

# Reflections . . .

Joni Perez

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Well, we are 2 1/2 days out of getting back from BOA Grand Nats and I'm just starting to come out of the fog. It always takes a "minute" before I am able to truly absorb the experience, both from a seasonal standpoint and a final performance standpoint. I would be lying if I said this season has been one of the most enjoyable...but I will say this...it has been one of the most, if not THE most, rewarding I've ever experienced.

I won't go into the details of all of the hardships that our kids and staff experienced throughout this season because no one wants to hear our sob stories. We are all fighting our own battles. And that is something that I've tried to keep my students aware of these past couple of months but this was definitely one of the most challenging fall seasons I've ever been a part of.

However, we fought the good fight until the very last minute and had the very fortunate pleasure of watching our kids perform one last time in the big show. Going into Indy, we weren't sure how many performances we would ultimately get to have but we worked our butts off to try and earn three of them. The sheer joy of seeing our kids react when being announced as a Grand Nationals Finalist was special. And I am thrilled to be able to say that I've never had so much fun watching a group of students perform than I did last Saturday night in Finals. We still had a lot of issues and could have used the over two weeks of field time we lost over the course

of the season, but man—did they perform. And man, were we proud.

Our shows are never clearly spelled out, and sometimes that can cause some interesting conversation and speculation and this year was really no different. BUT THE MUSIC. Our kids and staff absolutely fell in love with this show because of the MUSIC.

Not only were "Adoration" from Scythian Suite, "All This Shall Be Yours" and "Temen Oblak" fantastic pieces of literature on the field that easily offered our kids the opportunity to pour themselves into them, but our ballad...I will never forget when we listened to the inspiration for *How Great Thou Art* during our first design meeting back in January...It was a no brainer. Not even one hesitation to do it.

I remember discussing the various levels of familiarity with the song that everyone on the staff and design team had at the time, which ultimately foreshadowed how our students and audiences would receive the music over the season. For those who knew the song, they had a special connection with it, mostly through their connection with church and God. For those who did not know the song, their response to it was one of adoration and love. Because whether you knew it or not, it was simply

beautiful and needed to be shared on a big stage.

My connection to the song came from growing up as a child in Albany, TX and singing *How Great Thou Art* often in church at First Baptist. My grandfather was the music director, and my grandmother, parents, aunts

and uncles all sang in the church choir while I sat with my other grandmother, siblings and cousins and sang along while reading out of the hymnal. I remember following along the music staff with my finger and singing the words loudly (while simultaneously

sucking on a piece of hard cinnamon candy from my Nanny.) I remember hearing all of the older ladies in the back pews howling along as the church organ and piano (that now sits in my home) provided the accompaniment for our small town church family to sing along to. I'm sure many of you have your own special connection with *How Great Thou Art*.

As we began learning the music with the kids last spring you could tell that they bought in right away. Whether they knew the music or not, there was something about it that rang true to them. And I don't think I'll ever forget the first time we performed it at a football game and the crowd leapt to their feet afterwards, cheering

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and waving their arms. I had stranger after stranger coming up to me at that game saying they were so happy we were playing that song and that they just loved singing along. At a football game!

We had a standing ovation at Lufkin when we performed for their home crowd and I received emails from their football fans that next week about how much they loved our show and music. Over the next few weeks I also received emails from stadium golf cart drivers and other strangers from across our state that saw our kids, either at a game or contest, who just wanted to share how much they had been touched by the performance. PEOPLE CONNECTED and they wanted to share how much it meant to them.

Clearly there are many meanings that can come out of a show called “In the Garden of Cosmic Speculation,” but this interpretation was one that I found really unique and special. A few weeks ago we had a student share what his interpretation of the show was and he explained that our show was about Houston and the hurricane. We had six large prong-like props in our show that represented the six major hurricanes that had hit various parts of the world up until that point. We had a large circular spiral tarp that represented Hurricane Harvey. Our opener, “Adoration” from Scythian Suite, represented the impending chaos and ultimate destruction of the storm. The 2nd production, “All This Shall Be Yours,” was the struggle between the dark times and the eventual rise of the community to become heroes in the face of darkness. The euphonium soloist in *How Great Thou Art* was the voice of God telling everyone that we would be ok and that he would protect us, and that our closer, “Temen Oblak” (which literally means Dark Clouds) represented the dark clouds lifting and the triumph and survival of our city. WHOA.

A memory that will last a lifetime -- Watching the kids in sheer elation for over an hour after our Finals performance on Saturday night. We always have many tears and see lots of hugs after the last contest performance of the season, but this year was different. On a completely different level. Not just the seniors. Not just the girls. Have you ever seen about 300 kids loving on each other for almost an hour straight after a performance? If you have, then you're as lucky as we are. If you haven't... it's something to behold. I've never seen so much connection and appreciation for one another as I saw that night....UNTIL THIS MORNING IN CLASS.

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We decided to let the kids focus on homework, Region Orchestra prep, etc. yesterday during classes and reserved today for reflection. I didn't want to try and tell the kids how to feel about their season or what they should be thinking. I wanted to give them the opportunity to share their thoughts and personal reflections on their experience, whether it was over the weekend or something in the season that was meaningful to them.

Holy cow...I had NO IDEA what was in store...What I witnessed this morning was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. These kids...these beautiful kids, one after another, shared their hearts and bared their souls to each other for the better part of each class. I listened to kid after kid raise their hand to express how thankful they were for a friend, how proud of themselves they were for fighting for something bigger than themselves, how much it meant to have their parents standing in front of them in the rehearsal hall during our final run through, how much they developed a love for one another over the course of time while working together each day. They talked about how much they grew as a family. That they'd never felt as close as a group as this year. I heard kids talk about losing family members and other loved ones during marching season and specifically point out others in the room and thank them for carrying them through their personal battles. I witnessed young girls who I've counseled this fall share how much being in the band means to them and that it's what gets them through their darkest days. I heard move-in students shed tears and share about how they came from a small school or band program and how much they missed their friends from their old school but how proud they were to be in our band; they were

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thankful to have found a family here. I heard kids who all they wanted to do was quit until a certain person or group of people decided to take them under their wing and help them realize that they have a place in our band family. I listened to kids who struggle socially express that they feel welcome and important. Teenage boys sharing

how much they've loved performing together and growing together as friends and musicians. Grown boys embracing the fact that their buddies brought them to tears after finishing our last performance. Kids talking about meeting other band members and band parents who told them their performance made them cry. I heard kid after kid share their personal experience of their Finals performance and the sheer joy and elation that followed with their peers outside of the tunnel. Kids were crying and hugging each other like it's all they had in the world that night. And then they did this again in class this morning...two days later and in our smelly, broken-down band hall. And I cried and cried and cried while listening to these young

men and women share their hearts with one another with complete and total abandon. Most of my make-up was on my jacket sleeve by 10 a.m.

I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. A group of teenagers, many who are overly protective of sharing too much for fear of being criticized and many who are so hard on themselves and are afraid of failure or of being mocked that they don't let people see them too intimately, were literally baring their souls to each other. It was like they were finally free of their burdens and hardships and had the freedom to just be and express their love and care for one another. It was literally the most precious thing I think I've ever been able to witness.

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After the classes ended, Kyle and I took a few breaths to try and compose ourselves. We were not prepared for that. It's been a tough few months (and more to come in the spring) for him and me...I asked him, "Did we just miss all of that? Or was it hidden underneath everything?" He said probably a little of both. Kyle and I were so consumed this fall just trying to climb AND move every mountain that all of this was happening underneath our noses and we didn't even know it. It was in that moment that we were both able to release all of the burdens of the last 3 1/2 months because it was clear right then and there that every single moment was worth it. What those kids shared with us and each other was magic. Priceless. I'm still in awe of it. And it will never leave me.

So, what do I take away from this? I don't know that I can put it all into words. But after what has been some of the hardest months of my life and career, I can honestly say

that I have a certain peace that passes understanding as we put closure on this season. I know that God was with us the entire time, even if the enemy tried to stand in the way. GOD IS GREATER.

Marching Band is a funny thing. All band directors know this. Some of the best seasons competitively are not as deeply profound while some of the most difficult and challenging seasons can present some of the most beautiful and rewarding outcomes. I've been saying to the kids that being in marching band is sometimes like going to battle together. You suit up with your armor and you go out and learn what you're made of. That we're "in the trenches" together, and that we fight the good fight not just as a team, but as a family. I think my kids really got that this year. More than ever before. I am so very proud of them.

And yes -- I know it's "just band." But is it? Of course, not. And we all know this, too. **How Great Thou Art.**



*Joni Perez is in her eighth year as Director of Bands and fifteenth year overall at The Woodlands High School. Her responsibilities include conducting the Wind Ensemble & Concert Band and directing The Woodlands Marching Band. Mrs. Perez earned her Bachelor's degree in Music Education from the University of Houston in 2005 and is in her nineteenth year of teaching in Texas. Mrs. Perez's concert and marching ensembles have received exclusively superior ratings from the University Interscholastic League during her time as Director. TWHS Wind Ensemble has been recognized as a National Wind Band Honors Mark of Excellence Winner and was a featured ensemble at the 2012 Midwest International Band & Orchestra Clinic in Chicago. Under her direction, the marching ensembles have earned four consecutive trips to the 5A/6A Texas state UIL Marching Contest, advancing to Finals in 2010, 2012, 2014 & 2016. The Woodlands High School Marching Band also competes regularly at the regional and national level in the Bands of America marching competitions. In 2013, TWHS Band won the Bands of America Grand National Championship in Indianapolis and most recently finished as a Finalist in the 2017 BOA Grand Nationals competition. The band has been recognized as a finalist all four times they have participated under Mrs. Perez's direction between 2011 & 2017. Joni Perez is a member of the Texas Music Educators Association and the Texas Bandmasters Association. She resides with her husband, Brian Perez, of eleven years in The Woodlands, Texas.*