

# 20 Points of Creativity

## For The O'Connor Method Book One

(solo violin, viola, cello and orchestra books inclusive)

Following are "20" key points showing how creativity is engendered through the use of *The O'Connor Method Book One*. Teaching creativity in the early stages of string playing has been considered one of the most difficult concepts for teachers to comprehend. However, this task can be made quite simple given the right materials and methodology.

Most methods in use today (the Suzuki method, Essential Elements, et. al.) have assumed that musical technique and skill can be “taught” but that “creativity” is largely a matter of chance. Students are creative by nature and may (or may not) use their acquired musical skills for musical creativity “later on.” Actually *teaching* children to *be creative* has seemed like an insurmountable oxymoron to entry-level string teachers. However, foundational groundwork for creativity for very young people is *inherent* in *The O'Connor Method Book One* and therefore does not need to be *taught* so much as *presented*.

We must keep in mind that it is not important for a young child of Elementary School age to improvise or compose. There is no need for 7-10 year olds to worry about composing or improvising when they are first learning to play their instruments. It is enough to assimilate the creative musical foundation inherent in the materials of *The O'Connor Method* itself and know that this will influence the way young music students internalize and approach music in a general way. The "20 Points" are designed to help teachers recognize these sometimes subtle, sometimes “hidden,” but nevertheless potent building blocks as they are happening along the way while making beautiful music. String teachers at the beginning levels do not need to reinvent the wheel while teaching in the *American Music System*. They can be more effective merely by being more aware of the many wheels that are already turning within *The O'Connor Method* for their students’ musical journey! Let the materials help you to help your students!

Shinichi Suzuki proved that all children could acquire the skills needed to play string instruments. His doctrine of “every child can” is something that all of us reading this embrace. *The O'Connor Method* takes this idea a step further by adding creative skill along with technical skill to what every child can do. I believe that the natural creativity that every child is born with can be nurtured in the realm of music and that the foundation for further creativity can be established and enhanced through a new understanding and teaching of the basic underlying groundwork of creativity at an early age.

As we head into the new era of pedagogy for strings, new buzz words are becoming prevalent and are being “tossed around” without much helpful explanation: *creativity*, *improvisation*, and even *composing* for young children. When we try to jump from an all-technique-based training as presented in the commonly used current methods, all the way to the full-fledged creativity that we may envision for our children after seeing what

a professional-level violinist or string instrumentalist can do in the *American Music System*, we can overshoot the goal by attempting to jump too far - only to miss our mark (pun intended!). Children can feel overwhelmed, intimidated and even frightened. A child may even start to feel that he is “not one of the creative ones” because he cannot make this giant leap and we will have defeated our very purpose. Unless you have a little Mozart on your hands, music students simply don't need to be composers at age 10. We should all be excited about and committed to the concept of creativity but should not lose sight of the fact that there is an underlying foundation needed to gradually, gently and naturally acquire creative techniques. The same creative techniques that I myself use today are grounded in this very foundation acquired through a gradual internalizing of the music I grew up playing – American music. Most teachers think of creativity as composition or improvisation - and rightly so. However, ***composing and improvising are the result of learning to be creative, not the process of becoming creative.***

The "buzz word" I would like to promote for young music students is *arranging*. Within the "20 Points" there are many demonstrations of how to implement arranging techniques. For a child of Elementary School age, "arranging" even a single note of music to make it different from my original notation in *The Method* could be as powerful and engaging to him as a High School student's composing a song or improvising a solo on stage. Arranging a new ending, adding an intro, creating solo sections, or changing the form from ABAB to ABBAB, for example, are all easily accessible tools to build creativity. Furthermore, arranging existing materials (material in my *Method*) ensures that the quality of the material remains consistently high for a young student. This is extremely important because we want to train the ear in the formative years to develop a taste for great music and not be overly and/or artificially enamored of just any random succession of notes made up by young students. On a personal note, I myself am known as one of the most creative improvisers on string instruments; however, I was not even aware of improvisation until I was 12 years old. I composed my first whole pieces at age 13, only then realizing creativity that was founded in an extensive experiential background and groundwork inherent in the music I had learned to hear and play.

What follows are "20" ways in which *The O'Connor Method Book One* provides the building blocks of a musically creative person without the need to learn composition or improvisation until more advanced levels of development. As you will see, it is all contained in the music and materials. Just becoming aware of what is there will help you as a teacher to approach the music a bit differently yourself and therefore be able to communicate many of its magical secrets to your students.

The "20 Points" below are relevant to *The O'Connor Method Book One* for Solo Violin, Solo Viola, Solo Cello and Orchestra taken together as a whole or used separately according to the realities of each teaching situation. In an ideal circumstance, *Orchestra Book One* should be used in group class for students of the *Solo Method*. It is extremely helpful that the students in group classes participate in the 3-part harmony featured in the *Orchestra Book One* when and wherever possible to supplement the mostly unison or octave playing common in most one-instrument group classes. For violin group classes without lower strings, I have provided the same 3-part harmonies in supplemental books

featuring 1st, 2nd and 3rd violin parts for this purpose. Furthermore, I have arranged the music to sound equally satisfying if played by three students (one on each part), 30 students or 300 students, making this book appropriate for ensembles of all sizes.

## 1. American Song Structures

**Using the basic structure of the American song form and then learning to rearrange it in elementary ways is a very creative experience for beginning music students in *The O'Connor Method*.** Teachers and students can make creative decisions on how to restructure a given piece by choosing what sections to repeat and how many times to repeat them. If appropriate for their group, they can make way for solos (vocal or instrumental) and decide in what part of the structure to “insert” the solos. This process can be referred to as “arranging,” and it goes hand in hand with the actual performance history of American music. *The American Music System* gives the students a feeling of ownership of their own music materials by participating in this process.

Whereas the American song form is well suited for this type of creativity, other methods offer music that does not easily lend itself to rearranging. Often very short musical phrases or partial forms are offered and the important structure of a tune is sacrificed for technical issues. The structure of any art form is born of creativity and inherently includes creativity. The satisfaction – sometimes even elation - of a student or group of students working their way to the conclusion of a piece's total form is very powerful. The American song structure is simple (easily “taught,” grasped or absorbed) but profound (potentially inviting limitless creativity). Our American jazz players have surely proved this to be the case!

## 2. Musical Variation

**Experiencing variation is one of the most important ingredients of creativity in *The O'Connor Method*.** Indeed, the ability to improvise and/or compose may be said to be based on a “sense” of variation. Instilling this sense of variation in very young children can be a monumental cornerstone in the foundation of future creative music making and it is easy to introduce with American music. The rhythmic (1st, 2nd & 3rd), melodic (4th & 5th) and harmonic (6th & 7th) variations of “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” offered in *The O'Connor Method Book One* are accessible to beginners and provide a broad range of “what can be done” with a simple tune. “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” is a perfect piece with which to lay this foundation as this music inherently cries out for variation. Beginning pieces from other commonly used methods (“Ode to Joy,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” “Long Long Ago” and “Freres Jacques”) are, from a creative standpoint, more difficult to understand and therefore made even more difficult as beginning tunes by the addition of variations. Beginning students are required to comprehend the variation of a more complex structure right from the start and much too early in their development. Not so with “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” having an easier-to-understand (“smaller”) structure and using just the first half a major scale for its melody.

In addition, many of the arrangements in *Orchestra Method Book One* are orchestrated in such a way as to provide harmonic and rhythmic variation in the middle and lower voices during the “repeats” of the form. In learning “Beautiful Skies,” “Amazing Grace,” “Golden Slippers,” etc., the violas and cellos can enjoy providing the variation during the repeats of the form and the violin students can be taught to sense how differently their top voice sounds and feels with the varied inner and low voices underneath them.

### 3. Experiential Variety: Other Parts Of The Music

**Learning more than one part to a particular tune or arrangement and experiencing the same music from another angle are creative experiences. Using the *Solo Method Books* combined with the *Orchestra Method Book* makes this experience possible.**

Viola and cello students studying the solo versions of *The O’Connor Method Book One* repertoire find themselves learning alternate melody lines (with variation in rhythm or texture) of the same tunes in the *Orchestra Method Book One*. The orchestrations are often in different keys from the solo versions providing a further broadening of experience. Approaching the same material from different keys and different parts of the ensemble is a highly creative experience and instills basic ideas of composition and “thinking outside the box.” Walking in someone else’s shoes can easily be experienced in this music.

Violin students studying the solo version of *The O’Connor Method Book One* will find learning the viola-treble-clef part (included in the Viola Part of the *Orchestra Method*) to be a similar experience. Violin students can “jump over” to help the violas and contribute in a new way to the arrangements they already know - moving from an upper-voice perspective to the inner voice.

### 4. Voicing - Counterpoint

**I think we sometimes underestimate children and their musical abilities. “Dumbing down” music for Grade School students is not necessary.** Does anyone remember singing the “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” canon (round) in Grade School? I do. During that era, children were taught this musically sophisticated project early on. It required listening, counting, focus and a whole host of things that challenge and engage the young student.

My *Orchestra Method Book One* engages in a similar fashion by subtle and simple moving counterpoint, musical calls and responses and even some canonic (elementary fugal) arranging. For example in much of the music, the lowest voice (cello) is given the roots of the chords. However, the lower part is certainly not limited to the roots and 5ths. Often the cello part will gracefully depart, allow another voice to have the tonic note of the chord and then return to the chord’s “root.” The idea of *departure* and *return* is a highly creative concept – one of the most fundamental building blocks of improvisation

and composition, and here presented in the basic form of written counterpoint.

## 5. Textural Variation

***The O'Connor Orchestra Method Book One* has built into it a significant textural choice that teachers and students can make for each piece: whether or not to include the piano part that I orchestrated into the arrangements.** The addition of the piano part (for the teacher or assistant to play) in *Orchestra Book One* allows the teacher to play with students instead of conducting them with a baton. Beginning students should learn how to play with each other by listening for tempo and entrances rather than following the stick of a conductor for “staying together.” A student can always learn how to follow a conductor later - it is actually one of the easiest things to learn in music. Whereas learning to listen to something other than your own part is one of the most important and fundamental things to achieve for good musicianship and also to become able to think creatively. We should concentrate more on listening in the beginning levels rather than on using our eyes to follow cues. However, my *Method* allows for the piano part to be omitted as well freeing the teacher to conduct with the baton if that is deemed helpful. Perhaps both approaches can be alternately employed thereby training flexibility for varied situations.

This aspect of *The Method* can be made a creative part of a class by having the students practice a particular arrangement both with and without the piano part and discussing the feel and sound of the difference. Great care was taken in creating each orchestral arrangement so that the piano part can be added without compromising the independence of each string part. And further, when the piano is removed from the ensemble, the arrangements are composed in such a way that the students and listeners won't feel that there is something "missing." Presenting this level of sophistication in a form accessible to Grade School music students was a great challenge to me as a composer notwithstanding the constraints of the pedagogy required at this level. I was surprised in retrospect to find that I spent longer composing the *Orchestra Method Book One* than I did composing my “Americana Symphony.”

Silence in the context of music is a wonderful texture in a group setting. This can be difficult to achieve with young children but very rewarding for them if accomplished. Silence can be taught as something “real” to listen for and not just regarded as the absence of sound or activity. Relating “silence” to “space” is a very creative concept and lays the groundwork for more sophisticated phrasing in jazz, classical and, indeed, all genres of music. Using “active” silence at the beginning and at the end of a piece and experiencing the final resonance from the instruments in the room can be a very first step in establishing an appreciation for this creative dimension of music.

## 6. Rhythmic Feel And Groove

**The physical process of feeling basic rhythms and learning to make a groove “work”**

**and “feel right” with others in an ensemble setting is a creative process.** *The Orchestra Method Book One* features many tunes that are inherently rhythmic. Most American music is highly rhythmic at its core - music that makes it necessary to “get a feel for the pulse” and material that naturally “resonates” with a student’s sense of body rhythm and movement. Other string methods concentrate mostly on melodies or scales in the early stages and therefore offer experience that is not inherently rhythmic.

The notion of not just simply learning to play metronomically accurately but rather finding where to place your rhythm with another student's rhythm in group class, in orchestra or with your teacher's accompaniment - and whether it is further ahead of the beat or more behind the beat - is a highly creative experience. Mathematical concepts used in learning to “count” rhythm are important to be sure and are certainly presented in *The Method*. However, at bottom, rhythm is a “feel” and to learn rhythm from this point of view is not only more creative but also more satisfying to young children.

## **7. Tuning Your Notes To Chords**

**Finding correct pitches of notes that “harmonize” with chords as opposed to tuning to unisons or octaves requires far more creative sensibility.** Tuning up a single note to a full chord (triad) played by your fellow students in the group class, in orchestra, or with your teacher at the piano or guitar, is a fundamental step in “discovering” a “new” sound that is satisfying once the “fullness” of an in-tune chord is accomplished. Discovering sounds like chords and harmony can be thought of as the heart of creativity. *The O’Connor Orchestra Method Book One* presents pieces that I have orchestrated in simple triads and in increasingly more complex harmonies as the book progresses.

Current methods of learning pitch by playing tunes or exercises only in unison or octaves do not offer this creative dimension. On the other extreme, ascertaining what a chord is with many voices sounding at once as in a full symphony orchestra can be overwhelming. Students sometimes “tune out,” rather than “tune in” to the chord if the sound is too big and complex. Learning to play in tune and to find a sense of the pitch as it relates to a three-note chord is in fact a creative experience. However, learning to find your pitch in a group of unison notes is largely technical or academic and, if done repeatedly over a period of years, could actually stunt musical creativity.

## **8. Variety: Keys - Tonalities**

***The O’Connor Method Book One* presents a wide variety of keys and tonalities in the repertoire.** The inclusion of pieces in C Major and F# Minor in addition to the more common violin keys of A, D and G Major gives students aural and physical experience in these “other” tonalities at an early stage of development. Experiencing how the note “A” sounds and feels different in the key of A Major from how it sounds and feels in the key of F# Minor or in the key of C Major, for example, is a creative experience for the student.

Resolution of a melody line to alternate chords built into a single arrangement is also a building block of creativity. For example, the first line of “Appalachia Waltz” resolves to a B Minor chord and then immediately following, the repeat of that same melody resolves to a D Major chord. Having this pointed out and experienced by young string players nurtures creative ideas. The inner and lower parts can “take credit” for the different substitutions since the top voice remains unchanged. Similarly, hearing and feeling how the dissonant suspensions in “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down Variation 6” resolve to the consonant harmonies that the students will recall from earlier variations is experiencing how things can change about something that is already familiar to them.

In addition, American music offers tonalities not often encountered in beginning string pedagogy but are basic in thinking about American music creatively. The melodies of tunes such as “Old Joe Clark” and “Boogie Woogie” contain lowered 7ths and lowered 3rds but are nevertheless extremely accessible and attractive to young music students. The modal and blues tonalities contained in these tunes subtly and naturally “instruct” the student providing an early alternative to the major-mode-only tonality common in other methods for perhaps years of study. Lowered 7ths are also included often in the inner melody lines of the orchestrations. Even as early as “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down Variation 3,” students can experience a sophisticated harmonic move in a very accessible way. The students would not need to “understand” the extent of this theory until much later but they would be internalizing the sound and feel at a very early stage of development. Later, the theory behind this harmonic movement will have meaning to them in the reality of music they have known for a long time.

## 9. Theoretical Knowledge

**Learning how to read music and “find the music” aurally at the same time is paramount to nurturing creativity.** Learning the “math” of what constitutes a whole note is important to be sure. However, of no less importance is learning what this sound – the sound of a single pitch sustained over four pulses - means in the context of ensemble playing. Putting some basic theory into context immediately in an ensemble is putting our best foot forward. Theory without a way or means to apply it, and therefore musically hear and feel it in a group class, ensemble or orchestra, is academic and can be boring and considered “not relevant” by young students. Students following *The O’Connor Method* tract are taught not only to “count” the four beats in a whole note while they are playing it but to listen actively to what “else” is going on in the music as a whole – rhythm, counterpoint, call and response, harmonic shift, or maybe just a “settling” of the harmony with everyone else playing a whole note too. Great care has been taken throughout my *Method* to reveal theoretical concepts in musically satisfying contexts – more building blocks for creative thinking.

## 10. American Musical Language - Mother Tongue

***The O'Connor Method* as a whole and *The O'Connor Method Book One* in particular take advantage of perhaps the greatest musical "mother tongue" of the 20th and 21st century - American music.** One billion people in India listen to and love American music; yet, as I learned on my recent tour to India, European classical music is essentially non-existent in both concert halls and classrooms there. However, this is just one example of the reach American music has had. Our diverse and rich culture surely has become the "mother tongue" of music for the world. American blues originated in the Mississippi Delta but is being enjoyed in abundance in Japan today. As wonderful as Japanese Kabuki music is, that particular "mother tongue" never seemed to resonate here or in most other parts of the world. The "mother tongue" that Suzuki described as a staple for his method manifests itself most fluently in the *American Music System* in the 21st Century. We may not be able to understand each other's spoken language in different parts of the world, but the world over enjoys Elvis, the Beatles and Michael Jackson. The American music language collectively has become the world's.

For over four hundred years, the *American* musical language was - and still is being - created by a multi-cultural, multi-generational and multi-faceted cross-pollination unlike any other the in the world's history. Because it carries cross-cultural communication at its heart, or "in its DNA," *American* music is able to rise above and speak to all cultures. *The O'Connor Method Book One* presents this musical language in a way accessible to beginning music students. Being able to "speak this language," i.e. play the tunes in *Book One*, is the first step in gaining a command of the language that will later result in individual creative uses of it.

## 11. Many American Styles

**The American music system is known for its wide range of styles; *The O'Connor Method* takes advantage of this wide variety as a creative learning tool.** Hoedowns, folk songs, spirituals, jazz tunes, jigs, blues, rock, ragtime, etc., provide a stylistic breadth that triggers a creative response to the materials. The contrasts that are revealed naturally and subtly by these various styles require differences in how the student feels and approaches the music. The simple task of learning a new tune in a new style is a creative endeavor. Methods that offer music from mostly one style (such as baroque music) miss out on this great opportunity to reveal the contrasting sounds, rhythms, melodies, tempos and textures available on a particular instrument even in the beginning years.

In addition, many of *The O'Connor Method* tunes themselves "cross the lines" between styles – in itself a classic trait of the *American Music System*. Folk songs, spirituals and popular songs can be – and traditionally have been - "jazzed up" or turned into fiddle tunes or creative instrumentals. Modern harmonies (including suspensions and dissonances) can be added to the basic harmonic movement of a tune originating in one style and creating a new sound, or even a new style. This cross-pollination of style is a hallmark of *American* music and is a highly creative experience "organically" available

to the young student who learns and plays the music from *The O'Connor Method*.

## 12. Music of Different Eras

**A span of 400 years and more is represented in *The O'Connor Method Book One*. Music from the 1500s and 1600s to music written in recent years expressly for *The Method*, engages the students' imaginations in time and space.** From one tune to the next, the student will visit virtually all eras of music. There is the 400-year-old "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" to start, followed immediately by the recently composed "Beautiful Skies." Or the 500-year-old melody of "Amazing Grace" followed shortly by the modern-day "Boogie Woogie." Other string methods that do not feature any music at all from the 20th century, and that barely even touch the 19th century save for a tune or two, do not allow the student to feel the magic of literature from different eras as they are first learning to play music.

There are many examples in the *American System* repertoire of a single piece of music that has been reinterpreted through various eras, therefore becoming relevant in new ways to subsequent generations. Learning and playing "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" connects students to the various cultures of earliest America and equally to the modern jazz cultures that recently enjoyed that same tune at the French Marciac Jazz Festival in 2010 (available for viewing on YouTube). Learning how this tune spans hundreds of years and thousands of miles shows the student how *old* becomes *new* again. Time and space travel indeed!

It is commonly thought that *thinking* or *acting* "outside the box" is necessary for creativity. Quite so. However, some music in itself is inherently more "outside the box" than other music. Just try to find a "box" for "Boil 'em Cabbage Down"! Merely *learning* that tune puts students "outside the box."

## 13. Musical Histories

**Studying a piece of music from the perspective of the history associated with it adds yet another dimension to instilling creativity. I have researched and written histories of each tune contained in *The O'Connor Method* and they are printed in the books as part of the music lesson for each piece.** Knowing about the rich and interesting cultural and historical background of each piece in *The Method* allows students to view the music through a different prism. The concept of double meanings is allowed to emerge. Since there is so much diversity in American music, the stories about the music are diverse, and therefore interesting and creative to students. By comparison most of the foundational classical music contained in the existing string methods is mostly German and it represents music from an approximately 100-year span in contrast to the 400+-year span of my *Method*. So unfortunately, even if the students do learn a story about a court composer who played for the King and Queen, the history of the music from that perspective gets repetitive, seems archaic and becomes less interesting

and ultimately irrelevant to American life or modern day life.

The histories of the tunes included in my *Method Book One* are varied, fascinating, and are in fact very relevant to American life and modern day life, merely by virtue of their diversity alone. Some parents of young students may want to conduct even further research into the history of a certain piece of music as well and share this with a curious child. Sometimes the histories show that not everything is known about the origin of a certain piece or style leaving the student free to use his imagination. Diversity is exemplified further in the histories I have written for *The Method*, because for some of the music we are not at all sure of its origins. Did an African American write the music, or a European American, or a Native American or a Latin American? Perhaps the Gypsies or the Melungeons of Appalachia wrote the original tune or words. Or maybe one community showed another community the music, or the music was a product of a shared experience between communities - a lesson in being creative in and of itself. The myriad of “maybes” inherent in the *American Music System* subtly “give students permission” to imagine their own details or visualizations of the historical summaries given. These creative endeavors related to the music provide a basis for curiosity and therefore a foundation from which new ideas about the music can flourish. Children may find this aspect of creativity easy to access and a doorway into thinking about the material in new ways.

## 14. Diversity & American Democracy

**The concepts – and probably more to the point the realities – of diversity, democracy and freedom are fertile ground for the growth of creative ideas.** The project of making these broad concepts and realities work in the musical environment promoted by *The O'Connor Method* is a creative endeavor. Our Founding Fathers were highly creative people. Our music reflects this spirit. American folk music spawned from a highly unique blend of cultures that made up the early American grassroots population. In America, music was, from its very inception, changeable. It did not pass unchanged from one person, one place or one generation to another. Each player was able – indeed almost expected – to change the music to fit his own concept, personality, playing ability, taste or regional style.

As groups of musicians learned to play together, American music changed again, as the democratic ideals of negotiation and compromise were manifested in the act of sharing and making music. American music itself has proven that it is sustainable and durable enough to withstand different musical treatments and adaptations by a diverse population. The music has proven pliable and flexible enough to accommodate changes in tempo, key, instrumentation, lyrics and regional style in order to include others and build musical communities. The fact that many musicians can contribute to the same music suggests common ownership of that music. This is a valuable American trait. The idea of music making as a democratic process requires a highly creative skill set - one that can be acquired in the *American Music System*.

## 15. Find Your Expression

**The ability to use music for expressing emotions is fundamental to creativity and indeed to the whole purpose of music in general.** American musical styles, by their very nature, provide a venue for easy accessibility to this aspect of creativity. All styles of American music were born of intense emotion, the need for emotional release or the desire for cross-cultural communication and this aspect of the music is ever present – subtly or otherwise. The cartoon figure in my *Method* named "Fiddle Boy," features various emotive facial expressions and has childlike things to say about the music. Interpreting the expression on Fiddle Boy's face and the feelings behind his words is actually a form of creative learning. Learning to find the expression in music – in any music - could be the single greatest skill a musician can obtain.

"Feelings" are not only emotions but sensations as well. Much of American music exhibits sensations of movement – spinning, bouncing, dancing, grooving – or sensations related to natural habitats – wide open spaces, journeying, running in the outdoors, "breaking out," feeling free. Teachers can engender a sense of "feelings" in music by asking students how the music "feels" from a sensation point of view.

Learning to express oneself emotionally is something that a child can come to know and understand with music making. Students will more freely express themselves if they feel an ownership of the music that the *American System* allows them to call their *own*. Learning to relate *their* music to basic or even surprisingly complex emotions at a young age through *The O'Connor Method* provides a foundation from which more mature forms of creative self-expression can flourish in later years.

## 16. Context: Formal And Informal Settings

***The O'Connor Method Book One* includes and promotes the concepts of formal training and discipline. However, the very same material used in this formal enterprise can also be used in more informal "jam sessions."** This is contextual variation - a fundamental concept to learn and an important building block of creativity. Guitars, bass guitars, banjos, mandolins, accordions, ukuleles, harmonicas, wind or brass instruments and various formal and informal percussions instruments can be added to the string material to create whole new sounds, "feels" and perspectives. Taking a familiar piece and changing the circumstances that had been typically associated with it is a key ingredient in thinking "outside the box." The ability to create new frameworks, by changing the context of your materials and of your environment, can eventually lead to the ability of composing and improvising music. Using an example of a single piece of music from *The O'Connor Method*, a simple change of context from "formal recital" to "informal jam session" can engage the student in this process.

Another idea that *The O'Connor Method* promotes by its illustrations is to practice in a variety of places whenever possible. Change the *context* and feel what it is like to play a lesson outdoors or even on the sidewalk as I did as a child in Seattle. Playing a lesson

for a younger sibling, or even a family pet, changes the context of the music and subtly occasions a change in how one plays.

## 17. Bridging Solo & Ensemble Repertoire

**Featuring a shared repertoire, *The O'Connor Method* taken as a whole creates many opportunities that may not have existed before.** One can assume that in a school orchestra class of say 30 students, there will be at least a few students studying privately and learning from the solo *O'Connor Method* books. These students will have a clear advantage from solo lessons on the same repertoire included in *The O'Connor Orchestra Method*. Student mentors can emerge. Teachers can identify these student tutors/mentors and should have them help others in group classes and after school. In this way, *The O'Connor Method* reaches into another world of creativity - personal creativity, group creativity - learning from each other and the self-electing of leaders among the students.

Sometimes students feel more comfortable and “freer to experiment” in groups of their peers than in student/teacher or parent/child relationships. Students are also naturally motivated to find ways to help their peers and ways that will help the group as a whole. The "building the community" aspect that music can provide through an artistic and creative hub in a music schoolroom after school, for instance, can be a significant building block for a stronger society. The bridge between solo repertoire and orchestral repertoire means that some private students can bring their keener knowledge of the same tunes and pieces to the larger ensembles or orchestras. Building a community based on music shared in common is doubly creative – socially and artistically – and is a feature of combining the solo and orchestra “arms” of *The Method*. School classrooms or any other place that students can gather are the very places for it!

## 18. Multi-faceted Mentoring

***The O'Connor Method* promotes a multi-faceted mentoring concept and vision for music education. In addition to teachers and parents, the actual manual itself and its contents can play a part in the role of mentoring.** Most creative artists in any genre will credit the influence of a mentor figure (or figures) without whom their art would not have flourished. Many of these mentors were not even acquainted with the students on a personal basis. Identifying a mentor – whether it is a teacher, parent, friend, or someone like me whose music on recordings/videos and whose compositions can be studied and admired - can be an important element in nurturing a creative spirit in young people.

Several tunes that I wrote especially for *The O'Connor Method* were deliberately created from a child composer's perspective and from a view of how to correlate a music lesson with other childhood activities. The example of myself having been a well-known child musician, gives me the opportunity to communicate (through photos and personal stories) how certain kinds of music felt to me and what it meant to me to learn and make music when I was a similar age to most of the students learning from the *Method*.

Teachers can expand on the mentoring aspect of *The Method* by helping students to identify figures that they can admire and wish to emulate. Some “likely candidates” are pictured and written about throughout the *Method* books.

## 19. Visual Stimulation (Layout And Mapping)

***The O'Connor Method* books are visually creative works mapped out with color, photographs, diagrams, artistic filigrees, geometric shapes, color/key associations, story boxes and elegant presentations of the music itself.** The "mapping" formula for *The Method* showcases the sheet music on its own page set apart from any instructional "clutter." In addition to the notation itself as a visual stimulation, the exercises and "Learning Pages" of the solo book versions of *The Method* present the opportunity for children to learn more about each piece of music than simply “how to play the notes.” Just because a student can play a particular tune well with no mistakes does not mean that the music lesson for that tune is complete. The fact that the "Learning Pages" always follow, rather than precede the sheet music, demonstrates the attitude that there is always more to learn about a tune than “what you already know.” This mapping acts as an incentive for further development of each tune – creativity!

Further, there are visual diagrams throughout the beginning books allowing young students to sense music more visually. A musical staff chart is presented showing the students very big note shapes in the lower range progressively getting smaller toward the upper ranges – sound modulating in imagery. A similar chart shows the thickness of the string as being *thin* for the high notes and *fat* for the low notes. Students can correlate this visual imagery with how they perceive musical pitches to rise and fall.

Another chart shows the seven colors of the natural *rainbow* and how I make a correlation to the seven degrees of the musical scale. The home note or 1st degree represents the primary color and first color of the rainbow (*red*). The musical triad represents the three primary colors in the 1st, 3rd and 5th stripes of the rainbow – *red, yellow and blue*. The most dissonant of musical harmonies reside in the 6th and 7th degrees of the scale. As music goes, so does the *rainbow*. The most complex colors of *indigo* and *violet* rest in the final outer layers of the rainbow color spectrum – the 6th and 7th degrees from the home color of *red*. This rainbow chart together with the other charts in *The O'Connor Method* combine to provide ways for students to organize music visually suggesting relationships to notation, color, geometrical shapes and sizes, text boxes and the beauty of our natural habitats.

## 20. Going Green

**The "green component" of *The O'Connor Method* is manifested in several ways.** The recycled paper used for the actual production of the physical books is just the beginning - but nonetheless a very good lesson in the art of conservation and creative use

of resources. A recurring theme of photographs of beautiful natural habitats placed throughout is a feature of all *The O'Connor Method* books. These photographs are carefully correlated to the natural themes of the music. The concept of visualizing music in various habitats through the use of photos, color and words is a creative process.

*Book One Method* tunes such as “Beautiful Skies, "Climbing the Mountain," "Westward Journey" and Appalachia Waltz,” for example, are accompanied by companion visual images that not only help to describe the music to the student, but remind the student of our beautiful landscapes and bodies of water that can be celebrated and interpreted through playing and being creative with the music itself.

The landscapes of the United States have long been the muse for many American composers. Some of the most beautiful songs in American history have been written for a specific natural habitats, such as *The O'Connor Method's* "Shenandoah," "Deep River" and “Lazy River” – each depicting one of our most precious water ways (the Shenandoah, Ohio and Mississippi rivers) crisscrossing our landscape and reminding us of our history. The photos of children in natural landscape settings contained in the books bring a physical or emotional experience to the musical materials: thus, playing “Climbing the Mountain,” for example, becomes a new kind of journey as the students ascend with their scale-like passages, transporting music beyond the classroom into the world of natural beauty - and *climbing* it!

## Accessibility For Teachers - Small Steps

A beginning teacher using *The O'Connor Method* books will not need to know an extensive amount about improvisation and/or composition to be successful in instilling, nurturing and engendering creativity. Being able to recognize the roots of creativity and to point them out along the way is the intended goal for teachers using this *Method*. As I have shown in the "20 Points" above, *The O'Connor Method* books and the artistic messages contained within them provide the necessary creative building blocks in a natural way, easily grasped and internalized by students and teachers alike.

Creativity training is largely absent from most string pedagogy. In other methodologies for the beginning music student, there has been a significant lack of understanding of the basic fundamental level of creativity – where it *comes from* – and how to present it. I have shown how this can be done in these "20 Points" as it specifically relates to *The O'Connor Method* and more generally, but no less importantly, the *American Music System* as a whole. Remember that improvisation and composing comes later – Middle School at the earliest. Composing and improvising before that age is unnecessary and will likely detract from a child's ability to learn and internalize music, understand the disciplines of music and learn to play his/her instrument well. *The O'Connor Method* nurtures the steps of "letting go" and "thinking outside the box" without “forcing” huge leaps of creativity too early on. The “right-brainers” are the future of not only musical development in America and elsewhere in the world, but of other work environments too as the *information age* and the *conceptual age* begin to intertwine. The "20 Points"

reflect the steps that will help music students not only save music in our current environment, but actually save our environment! How? By becoming better students, better stewards, more thoughtful and caring citizens, better leaders, better team players, more well-rounded individuals, and more creative thinkers.

I believe that the “technique-oriented” (left-brain) musical training so prevalent in today’s string world is responsible in large part for the paucity of string playing composers, arrangers, improvisers and band/ensemble leaders in the United States. Yes, band-leading requires creativity and our current string players do not seem to be emerging as leaders of jazz, bluegrass, rock or other music groups that require creative skills. With your help we can use *The O'Connor Method* to reach many young people helping them to attain the same level of technical skill that other methods have offered while, at the very same time, providing them with a creative musical foundation upon which they can build and grow into fully realized musicians when they are in Middle School, High School and beyond.

Welcome aboard and congratulations!

Mark O'Connor - 1/4/12