

WINONA DRIVE PROJECT FOR BANDQUEST

By Michael Colgrass

The following outline resulted from a five-month project I undertook at Winona Drive Middle School in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, to teach children in the classroom to write music. My original purpose was to write a piece for the kids on a commission from the American Composers Forum BandQuest project, but I found myself getting much more deeply involved. I wanted the kids to write pieces as well.

But how can you teach children to write music quickly?

My approach was to use graphic notation. The following paper shows what I did and how I did it, and also outlines my plan for follow-up by the school music teacher or band director.

In my project we formed what I called a "composition team," made up of those children who were most interested in working intensely on writing music. We met two or three times a week and wrote music. After becoming quite adept at creating graphic pieces, they wanted to learn something about conventional notation, which they became interested in as a result of using graphics. Finally, with my help, they wrote three pieces which the University of Minnesota Symphonic band recorded for them. These pieces were a mix of graphics and conventional notation. And I finally wrote my piece for young band called, "Old Churches." I could not have written this piece without my involvement in this project.

One of the key points I make in the following outline is that creating the music is one thing, but if the middle school band is to play it, the musicians need to be coached on their instruments on the playing of basic graphic notation symbols, and then to spend a little time practicing and getting used to playing graphics.

In our system of music education, children learn to play an instrument through conventional notation, which makes them very self-conscious about mistakes. In graphic notation, there are no mistakes – only gestures. But after being trained on major and minor scales, graphics sound so unusual to kids at first, they need a little time to get used to making these sounds in a new way, because they are, in effect, improvising.

The upshot of the project was that the Composition Team, in a video-taped interview, said they thought kids should learn graphic notation first, then go on to conventional notation, because playing graphics provides a non-threatening approach to learning a musical instrument.

The score and parts to "Old Churches" is being published in August by the American Composer's Forum and will be distributed by Hal Leonard.

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SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF GRAPHIC NOTATION TRAINING FOR MUSIC TEACHERS

By Michael Colgrass

STAGE I

- 1) Ask students to think of a sound, then to imagine a mark they might make on a blackboard to represent that sound. Explain that the empty space on a plain blackboard (no leger lines) is a potential soundscape for the voice - with the top of the board representing the highest the voice can go and the bottom the lowest.
- 2) Make a mark on the blackboard and ask the kids to sing it.
- 3) Hand chalk to one of the kids and ask him/her to make a second mark, then sing it, then to hand the chalk to someone else.
- 4) Continue until a soundscape has been created,
- 5) Ask group for suggestions on how they could sing the soundscape together. When someone starts to give an idea, ask him or her to come up to the blackboard and lead a performance. Perform the piece several times, with different students leading.
- 6) Explain that they just recreated the past 1000 years of music development - inventing sounds, creating a notation, inventing the conductor, and performing the piece.

Assignment: Everybody come in with a graphic piece for the next session. At this session, each student draws his/her piece on the blackboard and leads the group through a performance of it.

STAGE II

- 1) Form a group of students who want to create graphic pieces, calling them the "composition team." This team gets together with the teacher and creates many pieces, individually and in tandem, as desired, creating new graphic symbols to suit the sounds they invent.
- 2) Hand out copies of the Graphic Notation Chart to band members and drill the examples explaining each as you go.

Assignment: Practice these graphic symbols on your instrument at home and be prepared to be tested on them.

STAGE III

PREPARATION OF BAND MEMBERS TO PLAY GRAPHIC PIECES

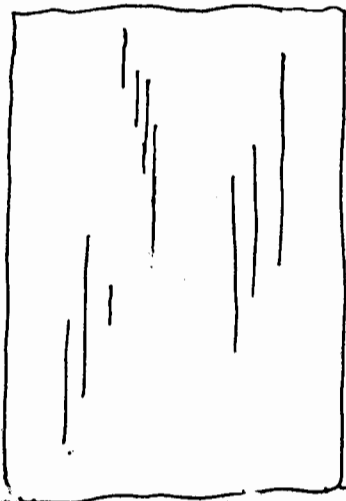
To prepare the children to play graphic pieces with confidence and skill, they need to practice playing their instruments reading graphic notation. Following are a set of 12 basic forms of graphic notation that the Composition Team would use. The band director practices these forms with the band, explaining where necessary exactly what the kids should do. S/he may also give private instruction to individuals. Then all students are tested individually on all 12 forms, with coaching given where needed.

Note: The band members developing skill and confidence in the playing of these 12 basic graphic forms is the key to getting a smooth performance of the Composition Teams' graphic pieces, in the same way that practicing scales and chords is the way to prepare a band to play conventionally notated music.

GRAPHIC NOTATION EXAMPLES

Michael Colgrass

Typical graphics composer can use in creating new pieces.
These samples can also be used by instrumentalists to practice performing graphics.

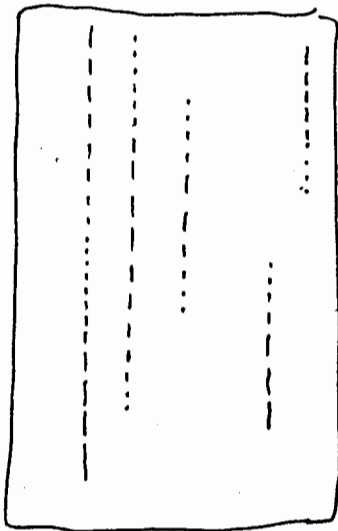


Name
of
voice
or
instr.

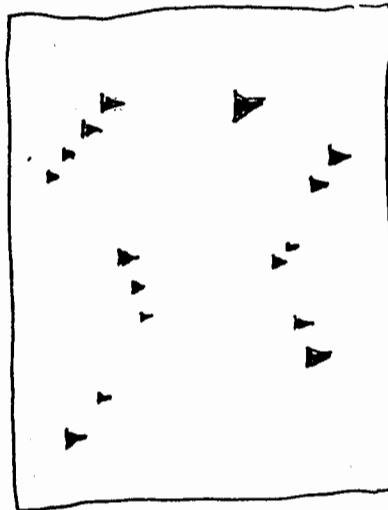
LINES
Long tones



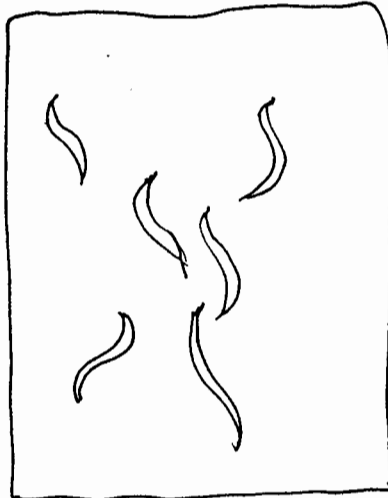
SKITTERS
Very short notes



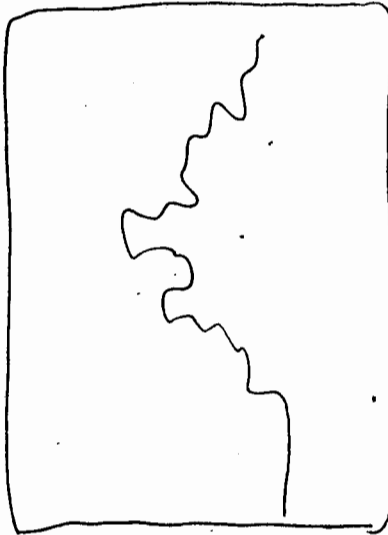
LINES & DOTS
Combine long and short
on same note



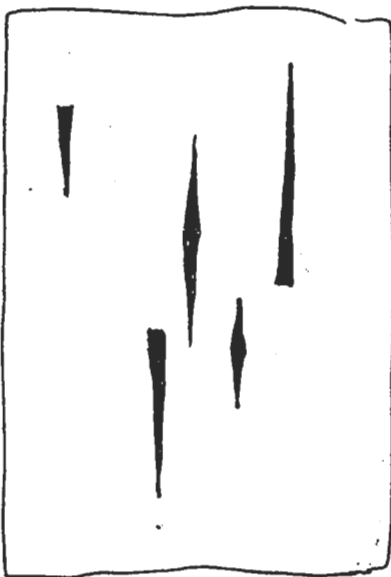
BITES
Short, sharp attacks



DOLPHINS
Swoops of sound
Thick = loud, thin = soft

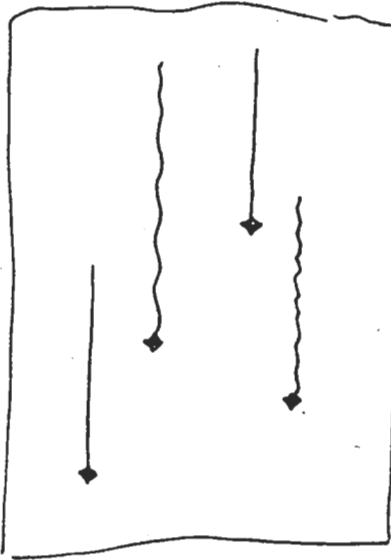


LANDSCAPE
One long uninterrupted line



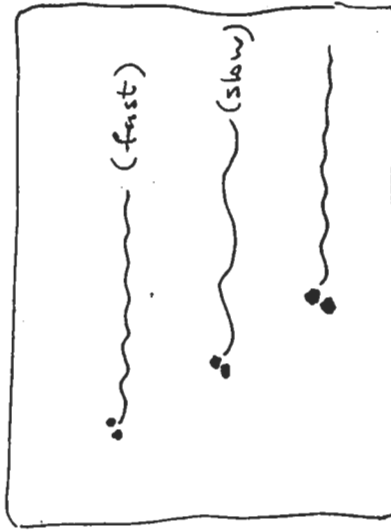
SWELLS

Soft to loud - loud to soft



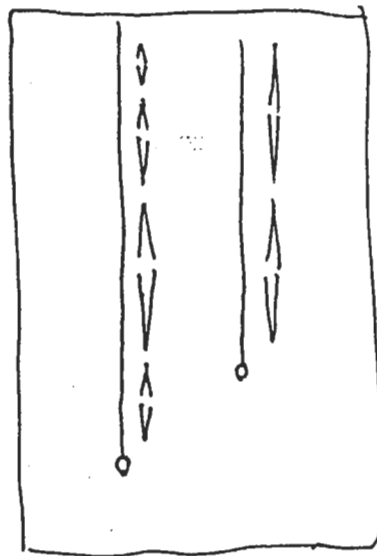
SURPRISES

Loud attack, then immediately soft, with straight or wavy line



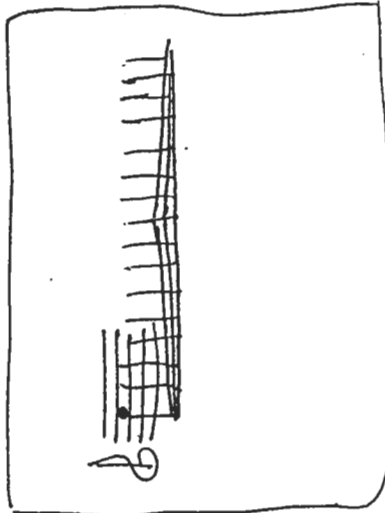
QUIVERS

Alternate quickly between two adjacent pitches



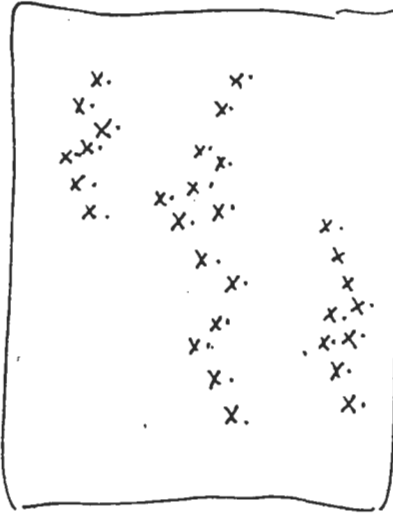
WAVES

Breath accents and swells on one long uninterrupted tone



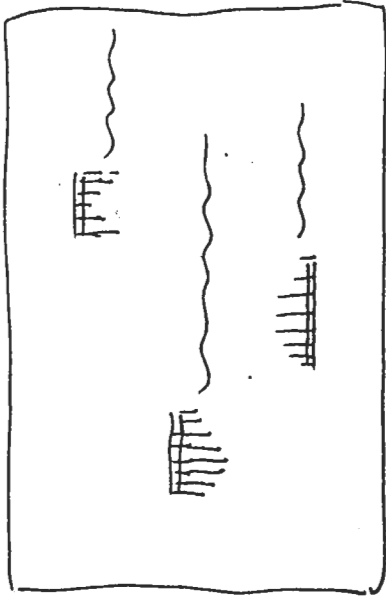
SKIDDING

Speed up and slow down on one pitch



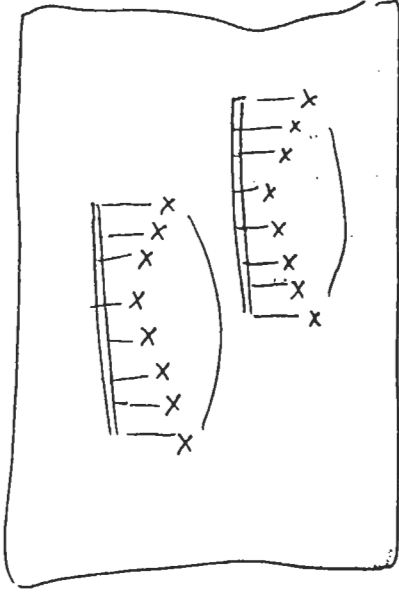
MICE

Random mouth clicks or click keys on instruments



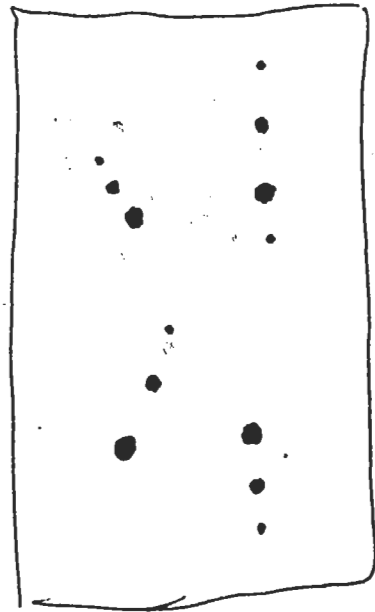
MURMURING

Rapidly play any convenient series of pitches



WIND

Blow across embouchure hole or shaft of instrument, while freely fingering the keys.



ROUND TONES

Short but full sounds. Volume according to size.

STAGE IV

- 1) The Comp Team brings in their finished graphic compositions and leads the band through readings of them.
- 2) Continue this process until the composers and players become skilled at graphics and are used to performing them without inhibition.
- 3) Teacher can then explain how each graphic corresponds to a conventional music notation, i.e., long and short note values, crescendo, sforzando, fortepiano, fortissimo and pianissimo, glissando, accents, accelerando and ritardando, trills, breath accents, etc.

STAGE V

COACHING INDIVIDUAL COMPOSERS

Now the teacher can coach individual composers in the writing of music. Since the process uses graphics, the teacher need not be an experienced composer, because s/he will be dealing with basic logical principles. Every principle that applies to writing music with graphics also applies to composing with convention notation.

Basic principals that strengthen compositions are:

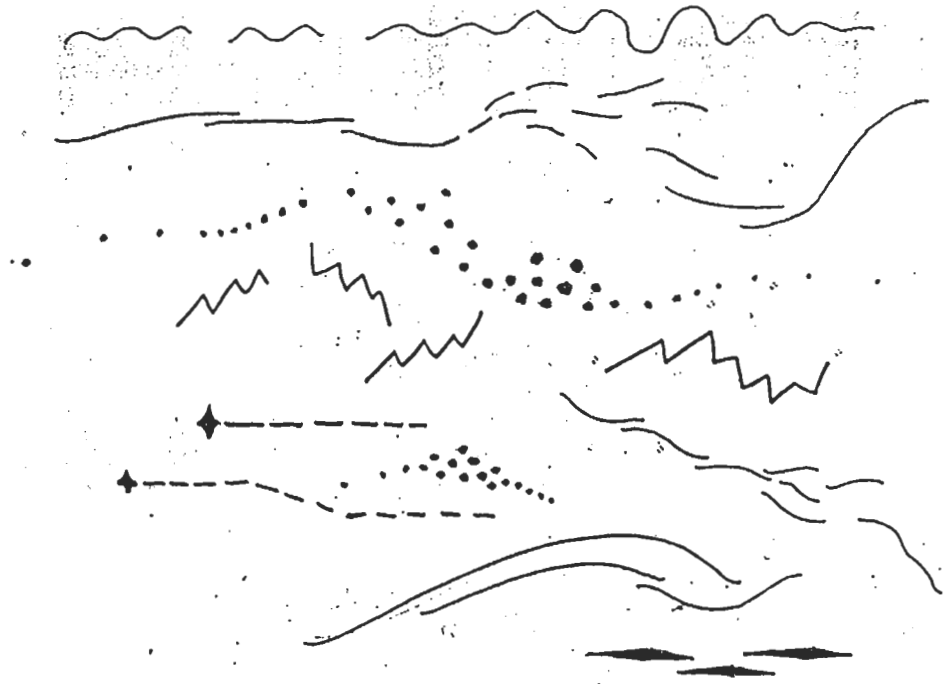
- 1) Limiting yourself to one simple idea (lines only, dots only, etc.).
- 2) Developing and varying that one idea in interesting ways.
- 3) Adding a second *contrasting* idea to show the generative benefits of opposing forces. Musical example: first and second theme of the sonata form. Other arts examples: conflicting characters in a movie, novel or play that generate a story.

Teacher's Role

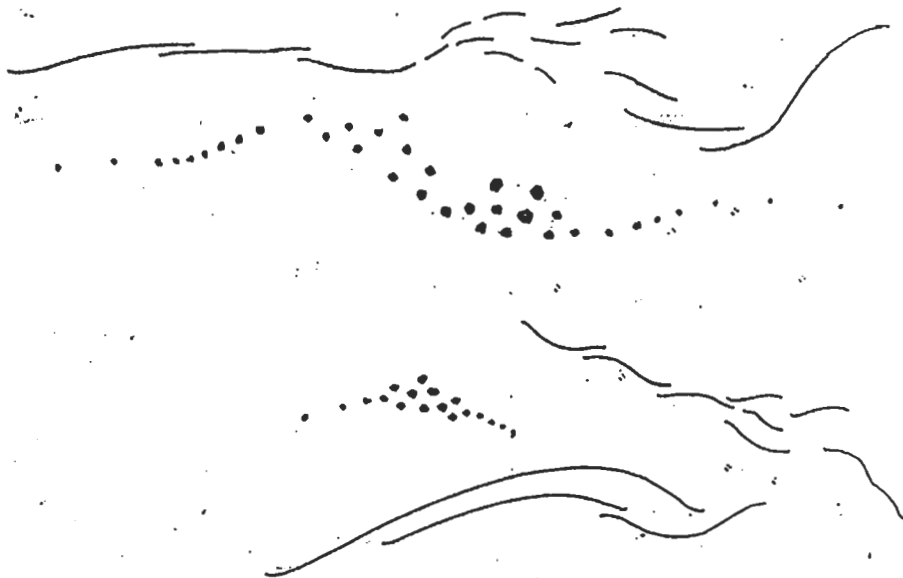
Beginning students will typically use an abundance of graphic ideas all at once and then find they are confused about what to do next. They have so many different ideas they don't know which to focus on. The teacher's role then is:

- 1) Help the student prune their early graphic notation work of any "extra" material -- dots *and* lines *and* skitters *and* dolphins, etc. -- and choose the one idea the student would most like to focus on.
- 2) Offer examples from other arts that the student would easily understand, like the strength of having one topic sentence in the opening paragraph of a speech; or one as opposed to many lead characters in a story; or one central point of visual interest in a painting. In this way, graphic notation becomes an analogy for teaching *process* in other subjects.

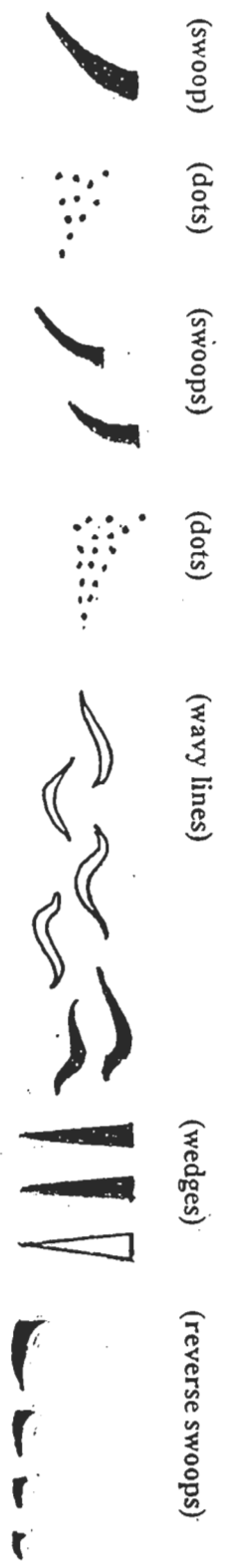
EXAMPLE OF A COMPLEX GRAPHIC NOTATION
(Many ideas, leaving little room for development)



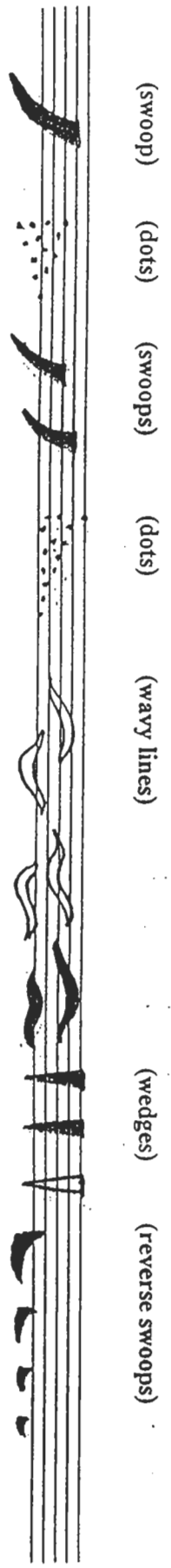
EXAMPLE OF A SIMPLER GRAPHIC NOTATION
(Clearer statement of material allowing for development)



1) Example of graphic notation of sounds



2) How these graphics would look on music paper:



3) Music that might be defined from the graphics.

1/4=108

(swoop) (dots) (swoops) (dots) (wavy lines) (wedges) (reverse swoops)

BENEFITS OF USING GRAPHIC NOTATION FOR MUSICAL TRAINING

The students learn how to:

- Invent their own system of music making.
- Play their instruments without fear of making mistakes. since no "right" or "wrong" notes exist in graphics.
- Create music and understand the overall musical creative process.
- Approach conventional musical notation with a new perspective, understanding how it came into being.
- Improvise on their instruments.
- Expand technical control of their instruments.
- Sing, and see the benefits singing the music they play.
- Develop leadership and communication skills by generating performances of the graphic pieces they and others create.
- Draw analogies to other subjects of learning in and outside the arts.
- Understand that a simple process underlies all seemingly complex subjects.

The teachers learn:

- * A method for teaching creativity.
 - * A method for teaching improvisation.
 - * A first step in teaching a musical instrument.
 - * A metaphor for teaching process that they can use to teach other subjects.
 - * That creativity can be taught.
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