

The Conductor-Composer Mentorship Through the Pinnacle Project

In the summer of 2001, Julia Carey was invited to participate in the Pinnacle Project Summit, an event that was directed by Rena Subotnik and sponsored by the American Psychological Association and the Claymath Institute. The purpose of the Summit was to bring together established masters in the arts and sciences, outstanding researchers and professionals who were beginning their careers, and extraordinarily talented high school students.

The goals of the Pinnacle Project were to 'establish a venue for fertilization of ideas about talent development across disciplines; provide an opportunity for highly gifted adolescents to learn from and be guided by mentors in their fields of interest; discuss in a safe forum the joys, stresses, and expectations associated with talent development; plan investigations that would serve as a basis for mentoring; and publicize the talent development needs of gifted adolescents.'

The Pinnacle Summit was a unique opportunity for Julia to see her musical development in the contexts of other disciplines. Each morning of the summit, the teams met to pursue their short-term projects and to develop their plans for the coming year. In addition, each day included lunchtime roundtable discussions that facilitated the exchange of ideas and questions among the various disciplines. During the course of the summit, each of the masters gave a lecture to the entire group. At the culmination of the week, each young scholar gave a presentation of what they had learned from their individual team meetings and talked about projects that they were planning for the coming year.

Julia was paired with conductor Beatrice Jona Affron, the Pinnacle music mentor. Affron has been the music director of the Pennsylvania Ballet since 1997, and has also conducted a great deal of contemporary music, including the national tour of Philip Glass's *Les Enfants*

Terribles and the premiere of the revised version of Argento's *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night*. In addition, Ms. Affron has conducted many classical operas, such as *Die Fledermaus* at Boston Lyric Opera and Glimmerglass Opera's production of *Lucie de Lammermoor*.

In this mentorship program, Beatrice Affron and Julia Carey met every morning for a week. They used Richard Strauss's *Salome* as a point from which to explore the interdisciplinary life of the musician, particularly the orchestra conductor. In an effort to understand the specific artistic choices that the composer made in creating his depiction of Salome, they examined Oscar Wilde's version of the story, the biblical story, and portrayals of Salome in visual art. Julia and Beatrice also studied three video recordings of the opera to explore the artistic choices of singers, conductors and directors. In addition, they made detailed analyses of excerpts from the score and talked about how the conductor might approach those sections. In order to develop a shared language about conducting techniques, they worked on the first movement of Beethoven's First Symphony and used solfège to sing the score. The long-term project that Julia and Beatrice designed was to prepare Julia, who is a composer, to conduct one of her own compositions, which she has since done.

Beatrice comments on her work with Julia:

To what extent did you get to know Julia personally and as a young artist?

A week is not a long time to get to know someone, but because our project gave us so much to talk about—music, literature, conducting, composition, solfège, the life of the

continued

Julia and I have stayed in touch and we have seen each other periodically since our time together at the Pinnacle Project. Since entering the Harvard/New England Conservatory double degree program, Julia has not only continued to compose, but she has also conducted and played the harpsichord in a number of student productions. Most recently, I attended a performance at Harvard's Arts First Festival in which Julia was both music director and continuo player. The work, which was semi-staged, was a wonderful Monteverdi madrigal, Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda. Julia led the singers and instrumentalists from the harpsichord, and even though her hands were busy at the keys, she found a way, through her body language and facial expressions, to direct the others with real clarity and sensitivity. It has been (and will continue to be) a great thrill to watch Julia develop as an artist/teacher (conductor)/scholar. Her commitment to creating new works in no way overshadows her desire to research, direct and perform music from the past.

—Beatrice Affron, May, 2007

MENTORING THE DEVELOPING ARTIST A relationship of mutual respect for learning

In conductor Beatrice Affron's words, "Images from my lessons with Julia convey something of the democratizing effect of singing and conducting music together. One conducts to lead others, of course, but one can also conduct in order to sing with others and to enjoy a shared understanding of the music. Singing while conducting also creates a kind of artistic intimacy and interface between the composer—deceased or living—and the conductor, between the conductor and the performers, and among the performers as they communicate with one another. It is in this milieu of musical expression that singing and conducting allow musicians to shape and translate the ideas that emerge out of musical discourse in order to organize the interpretation itself. Julia's progress with singing and conducting will be a critical factor in the directing of her own music, as well as in her artistic relationships with her peers, mentors, and, eventually, her own students." ¶



musician—we did cover a lot of ground. I was very glad to devote some of our time to exploring Julia’s own compositions and it was a new and fascinating experience for me to have an up-close glimpse into how a young composer develops.

What were your sessions like? What did you learn about Julia? The ways she learns? Her strengths and her challenges?

Our sessions were quite focused. Never having engaged in this kind of mentorship myself, I had decided in advance to design a rather structured curriculum for the week. In a sense, that design was more a reflection of my musical life than of hers, but because I am not a composer, I thought I could be more useful to Julia by exploring with her the conductor’s point of view; in turn, she could teach me about the point of view of the composer.

The interdisciplinary approach of the conductor was not new to Julia; her interests range broadly outside of music to math, history, and literature and then redirect themselves to her own compositions. Julia sets the poetry and stories that are meaningful to her in her vocal music and refers to them in her instrumental compositions as well. Perhaps the least developed of her skills that we explored together was conducting, which is not unusual for a teenage musician. In the absence of an orchestra,

we used fixed pitch solfège to read Beethoven’s First Symphony together while she conducted, and we talked about ways to bring out what we thought the composer might think was most important in the music.

How do you think the Pinnacle Project benefited Julia as a composer? As a conductor? A musician? An interdisciplinary thinker?

Because the piano is Julia’s instrument and the original means by which she composed, she has always performed her own music. As far as our plan for her to conduct her orchestral works, Julia took the ball and ran with it, and within months after the Pinnacle experience, she had already conducted one of her own compositions. We met only a few times thereafter, but it seemed to me that Julia had really understood conducting to be yet another way to be profoundly connected to her own music.

What were your goals for your relationship to Julia as a mentor-teacher-role model?

My hope for Julia was that I could be a resource for her, if she ever needs advice or help in conducting her own music. For myself, I was delighted to begin a friendship with this totally delightful and engaged young musician. ¶

PORTFOLIO PORTRAIT EXHIBIT 5: An Emergent Philosophy of Music-in-Education as Industrious and Compassionate Learning

As email discourse continues, Harriet reveals herself as an articulate advocate for music’s role in any child’s education. According to her, ongoing exposure is crucial from day one, and should expand to the point where every child has the opportunity to develop an interest in music. Once this interest is determined, the challenges of music demand a personal relationship with a teacher and the responsibility of daily practice. The reward of passionate interest is to learn more and work harder, thus putting young artists in command of their own career choices.

Inquiry Question: From your perspective as a parent, how has your view of music education evolved as you watch Julia grow up musically? To what do you owe her early successes as a composer? What advice might

you give to other parents about the role of music in their children’s education?

“This is only my personal point of view... I feel that every child should have an exposure to music—infants should hear lullabies and play-songs; toddlers should play music games with parents and siblings and learn the songs of their heritage in family settings; nursery schools should include music education, which should expand through the advancing grades. Every child that expresses an interest in an instrument should have the chance to meet with an understanding and perceptive teacher.

“The responsibility of daily practice should be an essential part of the experience, as should learning to see performance as a way of giving. And the reward of achievement should be the opportunity to learn more and to work harder. Musicians can’t be forced—it is much too hard a task to undertake to be motivated by anything less than passion. I believe that true

musicians become musicians because it becomes impossible for them to think of themselves as being anything else.”

Julia responds to this same question by describing the observations she made while engaged in residency work in schools:

“I have realized how important it is for all young children to be exposed to music and to be given the opportunity to study music. I’ve realized that there is a balance between studying music in a serious, methodical way with a teacher and being allowed to experiment independently with improvisation and creative techniques. Likewise, there is a balance between independent, individual practice and ensemble activities, since both kinds of music-making are equally important in unique ways. I owe my early success to the guidance, support, and encouragement of my family and my teachers. I have always been very fortunate to have people around me who wanted me to succeed in music and who gave me all the help and advice I needed.”

AS JULIA DEVELOPS AS AN ARTIST, SHE BECOMES INCREASINGLY AWARE OF HOW THE STUDENT- MENTORSHIP RELATIONSHIP WORKS, A CRITICAL STEP TOWARD HER INTEREST IN FACILITATING LEARNING IN SCHOOL RESIDENCIES.

The critical role of teacher/ mentorship in music learning

To both Harriet and Julia, nurturing artist-mentors become the wellspring of learning. They agree that musical mentors provide a role model for (a) commitment to music as a way of living and learning, and (b) teaching as constructive criticism and stimulation for the individual learner. As Julia develops as an artist, she becomes increasingly aware of how the student-mentorship relationship works, a critical step toward her interest in facilitating learning in school residencies, as described later in this article.

What effect do you think mentorship played in Julia’s development as a musician and as a person?

Harriet Carey continues:

“Julia has had some wonderful mentors in her life and, as I reflect on this amazing collection of teachers, I am struck by one common trait—they all had a true understanding of the individual as creative artist. Julia’s most formative teachers all were artists themselves—teaching was an important part of their lives certainly, but as individuals they were defined by their commitment to their art. In this way, they serve as examples first—and it is very important for the young musician to understand that music is indeed a way of life. And because the teachers defined their individuality this way, they were understanding and supportive of the individuality of their students. This is especially important in a creative art like composition, where an attempt to mold a student to a certain image can curtail growth entirely.

“I have spoken about Rodney before—he has this wonderful gift of encouraging creative growth, and has mentored Julia since she was ten. Beatrice Affron came into Julia’s life at a later stage as a conductor-mentor, being paired with Julia through the Pinnacle Project (see Photo Essay). Beatrice is a shining example of a young accomplished artist living her art. Of course Julia was immediately drawn to her. Beatrice taught Julia not just about score analysis and issues of conducting, but also about the connections of the artist to the music and how to shape an idea into a reality.”

Julia comments:

“I think that one-on-one mentoring relationships become increasingly important to young musicians as they become older and more serious in their studies. To get the advice and guidance of successful, professional musicians is instrumental in helping young musicians make decisions to become successful and professional musicians themselves. For composers, being able to show your music to both more experienced composers and conductors or instrumentalists allows you to get feedback not only about the aesthetic issues of your music but also about its playability.

“Rodney Lister and Beatrice Affron have both been extremely important influences in my life. I have studied with Rodney Lister since I was ten years old. In addition to being my composition teacher, Rodney has been my chamber coach and taught me theory and has expanded my reading of orchestral literature. Rodney is an excellent teacher of composition, although he views the role

of teacher more as that of critic. Beatrice is a role model for me because she is a successful young creative artist who lives her art. She has helped me to see my compositions from a conductor’s eye, in terms of bringing an idea into reality. I will always be grateful for both Rodney and Beatrice’s advice and support as I am indebted to Sergey Schepkin as my piano teacher and friend.”

The role of community service and scholarship in music learning

Inquiry Question: How did it come about that Julia became involved with education and community service through music? What value do you see in her spending time with the From The Top Cultural Leadership Program, the Metropolitan Opera Guild’s Creating Opera in Schools (Artifact 8), and the Conservatory Lab Charter School?

Harriet responds:

“Julia became involved with the Cultural Leadership Project after performing on the From The Top Radio Show. She enjoyed working with the teachers and students at the Conservatory Lab Charter School over her junior and senior years of high school.

“She had the opportunity to come to know the students as she worked with them in their music classes (she learned recorder so she could assist the students on that instrument) and listened to their performances. Julia and her friend Sarah Charness were also able to perform for the children, and Julia gave a short presentation of some of the music she wrote when she was quite young. She was invited to write two new works for the end-of-school recitals. She introduced the noted African-American poet Charles Coe to the CLCS, and he was able to meet with the children on a number of occasions to talk about creative writing and poetry, in addition to writing the text for the two works for the two concerts—*May All Who Enter Here* and *Lullaby*—that Julia set to music to involve the entire school in chorus or on recorder, violin, or percussion.

“The two years Julia spent at the charter school were formative—it was the first time Julia had the chance to teach, and she