

Teaching an Old Art Form in a Modern Age

Wallace Dierolf

Our world moves very quickly today. So quickly that I fear we often lose our sense of perspective, or direction, and in the framework of this article our reason to teach music. I strongly feel that our species needs the arts more today than ever in the history of our civilization and that as music educators we have a very important responsibility. The responsibility is to not to rush the process, but to slow down and embrace what is so unique and important about teaching music in today's fast paced world. It begins with us. We are the pace setters in the rehearsal.

We are teaching a very old art form in a modern age. It takes as long for a young person, indeed a person of any age, to learn how to produce a centered, characteristic sound on a musical instrument as it did someone hundreds of years ago. The amount of time, patience and correct practice to achieve this one simple objective has not changed. True, we have some technology available that has proven to help in various aspects of music education and one could even argue that improvement in the design and construction of certain musical instruments makes some musical achievements easier today. However the basic human species has not changed. The tools yes, the species no.

Achievement in basic musical objectives such as pitch recognition, feeling for pulse and the reading of music notation still takes the same

effort, time and patience as it always has. What a wonderful gift to offer our students—the timeless gift of an old art form in a modern age. Music is still today an educational experience that offers the joy of achievement that comes from slowly and methodically training the body and mind. I believe that today in our fast paced high tech world this is an important reason why the inclusion of music in a person, especially a young person's education is more important than ever.

As simple as it may seem we often overlook this important aspect when teaching music. We tend to speed up the process of basic musical achievement when in truth we should be slowing down. Because when we rush the process of music education, we lose the very essence of its beauty and we often deny the student some of the greatest educational value to learning music. Educational values such as patience, self-discovery, self-discipline, repetition and a wonderful blend of

body, mind and emotion, all can be lost when we rush the process of music education. And when we rush the process we fail to provide our students with the truths of an old form in a modern age.

Let's take a look at a few specific areas of music education and see how rushing the process can deny students a much higher level of achievement.

The process of tuning an ensemble is a wonderful opportunity for students to learn a great lesson in fundamental ear training. Most of the time directors over use a tuning device of some type. Or perhaps each student has such a device on their music stand or attached to their

instrument. They learn to adjust their instrument while looking at lights, arrows, dials etc... They are "seeing" pitch rather than "hearing pitch". The same thing happens when a director is tuning the students via a tuning device. The director informs them that they are sharp or flat and then they adjust their instruments, posture,

Achievement in basic musical objectives such as pitch recognition, feeling for pulse and the reading of music notation still takes the same effort, time and patience as it always has. What a wonderful gift to offer our students.

Music is still today an educational experience that offers the joy of achievement that comes from slowly and methodically training the body and mind.

Teaching an Old Art Form in a Modern Age

fingerings and/or embouchure. Again no opportunity is provided for the students to learn to adjust the pitch of their instrument by simply using the human ear. Why do we do this? Well, it is faster and easier. Faster and easier, yes, but where is it we are going in such a hurry?

What we should do is slow down and guide the students in the ensemble to patiently discover the greatest musical instrument of all time... the mind's ear. Use the technology yes, but use it

in addition to the lessons of fundamental ear training needed to hear and adjust to pitch. Allow the students to tune first without the use of a tuner. Have them tune to a reference pitch or pitches.

Tune to sound, use the ear.

Then have the students view the tuner if necessary.

By doing this we are empowering the students with the skill to hear and adjust to pitch by using their own external and

internal ear. When we rush this process we are enabling students leaving them dependent on

someone else's ear or a tuning device of some type. As the old parable states:

if I give you a fish I have fed you for a day,
if I teach you to fish I have fed you for a lifetime.

Most of us would agree that the two primary elements of music are time and pitch. Indeed one of the standard definitions of music is the organization of sound and silence. So the next logical area to explore in the teaching of an old art form is time. Music is after all a "temporal art"—it is governed by time. Again the methods by which we teach the elements of time in music can either empower or enable our students. The methods we choose to teach and feel time in music should be done to enhance the musical awareness of our students. As with teaching pitch, rhythmic development should reflect the rich traditional educational value that can come from the study of music.

The metronome is a wonderful device. Like the tuner it is a tool that all of us have come to appreciate and use within the framework of music education. However like the tuner it too can be over used and indeed misused. Again the primary objective should always be to develop the student's internal and in this case external feeling for time. We must be very careful not to use the metronome as a substitute for what should be done with the human mind and body. As a species we can feel time and we can be taught to feel various lengths of time. We can also learn to concentrate on keeping a steady feeling for the passing of time. Indeed the internal rhythms within our body's

organs keep us alive. Time is already in us.

There are many ways in which to help our students develop a sense of time.

Allow me to offer one simple and fun exercise

that will help your students discover their internal

metronome. Ask your students as an ensemble to listen carefully as you tap, clap or snap a steady tempo.

Start with a medium tempo. Then tell them as they are listening to the pulse you are generating to count silently to eight at the same tempo. Tell them that they are to start counting when you stop snapping, tapping or clapping the pulse and that when they reach the number eight to say it out loud. (You may need to say "one two ready count" and then stop generating the pulse.)

You will see heads bobbing, feet tapping and various levels of concentration as they try to maintain the pulse. Then to your surprise, and their own, a self-discovery moment happens when they may or may not all arrive at the "eight" together. Give them a moment to enjoy the outcome and do it again at the same tempo and to the count of eight. After they achieve some success as a group try a slower tempo. They will discover this is harder



Teaching an Old Art Form in a Modern Age

which gives you a wonderful opportunity to discuss attention span and why it is harder to keep a slow pace than a fast one.

Again the important aspect, or educational element, is to empower not enable and allow the students to discover how we as a species are able to feel time.

So where does all this lead? Well to the stage of course. Music is a performing art. It is meant to be shared with others. When students have been empowered with the fundamentals of ear training and are able to adjust pitch by ear they will be much more successful at maintaining a high level of intonation within an ensemble when it is most important...in performance...on stage. The same is true with allowing students to discover their ability to feel and maintain a steady tempo and rhythmic subdivision. Students within an ensemble will perform with rhythmic accuracy and rhythmic stability in performance if they have been taught to feel time.

I urge you to slow down and guide your students toward the human experience of feeling pulse and hearing pitch. Empower them with this ageless gift. Allow them to discover and embrace the greatest tuning device and metronome ever created...the human mind. Teach them to be patient, to slow down, to embrace and celebrate the balance of mind, body and soul as they study the art of music. It is what makes us human.

Wallace Dierolf earned his B.A. Degree from St. Mary's University, with honors, and his Masters degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio. While attending St. Mary's University he was inducted into Delta Epsilon Sigma, an international academic honor society for students attending private universities. Mr. Dierolf served the students of North Side ISD(San Antonio) for twenty-nine years as both a Middle School and High School Band Director. Band programs under his leadership received numerous TMEA and UIL awards. In 1998, Mr. Dierolf opened Sandra Day O'Connor High School in Helotes, Texas. The band program at O'Connor earned six consecutive Sweepstakes Awards and rapidly grew to become one of the largest 5A programs in Texas. While at O'Connor he also served as the Fine Arts Department head and was the school's first "Teacher of the Year." Mr. Dierolf has been blessed with many teaching honors including receiving the outstanding Alumnus award in the field of music from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 2003. Soon after announcing his retirement, the North Side ISD School Board voted unanimously to name the new band hall under construction at O'Connor the Wallace C. Dierolf Band Hall. Wallace Dierolf is currently a student teacher supervisor and lecturer at Texas State University.