

# Answering the Call

**Dr. Eugene Dowdy**

---

*Eugene Dowdy, chair of the music department at the University of Texas at San Antonio, was asked to write a column about his experiences in his transition from a middle school director to a university music chair.*

The phone rang at the front desk of the UTSA music department: “May I speak with Mr. Dowdy please?” “You mean Dr. Dowdy, the department chair? Yes, I’ll put you through.” (Pause) “Dr. Dowdy?” “Yes, this is Gene Dowdy” (Even though I understand the whole “Dr.” thing in academia, it still strikes me as unnecessary, probably from my years as a public school teacher, a “Mr.” before earning my doctorate, and as my youngest daughter will say to her friends, “yeah, he’s a doctor, but he can’t make you better if you’re sick”) It was a busy day in the office, and I did not have time for an unsolicited phone call. But something sounded familiar about that voice. The phone call turned out to be a former student who I taught as a beginner twenty years ago, but we had failed to keep in touch. He wanted to have lunch with me and catch up on old times. We met later and enjoyed sharing our time. That phone call turned out to be the basis of a good teaching story.

It is a blessing of teaching when we hear from our former students. I really enjoy the emails, phone calls, occasional cards, graduation, wedding, and birth announcements from these grown ups that still call me “Mr. Dowdy” from my public school days. I remember most of them, though sometimes I need a prompt for a name. Of course, as music directors, it seems we take special pride in news of former students who have gone into the music profession as teachers, performers, composers, industry members, and the other fields associated with making music. And, like you, I have some former students who have gone onto great things, both in music, and in other areas.

Now back to my story: this particular student’s tale is now a favorite to share with my orchestra director friends. The reason? The former student is not a string player, but rather a brass player who started as a sixth grader in my middle school beginning band.

Back in my public school days, I taught band and orchestra for several years in the Northeast ISD in San Antonio. During lunch that day, I learned that this beginning band student had continued on to make all-state, earn a performance degree in music, and win an audition with a world-renowned musical ensemble. He explained

how he had just accepted a management position in entertainment for a nationally known major theme park. The fact that he wanted to share his accomplishments with me was an honor, and I felt pride in his success. I

humbly admit that I often retell this story in order to share one of my teaching successes with my colleagues. I especially enjoy the responses from my fellow string teachers who always seem surprised that I “had” to teach middle school band, and are impressed that I may have helped produce a good brass player. Usual responses include: “You were a

**My hope for the university community, and for you, is twofold: 1) that we share with our students the skills and joys of making good music together, and 2) that we call each other and share our successes and challenges. Who knows where this path will take us next?**

## Answering the Call

band director?” (said in the same tone of voice that one might say, “You were abducted by space aliens?”), or some say, “Good thing for brass methods, huh.” We hear about band directors teaching orchestra, but it seems less often that we hear about string folk teaching band.

In addition to my former student sharing his accomplishments with me, he wanted to hear about my career, my continuing education, and my move from public school to academia. I told him that even though I am the chair of a university music department and a tenured associate professor conducting the university orchestra, I still consider myself a teacher first. I shared my belief that teaching is the most important job in our society.

Next, he asked how I wound up teaching both orchestra and band. Interestingly enough, this, too, was the result of a phone call. I remember that call like it was yesterday, although this happened twenty-one years ago. I was hardly a year out of college, just shy of my 24th birthday, the summer following my first year of teaching middle school strings, exactly one month before school started, when my principal called and asked the following question: “How would you like to be on campus all day?” He knew that traveling to elementary schools after my three middle school classes were done was normal but tiresome for orchestra directors. When I asked how that would be possible, he invited me to accept a joint appointment as orchestra director and assistant band director, a proposition to which I immediately agreed. My

principal, who happened to be a good musician himself, mentioned that I had the support of the Fine Arts Director of the time, none other than current TBA Executive Director Alfred Sturchio. Mr. Sturchio knew that I was a 3rd generation music director with some band blood in me. In addition to formal violin studies, my father and grandfather were band leaders, and I had played some trumpet in family ensembles growing up. Immediately I began making the plans necessary to teach three beginning band classes in



addition to my three orchestra classes. I cleaned up my trumpet, rented a clarinet from High School Music Service, got a hold of the band’s method book, and finally met with the head band director to understand how he wanted the beginning classes taught.

Fortunately, I had already earned the band director’s respect during my first year as we presented “full” orchestra performances on each concert, including UIL contest. (Would someone explain to me why we call it “full” orchestra? We really mean symphony orchestra, right?) As recommended by my college music education professors, I had heavily

## Answering the Call

courted the four most important people to know at school: the head secretary, the head custodian, the head band director, and the elementary music teacher. In some schools the head coach may be more powerful than the band director, but not usually in a middle school. I worked hard to develop a good relationship with the band director, and from this experience I learned numerous important facts about wind, brass, and percussion performance techniques. These additional teaching skills helped me with the district junior honor orchestra that I had been invited to direct that year. This group occasionally met as a symphonic orchestra.

I can say with certainty that my years of teaching orchestra and band helped me develop a confident and successful approach to teaching and directing symphonic music. During my second year of teaching, I was appointed to conduct the Youth Symphony the second tier of the Youth Orchestras of San Antonio. During the next few years, I realized how important it is to offer symphonic music instruction to young musicians. Students love the sound, the challenging music, and the social interaction between orchestra and band members. And, working on symphonic music enhances collegiality among band and orchestra directors. When we work toward the common goal of a performance, great things happen in the lives of students and teachers.

Another phone call in 1987 provided a very special opportunity for me. Through a recommendation from the new NEISD Fine Arts Director, C. Ron Wells

(TODA Past President and Orchestra Director of the Year), I was invited by A. Clyde Roller to conduct an intermediate orchestra at the Interlochen Arts Camp. Clyde Roller, who passed away recently, is one of the finest orchestral conductors and teachers I have ever known. This phone call resulted in nine years of conducting the Intermediate Concert Orchestra on their eight weekly concerts each summer. It was during this time that I began keeping an annotated list of all the symphonic pieces for youth orchestra I had taught. I hope to publish this work someday.

Teaching at Interlochen provided me with the opportunity to meet new friends from colleges and schools worldwide. Through these relationships, my students were able to personally meet composers such as Art Frackenpohl, David Ott, Jake Romig, and William Presser. We performed world premieres of important youth orchestra works, and most significantly, the students learned to appreciate new

compositions. Through Interlochen faculty such as conductor and former Philadelphia Orchestra solo trombonist Henry Charles Smith, and Allen Ohmes, a violin professor emeritus at the University of Iowa, I was inspired to attend further graduate training in orchestra conducting.

In 1992, my wife Stacy and I resigned our teaching positions and, with two young children, moved to Iowa where I studied under the direction of James Dixon, a distinguished conductor of the University of Iowa Symphony Orchestra. In my doctoral studies, I learned the complexities of teaching and conducting the standard orchestral literature. Upon graduation

**I realized how important it is to offer symphonic music instruction to young musicians. Students love the sound, the challenging music, and the social interaction between orchestra and band members. When we work toward the common goal of a performance, great things happen in the lives of students and teachers.**

## Answering the Call

with the Doctorate of Musical Arts in orchestral conducting, I now had the opportunity to teach music at a higher level and to teach teachers. Today, as both a department chair and teacher, I support an outstanding faculty and teach the next generation of orchestra and band directors. This is a special responsibility that I am fortunate to have.

My hope for the university community, and for you, is twofold: 1) that we share with our students the skills and joys of making good music together, and 2) that we call each other and share our successes and challenges. Who knows where this path will take us next?

*Eugene Dowdy is Department Chair and an Associate Professor in the Department of Music at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He conducts the UTSA Orchestra and is the founding violinist of Rio Trio, UTSA's faculty piano trio. Dowdy received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in orchestral conducting from the University of Iowa under James Dixon. He earned the Master of Music from UTSA and the Bachelor of Music (with a Performance Certificate in violin) from UT Austin, where he taught in the University of Texas String Project under Phyllis Young. Prior to his university appointment, Dr. Dowdy taught public school orchestra for nine years in San Antonio (NEISD) and was honored with the two top district awards: the Human Relations Award (1989) and Teacher of the Year (1992). In the spring of 2001 he was one of three UTSA faculty recognized by the Alumni Association for outstanding teaching. He is listed in Who's Who Among America's Teachers (1992, 2002), and Who's Who in America (2002, 2003). In addition to being the Resident Conductor of the Youth Orchestras of San Antonio, he is an active guest-conductor and clinician at regional orchestras, festivals and contests throughout Texas and the Midwest, including nine summers on the faculty of the Interlochen Arts Camp. Active in many professional and honorary music organizations, Dowdy is the Immediate Past President of the Texas Orchestra Directors Association. Gene and his wife Stacy count two musicians as daughters, Jessica (piano) and Rachel (cello).*