

Creative Ability Development: The Five Stages of Creative Ability

Science and Art / Truth and Beauty

-Dr. Sera Smolen 2021

Working closely with Alice Kanack, author and composer of the Creative Ability Development series, I have included “CAD” with families in my Suzuki cello studio since 1994. I have been moved to share this beautiful process as guest clinician at summer institutes and with many groups of teachers and parents around the world. I study and perform different forms of improvisation from around the world. I find that starting with CAD allows young musicians to develop in deeply musical ways, allowing them to go in any direction.

Conscious work and Unconscious work

Alice Kanack examined the memoirs of great artists and scientists throughout history. Do scientists create new things differently from the artists? Both artists and scientists do “conscious work” during the day in laboratories, offices, libraries, theaters, art studios and music rooms. By night, brains naturally route conscious work to the realm where “unconscious work” is done. By day, we work. Around-the-clock, however, problems are absorbed into the inner, secret workings of the mind. The parameters of the problem are enhanced, beautified and tempered in the vast unconscious. Having an artistic or scientific problem to solve will, without fail, open amazing avenues of communication inside the mind. This mysterious, universal dance between the conscious and the unconscious mind has preceded most great discoveries throughout history, both artistic and scientific. Like great artists and scientists who write about this in their memoirs, we do the usual modest amount of work by day. By night, problems and their possible solutions are turned sideways and inside out. We work the next day so it can be re-ordered the next night, refined and re-

proportioned until the most elegant solution comes to the surface. Each of us can have this exhilarating access to the whole mind.

Five Stages of Creative Ability Development

Stage 1: Breaking the Ice

We have our first aesthetic needs at age 2. “Breaking the Ice” begins at age 2-5, or when one begins improvising. Alice Kanack’s books for beginners are “Playing from the Heart” and “Musical Improvisation for Children”. These collections of very short improvisations invite the youngest players to use their very first skills on the instrument with spontaneity. They play while pretending with a story, imagining animals, and listening. We simply take the “one point” from our most recent lesson and invite children to play with it. They might pluck two open strings with planted feet or use a few selected notes on one string. They imagine the ladybug on the flower with pinky on the bow... a giraffe, frogs, rainbows, thunderstorms or Pegasus the flying horse while improvising freely with very simple instructions.

To break the ice, everyone on earth begins with one note. Master improviser David Darling calls this “One Quality Sound”. We simply continue to make music from that one sound. It may be peaceful, tentative, mysterious or wild...it may be an organized exploration of a musical idea, or it may turn into splashing gestures. Some students are timid, while others are fearless or silly. Some repeat things many times, while others begin by surveying all their choices. All of this is absolutely normal. As teachers or parents, our job is to create an atmosphere in the room where *“There is no such thing as a mistake”*. We witness all of it with relaxed confidence and delight. We embrace this atmosphere lesson after lesson, practice after practice. This affirms for students that everything has been just right.

Beginning string students add notes to their improvisations based on skills they now have. “Fun Improvisation for Violin (or Viola, Piano or Cello)” is a rich resource which often takes a student around two years to complete. They improvise with “What’s the answer to my question?” which has become well known around the world. Each player generates many musical answers to this familiar musical question. This musical question is a musical version of “how are you?” It is never finally answered “once and for all”. Freedom and discipline are integrated by this daily practice of making spontaneous choices. By day, they play, while the unconscious mind continues to solve creative problems every night. They play “What’s the answer to my question?” the following day, supplied with fresh ideas from the dreaming, unconscious mind. This simple process continues. It “breaks the ice” so the conscious mind which operates in a linear way can dance with the unconscious mind which has an endless supply of hidden soulful dimensions. To become familiar with this seemingly sloppy process is to break the ice, whoever you are, however old you might be.

I started improvising as a young adult, having trained for many years at university in classical music. The rule that **“There is no such thing as a mistake”** sent me into a very unfamiliar world! I thought I might die if I made a mistake and was terrified at the thought even trying to improvise. Now, I have improvised on the beach, in the dark, in temples, at parties and with silent movies. I have improvised in jazz groups, with dying people, in concert halls and cafes around the world, with avant garde musicians and in recording studios. I have performed improvised projects with dancers, poets, painters, drummers, and with people who do not speak my language. Using the universal language of music, we make bridges to connect with people of different cultures. We are all born creative, and it is never too late to start. Eventually, we can all find our overlooked and buried authentic

voices. There are many classical musicians who have found fresh air, exploring music beyond the academy.

Stage 2: Finding your Voice

We are born with our own songs inside us. We learn masterpieces to be part of the great musical history which precedes us. We gain necessary skills and essential musical vocabulary to improvise. Each person can play until they uncover their own unique musical voice. In my experience, it takes two or three years for people to pass through this stage. We teachers learn to facilitate this recognizable, non-linear, organic process. We emphasize games, self-expression and musicality. As always, “*There is no such thing as a mistake*”, and we improvise for at least a couple of minutes on most days. Each instrument begins in the most accessible, idiomatic key where we stay for a long time, making music. Many students who have a robust tone in the practice room may begin improvising softly. They are playing *into* themselves, unlocking a labyrinth of musical beauty down deep inside where there is a hidden world of shapes, colors and memories. They are listening to whispers from their own musical voice as it begins to rise to the surface. It’s all perfect. No worries. The tone comes back.

Experiments letting fingers fly may contrast with other artistic journeys: repeating three notes for a week, quoting a musical idea found in repertoire, orchestral music or scales. Each person will acquire their own unique musical expression, touching the instrument their way, the way only they would venture from one note to the next. A musical voice will gradually emerge which begins to sing its own song. We begin to hear cohesive phrases, and later, entire pieces of music. Perhaps, as Pete Seeger says, the most beautiful, strongest songs have yet to be created.

“Fun Improvisation for Violin (viola, piano or cello)” goes on to introduce Greek modes. The Greeks claimed the seven modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian Myxolydian, etc.) to be eternal, archetypal “moods” of the human soul. I cannot say if this is true, but each mode does seem to correspond to something ancient and innate to each of us. I like to assign one mode as a tonalization, after which we improvise in that mode for several weeks. There is indeed one minute to spare for improvisation in a typical lesson. Later, of course, we find Greek modes in Jazz, world musics, solo repertoire and orchestral music.

In Creative Ability Development we begin to use Greek modes to improvise in simultaneous parts. “Improvising String Quartets” is dedicated to improvisation games, exercises and variations created spontaneously in layers using different musical roles. Players learn to create drones, melodies, rhythm machines, musical soccer games, telephone games and imitation challenges. Players learn about music theory, leadership, listening and communication. To perform an improvised string quartet builds skills with musical structures, dynamics, texture and contrast. We start with simpler improvisation strategies early in the process of learning to improvise, continuing to use this book until we modulate between relative majors and minors, improvise in different styles and until we can create a quartet performance without rehearsal! We experiment with self-expression, melodic vocabulary, basslines and imitation games by day, while the unconscious mind builds additional scaffolding night after night. Although this faithfully occurs for anyone and everyone, it still moves me deeply. To hear a unique artistic voice miraculously emerging from this process still takes my breath away.

Stage 3: Sharing and Using your Voice

At this stage, we find students naturally reaching for virtuosity beyond what we thought they could do. We now have young musicians with a

legacy of musical experiences and reasons to use them. Teachers and parents continue to listen without judgement, delighted and confident that this is all as it should be. The music of children has as much life in it as the art of children.

“Basslines and Fantasies” by Alice Kanack, allows players to improvise in every key, navigating across the instrument while shifting up and down the strings. To improvise in every key is a point of arrival demonstrating knowledge, expressive skills, and music theory. This beautiful collection gives students a bassline in each key with a fantasy piece in that key. Alice Kanack’s music opens hearts, inspiring people of every age with a wide range of musical journeys we revisit again with more powers of expression and artistry.

“Improvising String Quartets” continues to offer more sophisticated improvisation games allowing us to use what we know about music theory, musical roles and leadership. Learning music theory by creating music makes the theory clear and unforgettable. It is so different from taking a music theory test sitting at a desk. Students interlock layers of rhythms together and add rhythmic modulation. They give and receive musical cues while creating themes with variations. They create bass lines which imply chord progressions. They learn to create melodies over drones, rhythmic patterns, and ostinato. We learn to generate harmonized melodies and variations on a theme. They are invited to spontaneously create dramatic expressive contrasts like fire and ice. We have heard improvised string quartets created by professionals as well as graduate students.

Stage 4: Breaking away: the Search for Truth and Beauty

In practice, a totally improvised string quartet is often rehearsed by young musicians in a casual playful way. Even though they laugh together in rehearsal, we hear a shared dream rising into the

atmosphere of the room from their music making. After these years of playing, conscious work becomes integrated, bonded, hard wired into the unconscious process. There will be an “ah ha!” moment. It may take hundreds of hours of improvising, but a lightbulb will turn on. There is a way to use beauty to tell the truth. Conscious work can bloom in the hidden world of the unconscious. The greatest of the great scientists, the most legendary artists and spiritual seers agree: Truth is Beauty and Beauty is Truth. A musician who has studied classical music literature with the double training in creativity has a “voice” of their own, with musical vocabulary and syntax on the instrument. They have internalized musical conventions. Whether or not it is always “pretty” does not matter. The sincerity of expression it requires to tell the truth does bring us into the inner realm of beauty.

Stage 5: Inspiration and Meta-Cognition

In 1865 August Kekule discovered the structure of the benzene ring. Along with other scientists, he had been working on this problem for many years. The solution came from his unconscious mind. One day as he was climbing apple trees with his children, he looked into the sky and saw an image of a snake with its tail in its mouth. This was the final glimpse he needed to unveil the most elegant, final solution to the mystery behind the structure of the benzene ring.

There are many examples of this fifth stage of creative ability which have occurred throughout history. In the documentary film “My Octopus Teacher”, we can see all five stages of creativity as Craig Foster worked to refine the powerful message in this project.

Truth and Beauty are meant to be integrated within each of us. Creativity gives us more insights so each of us can weave our voices to the poetry of the past and the future. We synthesize skills to express our experiences, continuing until our music takes on a symbolic

power. The cathartic breakthrough in the practice room we call inspiration, or that “ah ha!” moment in the laboratory is also called “meta-cognition”.

Great creative ability is born of the search for truth and beauty.

In our search to understand our world, and in our need to create a better one, lie the roots of all genius and all of the growth and development of mankind.

Throughout history, those men and women with the greatest need to understand and communicate truth and beauty were those who were responsible for the most important and lasting achievements.”

—Alice Kanack