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Uncommon Action: An Interdisciplinary Arts Performance on Ally Involvement

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Uncommon Action: An Interdisciplinary Arts Performance on Ally Involvement

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Music Education

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Abstract

This instrumental and dance performance, titled “Uncommon Action: An Interdisciplinary Arts Performance on Ally Involvement”, was designed to raise awareness about bullying and becoming an active ally in the event of bullying. Sixteen student musicians and a team of production assistants were enlisted to produce this interdisciplinary program that was over a year and a half in the making. This production is a unique artistic effort where the classical musicians will also perform as dancers while playing, similar to what is seen in performances by marching bands, drum corps, Stomp, Barrage, Blue Man Group, etc.

The musical piece, commissioned from Eric Maine ('12, B.M. in Music Education), tells the story of a student who suffers the effects of being bullied in school, and the ally who steps in. The story is based on a four-sectioned poem written by Rachel Dentinger. Each section then relates to the four movements of the symphonic music. This type of story music is called program music.

Different instruments represented different “characters” in this original classical piece, with a single cello playing the role of the victim of bullying, and the alto saxophone as the ally, the leading roles. The upper strings and the brass represented the bullies and the woodwinds acted as bystanders. The first half of the performance featured a seated performance, with the performers in traditional concert dress. However, in the second half of the performance, the entire ensemble came alive with movement, lights, colorful costumes, and make-up.

For the larger instruments, such as the cello, bassoon, and tuba, special harnesses were either purchased or engineered to make the dance possible. Rigging for the snare and bass drum were designed based on traditional marching band gear. Most notable for ingenuity and design was the cello mobility device: a cello stand with weighted wheels and casters to allow for the cellists participation in the choreography.

The focus of this project is on becoming an active ally as an empowered bystander in the instance of bullying through the creative elements of music and dance. The performance premiered on February 3rd, 2013 at 2 PM and 4 PM at CNY Jazz Central in downtown Syracuse. The goal now for this performance is to turn it into touring educational programming that visits schools and community centers, to spread the anti-bullying message to students.

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Reflective Essay: “Uncommon Action”

As a music education major, I took an unconventional route by pursuing a degree with an honors distinction. Most of my peers opted to add “performance honors” to their degree, but performance was not the path I wanted to take. At the time, my passion for performing had not developed to where it is now. I wanted something more academic. My strengths lay in organizing and planning big ideas. I knew that I needed to find a way to express my passion for music and education in an academic way.

The Beginning

I wanted some kind of exciting performance to be my project. I would always daydream during the many concerts and recitals I was required to attend as a music major and I always wished I could see something more active. This led me to my thinking about our needs as a society for visual stimulation to engage in activities. I wondered if this lack of stimulation was perhaps why concert attendance at classical concerts was dwindling. This was around the same time that the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra was closing and we were having discussions in our professional development class about how to regenerate interest in these concerts for the general public.

Putting these things together in my head, I began thinking about a performance where I would have both an instrumental group and a choral group dance while they played traditional classical repertoire. I was comparing it to Dalcroze Eurythmics, a theory in

general music education about how movement aids the acquisition and meaning of music, and at this point, my focus was on the performers.

His frustration with the lifeless theoretical grasp and mechanical performance habits of his own conservatory students led him to question the conventional music education methods of his time. He developed new notions, practices, and props: bare feet and legs, tunics and hoops! Dalcroze's passion was not gimmickry but discovery... (Farber & Parker, 1987, p. 4).

While this idea was still in its infancy, I needed to apply for Crown Scholarships. This was over the winter break in December 2011 and January 2012. Upon submitting my budget proposal, I was awarded \$4,500 in Renee Crown funds. As a person deeply involved in the arts, I know that arts' funding is rare and I was very grateful.

While I was excited about my project, I was conscious that there was no hook. Surely the visual would be cool, but there was no story element.

Background in Bullying Discourse

Being a music education major, I know that bullying is a huge issue in schools. I've had a lot of experience in teaching others to be empowered bystanders. I was in a club in high

school called A World of Difference. This club trained high school students to go into middle school health classrooms and run activities about stereotypes and prejudices and how to become an empowered bystander. An empowered bystander is different from a regular bystander in that they are knowledgeable and encouraged in standing up against adversities faced by others, particularly in an act of aggression, whether that is verbal, physical, or electronic. To infuse the topic of bullying into my music, I wrote a poem in late spring 2012 from the perspective of a bullied student. This is what I was going to give to a hired student composer to base his or her music on.

Musical Style: Program Music and the Symphony

Instrumental music with an extra-musical narrative is called program music, or programme music. This can be an implicit or an explicit narrative. Program music was initially seen in the Renaissance and then used slightly by Haydn (one of the same composers who initially began using the four-movement symphony). I believe strongly that music needs to have a meaning and telling a story is the clearest way to do so.

The poem/music was to be loosely based on the four-movement symphony structure from the late 18th century, used first by such composers as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

This was a format that had evolved from the previous three-movement symphony. The four movements used were titled by their tempo or speed: allegro (fast), adagio (slow), scherzo (very fast), and allegro (fast) again. Even though this piece wasn't going to be a

full-length symphony (I was aiming for a twenty-minute work), I wanted a structure to guide the work of all of the creative members in my project.

However, I switched the adagio and the scherzo movements to allow the story to flow as I'd like. Each movement corresponds as follows: introduction of characters (allegro), actual event of bullying (scherzo), reflection/lament of the bullied (adagio), and the bystander standing up (allegro). The fourth movement is left ambiguous in the text as to whether this actually happens in the story or if it is all an imagining of the bullied student (see Appendix A). This later is reflected in the choreography.

Creative Players

In my search for composers, I found Eric Maine. He was a music education major who happened to compose music in a very film score-esque way.

I also found my choreographer, Anthony Wright. Not only is he a great dancer, he also happens to have played a lot of instruments, so he would also understand the limitations of the choreography for the sake of the instrument/player/music.

Together, we decided officially on instrumentation. I essentially wanted a large chamber group that was essentially an orchestral reduction. I wanted to be able to fill the visual space when all of my performers were on stage. We decided on sixteen instruments: two violins, one viola, a cello, a piccolo, a flute, a clarinet, an oboe, a saxophone, a bassoon, a trumpet, a French horn, a trombone, a tuba, a snare drum, and a bass drum.

We also then decided on characterization. We decided that the woodwind players would be the bystanders, with the alto saxophone becoming the empowered bystander in the end. This was chosen because both the composer and myself played the alto saxophone and it was a little inside joke. The upper strings and the brass would be the bullies and the cello would be the victim. We decided that the cello would be a good choice because it would need the most adaptation for movement and that adaptation would be a good representation of its “otherness” as the victim.

Eric and Anthony were set to task with writing and choreographing the music over the summer. We would chat online regularly about it, but for the most part, we would reconvene in the fall.

Once we returned to school, I began auditioning for a conductor and musicians. The musicians could perform any piece of music they would like to give us a good idea of their tone and ability. Then, they learned a little dance that Anthony choreographed, to show us if they could move. And finally, we would have them play a scale while walking around the room. We also gave them the direction to do it with a certain emotion (happy, sad, angry, etc.). We needed to see if they could act. What we were amazed to discover was that their acting actually changed their tone drastically, and in a good way, so that their sound reflected the emotion they were trying to express as well. It was a “break-through moment” for us, one that I talked about fondly on the performance day in my post-performance dialogue with the audience.

Around this time, I met with the student intern in the engineering school who was working on the cello adaptation. When we met in person, he understood better what I wanted and I was able to explain more clearly my thought process to him. We decided together that the whole project and completed deliverable could be done easily by Halloween.

Instrument Adaption

For the cello's mobility, I did a lot of research. There are some pictures of "marching cellos", usually a cello with a guitar strap or a uniquely designed harness, but I needed something similarly cost-effective, but would not require any long-term changes to my performer's cello. Right before we left for summer break in 2012, I contacted the engineering department. A friend of mine had told me that one of his professors was a lover of music and adapting an instrument for mobility would be really interesting to him. When I spoke to this professor, he said that designing a cello mobility device could be something that he could assign either as a class project or to an intern over the summer and that it would be covered under their budget.

By the time the Halloween deadline rolled around, the student intern had contacted me and informed me that he was unable to complete the project. I was furious at this. The

cello was such a focal point of the project and if it could not be mobile, the performance would be very different.

I had to ask another friend of mine, Alex Stowe, an SU graduate of 2010 who lived in the area, to make something for me. I sent him some pictures and ideas based on immobile cello stands. I purchased an adjustable cello stand and Alex put casters and wheels on it. We put ankle weights on the bottom to adjust the balance as well. Due to this setback, poor Brian Savage, my cellist, did not get to practice playing and moving with his cello until very late in the rehearsal process.

Venue

I was looking into my venue choice by the fall. I couldn't commit to anything yet, though, because what I was really waiting for was the SU basketball schedule. Much like in high school, music and sports often conflict schedules, with the music schedule yielding to the sports schedule more often than not. Many of my performers were involved with the Sour Citrus Society, the basketball pep band at Syracuse. I couldn't schedule my performance for a time that they would be required to play at a game. So I was resigned to waiting for both the men's and women's basketball season schedules to be released.

I stumbled upon a place called CNY Jazz Central. It seemed quite small, but it did have all of my other requirements: offstage space, dressing room, lighting. There was really

only on offstage wing space on stage left, but it was very large so it made up for the lack of stage right wing space. There were dressing rooms of sorts; truly, it was just the basement of the building. The performers would either have to walk across the stage or walk outside to get to the offstage space stage right. I was worried about the lack of space for the performers to move around in, but I was sure Anthony could work with it. I was also afraid of the volume level. The strings would certainly be heard at that proximity but the brass had the potential to over-blow and, being so close to the audience, that could be a problem. I took measurements of the stage space so that we could recreate the dimensions in our rehearsal space.

The venue also had a specific lighting designer on board that they told me I could contact to work with. I made a mental note at this point to set up a meeting with her. With Bob Rogers, the general manager at CNY Jazz Central, we worked out the details of our contract. I selected February 3, 2013 at 7 PM as the performance date and time, with the night before being the dress rehearsal. We decided that this would be a non-ticketed event, as then we could put it in the contract as a private function and I could pay a few hundred dollars less.

Movement and Music

I drew inspiration for my original idea from drum corps, Stomp, Barrage, Blue Man Group, etc. My conductor showed me a video of the University of Maryland performing Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun", a popular Impressionistic piece, from

memory and with movement in May 2012 (University of Maryland, 2012). Their performance was on a large stage at their university. It seemed that the performers and conductor were on stage the whole time. They did not perform a seated version of this piece, as we intended to with ours before adding the visual elements. It was still remarkable to see music and movement performed simultaneously.

but I hadn't seen anything like this either in person or on the internet before. Honestly, at first I was jealous. I didn't feel like my idea was original anymore. I started picking out "flaws" in the performance: the larger instruments were mostly seated, the costuming looked sloppy, there was no meaning coming from the music, etc.

But then I realized I could learn from this performance. At times, there is a conductor bopping around amidst the movement and that led me to consider if I wanted my conductor onstage or not (eventually, due to space constraints, Jared would not conduct onstage for the movement performance). All of the performers had this ten-minute piece memorized, which gave me hope for my twenty-minute piece. Additionally, Jared discovered this video because he knew the horn player, Kara Neil, from high school. I asked for Kara's contact information and eventually was able to interview her via email to learn more about their process.

Other Research

I conducted other experience- and interview-based research for this performance as well. I went to an anti-bullying conference in September sponsored by the School of

Education. It was here that I actually came up with the title for my project. I ended up writing “Uncommon Action: An Interdisciplinary Arts Performance on Ally Involvement”. I chose “Uncommon Action” because it had two meanings: one was that the players were moving, which is uncommon to the traditional instrumental setting. The other meaning was that an empowered bystander taking a stand for a victimized individual is often uncommon. I wanted my audience to understand the ally focus, particularly that of the active ally/empowered bystander, meaning someone who does more than ignore an event of bullying, in this case.

From this conference, I heard Mara Sapon-Shevin speak. She is a professor of inclusive education at Syracuse University and is very knowledgeable about the rhetoric of bullying. She was willing to meet with me to discuss my project. I went through the full details of my project and she explained to me that using the terms “bully”, “ally”, and “victim” were not the most advisable, because each individual has more characteristics than one summative term (M. Sapon-Shevin, personal communication, October 10, 2012). I decided from my conversation with Mara not to use these terms anywhere in my program or future discussions, except with the performers. When I put the players and their characters in the program, I simply grouped them by who they portrayed, but I did not label them in any way.

The precise release of language became very important to me in structuring my performance. I met with my Literacy professor Dr. Kelly Chandler-Olcott to discuss both when to release my poem to the audience and also how to infuse both the audience and

performers with more of my meaning from this art (K. Chandler-Olcott, personal communication, September 11, 2012). With Kelly, I decided that truly the audience was going to be my focus. I did from time to time ask my performers to do some unusual things that they wouldn't ordinarily do in a collegiate rehearsal: exit cards on what they were learning about, writing in something their character would say at a certain point in the music, etc. But Kelly helped me really structure and organize the final performance more. She suggested putting posters up around the room at intermission for the audience to wander and write on, responding to statements about bullying in order to prime their reception of the performance.

Another person I met with, by suggestion of Kelly, was Joanna Robertson, who had a unique background in both music education and literacy. With Joanna, I talked specifically about the release of my poem to the audience (J. Robertson, personal communication, October 15, 2012). We both agreed on the fact that often program notes and that sort of thing are never found anywhere else in the performance but in the program, so if the audience were to hear the music without the movement in the traditional setting, the text should be in the program where it is up to the audience member to read it or not. However, for the music with movement, the text should be at least read aloud to the audience. This would ensure that they would hear the poem aurally, in case they did not read it, or if they needed reinforcement. Instead of doing it in one chunk, I chose to read each stanza with each corresponding movement of music. This also gave me a role onstage.

Rehearsal Structure

For the first few months of rehearsals, the focus was on the music. Jared would rehearse them, set tempos, and fix mistakes. I would read the corresponding poem stanza before they practiced each movement so that they would learn the meanings associated with the music. At the last music rehearsal, we made a rough recording so that we could work from something other than the MIDI file at movement rehearsals. We also had some memorization contests where the players would play full movements from memory for prizes.

Then we began movement rehearsals. I used the term “movement rehearsals” as often as I could. I did not want to say “dance” too often because I did not want these non-dancers to be uncomfortable. Anthony was very good about this. Sometimes he would have to alter things to fit their comfort level. For example, in dance, often combinations are begun with the right foot. But as most of the performers are in the marching band, they are used to beginning things with their left foot. We did most of our movement rehearsals without instruments, to their own recorded track. Eventually, we added instruments to just hold to get used to moving with them as they either sang or listened to the recording.

Almost all of the players were able to practice moving with their instruments very early on: I bought a tuba harness for a concert tuba, my French horn player was able to play and move with his French horn, so we didn't need to borrow a mellophone (marching French horn), my bassoonist already had a strap, and the bass drum player borrowed a

marching bass drum. The other instruments were fine for movement. All I needed was some rigging for the snare drum and the cello mobility device.

Increased Attendance

In the fall, I finally met with Victoria King, the lighting designer that worked through CNY Jazz Central. I found out that she was also a music educator. She wanted me to encourage more youth groups to attend the performance and recommended that I added another performance. In order to do this, I had to contact CNY Jazz Central and add an addendum to that contract stating that I would be adding a performance at 2 PM on February 3rd, 2013. This would also cost me a little more money.

To raise more money, I met with my advisor Elisa Dekaney and we brainstormed people and groups to ask money from, much of it being the university. With the help of Caitlin Moriarty, a graduate student in Arts Leadership, I created a budget proposal for these people. I submitted this to both the School of Education (SOE) and the School of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA), in which I am dually enrolled. I was granted \$500 and \$1,000, respectively. This was excellent but not quite what I needed.

The Director of the Setnor School of Music, Dr. Patrick Jones, recommended that I create a KickStarter page, to ask for donations from friends and family to support my project. This became something that I worked on at the end of the fall semester and over the winter break. It became great advertisement, actually. My friends and family were kind

enough to help me reach that goal of \$1,000. I was able to add a second performance time!

Except then a major catastrophic realization came.

The flutist texted me over winter break to tell me that my capstone performance was on the day of the Super Bowl. Once again, sports scheduling was conflicting with arts scheduling. I emailed Elisa Dekaney asking for advice. We ended up deciding to keep the 2 PM performance and switch the 7 PM to 4 PM. That way, people could skedaddle off to their wing parties in time, my performers included.

Visual Choices

Other expenses that I had were costumes, hair supplies, and make-up supplies, all of the visual aesthetic elements. I had a vision of solid v-neck colored tops representing the character traits and black pants. I wanted dress pants for the men, which they owned themselves, but I wanted uniform, solid, non-see through black leggings for the women. I had originally wanted them to perform barefoot, but considering that their dressing room was in a basement, I decided against it. They could bring in their own black dress shoes or flats. I also wanted more extreme make-up, like face paint or war paint.

In order to purchase the costumes, I first needed to decide on my color scheme. This took a lot of thought and I consulted with a lot of close friends for advice. Even though it was a stereotype, I decided for red for the “bullies” (upper strings and brass). Because the “bystanders” (woodwinds) were so passive, I went with gray. And because there was a striped gray and teal sweater that I could choose for the percussionists, who were kind of hybrids between bystanders and victims, I chose teal for the “victim” (cello). The “empowered bystander” (saxophone) got both a gray and a teal sweater, as he changed during the fourth movement. I got a lot of these sweaters on sale, but because some sizes were sold out, some performers got larger sizes than they needed. They got to keep their costumes as a bonus from the performance. If I ever want to recreate this performance again, I see this decision as being a potential problem.

Show Time

When it was the dress rehearsal night, everything was right on schedule. The dress rehearsal itself went very well. We went through the movement performance first, because that would be the most important to have the most people at and some people had to leave early.

We decided to put Jared in the back of the house, in the last row of the tiered seats, to conduct, so that he would be out of the line of vision of the audience. It also helped to keep the performers’ eyes up because they needed to look up to look at him. Victoria ran the lights and Anthony and I indicated what changes we wanted made.

On show day, my family arrived early and helped me get the day prepared. I had bought Jared and Anthony teal ties to wear with their black outfits, as well as a teal skirt and black top for myself. I wanted us to represent the side of the empowered bystander as leaders in this project.

At the theater, we began setting up. I was coordinating Victoria King, Logan Kriete the videographer, Ron Keck the audio technician and owner of SubCat Music Studios, and my two photographers Ross Hecht and Shea Kastriner.

My four hair and make-up artists were downstairs working on the performers. These women were working on creating war paint-esque looks for the performers, matching their character's sweater color. They also were creating updos for the female performers and gelled looks for most of the male performers. I wanted the bully characters to look fierce, sharp, and intimidating, while the bystanders could look more elegant and graceful. Our victim, the cellist, had very simple lines drawn on his face and his long locks were pinned back out of his face. Our maybe-ally, the saxophonist, had both the gray/white color of the bystander and the teal color of the victim on either side of his face, to show the indecisiveness of his actions. The make-up and hairstyles not only helped to convey characters to the audience, but it was later evident that it helped transform the performers themselves into acting even more the part of their character when they danced.

I was nervous to greet the crowd. I sent my performers in to their seats on stage. They had their hair and make-up already done, as there wasn't going to be time in intermission. Besides that, they were wearing concert black. I was supposed to give the audience the fire exits/bathroom/cell phone speech. I forgot the electronic devices part, but that was okay. I was anxious sitting there during the seated performance part. I knew that the audience would likely be a little bored at that point. It was okay; they were kind of supposed to be. This would help them to see the contrast of their own engagement when they heard the same exact music later with the visual elements.

Before I knew it, twenty minutes had flown by and it was intermission time. The performers bowed and I sent them back down to their dressing room to change. Jared and Victoria began clearing the stage of chairs and stands. I invited the audience to wander the room and write their comments on the statement posters hung on the surrounding walls. Many people participated in this and I was glad for that. The comments were a little general and idealistic, but the point was to prime the audience for receiving more information about active allyism in bullying when they watched the performance. And, this was an activity that many talked about even weeks after the performance. It stuck in many of their minds. In the fifteen minutes of intermission, I would wander between theater and dressing room. My performers were pumped. This second half of the performance was what they worked so hard for.

I got my performers up the stairs and they crossed the stage to their offstage left waiting space. The audience clapped. I took the house lights to half and out, and then went over

to my mark on stage right to read the first stanza of the poem stage right. I had to move the standing mic at the beginning and end of each reading. I wish I had just used a handheld mic. I also hadn't memorized or really practiced reading the poem. It would have been better if I had. During one of the readings, I awkwardly dropped a paper. I wish I hadn't. I think I had been so focused on all of the other parts of the performance, I hadn't thought about my own!

The performers did brilliantly, though. Seeing all of the visual components (hair, make-up, costumes, lighting, movement) finally together was truly moving. I was so impressed with the performers. Many of them were so much more expressive than I had ever seen before. Anthony and I kept looking at each other in excitement and disbelief.

There were a few mistakes here or there. Some people were getting a little lost in the music or playing a few wrong notes and once in a while a performer would noticeably mess up a dance move. But everyone kept going and got back on track together. This is a highly advanced performance skill that I was so proud of my performers for.

After the performance, they came out and bowed. Then we held an open dialogue between the audience and performers/contributors. I had included this in the program, because sometimes when performances include this it is viewed as optional and much of the audience opts to leave. I didn't want it to be optional, though I have a hunch most of the audience would have stayed, given the choice.

There were plenty of comments and questions. Sometimes, I would call upon my performers to answer the questions because I knew that they would give a unique perspective that the audience wanted to hear. When I concluded the dialogue session, I was flooded with people coming up to me to give me their individual feedback. People were very impressed; I had people I had never met coming up to me saying that they wanted this to be shown to more people, children in particular. People came up to me telling me that they had been bullied as children and that this performance really resonated with them in a personal way. Of course, my family, friends, and advisors were all very proud of me.

After a brief half hour, it was time for the second performance. The audience was much smaller for this performance, most likely due to the impending Super Bowl. It still went very well. My performers were extraordinary. I hoped they understood how much I really appreciated their hard work. We had a group picture and group hug at the end of the second performance. I know they had fun participating in this. They will still talk about it wistfully even two months later. They are very proud of themselves.

Over the next few days, I received a lot of positive feedback. I got a lot of nice follow-up emails from people who attended, as well as had a nice review in *The Daily Orange*.

Afterwards

It was strange not having a major project to focus on after that. Slowly, I began to send out the thank-you notes and small rewards (like signed posters) to the people who earned them via KickStarter donations.

At present, I am working still with Victoria King to get this performance into a school somewhere. My biggest concern at this point is having to replace graduating members with new members if this program were to tour in the next academic year and what would be the easiest way to re-teach this. It is certainly a project that I want to grow and continue with as a part of my life.

From this project, I have learned the value of adding movements to pieces. I can see myself replicating this project with my future students, and adding movement to the pieces that they are learning in their ensembles, whatever that may be. I really want my students to experience different performance concepts and constructs that are evolving to reflect the 21st century. I hope that I can use my experiences in this project to continue creating exciting experiences for my students.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Text

1. Look around at who is here

I creep through the crowd, overcome with fear
 There are those who hate for no reason at all
 And those who shrink back as I take the fall.
 There are some who join in with jeers of their own -
 Do they not know that I feel all alone?
 For what's worse than the bullies is those who don't speak
 And this is why my world is so bleak.

2.

The moment they see me, the words zing by
 It takes all my strength to keep in my cry.
 But it's too hard when they strike me and bray
 And this is the moment when I start to pray
 I pray something stops them from picking on me
 There are so many around who could force them to flee
 Yet nobody moves or makes any sound,
 They keep to themselves, their eyes to the ground.

One person moves and my heart fills with hope
 But they only moved closer to stand over and gloat -
 Glad I am the other and that they are fine.
 Silence is easy for those with no spine.

3.

Even when I'm alone in my room
 I can't stop thinking of my impending doom
 And when I sort through the thoughts in my head
 I realize - I'm better off dead.

4. Every day I return is exactly the same
 I don't think they know any more than my name
 I no longer react to the words that they say
 Or to the way that they think beating me is for play.

I've given up and this is the end.
 I cannot believe no one stands up for their friend.
 And even if you're not a friend per se,

Your help could bring me another new day.

One kind word is all that it takes
to know that my death would be a mistake.

What if you stepped in?

Appendix B - Performance Program

Appendix C - Project Photos

Appendix D - Performance DVD

Appendix E - Performance Audio

Summary

This instrumental and dance performance, titled “Uncommon Action: An Interdisciplinary Arts Performance on Ally Involvement”, was designed to raise awareness about bullying and becoming an active ally in the event of bullying. Sixteen student musicians and a team of production assistants were enlisted to produce this interdisciplinary program that was over a year and a half in the making. This production is a unique artistic effort where the classical musicians will also perform as dancers while playing, similar to what is seen in performances by marching bands, drum corps, Stomp, Barrage, Blue Man Group, etc.

I wanted some kind of exciting performance to be my project. I would always daydream during the many concerts and recitals I was required to attend as a music major and I always wished I could see something more active. This led me to my thinking about our needs as a society for visual stimulation to engage in activities. I wondered if this lack of stimulation was perhaps why concert attendance at classical concerts was dwindling. This was around the same time that the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra was closing and we were having discussions in our professional development class about how to regenerate interest in these concerts for the general public.

Putting these things together in my head, I began thinking about a performance where I would have both an instrumental group and a choral group dance while they played

traditional classical repertoire. I was comparing it to Dalcroze Eurythmics, a theory in general music education about how movement aids the acquisition and meaning of music.

Drawing on my experience from participating in the Syracuse University Marching Band, I began to think creatively about how to use the visual component of marching in combination with my vast theatrical expertise. I designed a project in which instrumental musicians memorized both music and choreography and performed them both simultaneously. This choreography, along with other visual elements, would suffice as the visual stimulation for the audience.

The musical piece, commissioned from Eric Maine ('12, B.M. in Music Education), tells the story of a student who suffers the effects of being bullied in school, and the ally who steps in. The story is based on a four-sectioned poem that I wrote. Each section then relates to the four movements of the symphonic music. This type of story music is called program music.

Different instruments represented different "characters" in this original classical piece, with a single cello playing the role of the victim of bullying, and the alto saxophone as the ally, the leading roles. The upper strings and the brass represented the bullies and the woodwinds acted as bystanders. The first half of the performance featured a seated performance, with the performers in traditional concert dress. However, in the second half of the performance, the entire ensemble came alive with movement, lights, colorful costumes, and make-up.

Color played a large factor into expressing our meaning to the audience. Even though it was a stereotype, I decided for red for the “bullies” (upper strings and brass). Because the “bystanders” (woodwinds) were so passive, I went with gray. And because there was a striped gray and teal sweater that I could choose for the percussionists, who were kind of hybrids between bystanders and victims, I chose teal for the “victim” (cello). The “empowered bystander” (saxophone) got both a gray and a teal sweater, as he changed during the fourth movement.

The performers also received war paint-esque make-up for the performance, matching their character’s sweater color. Their hair was also done: updos for the female performers and gelled looks for most of the male performers. I wanted the bully characters to look fierce, sharp, and intimidating, while the bystanders could look more elegant and graceful. Our victim, the cellist, had very simple lines drawn on his face and his long locks were pinned back out of his face. Our maybe-ally, the saxophonist, had both the gray/white color of the bystander and the teal color of the victim on either side of his face, to show the indecisiveness of his actions. The make-up and hairstyles not only helped to convey characters to the audience, but it was later evident that it helped transform the performers themselves into acting even more the part of their character when they danced.

For that mobility, the larger instruments, such as the cello, bassoon, and tuba, special harnesses were either purchased or engineered to make the dance possible. Rigging for

the snare and bass drum were designed based on traditional marching band gear. Most notable for ingenuity and design was the cello mobility device: a cello stand with weighted wheels and casters to allow for the cellists participation in the choreography.

The focus of this project is on becoming an active ally as an empowered bystander in the instance of bullying through the creative elements of music and dance. The performance premiered on February 3rd, 2013 at 2 PM and 4 PM at CNY Jazz Central in downtown Syracuse. The goal now for this performance is to turn it into touring educational programming that visits schools and community centers, to spread the anti-bullying message to students.