

## The Child's Voice: Art, Poetry and Music from the Terezin Concentration Camp for the Music Classroom

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*Abstract: The use of music education and the arts to discuss interdisciplinary subjects, particularly that of the Holocaust, is explored in this article. A brief historical context is given and is followed by suggestions for exploring a several works connected to the Terezin Concentration Camp. The use of the Facets Model (Barrett, McCoy & Veblen, 1997) is employed to demonstrate entry activity possibilities for exploration in art, music, poetry and history. This information is aimed at Middle and High School students in a general music or choral classroom.*

*This will be our reply to violence:  
to make music more intensely,  
more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.*  
Leonard Bernstein, 1963

*The artist is able to separate the external situation  
from the creativity that belongs to the mind, to the heart.  
The creative mind cannot be imprisoned,  
even in conditions of brutality.*  
Francesco Lotoro

### Rationale

Few students that attend school in the Chicago suburb where I teach are able to comprehend the horror of the Holocaust. It is a world far removed from their lives. However, these students are still able to feel pain, understand grief, offer compassion and commiserate with others facing the challenges of coming of age. While the subject of World War II and the Holocaust are taught in both the seventh and eighth grade years, few experiences in their English and Social Studies classes allow my students to connect with individual children that are experiencing these historical events and using the creative arts as an outlet for their own expression. An effective lesson or unit that can be adapted to work with other world events will offer these students the opportunity to give voice to these children, feel music in a new way, and may better equip them to deal with emotional pain they may face in their own futures.

### Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin

During World War II, from 1940-1944, 15,000 children passed through Terezin Ghetto/Concentration Camp in Czechoslovakia. Fewer than 100 survived. Most of the artifacts of the camp were liquefied when the Nazi Regime closed the camp near the end of the war. However, among the remnants, a selection of poetry and art created by the inmates was found. These artifacts were saved by Willy Groag, a leader of one of the children's homes at the camp. Much of this artwork, poetry and music was created by these children. The need for a creative outlet persevered in the face of all that was faced by those brought to Terezin. "Art created in the Holocaust was created on sites of horror and atrocity, places that one would expect to destroy creativity" (Ornstein, 2006, p. 392). Bauhaus trained artist, Friedl

Dicker-Brandeis led the crusade of an education in the arts and humanities for these children prior to meeting her death at Auschwitz (Leshnoff, 2006, p.92).

Terezin existed as a "model ghetto" with the intention of deceiving members of the Red Cross who were tasked with the job of investigating Nazi prisoner camp conditions. In choosing to place members of the artistic class (professors, artists, musicians, writers) in this ghetto, along with thousands of children, the Nazis unintentionally created a haven for cultural life in the midst of the horrors of the Holocaust. To keep up the deception, artists and musicians were allowed to bring their supplies, music and instruments – and were often given additional items – that their creativity might continue and aid in the Nazi façade. The surviving children from Terezin speak of classes with these artists and musicians, such as Dicker-Brandeis as "liberation from fear" "meditation" and offering feelings of being alive (Leshnoff, 2006, p. 96). Her teaching methods, progressive for their time, encouraged the freedom of self-expression, liberation of spirit and natural development. She encouraged students to not only see something as it was, but what it could become, thereby urging children to use art to continue to find beauty in their own world, despite the atrocities surrounding them. This environment, while unable to save the lives of many of these children, gave their souls and creative selves a place to blossom.

### Creativity in Captivity

Francesco Lotoro (n.d.) is an Italian music teacher and musicologist. In 1982, after a visit to Auschwitz, he began a decades long crusade to resurrect and make public the compositions left behind during the Holocaust. He has found over 4000 pieces, all of varying styles. Some are solemn in nature, others are bawdy and Vaudevillian, and others drip with homonyms unrecognizable to the Nazi prisoners. Few pieces are written on manuscript paper. Many are scratched into the margins of newspapers, on toilet paper, in notebooks and diaries. This music serves as a testament to the power and ability of the creative mind, despite the brutality of the human world. Lotoro's work through the Creativity in Captivity project has brought much of the work at Terezin and other camps into light and has made projects like this possible.

I have brought together three specific pieces that derive from these original poems and artwork: *Birdsong*, a piece for 2-



part Treble Chorus written by Paul Read with the text from one of the Terezin poems; *The Butterfly*, a poem by 17-year-old inmate Pavel Friedmann; and *Flowers and Butterflies*, a painting by 10-year-old inmate Margit Koretzova. These three works were chosen because, rather than depicting the horrific scenes around them, these children chose to find joy and celebrate life, proving that the human spirit is powerful enough to overcome anything. This project was originally dedicated to creating connections between these three works and I will present teaching strategies and assessments for each. In addition, students will learn of Lotoro's work and what compelled him to embark on his journey. Beyond the performance, students will be offered a final assessment where they will be challenged to demonstrate the breadth of their ability to make these connections.

### Poetry and Art in the Music Classroom: How to Move Beyond Preconceived

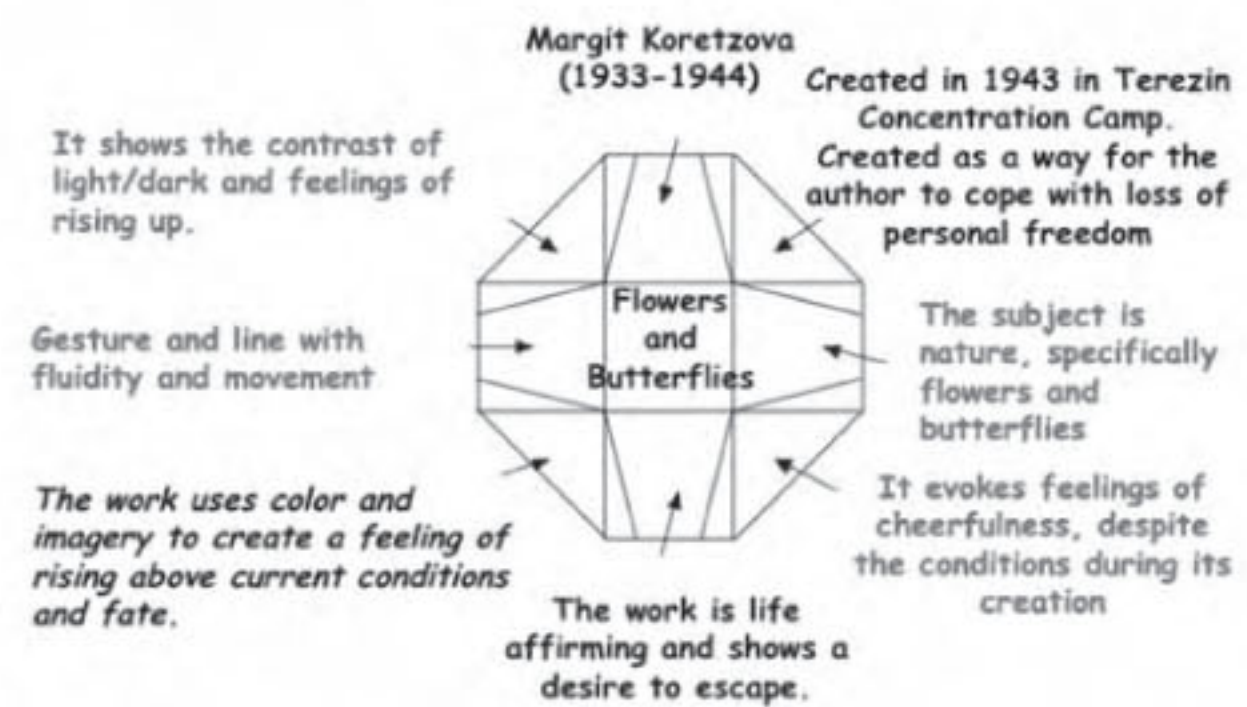
By their eighth grade year, which is when I normally teach this unit, many students have been introduced to poetry and have an understanding, or preconceived notion, of what they believe poetry means to them. Dias (1996) emphasizes this in his struggle with teacher as interpreter, rather than student as navigator. Students are overly concerned with “getting the facts right” rather than truly considering the possible meanings of the poetry. Much of this problem is derived from a teacher-centric view of poetry in education when, in many cases, children are perfectly capable of reading and interpreting poetry on their own just as they do literature when written at an appropriate level. Ciardi (1975) argues for the goal of not defining words (or, in this case, lyrics or poetry), but instead of arriving at an experience. Using the “language of experience” in order to consider poetry. In this particular instance, these students will not have experienced the horrors and experiences that the children from Terezin experienced. However, they will understand pain, fear, loneliness, a desire for something better; these are all unifying emotions felt by everyone, even children. Similarly in art, students are often educated to believe that art comes from a specific time period, must be created by a master artist and they often fail to simply consider the work itself and what it could mean. However, in the choral classroom, discussion of both the art and the poetry need to be intertwined with the music. Each informs the other and cannot (and should not) simply be considered as separate entities. For that reason, I have chosen to focus on the Facets Model (Barrett, McCoy, & Veblen, 1997; revised in Barrett, 2013). This model allows for a variety of entry points into a work (as will be witnessed in the unit plans further along in this article) and allows for flexible lesson plan writing. This model allows for a far more organic source for connections between these works and allows the student to flow more seamlessly between works, rather than simply trying to answer a question or plug in the “right” answers. Below you will find sample lessons that I use with eighth-grade classes and can be modified for your own students.

#### Sample Lesson 1

In lesson 1, we explore the painting *Flowers and Butterflies* (Margit Koretzova, 1943, age 10) as the students see it and before knowing the artist's age and background.



Flowers and Butterflies - Margit Koretzova 1943



Consider the colors she chose and then discuss how our emotional response to the painting changes if we put a filter (I offer suggestions and show them samples of black and white, neon, sepia toned and Instagram filters) over the paintings. Students contribute their own thoughts both aloud and in journals that they create for this unit.

#### Sample Lesson 2

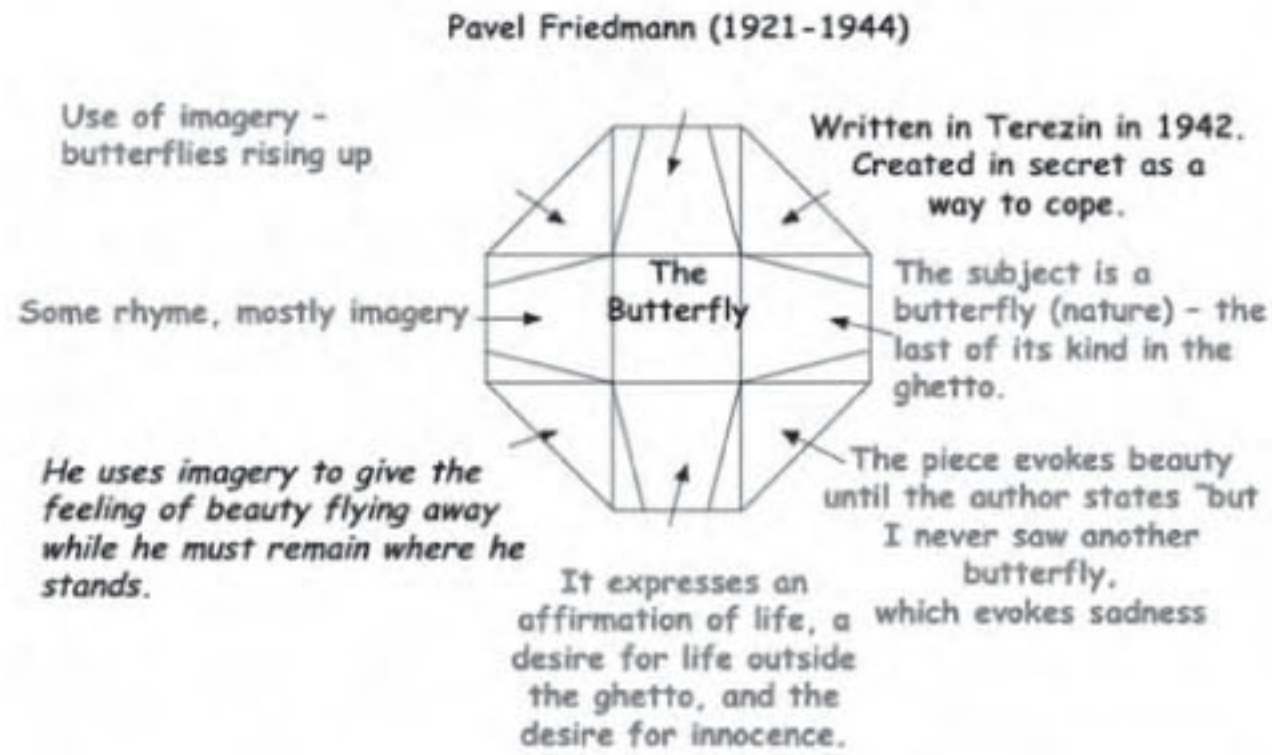
In lesson 2, students read through the poem *The Butterfly*.

##### The Butterfly (Pavel Friedmann)

The last, the very last,  
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.  
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing  
against a white stone. . . .  
Such, such a yellow  
Is carried lightly 'way up high.  
It went away I'm sure because it wished to  
kiss the world good-bye.  
For seven weeks I've lived in here,  
Pinned up inside this ghetto.  
But I have found what I love here.  
The dandelions call to me  
And the white chestnut branches in the court.  
Only I never saw another butterfly.  
That butterfly was the last one.  
Butterflies don't live in here,  
in the ghetto.



The following diagram shows many discussion points relating to this poem, and the symbolism of the butterfly juxtaposed against the ghetto.



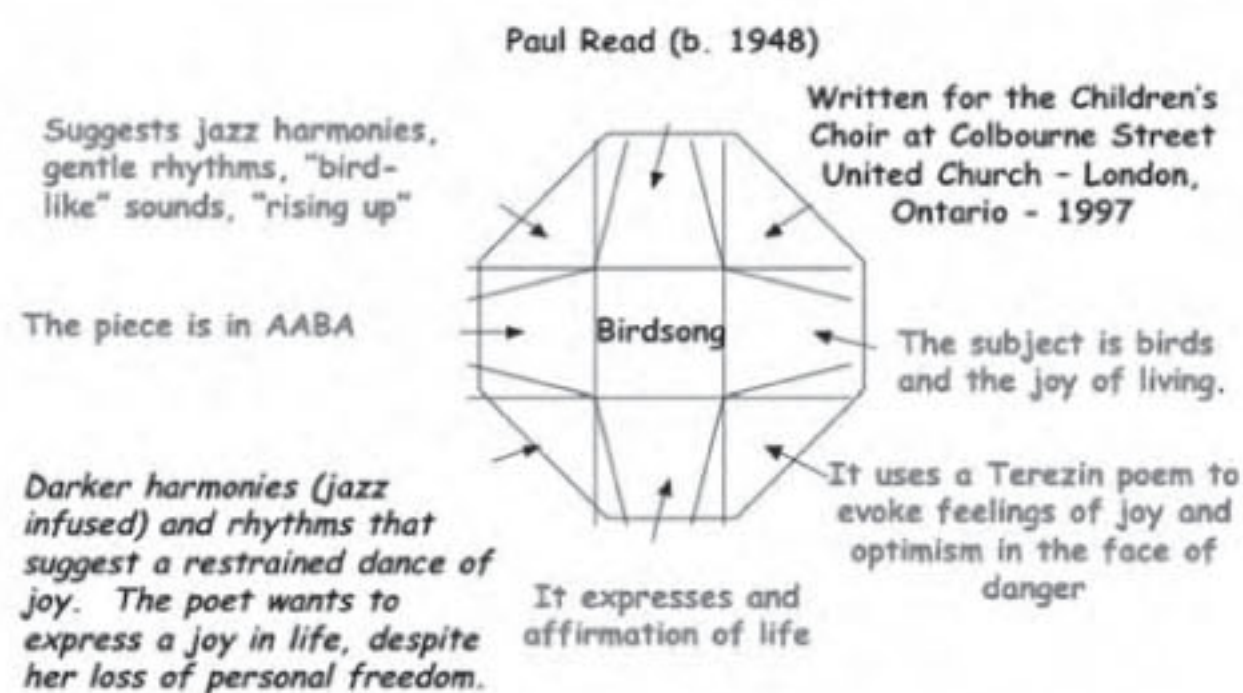
After discussing the main words and phrases, the students are asked to match words to colours using coloured pencils, crayons, highlighters, or markers. For example, if they see yellow as a happy color, words such as *pleasant*, *bright* or *welcoming* might be words that say “yellow” to them. This can be done in their journals, in small groups or as a class. I am always amazed by student responses to this part of the project. They engage in heated discussions about their colour choices, learn to respect others’ thoughts, yet still retain their own beliefs.

At this point, I often use an activity called a *colour composition* in which students explore colour and music together. This occurs before we look at the music we are going to examine. Students are assigned (or choose) a particular colour and are asked to create a brief (60 second) composition that demonstrates their emotional response and feelings about that colour. The compositions can be created electronically, vocally, or using simple classroom instruments depending upon what is available in your classroom. Rather than have the students use traditional notation, I focus more on what they are able to perform instead of what they are able to notate.

### Sample Lesson 3

This lesson starts with a reflection on what the students previously experienced with the painting and poem. What connections stayed with them? Did any other thoughts arise about the artwork and/or the poem?

The following diagram depicts the many ways this interdisciplinary lesson may be implemented by using Paul Read’s arrangement of the poem “Birdsong” as the central theme.



### Birdsong (Anonymous Child, 1941)

He doesn't know the world at all  
Who stays in his nest and doesn't go out.  
He doesn't know what birds know best  
Nor what I sing about,  
That the world is full of loveliness.

When dewdrops sparkle in the grass  
And earth's aflood with morning light,  
A blackbird sings upon a bush  
To greet the dawning after night  
Then I know how fine it is to live.

Hey, try to open up your heart  
To beauty; go to the woods someday  
And weave a wreath of memory there.  
Then if the tears obscure your way  
You'll know how wonderful it is  
To be alive.

Students then listen to Paul Read’s accompaniment of “Birdsong” before looking at the music or reading the words, again journaling throughout in order to continue making connections to colours they hear in the music. Students then add the text by reading it aloud. I ask them to think about how the text changes the way they hear the harmonies. The students sing through the piece or listen to a recording. We then discuss how they felt while singing or listening to the piece.

This arrangement was composed by Paul Read in 1977 for Soprano/Alto choir and uses the text of the poem “Birdsong”.

### Sample Lesson 4

1. Teacher led introduction to Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the children of Terezin.

- Terezin was a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia that operated between 1940-1944. Hundreds of thousands of people passed through this camp.
- The camp housed many artists and musicians, including Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an art teacher.
- Many of the artists, musicians and teachers in the camp taught their skills to the children, encouraging them to use art, music and poetry to cope with their situation.
- The children hid their drawings and poems until they could be smuggled out from Terezin.

2. NPR (National Public Radio) “Honouring our will to live: The lost music of the holocaust” (Poggioli, 2013). This podcast explores Lotoro’s work.

3. Student Journal Prompts (to be completed privately in their journals to ensure that students feel comfortable).

After viewing the painting:

- Describe how this painting makes you feel.
- What do you think the painting is about?
- What are the butterflies doing in the painting?
- What colours are used in the painting?
- If the painter used different colors, would this picture make you feel differently?



- What if the painting were in black and white? How would that change the way you feel about it?
- If you could put an Instagram filter on the painting, which filter would you use? Why? How would it change the way you see the painting?

After reading the poem:

- How do the poem and the painting relate?
- Did you notice any connections between the color choices?
- Did you have any similar feelings when looking at the painting and the poem?
- If you were to choose a sound you could make to match these colors/words, what would you choose?

After listening to the piece:

- How do the harmonies make you feel?
- What do you notice about the progression of harmonies?
- Are they all “happy” chords or do some of them strike a different feeling in you?
- If you had to predict a storyline for this music, what would it be?

After Holocaust discussion:

- Why do you think these children chose to draw/write about life rather than death?
- Bring it all together: Now that you know about the background and we’ve analyzed each of the works separately, how do they work? What does the artist/musician/poet use to make the story come alive? (If students are struggling with this section, consult facets model(s) above for more information)
- What are the commonalities between the works? (Connections may include: Color Schemes, Life Affirmation, Optimism in the face of hatred, “rising up” over difficulty)
- What are some difficult situations where you may face the desire to use art, music or poetry (or dance or theatre) to help you cope?
- What music do you listen to that helps you get through a difficult time?
- What’s the theme of the music? What does it say to you?
- If it has words, what is one phrase that stands out to you
- Now that you have information about the circumstances surrounding the pieces we’ve looked at, how do you feel

about them? Do you react differently knowing the history?

- When you perform *Birdsong*, what message do you want to send to the audience? How will you make the stories of the unknown child, Margit and Pavel known to the audience?


\*\*Some of this information may be too personal for students to share. Encourage them to share what they are comfortable with sharing.

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