

Points of Entry

David Wallace opens doors to music for young listeners—and teaches fellow musicians to do the same.

by Heidi Waleson

On a Friday morning in April, teaching artist David Wallace is introducing Cesar Franck's Symphony in D minor to about 100 middle-school students before they hear the piece played in a New York Philharmonic rehearsal. Armed with a whiteboard, markers, a CD player, and his viola, Wallace, who is tall, calm, and soft-spoken, has no difficulty holding the attention of his audience. After a quick run through the elements of music (melody, rhythm, harmony, etc.) as well as the concepts of major and minor keys, eliciting responses from the students, Wallace focuses on themes. He first asks the students to suggest characters for themes, and then to make up themes that reflect those characters (they first choose "heroic"; and then, asked for contrast, "cowardly"). As the students sing their themes in turn, Wallace plays them back on the viola, writes them down, and then improvises transitional material to connect them.

Midway through the hour, Wallace introduces four themes from the Franck symphony and treats them similarly, inviting the audience to characterize each: "a ghost playing tricks on you in a haunted house"; "sneaky, lonely." "My Little Pony!" exclaimed one girl on hearing the fourth theme. "Yes!" says Wallace. In the next 30 minutes, he asks his youthful audience to suggest different kinds of accompaniment for the themes, plays them on the viola

while varying the rhythm, speed and articulation, and plays bits of the Franck CD to show them in different instrumentations. As a final "quiz," he plays a theme on the viola and has students hold up one, two, three, or four fingers to identify it. When the students confuse the second and third

"Real interaction involves a certain degree of risk," Wallace writes. "It might feel safer and easier just to talk. However, once you take the plunge and truly interact, you quickly discover that the payoffs far surpass the risks."



Striving to "truly interact," as he counsels in his forthcoming guide to teaching artistry, David Wallace brings himself to the level of his listeners by conducting this demonstration on his knees.

themes, he has them conduct both, effortlessly clarifying the difference.

Wallace is a teaching artist, an unusual hybrid of performer and educator. The best teaching artists are fine performers who can also communicate through words what is special about their art. But communicating

is more than talking. As the best teachers know, teaching means guiding students to actively participate and discover things for themselves. So teaching artists engage with their listeners, whatever their age or experience, and whether in a classroom, a workshop, or a concert setting. American Symphony Orchestra League Vice President Polly Kahn, who hired Wallace nearly a decade ago when she was director of education at the New York Philharmonic, explains the philosophy of education that underpins teaching artistry. "This is about open-ended inquiry, not about right or wrong answers, not about a body of knowledge. It is the belief that the ability to listen and take pleasure in music can be owned by anyone. David has taken this to a high art. He has a high degree of skill in opening up that line of inquiry, helping people be fascinated by music and want to go deeper into it."

Wallace has written a book on the subject, *Reaching Out: A Musician's Guide to Interactive Performance*, soon to be published by McGraw Hill. It distills the experience that he has gained in his dozen years of study and work as a teaching artist for Lincoln Center Institute, the New York Philharmonic, and other organizations. It further extends his work as a teacher of other teaching artists: in the graduate Arts in Education course at Juilliard, as a mentor to the Morse Fellows (Juilliard students who teach in New York City schools), and as a senior teaching artist at the New York Philharmonic.

A step-by-step guide that covers everything from philosophy to curriculum development to convincing fellow chamber musicians to join in the teaching artistry effort, *Reaching Out* posits that an interactive concert is not merely a lecture-recital, but "an event where the performers help audience members to perform, create and reflect in ways that heighten their musical perception." Interactive concerts, Wallace maintains, are by definition a two-way street, requiring creativity, flexibility,

and spontaneity on the part of the teaching artist. They require considerable preparation: The teaching artist must delve into the work presented and come up with an “entry point” to the piece (the themes in the Franck symphony, for example). The next step is to design engaging activities around that entry point that will work with a group, be meaningful to them, and give

playing and science study, when a summer music program at Baylor University opened his eyes. “Kevin Lawrence gave master classes, and he would ask, ‘What does this guy need?’ and I always knew. I realized I knew a lot about how to play. It made me think about teaching. Then during my senior year, I had a phenomenal violin teacher, Kenneth Goldsmith. He

Wallace, it was transformative. “It challenged the way I thought about teaching,” he says. “Something that had always inspired me about private teaching was that moment when the light bulb goes off in the student’s head, and their sound changes, or their bow arm changes. I realized that with the right approach, you can make that happen with 30 people at once. In an interac-



Wallace engages an appreciative audience of apprentice “conductors” at Avery Fisher Hall.

them real insights into the music. “Real interaction involves a certain degree of risk,” Wallace writes in his first chapter. “It might feel safer and easier just to talk. However, once you take the plunge and truly interact, you quickly discover that the payoffs far surpass the risks.” The aim of the book is to supply the “principles, strategies and skills” that will enable musicians to do it themselves.

A Natural Gift

Eric Booth, a guru among teaching artists and one of Wallace’s principal mentors, estimates that about 20 percent of musicians are naturally gifted at this sort of work, 20 percent will probably never get it at all, and the middle 60 percent can be successfully trained. Wallace is clearly in the first 20 percent. Born and raised in Texas, he was fascinated by music at an early age. He envied his father’s Texas fiddle-playing—he was angry when, at age three, he was given a toy violin that didn’t make any sound. At seven, he took up the piano because he simply “had to play rag-time.” By the time he was in high school, Wallace was vacillating between violin

could give an orangutan a great technique—he had learned late in life, and had a solid understanding of it.”

Wallace started dreaming about being a great pedagogue—“the next Dorothy DeLay”—or at least having a nice life teaching violin in a college, playing chamber music, and holding first chair in the local orchestra. Then, during his senior year of college at the University of Houston, he began playing the viola. “It opened a whole new realm of performing. When I came to New York to study at Mannes and Juilliard, I realized that teaching was not enough. I wanted to play, too.”

This duality of purpose made Wallace a prime candidate for the career of a teaching artist, and he was in the right place at the right time. During his first year at Juilliard, Wallace was looking for ways to support himself, and a friend recommended the new Morse Fellowship program, which was just starting in 1994. The fellowship paid \$4,000, but there was a catch—“I had to take this stupid course.”

That course was “Arts in Education,” taught by Ed Bilous and Eric Booth. For

tive concert, you can do it with 200 at once. Or a couple of thousand.”

In 1997, after completing his Morse Fellowship and receiving his doctoral degree, Wallace went to work as a teaching artist for both Lincoln Center Institute and for the New York Philharmonic, whose School Partnership Program pioneered long-term relationships of musicians with students and teachers. “From the beginning, David was somebody for whom the education mission was not simply a set of skills to call on to make a living, but part of how he saw himself as an artist,” notes Kahn. “At the same time, he is a very fine violinist and violist, so he has maintained great artistic integrity while having this other piece of his portfolio.” Eric Booth concurs. “All the elements that make David an important innovator and leader were there a decade ago,” he says. “He not only ‘understands’ but *lives* the truth that teaching skills make one a better artist, and artistic excellence makes one a better teacher. He is a great learner inside, and thus a great teacher.”

In fact, Wallace says, “I had an epiphany a few years ago. I realized that if I never

teach another private lesson as long as I live, it will be okay. I still do that, but my other work with teaching artists, children, and audiences is satisfying enough that it has eclipsed the thing that brought me to it in the first place. Plenty of people can teach violin or viola well, but everything we do as teaching artists is about the art itself. When you are mining the art to find what the real

Bridging the Gap

Helping listeners think like composers—to identify creative problems and figure out how to solve them—has spurred Wallace to do more composing himself. One afternoon in April, he helped Berta Alvarez's fifth-grade class at PS 165 figure out how to make a transition between two very different themes that they had already composed



posed for their "graduation" piece. Wallace set up the problem and elicited possible solutions from the students, giving each idea, no matter how rudimentary, focused attention and development. He then divided the class into six groups. Remarkably, each group came up with a different, successful

gems are, it is fulfilling in an artistic way. It's a question of what your calling is."

Wallace especially enjoys what he calls the "inherent creativity" of designing workshops and lessons and teaching them. The basic teaching artist mantra—that you can teach anyone about any piece as long as you find the right entry point—poses a challenge that he relishes. Wallace has introduced Bruckner to elementary-school children. He managed to present Tan Dun's *Water Concerto* for Water Percussion and Orchestra, which was being given its premiere by the New York Philharmonic, even though "they wouldn't give me a score, and the rehearsal I was supposed to attend was cancelled." His solution? "I had one CD of Tan Dun's music, and from that I figured that timbre would be a central element of the piece. That night, I was in my kitchen, sweating bullets, and I assembled a battery of water percussion instruments out of found objects. The next day, we improvised a water percussion concerto, and I have to say, we came pretty close!"

transition based on one of those ideas, wrote it down in letters rather than traditional notation, and played it on recorders.

"To bridge the gap, you have to know what the choices are," Wallace says. "So I looked at others: How did Beethoven solve the problem? How did Hendrix solve it? What distinguishes the best teaching artists is that they are so aware of the process, they are able to help a class or a student

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through, whatever stage they are at. A lot of it has to do with being able to ask good questions." The students in that class, he pointed out, have been in the Philharmonic program for three years, and the class is co-taught by two of the most seasoned teachers in the school. "They are used to solving problems," he said. "All I had to do is figure out what we needed to do, and they came up with solutions. That's the work of making art."

Alvarez, who has worked with Wallace for many years, calls him "inspiring." "He uses what they know, everything we have done, and helps them bring it out and put it into their final piece," she says. "He would never turn anybody off." The result? "My kids love music."

For Wallace, that result matters the most. Watching those light bulbs go off, time after time, with all sorts of youngsters, is enormously rewarding, as is seeing the transformative power of music in children's lives. "A few years ago, I had a student in my class who was also in our after-school composition program," Wallace recalls. "This child had a rough home life, and one day, during the lunch period, I saw him working on math with another student, struggling with long division, and crying. Later, he was walking around the room clutching a wrinkled piece of paper. It was his piece for the New York Philharmonic. That score had become this kid's security blanket, proof he had worth and could do something. That tells me that what we do goes farther and deeper than just a nice event."

Developing the skills to become a teaching artist takes both knowledge and practice—a fact that becomes abundantly clear one afternoon in Wallace's Arts in Education seminar at Juilliard. His beginning students still have a ways to go before they acquire the flexibility and spontaneity that seem so effortless when Wallace teaches. As four young musicians present sample

lessons to their peers, who are pretending to be fourth graders, their nervousness shows. One simply recites the planned activity rather than doing it. Another sets up a soph-

isticated exercise in clapping polyrhythms, but cannot answer a student's persistent question as to why two of the rhythms that the teacher says are different seem the same. None of these fledgling teachers plays their instrument.

Still, they are curious about teaching artistry, and want to go farther. Percussionist Jerome Jennings, who is getting a master's degree in jazz studies, says that Wallace's class has given him a "kitbag" of



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People

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Michael D'Vito

The teaching artist encourages active participation from his young charges.

skills, avenues to organize curriculum, and a new way to view teaching. "He has such a positive attitude and open mind," Jennings says. "I never felt any idea I brought to him was a bad idea." Jennings is one of seven students in the class who have been accepted into the Morse program for 2006-07.

Wallace has already been recognized for his contributions to the teaching artist field. In 2002, he received the first \$10,000 McGraw-Hill Companies' Robert Sherman Award for Music Education and Community Outreach. The prize gave him the breathing space in his schedule to write his book. At first, he fretted at the prospect of setting his ideas down on paper: "You want your philosophy of education to be a living thing, and once you put it in writing, will it become fixed?"

That seems unlikely to happen. In addition to his other work, which includes performing with his fiddling ensemble, the Doc Wallace Trio, Wallace's latest project aims to take the marriage of playing and teaching one step further. "I've been working with some musicians who are teaching artists to launch a new ensemble that offers a whole range of possibilities for people who are strong performers, composers. It will involve teaching artist work, school concerts, things for adults, and mentoring young ensembles." The project, based at New York City's 92nd St. Y and dubbed "Music Unlocked," involves two fellow Philharmonic teaching artists, flutist Tanya Witek and clarinetist Richard

Mannoia, and hornist Misty Pereira, who is director of educational outreach at the 92nd St. Y. Also on the team are Eric Booth and composer Thomas Cabaniss, former director of education at the Philharmonic and now musical animateur at the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The project, Wallace says, "came out of seeing a group of teaching artists performing Ravel's Introduction and Allegro. I looked around the stage and saw all these incredible musicians—the harpist got an Avery Fisher career grant, the flutist subs in Orpheus—and thinking, these people could be playing on any stage, and we're here in an inner-city public school having a wonderful time making music. Everyone made sacrifices to do that, and everyone does it out of sheer love of teaching and making music. There has got to be a way to create a new concert experience, a new market for people who can present and perform at a high level."

Eric Booth thinks that Wallace is just the person to figure that out. "His leadership derives from his courage to continually create, to take risks, to explore areas that are new and difficult, to take joy in processes of discovery and not just the delivery of great products," Booth says. "David walks his talk, and his talk is right on the cutting edge of what it means to be a joyful, bold, entrepreneurial, creatively satisfied, successful, wide-awake 21st-century musician." ~

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