligman pointed out that we often try to get the largest audience possible vs. “finding just the right audience at the right time.” Bryan noted: “Music as an art form is in the process of re-inventing itself to its audience,” or, as Shreve put it, “Maybe we should

tune the audience instead of the orchestra, so they're all synchronized.” dePasquale’s suggestion was “find better connections to other people by creating for specific audiences.” (For example, Scheer is working on a new commission specifically geared to 24 to 32 year olds.) As Bryan noted:

...if music is going to create a growth opportunity for itself, then it's not about so much what we're doing within the art form, but who's listening to it... how can we better engage communities and people that we have not in the past?...The notion of niche opera, is about selecting the audience.

***If you had a substantial grant, how would you make the next generation of musicians more creative, more imaginative?***

Leonard Bernstein believed that each child has his own inborn “song of existence” and “inner playfulness” which can either be nurtured or stifled. As a survey of the backgrounds of our panelists indicates, early exposure to music, in addition to drawing young people to the field, seems to foster the love and passion for it. In keeping with this, many of the participants are currently working, mostly on a volunteer basis, to bring the experience of music, including the appreciation and practice of it, to children.

There was agreement on the panel that teaching musical improvisation would benefit creativity. Bryan put it this way: “It's all about getting to the point where you don't have to think about what you're doing as you're playing...It's about completely letting go and kind of engaging with your imagination, with your creativity...engaging with a part of your thinking...that feels very uncomfortable. You know, to let go.” The Philadelphia Orchestra is already doing an improvisatory program as part of an outreach effort in their HEAR initiative.

There was also agreement that singing in choirs and student groups would be a way to tap into musical creativity. At the Curtis Institute's Summerfest, musicians and music lovers are provided with opportunities to explore classical music and experience Curtis' "learn by doing" philosophy. In this program, participants sing in chorus one hour a day together, as they do in Itzhac Perlman's program for prodigies. As Kendall said: "It's no instrument. You are the instrument." Scheer agreed. "I love the idea of singing. I really think if people would sing together, it would change the world." Singing music can help you discover your own musicality and bond with others while developing the capacity for collaboration. Several panelists also praised the value of finding a mentor who could provide support and wisdom over the course of a student's musical development.

In addition, it became apparent that taking a positive approach to teaching was best for developing creative students. Kendall said, "We learn through imitating our parents or the people who are around us, through positive encouragement, through repetition..." Shreve said that she was especially inspired by the teachers who found great things in what she was doing. She added that having a supportive mentor was extremely beneficial to her development as a composer.

Kaufman has said elsewhere, "When kids are allowed to imagine, to dream about who they might be in the future, and fall in love with the vision...they are more likely to have creative achievement over their lifetime." Let us inspire them to imagine and dream of being a musician.

### **Recommended approaches for increasing creativity:**

#### **In music teachers**

- Teach wellbeing to music teachers so that they can better foster the wellbeing of their students
- Find and train music teachers that are creative and imaginative
- Fund scholarships for musicians to go into teaching

### **In music students**

- Greatly increase the number, and support of music teachers and availability of music resources in schools (e.g. instruments, performance opportunities)
- Increase time allocated to music classes
- Develop more after-school music programs
- Bring more positive feedback into the music training process
- Cultivate a sense of intrinsic motivation in music students
- Develop the spirit and skills for collaboration
- Develop mentoring programs for young musicians
- Educate young people about more imaginative and innovative music
- Foster more wellbeing in music conservatories
- Teach composition, improvisation, and conducting in high school
- Foster opportunities for students to sing together
- Expose students to visions of the creative spirit and the joy of music
- Expose students to accomplished musicians
- Build students' music confidence at a young age
- Provide guidance and mentorship to young students
- Foster love of learning, curiosity, and imaginative thinking

### **In professional music performances**

- Increase grant and award programs to innovative performers and composers

- Influence more venues and music directors to feature innovative music
- Enhance and expand audiences for imaginative new music (through exposure and education)
- Improve wellbeing and cultivate a sense of agency for professional musicians in ensemble settings