



Wade Coufal with his peers in the first class of ArtistYear Fellows, Alexandra von der Embse and Michelle Cann. As the BOK Trio, they performed in many community settings in 2014–15, including a May event at the Magic Garden in Philadelphia.

PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON



Finding a Voice

OPENING THE WORLD OF MUSIC TO YOUNG HOSPITAL PATIENTS

BY WADE COUFAL

It's startling to think of the many ways that music has shaped my life—startling because I can't imagine life without it—and scary to think what course my life might have taken had I not been introduced to it.

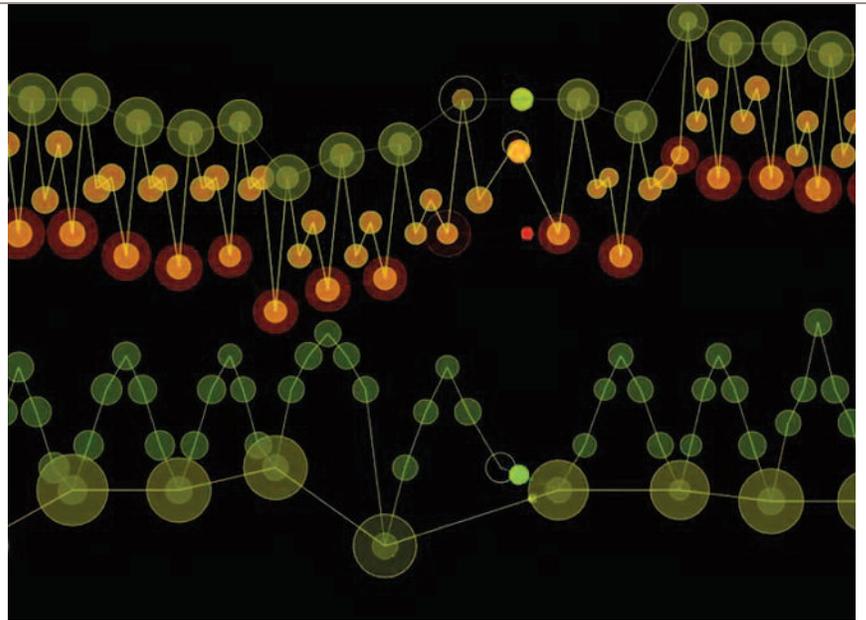
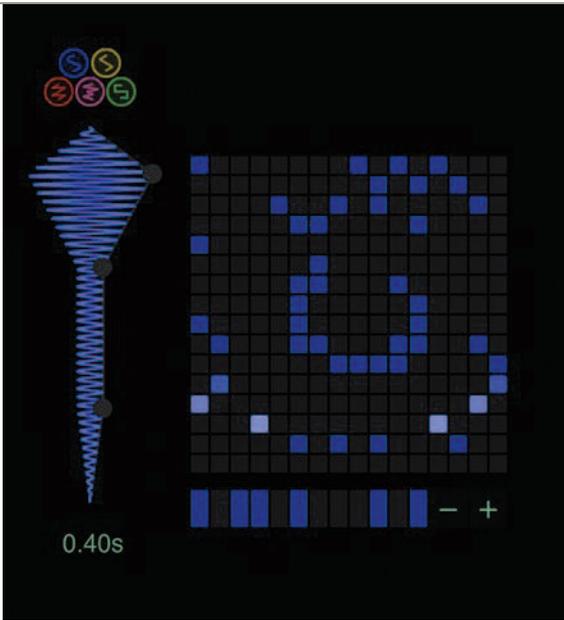
I was always the quiet kid in school, the one with crippling social anxiety, the one who was too afraid to look anyone in the eye. I tried so hard to stay out of sight and unknown that even my laughter was inaudible, just a silent gasping of air, out of fear that I might accidentally attract attention.

It's equally strange to think that a bizarre-looking instrument like the bassoon would be what saved me from perpetual anxiety. There was something addictive about making my own music. The bassoon really did become my voice. In band class, most of the other kids had never actually heard me speak, but they knew that I played the bassoon extremely well and that I did, in fact, have something to say.

Having the ability to communicate—whether it be through words, music, dance, anything—is incredibly empowering. For me, music has always been a friend, something I can turn to when life is looking bleak. This idea, that music can transform one's perspective, was the impetus behind my ArtistYear project at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children.

For the past year I have made music with patients who are unable to leave their rooms. Their immune systems are compromised, or they are contagious, or they are just too exhausted to get out of bed. Some of these children will be cooped up in their rooms for days or even weeks, and this takes a toll on their emotional health. It's one thing for an adult to be sick in a hospital, but for a child it is deeply confusing. I wanted to make music

As an ArtistYear Fellow I wanted to make music with as many kids as possible, to help each one find the unique artistic voice that might offer solace in an environment full of IVs, electrodes, and beeping monitors.



Online tools like these helped Wade work one-on-one with patients to create music.

IMAGES: SEQUENCE.ORG (ABOVE LEFT AND OPPOSITE); STEPHEN MALINOWSKI MUSIC ANIMATION MACHINE (ABOVE RIGHT)

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The children I worked with varied dramatically in demeanor. One kid might be hyper and excited about playing with instruments, so much so that you wonder what could possibly be keeping them in the hospital, while the next child might not even be able to sit up in bed. I had to thoughtfully plan music-making activities that would be flexible enough to fit the huge array of children I worked with. And I quickly learned that I could not use my own “voice”—the bassoon—in the hospital, because it was impossible to sanitize all its intricate hardware. I had to develop new ways to open the world of music to these children.

I had fantastic responses from a large number of the patients at St. Christopher’s, but every now and then I would have an experience with a child that really confirmed the amazingly transformative power of music.

MAKING MUSIC WITH QUIET KIDS

Before I walk into Ashley’s room, I read the sign on her door that indicates all the proper attire to be worn before going in, a slew of yellow, papery garments: a gown, mask, and gloves. After gearing up, I swiftly wipe down my laptop, speakers, and simple instruments with alcohol wipes, making sure I don’t miss a single key or mallet.

I introduce myself: “Hi! My name’s Wade. I’m a musician and I was hoping you might want to make music with me.” Ashley, 11 years old, is very shy. She looks down, and nods her head up and down ever so slightly, almost as if she is saying yes just to be polite. But I’ve learned that often kids who are quiet and soft-spoken will give this sort of timid response. It’s not that they’re not interested; it just takes some time to open them up.

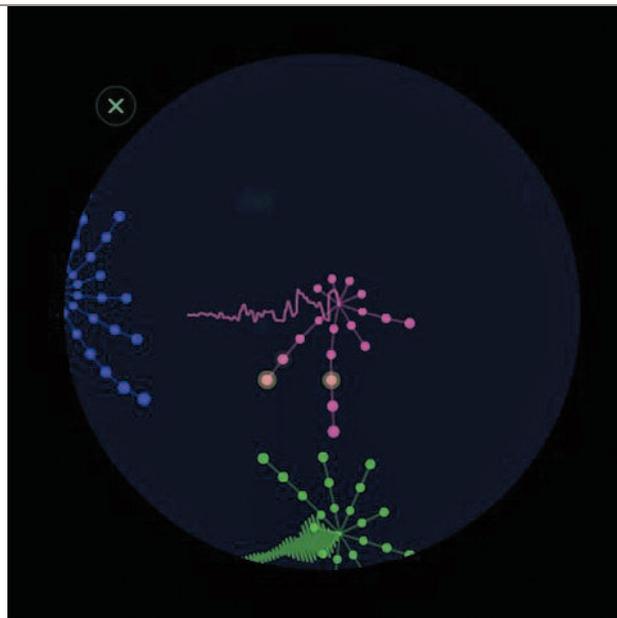
“Awesome! I’m excited to show you all my instruments and music.” While I set up, I ask a series of simple questions to get her talking, even if just a little bit. “Do you play music? What’s your favorite subject in school? Who’s your favorite artist?” It takes time; I am still a stranger, after all. She says she used to play the trumpet in band. She loves math. Her favorite artist is SIA. She’s still won’t look me in the eye, but she’s warming up.

I pull out my xylophone. Ashley is in middle school, though, so I know that the dinky, tiny keyboard isn’t impressive to her. I show her how to strike with the mallet, taking care to not stifle the key, to let it resonate and ring. We play Simon Says—I play a pattern, she repeats it back. The patterns grow in complexity, and within five minutes she has a good grasp of the instrument. Once I introduce the basics and technique of the instrument, I step things up a notch.



Wade donned a mask and gown during each visit to St. Christopher's Hospital, and captured the effect in this "selfie."

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I bring out my laptop and a set of speakers, open up my iTunes library, and hit play. An electronic track with a cool vibe comes on, with repetitive phrases. The music creates a new atmosphere in the room. The music is minimalist, staying within the same key signature, which makes it the perfect piece of music to improvise over.

I remove several of the xylophone keys—the ones that wouldn't work in the key of the piece—and I tell Ashley, "Improvise. Make your own music." She gives me a bewildered look, nervously laughs—and freezes up.

This happens with nearly every patient I've worked with! To them, the idea to create something out of nothing is terrifying. So I ease her into improvisation by playing around on the xylophone myself for a bit. The xylophone's timbre meshes perfectly with the electronic track, and I noodle around, making up rhythms and melodies as I go. "Now you try." She tentatively lifts her mallet and starts finding the notes, and in a matter of moments music is spilling out into the room. Ashley's excitement is almost tangible.

IGNITING A FLAME

For Ashley it was the same with each session. Doctors and nurses would walk into the room to hear her make music, stunned to see this quiet, distant girl become so animated. Her face would light up as everyone watched her create meaningful art, and her confidence filled the room. These special moments, these breakthroughs, affirm the power that music can have on a child's emotional well-being.

The act of creation gives us strength. The ability to express ourselves through sounds, words, movement, color—these remarkably powerful gifts we have as humans—allows for an incredible spectrum of emotion and a highly nuanced way of communicating. I am forever grateful to music for the ways in which it has given me life, a voice to speak with.

As artists, we also have the opportunity to help others find their creative voice. ArtistYear afforded me a year of exploration, to discover ways to inspire others to create, uninhibited by preconceived notions of what it takes to be an "artist." Igniting this flame in others is, I find, an art form in itself. Convincing someone that they are in fact a creative being is difficult, especially in a world full of hasty judgments.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time at St. Christopher's, creating a safe space for children to gain the confidence to write their own music, and sharing my artistic experiences with others. Thank you, ArtistYear, for helping me discover this new passion. ✧

Wade Coufal graduated from Curtis in 2014, and became one of the inaugural ArtistYear Fellows. This fall he joins Bard College's training program, The Orchestra Now.

ArtistYear expands to support five fellows in its second year. See page 3. More information is at www.curtis.edu/ArtistYear