

The “Uncle Wilbur” Series:

Lessons about Classical Music for Children



In 2009, Lauren and Mark Arnest with Thomas Wilson, associate conductor of the Colorado Springs Philharmonic Orchestra, and Gloria Slayton, an educator with over thirty years' experience teaching music and other subjects to elementary school children, conceived of a series of small plays with orchestral accompaniment to teach children about classical music. The lessons revolve around a magical character named Uncle Wilbur who somehow lives inside an old piano that has come into the possession of the protagonists' family. The three siblings (in the initial series a girl of eleven, a boy of nine, and a girl of six) have separate age-

appropriate adventures with Uncle Wilbur, whom they have kept a secret from their parents. Each of the children has discovered that if they correctly play the notes of music that appears in the piano bench, they can summon Uncle Wilbur out of the piano. He then leads them in an adventure with the symphony orchestra, which also magically appears in their living room. The full series of Uncle Wilbur shows is contemplated to comprise nine separate episodes, three for each age group of five- through seven-year-olds, eight-through ten-year-olds, and eleven through thirteen-year-olds.

The pilot episode for the Uncle Wilbur series, *Uncle Wilbur's New World Tour*, was performed in autumn 2009 by the Colorado Springs Philharmonic and actors from the Colorado Springs Conservatory. The script to this pilot episode may be read [here](#)^{Insert A}. It is targeted at children from approximately eight to ten years old, and was presented to classes of third through fifth graders from Colorado Springs school districts who traveled to the concert venue on a field trip. A later performance was offered to the public. The forty-five-minute episode (the script may be expanded to fifty minutes as desired) features music from Antonin Dvořák's *New World Symphony* and a visit from Dvořák himself. A subplot of the action is designed to teach

aspects of leadership, as well as some history about Dvořák's visit to America in 1893. Musical lessons include a demonstration of baton motion and deconstructing of some of the major musical themes in the symphony to see how they evoke different emotions. For this purpose, Mark composed some original variations on Dvořák's themes.

Prior to the performances, children in the targeted audiences had been introduced to the music in their respective classes and taught some of the history of the piece. They also were given a “teaser” to the Uncle Wilbur storyline. This backstory may be read [here](#). The children's names in the story were chosen to tie into historical names in the Colorado Springs area where the series was premiered. These names could be changed to correspond to local historical figures in other venues where the series might be offered.

In addition to the performers—an orchestra and one adult and one child actor—the Uncle Wilbur series calls for one simple prop: an old upright piano. Ideally, this would be an oversized, hollow box, through which the actors and a few of the musicians could make their entrances and exits, so that they appear to be coming out of it. At the premiere, this was a plywood box with a detachable front made to look like keys and legs of an upright piano. Another possibility is a “piano” mostly built of stretched thin elastic fabric, slit for entrances and exits, and which could be distorted and illuminated from behind for magical effects. In any event, the prop piano should not involve much in the way of budget or storage space. If a prop piano is not possible to obtain, a real upright piano may be used, from behind which some stage smoke might emanate for Uncle Wilbur's entrance. *Uncle Wilbur's New World Tour* also calls for some simple stage magic in the orchestra: an exploding confetti canister, some flash paper, and some stage smoke. All of these effects are readily obtainable and easy to use.

Reaction to the premiere of this children's show was mostly positive, with negative comments centering on a perceived imbalance in the ratio of music to dialogue in the play. These concerns were addressed in a rewrite after the performances. Some of the comments from teachers in the Colorado Springs school districts that saw the piece included:

The children loved having actors along with the music. For kids this age, in this fast paced world of entertainment, children need as much stimulation as possible. Having the visual as well as the auditory was great for our multi-sensory learners.

The interspersing of drama and music was great – especially the explanation/introduction of sections of the orchestra.

The excerpts from the Dvořák symphony were just right—very interesting to kids and just the right length for their attention span.

Reaction from the orchestra members was less positive, mostly involving the perception that their role was too small. Such opinion is understandable from professional musicians. However, as the Uncle Wilbur series is specifically a set of *plays* illustrating musical

ideas to children, it follows that a story and dialogue will be front and center. For this reason, it might be just as effective, if not more so, to use community or nonprofessional music groups to provide the orchestral music called for in the plays. Such musicians would not be called upon to play as much music and thus would likely be able to practice it more and play it well enough for the purposes of the plays. However, professional groups who are game are surely not to be discouraged from participating.

We are making *Uncle Wilbur's New World Tour* available to any orchestra and/or school or other group that would like to perform it free of royalties in hopes that we may work with them to perfect the concept. The entire script to this episode including the orchestra parts and musical cues may be acquired by contacting us here at millionmonkeys.us. A new episode entitled *Uncle Wilbur's Downtown Band* specifically targeted at five- to seven-year-olds is in the works and should be available by summer 2010.

[insert A: Uncle Wilbur's New World Tour]

Uncle Wilbur's New World Tour

Time: the present

Characters:

Spencer, 9 years old

Uncle Wilbur, Indeterminate age

Antonin Dvořák, about 50 [age he was on visit to U.S. in 1893]

Conductor and orchestra members

[Lights up on orchestra, CONDUCTOR comes out and begins conducting New World Symphony from beginning. Reaches point of violin tremolo, EX 1, CD 1 all other instruments drop out, violins get much softer, lights go down gradually on orchestra and come up on SPENCER sitting at the piano. Violins keep playing as SPENCER plinks out a few notes of the 1st movement theme on the piano, but makes some mistakes. Violins stop playing. Sound Cue 1, CD 2]

SPENCER: No, that's not right. *[suddenly seeing AUDIENCE]* Oh, hello. I'm Spencer. Welcome to my house—my living room to be exact. I'm trying to get Uncle Wilbur to show up, but you can stick around. Let's try this again. *[turns back to piano and tries again, hitting another wrong note. Sound Cue 2, CD 3]* Wrong again! *[to AUDIENCE]* I always like to consult Uncle Wilbur when I've got homework to do. Course, he's not my real uncle. In fact, I don't know *who* he is. *[looking at music again]* I get it - it's not E major, it's E minor. Okay, let's see if it works this time. *[Turns back to piano and again plinks out a few notes that are wrong.]* Drat, why can't I get this right? *[to AUDIENCE]* It's weird, too, because Wilbur is terrible at homework. But somehow after a visit from him, I usually get some good ideas. Maybe I can play the right notes this time. *[Turns back to piano and plays the right notes. Strange electronic sounds {recorded} take over the tune and a deep rumbling is also heard. Sound Cue 3, CD 4 [To AUDIENCE]* I think we're in luck! *[Steps away from the piano as smoke begins to emanate from it, it begins to shake, lights flash, etc., and as music builds to the climax, it*

suddenly poops out with a blat just as Uncle Wilbur stumbles out of piano, in bathrobe and slippers with toothbrush in his mouth.]

SPENCER: [*to UW*] Hello, Uncle Wilbur. [*to AUDIENCE*] This is Uncle Wilbur.

UW: [*irritated*] What an infernal nuisance! Ever since you discovered how the magic passnotes work, I've been obliged to appear whenever you play them. And this time, as you can see, I hadn't even finished my "twaLET."

SPENCER: I'm sorry, but it *is* 4:30 in the afternoon.

UW: Not where I just came from. Can't we do this later? I haven't had my double latte with whipped cream and those little itty bitty chocolate sprinkles on top yet.

SPENCER: [*feigning dejection*] I guess so. You probably don't know anything about leadership anyway.

UW: [*perking up*] Wait just a minute! Who says I don't know anything about leadership? And why do you want to know?

SPENCER: I've got to write a report about it, and I haven't got the slightest idea what it is.

UW: [*preening, striking a pose*] Just describe your dear old Uncle Wilbur, and that "A" is on its way!

SPENCER: [*rolling eyes in amused disbelief*] Not to hurt your feelings, Uncle Wilbur, but right now you're about as far from a leader as an old washrag.

UW: Nonsense! The only thing I'm lacking right now is someone to lead. And that is easily remedied. [*points toothbrush at ORCHESTRA sitting in the dark*]

[*lights up on ORCHESTRA*]

SPENCER: Oh no! Not again! I never know how they get in here. Last time the trombones spilled some Cheetos on the carpet and my mother blamed me.

[*A TROMBONE stands up and plays a few notes*] [3 sec]

EX 2, CD 5

UW: He says it wasn't the trombones who left the Cheetos on the carpet.

SPENCER: Well, someone did it. And this time they've all got to leave the place clean and be out of here before my mother gets back from work.

UW: I'm sure it won't happen again. Anyway, you should be glad they're here because now I can demonstrate leadership and that report is as good as written.

SPENCER: [*doubtfully*] Okay. I'm watching.

[*UW steps up on the podium, as CONDUCTOR steps aside, and begins to wave his toothbrush. The ORCHESTRA responds with a few blats from the brass and some disrespectful-sounding lazy slides in the strings.*]

EX 3, CD 6 (this track is blank - will be improved by orchestra)

SPENCER: Sorry, Uncle Wilbur, but that didn't seem to lead to much of anywhere.

UW: [*hemming and hawing a bit*] Humpf! [*getting an idea*] Well, of course not! I seem to have forgotten the most important thing! [*with a heroic gesture he sweeps open his bathrobe to reveal that he is clad in pink tights with a large "W" emblazoned on his paunch. He fastens the robe in such a way that it becomes a cape down his back*] Now we're in business.

SPENCER: What on earth--? What is *that*? [*indicating UW's new look*]

UW: It's my superhero outfit. Everyone knows you can't lead a thing without one. See, it's got a "W" here for "Wilbur."

SPENCER: A superhero outfit? Wait a minute! You just happen to be wearing a superhero outfit under your bathrobe?

UW: [*sotto voce to SPENCER*] It doubles as my jammies. Saves money, and they [*indicating ORCHESTRA*] won't know the difference.

SPENCER: Uncle Wilbur, I don't think you need to be a superhero to lead an orchestra.

UW: Of course you do! This is a *symphony orchestra*, for heaven sakes! You have got to be heroic even to attempt to lead one of those.

SPENCER: But it's not like it's dangerous or anything.

UW: That's what you think! In fact, all sorts of dangers can be lurking in orchestras! Why you might have a trombone explosion, for example!

[*TROMBONE stands up and makes explosive sound* {confetti canister is set off in region of trombone}]

EX 4, CD 7

Spit flying everywhere! . . . A violin could burst into flame from the furious friction

fulminating forth in a flourish of fiery fission.

[*VIOLIN stands and starts frantically bowing fast passage* {{flash paper set off by violin}}]

EX 5, CD 8

Why—why—you could have a gas leak from the bassoon, leading to the need to evacuate the city!

[*BASSOON makes ominous “gas leak” sound* {{chemical smoke pours from under BASSOON chair}}]

EX 6, CD 9

SPENCER: [*incredulously*] Uncle Wilbur, stuff like that only happens when you’re around.

UW: Well, okay, you have a point there. . . . But leading a pack of musicians can be quite like herding cats.

EX 7, CD 10 [*one or two INSTRUMENTS make cat-meowing sounds, stop.*]

Big cats. . . . Lion taming to be exact.

EX 8, CD 11 [*a few lower INSTRUMENTS make lion-roaring sounds, stop.*]

It takes a will of iron to keep them in line. They’re ferocious!

EX 9, CD 12 [*Full ORCHESTRA makes scary jungle sounds.*]

UW: [*looks alarmed*] Stop it! You’re scaring me! Stop, please.

[*ORCHESTRA stops*]

Whew! That’s better. . . . So you see why you need a superhero to lead an orchestra and why orchestra leaders have to carry sticks? It’s all we have to protect ourselves from the wild musicians.

SPENCER: [*skeptically*] Uncle Wilbur, none of that’s true.

UW: Since when have you become so skeptical?

SPENCER: Okay, then. You’ve got your superhero costume, let’s see you lead them.

UW: [*hesitantly, as he steps up on the podium*] Right. I’ll just step up here like this and command them with my---

EX 10, CD 13 [*a VIOLIN stands up and plays a few disdainful notes*]

UW: I beg your pardon, it is *not*.

SPENCER: What did s/he say?

UW: S/he said my toothbrush is “yuckky.”

EX 11, CD 14 [*ORCHESTRA breaks out in derisive sounds that last for a few seconds*]

UW: Alright, that’s enough! It’s clear I’ve got to take extraordinary measures [*steps decisively towards door in piano*].

SPENCER: Wait! Where are you going?

UW: I need a bigger stick. I think I’ve got one in the rumpus room. I’ll be right back.

SPENCER: But what am I supposed to do with them [*indicating ORCHESTRA*]?

UW: Might I suggest peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all around? In my experience musicians are always hungry.

SPENCER: But--

UW: [*exiting into piano*] Don’t worry, I know you’ll think of something.

[*UW exits into piano*]

SPENCER: [*to ORCHESTRA*] Sorry, guys, there’s no way we’ve got enough peanut butter for all of you, and besides my mother would kill me if she found jelly on the carpet—especially after the Cheetos incident.

[*ORCHESTRA makes disappointed noises on their instruments*]

[*to AUDIENCE*] You know, it is kind of cool to have an orchestra in my living room. Look, there are the trumpets. [*indicates TRUMPETS, who play EX 12, CD 15*] I want to take trumpet lessons. And there are the flutes. [*indicate FLUTES, who play EX 13, CD 16*]. My sister Penrose plays the flute. And over there are the drums. [*indicates DRUMS, who play EX 14, CD 17*] My little sister Zebulanna wants to play drums when she gets old enough. You’ve already met the trombones. [*indicates TROMBONES EX 15, CD 18*] The French horns are in the back there. [*HORNS EX 16, CD 19*] and the clarinets and oboes are in the middle here. [*indicates CLARINETS and OBOES*]

EX 17, CD 20] In front of them are all the strings. There are lots of those. [*STRINGS*
EX 18, CD 21]

I wonder how long it's going to take Uncle Wilbur to get back. You're probably thinking that he's not going to be much help on the leadership thing and to be honest, I think you're right. Just because he's got magic doesn't mean he knows anything. Yup, magic is the only way I can explain Wilbur. You see, he sort of lives in the piano and I don't get it, because whenever I look in there it's just filled with strings and hammers and piano parts. But just by accident, I found out that if I play some notes from the music I find in the piano bench, I can get him to come out. [*he picks up music off of piano music stand*] I don't know how it gets in there, but the music's different every day. Today, for example, it's the "New World Symphony" by Antonin Dvořák [*he mispronounces the name "DEE vor ack"*] Never heard of it. Course, my parents don't know anything about Wilbur. I decided it was better to keep him a secret. . . . Now he's in the piano looking for a big stick. Actually, I don't think a bigger stick has anything to do with leadership. And I'm quite sure you don't need a superhero costume to be a leader.

[*enter Dvořák from wings*]

DV: [*with slavic accent*] Indeed, young man, I think you are right about that.

SPENCER: Who are you?

DV: I am Antonin Dvořák. I'm the one who wrote the New World Symphony.

SPENCER: So what's "new" about it?

DV: [*laughing*] No, no! It's not a new symphony. It's a symphony about the *New World*. That's what we Europeans called America, because it was new to us. We called Europe the Old World.

SPENCER: So it's about America?

DV: Yes.

SPENCER: Oh. What did you say your name was again?

DV: Antonin Dvořák.

SPENCER: Nice to meet you. I'm Spencer. [*they shake hands*] Did you say Duh VOR zhak [*pronounces it right this time, hesitantly*]?

DV: That's right. It's a Czech name. I was born in the place that you now call the Czech Republic in 1841.

SPENCER: 1841? Aren't you kind of old?

DV: Oh, heavens no! I died a long time ago.

SPENCER: [*unabashed*] So, you're like, what? A ghost?

DV: I suppose you might say that. Maybe you could say that great music like my New World Symphony never dies, and that the people who create such things live on through their work.

SPENCER: That's just what Mrs. Perlmutter says.

DV: And who is this "Mrs. Perlmutter"?

SPENCER: My piano teacher. She's an old lady and she's really boring.

DV: Boring or not—she's right.

SPENCER: Still, I can see how we remember great artists through their work. But I don't see how I can be standing here talking someone who's dead.

DV: I'm afraid, I can't help you there. Maybe I'm just a wisp of stray imagination. We can never be quite sure.

SPENCER: Well, all sorts of strange things happen when Uncle Wilbur gets loose from the piano, so I guess I'll just have to go with it.

DV: Thank you. I do appreciate you "going with" my existence. But what's this about leadership you were asking about?

SPENCER: I have to write a report about it, and Uncle Wilbur was going to demonstrate, but it seems he doesn't really know how to lead anything.

DV: Hmmn. Well, I would think that if you're going to lead, you have to have someplace to go.

SPENCER: Makes sense.

DV: As the composer who wrote this piece, I have given you a destination, a place to go: It's my *New World Symphony*. And here is a map of how to get there. [*takes score of symphony off of podium and shows it to audience*] It's a kind of road map for going places with music. It's called a "score." Each of the musicians has a little part of it—the part that is for his or her instrument.

SPENCER: A score is a road map! --Hey, that's a metaphor! We learned about that in English. It's when you say something is something else that it resembles in some way.

DV: Interesting. So whenever we are going to take a trip on a road or with music, we need someone who can read the map. In this case that would be the orchestra conductor. [*bows to CONDUCTOR, who bows back*] Here is our conductor.

[*CONDUCTOR now bows to AUDIENCE*]

SPENCER: Uncle Wilbur said something about needing a “stick.”

DV: It’s called a “baton” not a “stick.” [*to CONDUCTOR*] Maestro, do you have your baton?

[*CONDUCTOR holds up his baton to show audience*]

Excellent. And now, Maestro, won’t you lead the musicians in my New World Symphony? It’s been a long time since I last heard it.

EX 19, CD 22 [*Here the CONDUCTOR leads the orchestra in a segment of the first movement.*] [*Note: This cue has been extended a bit in the score. It will end on a short but emphatic G major chord.*]

DV: Lovely! That was a part of the first movement. A movement is a chapter of a piece of music. Like a chapter in a book. Now did we answer your questions about leadership?

SPENCER: Not exactly. I understand that a leader has to know where he or she is going and that the score is a musical road map that shows the way. But I don’t understand how the conductor is showing the players where to go.

DV: I think we can clear that up. The first important thing is for the conductor to create a beat or a pulse.

SPENCER: You mean like a heart beat?

DV: Exactly like a heart beat! Maestro moves the baton to create a beat. It is the beating heart of the music.

SPENCER: Hey, that’s another metaphor! The moving baton is the beating heart of the music.

DV: Yes, and all the musicians play their notes in time to it, and you hear that heart beating as we go on our journey to the New World.

SPENCER: But how does moving the baton create the beat?

DV: Perhaps Maestro here would give us a demonstration. [*to AUDIENCE*] And all of you out there can learn, too. Stand up, everyone and see if you can copy what the conductor is doing.

[Here the CONDUCTOR silently demonstrates the way he/she moves the baton. DV can call out the numbers “one” “two” “three” “four,” etc. as he and CONDUCTOR have worked out previously. AUDIENCE “conducts” for a few moments, as well as SPENCER.]

Splendid everyone. That’s enough now. You can all sit down again. The moving baton shows the players not only *when* to play their notes but also sometimes *how* to play their notes—whether loud or soft or smooth or jagged. That is all written down in the score—the road map—and the conductor translates that map to the musicians by moving his arms.

SPENCER: [*writing notes on a school notebook*] Okay, I think I get it. “A leader must know *where* to go, *when* to go, *how* to go, and be able to tell others.”

DV: Correct.

[A HORN player now stands up and plays a few notes.][2 sec]

EX 20, SHORT CUE NOT ON CD [*Just five notes.*]

SPENCER: What did he just say?

DV: He said we’ve forgotten something about leadership. We know *where*, *when*, and *how*, we are going. But there is still something else we don’t know. [*to AUDIENCE*] Can anyone tell me what it is? [*takes guesses from AUDIENCE, pretends to hear the right answer if not given*] [10 sec] Yes, indeed. We don’t know *why* we are going on this journey. And that may be the most important job of a leader. A leader must be able to convince us *why* we should go where he or she wants to take us.

SPENCER: [*writing in notebook*] “Convince us *why* we should follow.” But how can you do that?

DV: You tell us about the place you want to take us. You show us why we would *want* to go there.

SPENCER: Okay, so why *would* we want to go to the places your symphony will take us?

DV: Tell me, did you ever want to travel in time, say, go places and see things in the past or future?

SPENCER: You mean in a time machine, like in the movies? Sure I did! But that’s all make believe stuff.

DV: Are you sure? You think it’s normal for someone calling himself “Uncle Wilbur” to

appear out of an old piano, but you're sure there's no such thing as a time machine?

SPENCER: Uncle Wilbur's weird, but time travel is a whole new level of crazy.

DV: Well, I'm about to show you a time machine, right here in your living room.

SPENCER: Mr. Dvořák, now you're making up stuff just like Uncle Wilbur does!

DV: Am I now? You see I wrote this symphony when I came to visit America in 1893. And I put all my impressions of what I saw and heard and felt in America into the music.

SPENCER: Like what?

DV: Like rivers and mountains and wild open spaces **EX 21, CD 23** [*MAESTRO conducts excerpt*]; like the great railroads that crossed them **EX 22, CD 24** [*MAESTRO conducts excerpt*]; like the energy and optimism of Americans as they built their country **EX 23, CD 25** [*MAESTRO conducts excerpt*], but I also included the sad voices of African Americans who remembered when they were slaves and saw the long road still ahead of them to freedom **EX 24, CD 26** [*MAESTRO conducts excerpt*]; and also the brave, powerful voices of the Native Americans who knew that their way of life was ending forever. **EX 25, CD 27** [*MAESTRO conducts excerpt*]

SPENCER: Wow!

DV: So what do you think? Did you see all those things when you heard my music?

SPENCER: Yes, I did. It was like a time machine. But something else happened, too.

DV: What was that?

SPENCER: Well, when the orchestra played the music about the African Americans remembering slavery, I could *see* them, but I also could feel a little bit what it was like to *be* them.

DV: Ah, now you begin to understand another secret about music! It can also take you inside other people and make you understand what they are feeling.

SPENCER: So, music's not only a time machine, it's also a mind-reading machine. Hey, those are metaphors!

DV: Ah, yes. Music can be so many things.

SPENCER: That makes me think of something else I want to know and it's not really about leadership.

DV: And what is that?

SPENCER: How do you make music sound like a train or an African American song? And please don't tell me its "magic," because that's what Uncle Wilbur says when I ask him how he lives in a piano.

DV: You see the orchestra is sort of a paint box, and all the instruments are different colors that we can use to make a picture, a picture made of sound.

SPENCER: Hey, there's a metaphor! The orchestra instruments are different colors of paint.

DV: You want to know how I made the train in the music, and I will tell you that I painted it with the special colors of the orchestra's instruments. The flutes and oboes sound like a distant train whistle, and then the violas and cellos rattle up and down an arpeggio like a train speeding by. You know, the puffs from the steam engine and the clacking of the tracks are never quite together, so I wrote violas and cellos slightly apart.

EX 26, CD 28

SPENCER: Okay, I can understand how you can make a train with music, because that's something that I can see and touch, but how do you make me feel what other people feel with music? For example, how did you make the African American song?

DV: My friend, Henry Burleigh, an African American composer and one of my students, taught me African American slave songs. I composed a new melody that evoked this world. First I thought of setting it as a church hymn, with low brass giving a solemn sound.

EX 27, CD 29

DV: But that sounded too dark. Then I thought of setting it romantically, with cellos singing passionately while strings and woodwinds played softly above them.

EX 28, CD 30

DV: But that seemed too sweet for this theme. So I thought of setting it as a something heroic and stirring, with high, bright strings setting off the French horns.

EX 29, CD 31

SPENCER: Gee, Mr. Dvořák, I kind of like that one!

DV: Yes, it's flashy, but it didn't seem right for this sorrowful melody, which speaks so beautifully of loss and longing. So I decided to give the accompaniment to the low strings, where the sound can be light and transparent even when it's deep. And I gave the melody to the most mournful instrument in the orchestra - the English horn.

EX 30, CD 32

DV: So does that answer your question—at least a little bit?

SPENCER: A little bit. Let's hear some more.

DV: I'm so glad you asked! [*to CONDUCTOR*] Maestro, would you now please lead the musicians in some of the second movement of my symphony?

EX 31, CD 33 [*CONDUCTOR leads ORCHESTRA in excerpt from second movement*]

DV: Ah yes, the second movement might be my favorite part of all. What did you think, Spencer?

SPENCER: I liked it a lot. But it made me think of another question.

DV: That's one thing I like about Americans. I noticed it right away when I came to visit in 1893. You ask a lot of questions! So what is it this time?

SPENCER: Well, I understand that a leader first of all has to know where to go so that he or she can take others there. But what I don't get is how a leader *decides* where to go. I mean, how do you pick the place you want to lead people to? It seems to me that that comes even before knowing how to get there.

DV: Oh, that is the difficult question. Each of us must decide on a destination, whether we are leaders or not. And for that decision, each of us must look inside.

SPENCER: Look inside?

DV: Yes, inside each of us is a desire, something we want to do. For example, when I came to America I wanted to help Americans create symphony music that reflected their experience and not just copy what European composers had done.

SPENCER: And did you?

DV: What do you think? Does my New World Symphony sound like the America you know?

SPENCER: Yes, I think so. How did you know what to do?

DV: I followed my feelings as a composer and in this case they led to African American melodies and the music of Native Americans—the people who were here before any Europeans.

SPENCER: So you just copied what African Americans and Native people were doing?

DV: Oh, no! I did not copy. I listened carefully and then made new tunes that had some of the qualities of their music, but were also fully my own inventions.

SPENCER: I'll bet everyone loved hearing the new American music you wrote!

DV: On the contrary! A great many people did not like it at all!

SPENCER: But why? I can hear so many American things in it.

DV: Many people at that time believed that African Americans and Native Americans had nothing to contribute to art and culture. These people were snobs, you might say. And they told me I was wrong to say that former slaves and so-called "uncivilized" tribes could show the way to a new American type of symphony music.

SPENCER: So I guess that made you change your mind.

DV: Not at all! Spencer, you are a very young man. People are probably always telling you to listen to your parents and your teachers and do what they tell you to do. All your friends are probably urging you to do just what they are doing.

SPENCER: You said it!

DV: Well, I am not going to tell you otherwise. You must listen to your parents and your teachers—and your friends, too. But at the same time, you must listen to what is inside yourself, and in the end you must follow that voice to the destination it takes you. I listened to that inner voice in me and I knew I was right to follow it. I did not care what other people thought.

SPENCER: Will that make me a leader?

DV: No. Following your inner voice will not make you a leader, because it might lead to a place that only you want to go. But I will tell you this: If you do not follow your inner voice you will never be a leader. It is only the person who fully believes in the place he or she wants to go who can lead others there.

SPENCER: So were you a leader?

DV: Yes. I was one of the first composers to use the melodies of common people as a basis for symphony music. And many composers after me followed in my footsteps.

SPENCER: Sweet. Let's hear some more music.

DV: Excellent suggestion! Maestro, please lead the orchestra in parts from the third and fourth movements of my symphony. Listen especially to the third movement, because that is where I put the Native American type of music.

EX 32a & b, CD 34 [*CONDUCTOR leads ORCHESTRA in excerpts from third and fourth movements, during which Dvořák wanders back through the players and exits the stage. As last chords are sounding, UW emerges from the door in the piano. He is wearing a crown*]

UW: I'm baa ack and I've got just the thing to lead the orchestra! [*He reaches back into the piano and starts pulling out a long stick.*] This ought to do the trick! And just in case, I put on this crown, so everyone knows that I'm the leader.

SPENCER: Uncle Wilbur, you just missed everything.

UW: I did?

SPENCER: Yes, you did. Mr. Dvořák here just explained everything about leadership and the orchestra played his New World Symphony.

UW: He did? They did?

SPENCER: Yes, and we all learned that leadership has nothing to do with big sticks, superhero costumes—or crowns.

UW: It doesn't?

SPENCER: Not at all. [*to the absent DW*] Mr. Dvořák, why don't you tell Uncle Wilbur what you told me. Mr. Dvořák? [*to the CONDUCTOR*] Do you know where he went?

[*CONDUCTOR shakes his head and shrugs shoulders*]

He seems to have left.

UW: Well, why don't you tell me then?

SPENCER: Okay. First of all, a leader has to know *where* he or she is going, *when* to go there, *how* to go there, *why* to go there, and be able to convince other people to go there, too. Oh, and a leader has to listen to his or her inner voice and really believe in the destination—the place he or she wants to go—or it doesn't work.

UW: [*crestfallen*] Oh. I guess you don't need me then.

SPENCER: There's just one thing I still don't get. Too bad Mr. Dvořák has left.

UW: [*brightens up*] Maybe I can help you.

SPENCER: [*looking him up and down*] I doubt it, but here goes: Mr. Dvořák said that the New World Symphony was the destination that the orchestra would take us to, but it

seems to me that we would never really arrive anywhere when we were listening, we would just be going there the whole time.

UW: [*scratching his head and pondering*] Maybe that's because the going part is the most important thing. Maybe the journey *is* the destination. I know that riding a train is more fun than getting some place on it. And I guess you could say that an orchestra is a train that we all sort of ride on as it moves through the piece. They even call orchestra leaders "conductors" just like on a train.

SPENCER: Uncle Wilbur, you know what you just did?

UW: You mean, spend 15 minutes finding this ridiculous stick and showing up in front of hundreds of people in my pajamas?

SPENCER: No, I mean what you just said. [*beat*] You just said that an orchestra is a train.

UW: So?

SPENCER: You just made a metaphor! You said something was something else that it resembles in some way.

UW: Metaphor? Nonsense, I've never met a four. You can't actually meet numbers—they're abstract concepts—even where I come from.

SPENCER: Oh, forget it, Uncle Wilbur.

[*here enter character of MOTHER, offstage initially*]

MOTHER: [*offstage, yells*] Spencer, I'm home. Where are you?

SPENCER: Oh no, my mother's home! [*to UW and ORCHESTRA*] You're all going to have to leave. [*calls out to MOTHER*] I'm in the living room, Mom.

MOTHER: [*still offstage*] Good. Have you been practicing your music?

SPENCER: [*to MOTHER*] Sort of. [*to OTHERS*] All of you have to leave now.

UW: Why do we always have to leave? I'm getting hungry. [*to ORCHESTRA*] Aren't you all getting hungry? Let's stay for dinner!

EX 33, CD 35 [*ORCHESTRA plays assent*]

Mother: [*from offstage*] Those are funny noises coming from in there. Just what are you up to, Spencer? Remember, I want to keep that living room clean.

SPENCER: [*call out to MOTHER*] Yes, Mom. [*to UW*] I told you before. My mother's very busy and the last thing she needs is to find out that there's someone living in the piano and that 70 other people are coming for dinner. I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to go.

UW: I think not. I say we all out to the kitchen right now at a fairly fast trot, sit down at the table in a friendly fashion, and have ourselves a nice meal. How's that for the *where*, *when*, and *how* thing? As for the *why*—well I think my stomach can answer that! And whenever my stomach talks, I listen to that inner voice! Am I a great leader, or what?

EX 34, CD 36 [*ORCHESTRA makes louder noise*]

Mother: [*from offstage, but louder*] What is going on in there? I'd better not find you goofing off with those friends of yours from school.

SPENCER: [*to MOTHER*] Nothing's happening, Mom. [*to AUDIENCE*] Seems I've got a problem. But there's something I almost forgot. If you play the magic notes backwards, Uncle Wilbur and everyone else has to go back into the piano or wherever it is they go. [*goes to piano, plays notes backward*] **Sound Cue 4, CD 37** Nice try, Uncle Wilbur, but not tonight.

UW: Drat. [*to ORCHESTRA and MAESTRO*] Come on, everyone, I guess we have to go.

[*UW exits into piano, lights go down on ORCHESTRA, SPENCER sees a bag of Cheetos on the floor and grabs it, just as MOTHER enters.*] [30 sec]

MOTHER: What *is* it you're doing in here?

SPENCER: [*keeping Cheetos bag hidden behind him*] Nothing, nothing, just getting some practicing in.

MOTHER: And just what have you been practicing?

SPENCER: It's called the New World Symphony by Antonin Dvořák.

MOTHER: Is that the one he wrote when he came to America?

SPENCER: Yes.

MOTHER: I wonder why he called it the "New World" Symphony.

SPENCER: It's because they used to call America the "New World" because it was new to them and to distinguish it from Europe, which they called the "Old World."

MOTHER: Where'd you learn that?

SPENCER: Mr. Dvořák—I mean, Mrs. Pearlmutter told me.

MOTHER: Hmmn. [*looking around suspiciously*] Still, I heard some awfully strange sounds in here.

SPENCER: I know. I’ve . . . uh . . . still got a lot of practicing to do before it sounds right.

MOTHER: [*wearily*] Well, why don’t you come and help me cook now, so we can get dinner over with.

SPENCER: Sure. I might enjoy that.

MOTHER: You might enjoy making dinner? Since when?

SPENCER: And eating it, too. It shouldn’t be something we need to “get over with.”

MOTHER: Is that so?

SPENCER: Right. You know, Mom, sometimes the journey *is* the destination.

MOTHER: I’ll have to think about that one. Anyway, you can practice piano later.

SPENCER: Thanks, Mom.

[*MOTHER exits*]

SPENCER: [*to AUDIENCE*] You see, I told you that a visit from Uncle Wilbur can clear things up—even if he doesn’t really know what he’s doing. Well, nice to meet you. I’ve got to go now. —Oh, and don’t leave any Cheetos or anything else in here on your way out. Please? [*exits*]

[*this is the END of the play, but the ORCHESTRA now begins to play the fourth movement again as the actors come out and take their bows, as well as the CONDUCTOR and ORCHESTRA*]

END

{{Insert B: Uncle Wilbur Backstory}}

Uncle Wilbur Backstory

None of the children would ever forget the day they knew that their childhood would be a little different from everyone else’s, a little stranger, a little bit harder to talk about with new friends. Even years later they each remembered exactly where they had been when they heard their parents call them into the living room.

It was the week before Halloween and the weather was clear and crisp. The air

was full of swirling yellow and red leaves and the sidewalks were knee-high with the fallen ones that made a swishing, crackling sound when the children walked through them. Nearly every house had a jack-o-lantern on the porch or a paper skeleton pasted in the window, or a green-faced plastic witch that cackled when anyone triggered the motion-detector inside her black gown. It was about 2:30 in the afternoon on a Saturday.

Penrose, who was nearly twelve, was upstairs talking on the phone to her best friend Lulu about the fact that Sylvan Forest in no way could draw horses, that their heads were much too small, like thimbles stuck on their necks, which looked like bananas, and that their legs always bent the wrong way.

Spencer was also upstairs in his room trying to compose a thank-you note to their grandmother for the birthday gift she had sent several weeks before, when he had turned nine. It was hard because she had sent him a Moonraiders' video game that was way too young for him. He was already at the asteroid-archer level and she had sent him the pebble-pusher level that he had mastered three years ago. He was staring down at the page where he had written, "Dear Grandmother, Thank you for the video game. It's --." Try as he might, he had no idea what to say next.

Zebulanna was out in the back yard trying to teach the family cat, Snarklechop, to walk across a board set between two lawn chairs to fetch a treat on one of them. Zebulanna, who was six-and-a-half at the time, loved animals and was very good at training them. But she was having no luck with Snarklechop, who kept jumping off the board and trying to snatch the treat with her claws from the ground.

It is possible that each of the children might have heard the delivery truck when it pulled up to the house, but none of them did. Maybe it was because they were concentrating so hard on what they were doing. It was downright strange that none of them heard the doorbell ring, or their parents talking to the deliverymen, or the sounds of furniture being moved around in the living room. No, the first thing any of them heard was when their parents began calling: "Penrose, Spencer, Zebulanna! Come into the living room, please."

Now, aside from having a keen interest in Colorado Springs history that sometimes made them seem a little overenthusiastic, Mr. and Mrs. Piker were about as normal and boring as parents could be. They didn't usually do anything sudden or surprising, and their main interest seemed to be making sure their children received a good education. In fact, they were getting ready to go out to a special PTA meeting at Spencer's school that very afternoon. No, they never did anything out of the ordinary, so that's why what the children found in the living room was so unexpected.

Spencer was the first to see it, even though Penrose got there first. "Wow!" was all he could say, as he looked at the big, hulking wooden thing that was now crouching like some sort of animal underneath the portrait of General Palmer at Glen Eyrie.

"You got a piano!" exclaimed Penrose.

"A piano?" asked Zebulanna, who had just come in.

"I thought you said we couldn't afford a piano," continued Penrose.

"This piano was free," said Mrs. Piker excitedly.

"A free piano? From where?" Spencer had recovered his ability to talk.

"It was the strangest thing," said Mr. Piker. "You remember that old abandoned house up on Maple street?"

Oh, yes, the children remembered *that* house. It had been empty and boarded up

longer than any of them could remember, certainly longer than Zebulanna had even been alive. They had been warned to stay away from it on countless occasions. Warnings weren't necessary, though, because none of them had any desire to go near the place. It just looked too spooky—all run down with peeling paint and boards falling off here and there and weeds as tall as Spencer in the yard.

“Well,” broke in Mrs. Piker, not waiting for the children's answer, “They're finally tearing it down to make way for a golf course. Your father happened to be passing by—“

Here, Mr. Piker took up the story, “And the workmen were just moving this old piano out of it. Who knows how long it had been sitting in there? Anyway, they said I could have it for free if I could move it out of their way.”

“So your father hired a couple of piano movers right away. And they just came and delivered it. Isn't that wonderful?” finished Mrs. Piker clapping her hands together and beaming happily.

“But,” said Spencer, “what are we going to do with it?”

“Do with it? Why you're all going to take piano lessons, that's what. I've already arranged with Mrs. Pearlmutter down the street to be your teacher,” said Mrs. Piker.

“But I want to learn the trumpet, not the piano,” objected Spencer.

“You can still learn to play the trumpet,” answered Mr. Piker, “It's always helpful to know the piano as well. It's the king of instruments!” He, too, was happily smiling.

At this point Penrose went up to the monster and began running her fingers over the strange carving in its dark wooden sides. “It's kind of funny looking,” she said, “Are you even sure it works?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Piker, “All it really needs is a good tuning. See?” She stepped over and played a few notes on the keyboard. It worked—after a fashion. It was the jangly, clunky sound of hammers whose felt covering had hardened with age striking old, slack, out-of-tune strings deep inside the wooden case. “When it's tuned, it'll be as good as new. Now your father and I have to get ready for the PTA meeting. You kids will be on your own for a while.” With that, she and Mr. Piker swept out of the room.

“Can you believe it?” said Penrose, “They got us a piano.”

“And we have to take lessons from Mrs. Pearlmutter,” said Spencer unhappily. “She's boring.”

“And old,” chimed in Zebulanna.

“I guess we should see how it works,” said Spencer. He clambered up onto the bench and pressed down a key. But this time the sound that came out was not a piano sound. Instead, it was a strange, whispery, hoarse sound, but it was most definitely the sound of a voice—a voice singing the word “let.” Spencer jumped away from the keyboard so fast that the wooden piece that covered it when it was not in use slammed shut with a bang.

“What did you just do?” asked Penrose in a shocked voice.

“Nothing. I swear. I just pressed down a key.”

“You better not be trying to scare us,” said Zebulanna, “Or I'll tell Mom.”

“Really, I didn't do anything,” said Spencer, “You try it.”

Penrose went up to the piano, opened the keyboard cover, and gingerly pressed down a key. Again the whispery, hoarse, muffled sound came out, but this time the voice was singing a different note and the word it sang was “me.” Now it was Penrose's turn to

jump away from the piano. "I don't believe it," she muttered, "Why is it doing that?"

Zebulanna went up to the keyboard. Sometimes she was braver than either of her two siblings. She pressed down a key. A different note this time, but the same voice sang the word "out." Zebulanna began to press one key after the other.

"Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!" sang the strange voice, the words coming faster and faster as Zebulanna pressed down the keys faster and faster. Finally, she jumped off the bench and ran out of the room yelling. "Mom! Dad! Come quick! There's something wrong with the piano!" she screamed.

Mr. and Mrs. Piker came rushing in. "What is it? What's the matter? Why are you yelling? Where's the emergency? What about the piano?" they babbled, interrupting each other and tripping on each other's legs as they hurried into the room.

"The piano's making strange noises," said Spencer.

"It sounds like a voice! Like someone's inside," added Penrose.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Piker, calming down.

"All it needs is a good tuning, as I said before," asserted Mrs. Piker matter-of-factly as she went over to the keyboard and played a few notes. The sound that came out this time was just the same old clanky sound of an out-of-tune piano. There was no voice, nor any way anyone could even imagine a voice.

"That's not the way it sounded when we played it," said Spencer.

Zebulanna chimed in, "It sounded like someone was trapped inside."

"That's absurd," said Mr. Piker, "Look." And he went over and opened up the top of the piano and peered inside. "There's nothing in here but old piano strings and the hammers that hit them when you play—well, and a little dust and maybe a spider web or two."

Penrose, Spencer, and Zebulanna approached cautiously. Standing on the bench, they could all just manage to look inside as Mr. Piker held the lid open. Although it was dark inside, they could make out an old metal frame that all the strings were stretched on and the little wooden hammers that hit them. A bit of a dry, musty smell rose out of it. Zebulanna jumped down and looked behind the piano.

"There's nothing here either," she said. And Penrose and Spencer went around and looked for themselves. She was right. It was just the old wooden back of a piano case. There wasn't even room for Snarklecho to fit back there.

"It just sounds funny because it's out of tune. We'll call the piano tuner first thing tomorrow," said Mrs. Piker reassuringly, "Now your father and I have to go or we'll be late. You all be good. We'll be back in an hour and a half." With that the Piker parents abruptly left the room. Seconds later the children heard the front door close behind them and saw the car pull out of the driveway headed for the PTA meeting at Spencer's school. The children were left in the living room looking at one another. A long time passed before any of them spoke.

"But I heard a voice," said Zebulanna at last.

"We all heard it," agreed Penrose.

Spencer approached the keyboard. He could feel his heart pounding and a dull pressure in his head. His hand hesitated over the keys. Finally, he lowered a shaking finger onto one of them. It was the voice again! "Let," it sang in a hoarse whisper. Spencer pressed another key. "Me," sang the voice on a different note. Spencer pressed one more key. "Out," the voice intoned in a crackly gasp. Spencer moved away from the

piano and looked at his sisters.

“Something tells me our music lessons are going to be very interesting,” he said.
The children would soon find out just how right he was.