

Getting To The Art Of The Matter

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What do you teach? Have you ever been asked that question? I'm sure we all have at one time or another and the reality of the matter is there can be countless responses. Perhaps you would say, "I teach band." Others might respond that they are a music educator or a music teacher. A few colleagues would take a more philosophical approach and respond that what they really teach is students and music is the subject. It is likely that an expanded list of "teaching tasks" might include discipline, references to teamwork, working towards a common goal and various other qualities associated with the citizenship and team player merit badge. The truth is that we teach a lot and we teach on multiple levels.

But, in the final analysis, what is it we really teach? What is the purpose of our calling? What is it that we value and do everything in our power to share with our students?

Perhaps we could start with a list of possibilities that might look something like this.

I strive to teach my students...

To Be Technically Accurate
To Perform With Expression
To Develop Responsibility
[Accountability]
To Play In Tune
To Understand The Music Performed
To Perform Difficult Music
To Develop Leadership Abilities
To Perform With Rhythmic Accuracy

To Be Sensitive To Dynamic Contrast
To Perform With Precision
To Be Successful In Festivals and Competitions
To Perform Music Of High Artistic Quality
To Perform With Feeling
To Become Knowledgeable Listeners
To Perform With Clarity
To Perform With Enthusiasm
To Learn To Make Informed Musical Judgments
To Perform With Good Tone Quality, Balance and Blend

Hopefully, we would all agree that when taken in the appropriate context all of these expectations could factor into our optimum equation of professed values at some point. But, what if we had to prioritize these 18 objectives? What if we had to identify six of these expectations and allow them to define the essence of what we teach and what we value? Which of these would be at the top of our list proclaiming what we value and what we strive to make the final product of our efforts? And, perhaps more importantly, what would others perceive our priorities to be.

Look at it another way. Suppose a member of your school board, an upper level administrator or a community leader that knew little about you, your program or your priorities followed you around and observed you for a week. At the end of the week that person was given

this list and asked to select the half dozen or so priorities that best defined what he/she thought you taught as your highest priorities during this period of observation. What would he/she say?

Suppose the conclusion was that you taught tone quality, technique, intonation, balance, blend, and rhythmic precision. Would you be OK with that? After all, those are the elements that we tend to value in adjudicated performances. We spend a lot of time trying to get it right. Why? If you take care of those objective elements you are very likely to "get your one." (Translation: be successful in contests and festivals.) Case closed!

But as the haunting Peggy Lee ballad asked, "Is that all there is?" Should there be more? Does "getting it right" justify and sustain our program? Can we really justify the significant cost of sustaining a band program solely on the perfection of notes, rhythms and trophies earned?

I think not. In my opinion the objective elements of music represent the second tier of priorities. They represent the craft of music. They serve no singular function and are not the actual music. Yes, they are important, but only to the extent that they serve the music and the artistic vision we hold for our students.

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With that thesis in mind, let's look at our list another way. What if our premier priorities were:

- To Perform Music Of High Artistic Quality**
- To Play With Feeling**
- To Understand The Music Being Performed**
- To Learn To Make Informed Musical Decisions**
- To Become Knowledgeable Listeners**
- To Be Responsible (Accountable)**

Think about it. Wouldn't this combination of expectations result in a more meaningful and lasting outcome? Don't they speak to the essence of why we should teach music? If we can introduce students to music of high artistic quality, teach them to make informed musical decisions, understand the music they are performing, and play with feeling then I would argue that we have elevated the educational experience for our students. And, yes, in the process they will likely have become knowledgeable listeners and developed a higher degree of accountability to themselves and to their peers.

In no way does this proposed set of values trivialize the quest for refined performance skills. In fact, how can these lofty goals be achieved without addressing the aforementioned list of objective fundamentals? Rather technical mastery in this context gives a sense of purpose and meaning to the place of fundamentals in the actual art and act of making music. We don't master the right notes for the simple act of doing so but because a failure to do so bruises the music. We don't play in tune to "stop the dial on the tuner" but rather to make the music more beautiful. With this

approach, fundamentals have no intrinsic value unto themselves. They ultimately exist to serve the music.

You see, it is how the music makes us and our students feel that brings true and lasting value to what we teach. It is unlikely that any of us joined this profession because we learned to play the chromatic scale at quarter = 144. Or, finally hit a "high C" on trumpet. Or, played in a Sweepstakes Band for that matter. It was because of the way music made us feel. It was those "goose bump moments" that defied definition but compelled us to choose a career that would afford us the opportunity to inspire students to experience the same.

Recently my son and I visited The Juilliard School in New York City. In all of our experiences there was little discussion of "how you play your horn." Of course it was obvious that craft was important, but it seemed every other sentence referenced the word art or artist. The focus was on making music at the highest artistic level possible and sharing music as the art form that it truly is. Is there a message there for us? Should we do no less? I think not.

So, what do you teach? Regardless of how you answer that question never forget it is not what you say but what you do every day and in every class that truly defines what you value and what you bring into the lives of your students. Are you simply teaching your students to get it right and "play well with others?" Or, are you passionate about teaching music as an art that has the potential to become tightly woven into the human fabric of each student life that you touch. The choice is yours.

Richard Floyd is presently in his 50th year of professional involvement as a conductor, music educator and administrator. Floyd has enjoyed a distinguished career at virtually every level of wind band performance from beginning band programs through high school and university wind ensembles as well as adult community bands. In addition to his duties as Texas State Director of Music and Artistic Director of the Austin Symphonic Band, he serves as chair of the ABA Educational Projects Committee and the CBDNA Music Education Task Force. His bands have been heard in concert at numerous state and national conferences including performances at The Midwest Clinic in 1989, 1997 and 2007. Floyd is a recognized authority on conducting, the art of wind band rehearsing, concert band repertoire, and music advocacy. As such, he has toured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe as a clinician, adjudicator and conductor. This includes 41 American states and nine countries. He was chosen TBA Bandmaster of the Year in 2006.