SECTION 5

Appreciation

Section Editor: Margaret S. Barrett
LOCATING THE HEART OF EXPERIENCE

Margaret S. Barrett
University of Tasmania, Australia

Early in my teaching career I worked as an itinerant music teacher, traveling between schools, sometimes up to five per week, teaching music and dance to children aged between 5 and 12 years. In what felt at times like an endless da capo aria, certain events stand out as signal moments.

On a hot summer’s afternoon, in my first year of teaching, I took a small group of kindergarten children for a listening lesson. They were new to school and the idea of education and were yet to absorb the rules of “appropriate listening behaviour.” I had chosen a recording of Swedish composer Arne Mellnas’ work for children’s choir Aglepta, a difficult work for choir and listener, that challenges the conventions of the singing voice and stretches the listener to think about vocal sound in new ways. The text is mostly nonsense words culminating in an ancient Swedish chant from the Troll proverbs.

The children’s initial reaction to the work was incredulous, and they rolled on the floor, whooping and babbling in imitation of the sounds the choir produced. I recall feeling a rising sense of panic – this was not the way my colleagues at the Conservatorium had responded to similar works – and debating with myself whether I should stop the recording as it continued for a seemingly endless four and a half minutes. And yet, the children seemed to be listening in all their movement and noise.

At the end of that first experience of the work, the children asked to hear it again, a response I hadn’t expected. Before listening again we talked about what we had heard and the composer’s description of the work, and experimented with our voices and bodies to hear how we could match the voices in the recording, and capture the swoops and leaps of sound. When we listened a second time, the children did not move or vocalise with the recording as they had before: rather, they listened whilst shuffling their out-stretched legs on the floor, swaying their seated bodies, and fidgeting their hands and fingers in an uneasy accompaniment that