



Tim Fitts PHOTO: KEN YANOVIAK

## Hybrid Vigor

### Teaching Musicians to Tell Stories

BY TIM FITTS

There is a common misunderstanding with fiction, an assumption that when a story is told well, the story must have been easy to write. Readers are often shocked to learn of the meticulous undertakings of minimalist writers such as Amy Hempel or the rewriting of John Fante; or that J.D. Salinger spent a decade writing *The Catcher in the Rye*, which reads as if it was written in a sitting, its tone perfect from the first line to the last. One of the initial shocks for students in a creative writing workshop at Curtis is the realization that language does not immediately flow from one's fingertips. Students attempting to write are immediately faced with the immense challenge of creating a narrative through language rather than music.

Any study of creative acts, no matter what the form, is only half-hearted at best if not studied alongside the pursuit of the source of ideas. This pursuit is tricky, mostly because the knowledge of how to tap the source of creative ideas is largely non-transmissible. The quest for ideas is often a lonely pursuit, as the artist explores the harmony between his or her internal and external lives. To study fiction alone is to study the stories themselves while leaving the process up to guesswork. By contrast, the study of writing fiction is the study of writing habits, of clues, and of identifying patterns among one's own bursts of inspiration.

In class, we begin by embracing the fact that fiction writing is anti-academic in nature. We meet over coffee in the cafeteria rather than in the classroom, in a naturally disarming environment conducive to open discussion. Everybody at the table understands that the idea of the morning will lead the discussion. The idea includes any experience that has the potential to resonate with a literary readership, and we discover the idea by scouring our backgrounds and reading contemporary short stories looking for patterns and implications. What we discover is that most of the stories we make up are not made up at all, but variations of seemingly

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Cross-fertilizations (above): Arnold Schoenberg and Wassily Kandinsky inspired one another in painting and music; Miles Davis, fired by the sounds of the basketball court; Alexander the Great motivated the founder of a television network; Morton Feldman interpreted Mark Rothko's paintings; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, inspired by literature

IMAGE CREDITS

SCHOENBERG SELF-PORTRAIT, KANDINSKY "PAINTING WITH THREE-SPOT,"

AND ABDUL JABBAR: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

DAVIS: RVB/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ALEXANDER THE GREAT: LVOVA ANASTASIYA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FELDMAN: ROB BOGAERTS/ANEFO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ROTHKO "MALIBOU": OWNED BY JASON BURNS/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

unrelated elements of our lives, tweaked and peppered with invention in order to heighten intended meanings.

The luxury of teaching at Curtis is that all students come to the table with "prepared minds," as James Austin would say: with personal narratives involving music. However, I've also discovered that most of my fiction students have experienced fascinating lives totally independent from music. For instance, one student, who grew up on a Texas goat farm, delivered an impromptu lecture on the variety of ways that coyotes prey on their livestock, and the improbable function of donkeys as a strategic defense against coyotes. Two recent students spent their high school years on the football field, while another told the class tales from his days in the Israeli army.

What we learn in these moments is that most of us carry around with us ready-made stories. We also learn the importance of developing experiences and areas of expertise outside of our recognized fields, creating a hybridization of stimuli—the richness of details that make fiction interesting. By nature, all writers engage in this process, since the only way to find new images is to seek outward and blend.

### THE PURSUIT OF MASTERY

The big question here is, what does the reading and writing of literature have to do with musical excellence? One only has to look as far as Morton Feldman's interpretations of Rothko's paintings. Miles Davis was inspired by attending Los Angeles Lakers games at the Forum, sitting in the front row with his eyes closed listening to the musicality of rubber shoe soles beating out a rhythm and the chirping friction of rubber on hardwood as the players changed directions. It can work in reverse: Schoenberg's string quartets prompted Kandinsky to express sound through color with a transforming vision.

In fact, this cross-fertilization occurs in nearly every field. CNN founder Ted Turner attributed his rise in the 1970s to a personal fascination with Alexander the Great. Famed basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar bonded with his college coach, John Wooden, over literature, not sports. And the list goes on. Scientists have long referred to this as hybrid vigor: the mixing of breeds in order to create stronger offspring with greater resistance to disease. Clearly hybrid vigor functions as a key element in the pursuit of mastery.

Here's the beauty of hybrid vigor. Once aware of its impact on the creative process, artists can actively amplify their creative output. All they need do is intentionally engage in the blending of alternate worlds by following their own fascinations without prejudice. Those alternate worlds may involve the high culture of classical music, jazz, theatre, science, or math—or the study of sports, beekeeping, home-brewing, or long-distance running. The effect is the same; the only necessary ingredient is fascination.

Fascination is where the images radiate, and this radiation occurs in the space where the two worlds overlap. After that it is all dexterity and determination, fear and desire, with the subconscious mind doing the heavy lifting. ♦

Tim Fitts teaches Introduction to Literature, Fiction Workshop, and Creative Non-Fiction Workshop at Curtis. His latest collection of short stories, *Hypothermia*, was published this year.