

The Innovative Spirit at Work

Symphony Composer, Conductor, and Business Coach? Meet Peter Wiegold

An Interview with Peter Wiegold: composer, conductor, conductor, and management coach by Ned Hamson - author of Global Innovation.

Hamson: You've got a "strange" background to be involved in doing innovation and communications work for business. I can understand working with orchestras and such, but how did it drift outside of that world? How did all that happen?

Wiegold: I ran this course at the Guilford School of Music for ten years called performance in communication skills and we brought in lots of different kind of trainers and we took the students through all sorts of theatrical and communication and presentation and those kinds of processes to help them as musician and as creative leaders, and in the end a lot of the work with those students was about their life skills. A lot of the point of that course was to strip them down and say, what are the basic communication skills, what are the basic creative skills. We did move away from the text as it were and do a lot of open space work.

Hamson: When you say you're doing communication skills for musicians in what sense, for their speaking or to look at their playing as being part of dialog and communication.

Wiegold: Everything from the bottom, which would be their artistic expression to the top, which would be walking on stage and saying "Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen." Particularly the bottom levels where if they're locked-up expressively, if they have issues about how they say hello or goodbye that will come out in their music.

It's similar to what certain theatre directors have done, just taking it down to sort of naked communication where everything becomes revealed; it's not hidden behind Mozart in a complicated cello scale. It becomes very evident that someone is faking or someone is good a beginning and not ends or someone noodles but doesn't go deep. And they if you work in very simple ways you have also ways of starting to bring those things to the surface.

Hamson: I heard Ray Bradbury tell a tale about dialogue and how it effects communications of all sorts. Bradbury's a prolific writer but not all of his books were big hits. He discovered when he was around fifty that his best writings were all written for one person. This started when he was in junior high school, instead of doing his homework, he'd have a little journal inside his book in which he'd write a story. At then end of the school day, he'd run to his aunt's house and read the story to her - his best stories, he remembered, were the ones that she liked.

He then recalled that his best stories since had been written to and for her. I kept asking him what people were saying and ultimately the principle I extracted form that was you can only speak to one person at a time and others "hear" you best when that one person is someone you know and care about. That is, that all artistic expression that really "works" is based on dialogue and when it really cooks -- it's directed towards one person and it's someone more than likely that you know.

Wiegold: That's interesting. It's sort of like the principle of resonance. I often teach people how to band lead. How to stand in front of a group of musicians and draw things from them. And if they're bringing a part -- say they want to bring the clarinet in, and I say OK introduce the clarinet part or whatever, they sometimes stare at the floor or shut their eyes or stare at the

ceiling, and I say "Look at the player and you won't have to do anything, because if you get the vibe of the player, then clarinetness plus Georgeness, or whoever the clarinetist is will get in the circle with you and the ideas will be there between you." And if you want to invent something for someone, the best thing to do is not to think 'now what does the clarinet part go like' but it's to look at George, the clarinetist and evoke something out of the vibe that is between you. And you're talking about that on a more general level. That's within the room that's how it works.

Hamson: The other thing that I took from that is related to a story in the Christian Bible. When the Disciples of Jesus were said to be speaking so that each person heard what was being said in their own language. I understood that to mean when you are in real dialog others hear what you say in "their language."

Wiegold: There's a phenomenon of being drawn in by the echoing cave of what people are doing and then a kind of resonance if people are doing something that resonates. It's attractive. It draws things in. That kind of conversation will draw attention to itself.

Hamson: So that's where this training of yours began with that kind of work.

Wiegold: Yes, because I was training them to compare with and to improvise and I was also training them to be workshop leaders. I was training them to go into schools, colleges, or stand in front of orchestras and be a creative director, draw things from people. So, I was training leadership skills as well as creative skills basically.

Hamson: Interesting. And then other people just started to come, or?

Wiegold: I've worked a lot in education and I've done a bit within the therapeutic movement. There's a therapeutic center in Greece where I've been to a few times. I've often worked with non-musicians like when I was in Greece; I'd work with a room full of people from business and social studies and all that. And then just in the last few of years I've started to do it within this business context.

Hamson: It really comes off as improving their communication or listening.

Wiegold: It's getting the idea that communication has something to do with a live spirit in the room rather than a sequence of exchanged pieces of information. The Erickson people I worked with mainly had an engineering background. So, they saw communication as information exchange. Which is different than communicating how bowled over were you by the sun coming up or by the sheer awestruckness of a certain system or something. I was working on the basic things like speaking clearly and presenting things in threes rather than in tens and looking at your audience, which is important even if you're imparting pure information. But I was also talking about that kind of thing artists have of not just saying it but saying it in a way that evokes feelings, thoughts, and attentions beyond it. Saying things in an imaginative way.

Hamson: When people have seen a film or presentation or they've listened to a great speech with real communication or dialog going on they're drawn in, as you say, and end up feeling as if Martin Luther King or John Kennedy or Winston Churchill is speaking directly to them. I think of stories of President Roosevelt in the Second World War and Winston Churchill in England... people would sit by the radio and think they were being spoken to directly.

Wiegold: I was just thinking. It's not just that people are speaking directly, but also truthfully isn't it. It's something to do with a sense of authenticity or truth or honesty in what's being said.

Hamson: A lot of people talked about that and it's unguarded or naked or however you want to say it.

Wiegold: Honest, or vulnerable. Yeah.

Hamson: People often are looking at it as just information exchange but there's no other way to run organizations if you can't communicate clearly, honestly, authentically and at the same time listen. It doesn't make any difference whether it's written or spoken.

Wiegold: When you say listen it's the way in which you respect the bodies and the souls of the people you're talking to isn't it. You talk in such a way so that you listen to them listening so it's touching their flesh rather than no flesh or anybody's flesh. The listening quality is having sympathy for your audience as well as empathy. Some kind of feeling for how they're feeling.

Hamson: When you're doing the workshops with strictly business folks are you using music as well to do it?

Wiegold: I move in and out of music. I did one very nice thing where I was with a very fine saxophone player, one of the best in this country. There were six of them in the room and I got them to decide which synthesizer sound they liked. And I made up six short pieces of music that the sax player and I played and then each of the executives had to introduce us and they had to imbue us both with the music, drink it up as it were, get a feeling for it. And then introduce us so as to invoke the music and also just practice the skills of he's come from England and all that introductory stuff. Therefore, they had to transpose their presentation skills towards interpreting something of us and embracing who we were and what we were doing. It got them into more soulful talking. They enjoyed trying to express in words the effect of this music. It got them in touch with expressing things from what they'd sensed as well as from what they thought.

Hamson: Have you been at it with the non-musicians long enough that you've heard back that it seems to stick with them perhaps better than other types of training they've had?

Wiegold: I haven't done that many, but the feedback seems to be that they were touched and there was a kind of visceral memory of that because they'd really felt, and really performed.

Hamson: I guess you'll hear over the years how well it sticks. Oftentimes people get training or they have some experience that seems to have changed them but then old patterns are really rather difficult...

Wiegold: Yeah, and you can't teach someone to be John Cleese or Mozart in a day. There's only so much you can do in a day. I guess the thing is to get people high isn't it. It's very easy to get people excited and enthusiastic. I sort of try to have a mixture of inspiring things that get them excited but then some ground ideas about how they can use it or practice it.

Hamson: Having them do the introductions. You moved them out of their normal way of

learning and then with the practice of applying some of it that must have helped...

Wiegold: I'm always thinking whether it's with businessmen or teaching competition or conducting rehearsals that always trying to distill things to the essences, like the nature of openings or closings or doing things in threes, or the nature of silence, the nature of poetic imagery. To distill some of the really basic things so that everyone can remember whether they're with engineers or in front of an orchestra the importance of silence, the importance of breath between phrases. I'm always looking for those universal things like breath between phrases that would apply in anything. Little exercises that help people have the confidence to take breaths. I do sometimes do conducting kind of things where there's a sound going on and then someone has to stop it and they hold the attention of the audience. They go stop, hold a physical gesture, and hold everyone in the room in that pause. And then say go and the thing starts again. And that ability to hold the room just by saying "Stop. Go." And the quality of that pause and the sense of timing as to when to release it that again a great conductor has that. But also someone like Kennedy would have that when they stopped in the middle of a phrase, let the pin drop, and then went on with the follow-up. I suppose I'm always looking for things like that the kind of elemental aspects of language that are in music and in art and in politics and so on.

Hamson: What drew you to this area yourself. You started in composition and then conducting or what?

Wiegold: Yeah, I started studying composition, conducting, piano and then I don't know what drew me to it. It's an interesting question because I've got plenty of composer friends who don't enter this world at all. I think this is what people say about me that when I teach composition, I teach the person as much as I teach the craft of composition. So I've always been people-centered within music. Unlike when I compose, I conduct one oboist differently from another. Because one is tall and tense and one's short and relaxed, and so I don't give the same signal to each player abstractly. I change the signal according to who I'm signaling. And some conductors don't do that they just give more generalized signals.

Hamson: It also sounds like you've always had an ability to just be open and to not categorize the person that you've met, or are working with.

Wiegold: I try to do that, yeah.

Hamson: The way I try to explain it is to have someone outside the room. Then I ask the person to come in and then immediately ask the others: "Who, what is this person?"

Wiegold: Oh, nice one!

Hamson: Because everyone immediately starts to categorize them.

Wiegold: Yeah and stereotype.

Hamson: And they decide who or what the person is just by how they walk; how they're dressed - that sort of thing. So people rarely ever see who actually came in.

Wiegold: That's a lovely exercise.

Hamson: It sounds as if however you were brought up, or whether it's just an inborn quirk of your chromosomes and genes, or whatever that you are not automatically categorizing people, which then turns out to be a basic part of your ability to transfer that to other people.

Wiegold: People say I understand people well. I find people fascinating and amusing and enjoyable to be with. So I've got quite a strong communal aspect in me.

Hamson: That leads me to another question. That engineers and musicians may have something very much in common in that the way they've chosen to express themselves - the engineers through numbers and technology and the musicians through an instrument. Do you find that they both have difficulty in communicating with people - face to face?

Wiegold: Musicians are classically that way - open in one way, closed in another; they communicate through their instrument but they can be very shy or just very undeveloped in terms of their social and emotional communication.

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About Peter Wiegold:

Peter Wiegold as business and communications coach: Peter Wiegold has led workshops for many kinds of groups - from children, to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, to leaders in arts and industry; workshops in schools, for actors and dancers, for orchestras and ensembles to develop their creative and communication skills, and for many groups of non-musicians focusing on spontaneity, creative leadership and self awareness and self-confidence.

Peter Wiegold as artist: His compositions have been widely commissioned, including works for the London Symphony Orchestra, City of London Sinfonia, Composers' Ensemble, and an opera for Covent Garden's, 'Garden Venture'. Peter Wiegold founded and directed Gemini for ten years, performing and broadcasting and pioneering participatory workshops in Britain. He regularly conducts the Composers' Ensemble (recent concerts in Dartington, London, Brighton, Bath, Darmstadt, Salzburg and Holland) and has also recently conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the Joensuu Orchestra, Finland and directed realizations of works by Maderna and Stockhausen for the London Sinfonietta. He is a regular guest conductor of Symphony Nova Scotia and has worked with 'Sharp Edge' the new music group of the RPO. He has broadcast as a conductor many times for the BBC, and has also recorded for Hesse Rundfunk, Germany, and CBC Canada.