



The Composer Essay Project

Motherhood and the Creative Process (According to Five Canadian Composers)

By Vivian Fung

Ever since becoming a mother to my rambunctious, now three-year-old son, I have frequently been asked, by men and women alike, how motherhood has changed my life as a composer. I have wanted to write an article like this for quite some time, and now — especially in light of these politically charged times (e.g., the *#metoo* movement) — seems an opportune time to share my thoughts. I have also invited thoughts from four of my composer colleagues — Linda Bouchard, Zosha Di Castri, Emily Doolittle, and Kelly-Marie Murphy— all terrific composers who happen to be mothers, and all of whom, like myself, proudly identify themselves as Canadian. There have been many articles written already about motherhood and creativity (see, e.g., Doolittle’s *Composing and Motherhood* at NewMusicBox), but I would like to concentrate on the day-to-day life of the composing mind and the creative process unfolding through a life of juggling multiple duties. Although I focus here on our experience as mothers, several male colleagues have voiced their own struggles upon becoming fathers.

I have not always wanted to be a mother. When I was 19 and highly impressionable, my then-mentor David Diamond offered this advice at a preconcert lecture moments before my NY debut: “You will have to choose, Vivian: either you will have a wonderful life as a composer, or you will have babies.” Being entirely green, I believed what he said and for the next twenty years I proceeded through life with the intention of being childless and focused on the singular pursuit of a composing career.

Linda Bouchard encountered similarly negative perceptions when she first became a mother, nearly two decades ago:

If you are a conductor (... and composer) and also a mother, you are not a very serious conductor, the stereotype came back very rapidly and it was a shock because I was 40 when I had my son so I could really notice the difference. In other words, if you are a mother, anything else you did was perceived as a hobby. Not a serious career.

Life changes. Not long after receiving David Diamond’s advice, I encountered a wonderful, supportive life partner who also was not only my #1 fan, but also someone with whom I gradually came around to wanting to start a family. I also started to question my life priorities, whether there was more to life than my work. It was truly a conflicted time for me, since my life was already resolutely devoted to music. As well, at the time, I felt I did not have any female role models to talk to about this, because the female mentors who were accessible to me did not have children. I felt alone and depressed for a long time, and when my husband and I decided to pursue having a child, it was not an easy decision for me to make.

When I was pregnant, I actually plowed right through my due date working on a 25-minute work for the Vancouver Symphony — my *Biennale Snapshots*. Thankfully, my son decided to wait an extra week to make his arrival into the world! With all the conflicts that I had, I wanted to prove to myself after giving birth that I indeed could do both, and do both well. The first year of my son's life was the toughest — I had nursing issues that completely occupied my time and had a hellish time trying to fit in composing with the sleepless nights and laundry-filled days. In some ways, these detours made me cherish my composing time even more, and I pushed through my groggy state of mind.

Zosha Di Castri also had a similar experience. She writes:

When I was pregnant, I was concerned about how to maintain my identity as an artist while also managing motherhood. It was important to me not to completely step away, so I actually took on some of my most ambitious projects leading up to and in the first year of her life. This was definitely challenging, but I think [it] was necessary to prove to myself that I could be both – that I didn't have to choose one over the other.

In all the conversations I have had with artists who are mothers, time management became a central focus to find time to compose. Interruptions become a part of life for myriad reasons, a sick child and then inevitably a sick mommy, doctors visits, the list goes on. Kelly-Marie Murphy writes:

I am quite good at compartmentalizing my life; being in the moment and doing what I am supposed to be doing. Generally, it was possible to eke out time to compose ... I think I felt a great responsibility to be working during those precious hours and minutes I had set aside. For the first few years, my writing time was in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep.

I agree — even with babysitters, day care, and preschool, I still have found my time to be stretched to the maximum. The only time I really had, especially during deadlines, was in the middle of the night. In fact, I would not have been able to complete my most recent pieces without pulling a few all-nighters. This, of course, wreaked havoc on my body, but at the same time, I felt like “superwoman” while going through this deeply intense experience of total immersion in my work.

Emily Doolittle writes:

We have a lot of babysitting help. The kids are in preschool/school and/or with a babysitter until 6 every day ... But it's still hard to have to stop working at 6 every day — perhaps that will be just when I have gotten into the best headspace for composing!

Despite the hardships of having to stop and start, delay, and compartmentalize, many of my colleagues feel that being a motherhood has actually fueled their lives as composers. Zosha says, *“I did find myself being drawn to certain subjects relating to motherhood in the early years ... I think it is natural as an artist to interweave your life into your artistic expression.”* Linda writes, *“Having a child opened me*

up to the world in a more compassionate way. Also, the stress of my career was experienced differently."

Not having as much time or space can also be beneficial for creativity, because, for me, it eliminated many of the doubts I had before having a child. Before my life as a parent, I would ruminate on each passage, essentially censoring every other note I wrote and obsessing over making it "perfect." Having a child has made me realize that life is indeed messy, and I have learned to trust my instincts and doubt less. Adopting a new rhythm took some time to get used to, especially all the starting and stopping, but I have learned to go with the flow, and live life in the moment and cherish the moments I have to write and daydream.

Emily states: *"I used to feel like I couldn't compose unless circumstances were exactly right, but I now know that I'll make it happen no matter what is going on around me. I think new ideas often arise in response to challenges ... "*

For me, seeing the world through my son's eyes has completely rocked my world. He has opened me open to feelings of compassion, joy, and connection, as well as being my teacher on how to set boundaries, be persistent, flexible, and, above all, patient. Through the sleepless nights and complete exhaustion, my creativity is being recharged by life with a child who has given me so much fuel to work with. I wrote a work called *Earworms* in 2017–2018, stemming from the fact that for my son's first year of life, he would want "Wheels on the Bus" playing everywhere he went — in the car, while sleeping, and even while eating. It became my earworm, and instead of resisting, I went with it.

I am writing this article in hopes of giving other artists and composers, both male and female, who are considering starting families the affirmation that it is possible to do both. As all of the composers above admit, the juggling act for creative professionals is not easy. I think a few baseline requirements are nearly essential — first, a partner who is willing to share in the responsibilities of raising a child; second, sufficient resources for childcare, in addition to day-to-day expenses, as well as a plan for saving for future educational costs and rainy days; third, a separate workspace, even if it is just a corner in a back room, to divide work from family life; and finally, above all, the continuing desire to create and work. I think now more than ever, with an increasing awareness of issues around achieving a balanced life, we can have our cake and eat it too.

Vivian Fung. October 2018. San Jose, USA.

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