


Don't Worry, He's Happy



He's scored a No. 1 pop hit, earned acclaim as one of the most distinctive voices in jazz, and stood before some of America's finest orchestras, not just as a soloist, but as a conductor. Today, however, the role being played by Bobby McFerrin is that of pied piper. At Tuttle Elementary School in northeast Minneapolis, McFerrin is leading the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, of which he is the Creative Chair, through an hour-long program meant to demonstrate to several hundred first, second, and third graders that music is fun, and that its fundamentals aren't really that difficult.

"Did you know that John Coltrane used the same 12 notes that Boyz II Men use, and that Beethoven used the same 12 notes that Stevie Wonder uses?" he asks, a conductor's baton stuck into his long dreadlocks like a pencil behind the ear. He points out that the human body itself is an instrument, and then proves it by having the kids slap their thighs softly, then harder in imitation of a rainstorm. He illustrates the differences between major and minor keys by singing familiar songs in major keys: "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." When one of the children asks if "Rockabye Baby" is in a minor key, McFerrin jokes, "Rockabye Baby" is in a major key. Believe me, if parents sang to their kids in a minor key, they would never sleep."

The children dearly love him, and as he leads the SPCO through a few crisp excerpts from Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, many of them wave their hands as if they were conducting the orchestra. Unfortunately for McFerrin, not everyone has been as uncritical regarding his wide-ranging career. Many, perhaps even McFerrin at this point, cringe at the mere mention of his 1988 can't-get-it-out-of-your-head smash "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Similarly, many in the classical-music establishment resent his rapid rise through the conducting ranks, which they see as a result of orchestras pandering to the celebrity-worshipping masses.

But no one can accuse Bobby McFerrin of not walking it like he talks it. He provided the single electrifying moment at this year's Grammy Awards, making an impassioned impromptu speech about the desperate need for

Whether he's playing jazz or classical, **Bobby McFerrin** conducts himself with style.

By **Daniel Durchholz**

music education and appreciation, however basic, in our schools. Whether his words will be heeded remains to be seen, but today, the kids at Tuttle Elementary understand exactly what he was talking about.

At the Grammys you spoke about the need to expose children to more music. Is the work you do for kids with the SPCO the type of program you'd like to see repeated elsewhere?

Actually, it's not about a program at all. It's about teachers taking the initiative to introduce music to the kids. Just take 10 minutes out of your school time and share your love of music with them. If they're exposed to different kinds of music, that makes a really big difference. I'm assuming that most kids have a musical preference and they listen to what their peers listen to. But if teachers will just take it upon themselves to play the classics, play jazz, play some rock, depending on what it is, some gospel, or whatever, it could have a profound impact on the way kids listen to music and the way they approach it. Music is like...countries: You can take a musical journey in your day.

It's obvious the kids love what you do. But with orchestras in trouble these days because of funding cuts and shrinking audiences, what's it going to take for classical music to win back adults?

The key, really, is just passion. That's it. It doesn't matter who the audience is, whether they're six or 60, as long as the musicians who are playing really exhibit passion about making music.

Some would say that your being asked to guest conduct various orchestras and your appointment with the SPCO is based largely on novelty appeal. Have you met a lot of resistance from members of the old guard who feel you haven't paid your classical-music dues?

I know that attitude exists, but I haven't really faced it. Only a couple of times have I faced musicians who obviously were not happy with me being on the podium. It was

just written all over their face. And there might be some silent resistance. But there are no musical snobs in [the SPCO]. It's not a stuffy orchestra at all.

What were your earliest musical influences?

Most people don't realize that my upbringing is classical. My father was an opera singer at the Metropolitan Opera, so the music that I latched onto first would be the music of my parents, which was mostly clas-



McFerrin's ebullient manner captivates students at Minneapolis' Tuttle Elementary School.

sical. But as a musician growing up in the late '60s and early '70s, there was that whole age where jazz and rock and classical musicians were opening up and speaking to each other and exploring each other's music. Look at the symphonic rock works that were happening. Rock musicians were writing these long opuses and using orchestras. Everyone was incorporating all these elements in their music. The ears were just so wide open.

You didn't start singing until you were 27. Why did it take so long for you to discover your voice?

I had this nagging suspicion that none of the various instruments I was trying out was my instrument. I had a really close call, actually, because I loved clarinet when I was 10, and I would be playing clarinet in a symphony orchestra nowadays, no doubt about it, if I didn't have to have braces and the orthodontist said I couldn't play clarinet anymore. That was my first heartbreak. Then I

played flute, which I didn't like, and then piano. But this voice inside me said, "You haven't found it yet." It took 27 years for me to really know that it was singing.

That was one sort of leap, but conducting is something else entirely. What made you want to take it up? An early midlife crisis or something?

Maybe, but you know, I actually started conducting when I was a teenager. So it's always been in the back of my mind. But being

a really shy kid, I could not imagine standing in front of a group of musicians and telling them what to do. But it looked like fun, and anytime I would go to an orchestral concert or I'd see something on television, I was very interested in the mysteries of conducting. You know, watching this guy, and why was he different from the other one, that kind of stuff.

And then at 38, I stopped doing solo voice concerts. I was tired of being onstage by myself. I took 18 months off and thought about how I wanted to re-enter the world as a musician. And conducting came up. My 40th birthday was approaching, and I wanted to do something interesting for it, and conducting was my present to myself. I studied Beethoven's Seventh for a year, and had lessons with Gustav Meier—who is still my mentor—Seiji Ozawa, Leonard Bernstein, lots of conductors. And I did Beethoven's Seventh on my birthday. But I wasn't bitten by the conducting bug like everyone thought I was. I thought I was going to have some incredible revelation and my life was going to change at that moment. And it did, but I didn't feel it. I thought I would float off the podium, but I didn't.

Because you've traveled a different path than the musicians you conduct, is there something from the pop and jazz worlds that you bring to the party that a wholly

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classically trained conductor would not?

I'm simply bringing myself and my experiences as a musician. My sense of fun and play, and love and passion. I'm so grateful to be a musician. I am so thankful that I get to play for a living.

When you worked with Yo Yo Ma on the *Hush* album, was there a clash of styles between you, who've improvised a lot, and Ma, who is used to playing the notes that are written on paper?

Clash is not the word. It doesn't even apply, because working with Yo Yo is one of the easiest, most enjoyable experiences. And he was really very curious and interested in improvisation. And I, at the time, was very interested in classical music again. When we were putting that record together we were teaching each other about music.

Is there a history in classical music of using improvisation?

Oh my goodness, yes. It's really amazing to me that classical musicians don't study improvisation in school. It just does not make sense. Bach and Mozart, for example, were fabulous improvisers. You wonder why it's not taught. Because if you learn how to improvise, you're establishing a historical connection with the musicians you're studying. That's a part of their life that's overlooked almost. Mozart was a great improviser. You could play a theme for him, and he would play it and play it many different ways. Bach was the same, just sitting down at the keyboard and playing. To me, the bottom line of improvisation is movement. You play a note, and you play another note, whether you know what you're doing or not. Kids, for example, don't know a thing about theory, but they're great improvisers. If you sing something to them, they can sing it back to you. They make up their own songs. They don't know a thing about theory, yet in some ways they're a lot more spontaneous than musicians who have all this head knowledge about what they're doing.

Can you, as one person, rectify this situation?

As one person I know I can't, but I know I can

help. It's funny, because I don't even have an agenda. I'm not on a mission to change the classical world. What's on my mind is the music I'm doing at the moment. Just having fun, and for some reason, fun is sort of looked down on, especially in classical music. They say, "Oh you can't have fun with Beethoven." Well, why not? That's not to say I want to have fun in a nonrespectful way. You can ask any musician that I've worked with in an orchestra that I have not goofed around with Beethoven or any of the pieces that we've played. There's never been sort of a turning the music upside down or playing it backward. But by fun I mean a sort of lightness of being. Sometimes we can take ourselves so seriously we just take the joy out of life. If you make a mistake, fine, go on. Don't get so bogged down with theory, or technique. Just be open, have a wide-open heart.

Do you approach a jazz recording like *Bang! Zoom* differently than an orchestral recording like *Paper Music*?

No, and I know that almost sounds impossible. But for me, it's the same. I'm the same Bobby whether I'm working with my jazz group, standing in front of an orchestra, singing chants, or whatever. I don't assume a different posture as a jazz musician or as a classical musician. It's the same to me, whether I'm doing a concert for kids or a subscription concert for adults. I'm dealing with 12 notes, the same notes that wrote "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "Ode to Joy." Same stuff.

Is there a difference between guest conducting and working with one orchestra like you do now?

Big, big difference. When you guest conduct, you come in and do a rehearsal, do a gig, and you're gone. You can make adequate music, but you can't make great music. You can make great music when you know it's a relationship. The longer you're with some person and you know everything about them—I mean you know them—you can just make beautiful music together. That's what I'm out to do now. @

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