Eleven years ago, using my own collection of world instruments purchased during world musical tours, I initiated an innovative project which encouraged my students to understand and appreciate musical traditions from diverse cultures. This unique and personal approach to the study of world music was realized by forming the Brooklyn College Academy World Ensemble. This multi-ethnic music education enables all students to learn about different genres while celebrating cultural commonalities. Through participation in this World Ensemble, students learn that they live in a world as diverse and as wondrous as the instruments they study. The non-traditional instruments are from the following countries: Africa, India, Pakistan, China, Vietnam, Japan, Israel, Egypt, Ireland, England, Russia, Spain, United States, and various Latin American nations. This course instructs the compositional, acoustical, and performance aspects as well as providing a venue for students to understand diversity. By introducing and performing on these non-traditional instruments, I have been able to integrate archaeological, historical, and scientific/acoustical properties inherent in each instrument. As the learning/skill level increases, a spiritual relationship starts to develop between the students and their instruments.

As a life-long learner of music, my obligation is to teach students about the collective cultures who can perform together as a holistic entity. To further enhance my understanding of the acoustical and spiritual aspects inherent in the ancient instruments, I decided to reconstruct the largest of the Membranophone family
(drums using a variety of animal skins to produce the sound). Reconstructing the Odaiko Drum (large Drum) provided an essential ingredient to help comprehend the function of this instrument in the musical life of Japan. For the creation of the Taiko Drum (small drum), a collaborative team decided to use a wine barrel from Napa Valley, CA. Synthetic skins were then placed on both sides of the drums in place of original animal skins. As a result, when striking the drums, I was able to generate the thunderous sound and timbre similar to the ancient Taiko/Odaiko drums.

Given the success of reconstructing the Taiko/Odaiko drums, my focus shifted towards a voice whose timbre exudes spirituality and beauty. The acoustical properties inherent in the Native American Indian flute enable the performer to produce a beautiful, intense resonant voice. This instrument allows the flute player to engage audiences in deeply personal conversations of trust, hope and spirituality. To fully understand the capacity of this instrument, I wanted to learn the artistry that goes into crafting and refining these beautiful Aerophones (instruments which use air to make a sound). The various woods indigenous to certain parts of this country are used in the construction of the flutes. The Native American Indian flutes I use in my performing and teaching career are hand-crafted by Daniel Bigay. Mr. Bigay is an Artist, Flute Maker, Performer/Recording artist and a member of the Echota Cherokee Tribe. Mr. Daniel Bigay's flutes have won awards at various Native American fine art shows across the country. His flutes are played by nationally known Native American Indian recording artists, the Hevreh Ensemble* (a classical world music group which recently performed in Prague and Krakow) and other professional and amateur players. Mr. Bigay's flutes and art pieces are in museums and private collections around the world. With financial help from a Hofstra University Faculty Research and Development Grant, Mr. Bigay graciously offered to instruct me on the artistry and crafting of the Native American Indian flute.

In a small shed up in the Smokey Mountains near Johnson City, Tennessee, I spent six, fourteen hour days watching an artist turn 100 year old barn wood into a magnificent Native American Indian flute. The days were unbearably hot with dust accumulating over the shed, my hair and clothes while searing heat/humidity attracted a plethora of “uninvited insects.” Between the insects, dust and heat, this anxiety ridden city girl was ready to bolt down the mountain. Yet escaping was not...
an option as I watched the spiritual voice steadily liberated from the old barn wood. Danny Bigay began the cultural tradition of hand crafting the flute by: shaping the mouthpiece, carving the bird while being gently placed on top of the flute, tunneling the first chamber so air can be blown through the windway hitting the block as it flows upwards towards the fipple while continuing down the bore of the instrument. Holes were made in succession to produce various diatonic tones when fingers are placed in proper order. Secrets passed down from ancestral voices were shown to me - entrusting me to keep the actual process a secret. After a while the dust, bugs, heat and humidity became part of a holistic journey into the creative depth of the spirit voice.

My introduction to the sounds/colors of the mountain wasn't complete until I met Katlyn. Katlyn, a 12 year old girl, led me up the mountain and schooled me about herbs, plants, rocks and assorted critters that roamed the forest. She had an encyclopedic mind, sharing stories and knowledge passed down from her ancestors who settled on the mountain many decades ago. She was my tour guide, my protector and a voice of comfort. Her story, like so many on the mountain, was filled with amusing, colorful anecdotes about life in Appalachia. As I was being led into the darkness of the woods, she told me her “secret.” Katlyn's eyes filled with the sad reality of living a life without the ability to read. “I couldn’t read anything until I met Kay (Mr. Bigay's wife a Cherokee Native) and she taught me.” Katlyn told me the first word she remembered was metamorphosis. One day during school, the science teacher asked someone if they could read that difficult “word.” With a bright smile, she told me how she was the only one who could read and comprehend metamorphosis. The passion, determination and willingness to share her story gave me insight into her character and the intrinsic culture around the mountain. I gave her a big hug and we proceeded to climb further up the mountain. The colorful shades of impressionistic light peering through the trees gave me the calmness I haven’t felt in years. The insects, critters, trees all became my environment. Katlyn guided me down the mountain to the familiar shed where the 100 year old barn wood, this city girl and Katlyn began their metamorphosis. The mountain forever changed my perception of what is brilliance. Brilliance is defined by Katlyn's knowledge of the mountain, Mr. Bigay's artistic creativity and the raw beauty of nature. Whimsical dreamers of artificial glory sweep this country making it nearly impossible for us to understand the simplicity of creating and dreaming of
a more equitable society. My metamorphosis is an ongoing journey reminding me that the voices who claim to know brilliance should have their own metamorphosis on the mountain.

Laurie Friedman-Adler

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