

Artist Teachers

Richard Floyd, 2018 TBA Featured Clinician

“I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few great artist teachers as there are any other great artists. Teaching might be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.”

—JOHN STEINBECK

So what is it you do everyday? What goes on in your “band director’s world”? Certainly a significant portion of your day is spent expanding your students’ skill sets. It’s all about fingerings, embouchures, rhythm precision, critical listening, tonal beauty and so on. It’s the requisites we address daily in an effort to facilitate the technical mastery of a piece of music: the nuts and bolts stuff. When you are not doing that, you are posting grades, meeting with parents, ordering buses, pleasing administrators and creating lesson plans. You know, completing those limitless tasks that no one told you about in college. Ah...the life of a band director!

Wait a minute...what’s missing? In that entire list of responsibilities, duties and tasks, any reference to the art of making music is missing. There is no mention of the core principle that remains the foundation and underpinning of all things music education. **If we do not inspire students to make, love, appreciate and embrace heart-felt music (not notes and rhythms) for a lifetime then we have fallen short in our quest to fulfill the ultimate mission for why we have music in our schools in the first place.**

Let’s look at it another way. If you look at the list of offerings for

any music educator conference or professional development program you will see countless clinics on rehearsal techniques, instrument pedagogy, time management, the care and feeding of band parents, cutting edge technology, the latest system for rhythmic mastery, and beginner recruitment. Certainly these are all important topics for exploration. However in the entire conference program, there will be far fewer sessions that focus on the subjective artistry of our profession or the intangible properties of music that give it true meaning and value. As one looks through the conference program it would be easy to conclude that our priorities are possibly skewed somewhat towards the *craft* of what we do as opposed to the *art* of what we do.

Let me submit to you two reasons why all of the above might be true. First, there is the clear reality that the craft is objectively measurable. The notes are right or they are wrong. The rhythm is right or to some degree it is flawed. The chord is in tune or it is defective. The same applies to logistical and administrative tasks. We have completed them or we have not. All that is required is a checklist or a rubric and a methodical, disciplined approach to measuring progress. We thus become comfortable with the notion that if you can’t measure it, it

doesn’t count. There is also a degree of comfort (or lack of same) knowing that measurable progress is being made. Stuff is getting done. It feels good and it is easy to quantify.

Secondly there is that “eight hundred pound gorilla in the room” that falls under the heading of auditions, chair placements and contests. In truth, virtually every activity in which we are engaged is accompanied by a scoring system or a rubric for evaluation or assessment. Look at our calendars. Like it or not, we spend an inordinate amount of time teaching to the test. Tragically, those tests rarely—if ever—measure to what extent the students are truly emotionally engaged in music making or developing a passion for music that will accompany them throughout their life journey.

Personally I find myself thinking more and more about the reality that we are all subject to and victims of our culture. There are a multitude of definitions for the word “culture” including the customary beliefs of a group of people, a shared set of attitudes, values, goals and practices or a set of values, conventions or social practices associated with a particular field or activity. If I reflect on my life’s journey and turn back the clock to the late 1950s when I was a high school band member in Richardson, Texas, I realize that so much of what we do has not changed or evolved that much. In the 1950s we went to marching contest, concert and sight-reading contest, solo and ensemble contest and rounded out the year

Artist Teachers

with all region and all state band auditions. Somewhere in there we performed a couple of obligatory concerts for the parents and community. Today I would propose that the only thing that has really changed in Texas over the past five decades is perhaps the addition of the honor band selection process and more sophisticated rubrics and scoring systems for all things competitive. Certainly we have refined our approaches to pedagogy, pushed the envelope in terms of technical dexterity, embraced many developments in technology, and yes, enriched our repertoire. All good! Unfortunately, at the end of the day, we are essentially still “teaching to the test” and measuring our successes and failures with the same means we have embraced for decade. In short, we are victims of our culture.

Am I proposing a radical change in our culture? Absolutely not! So much of what we do has served us well, but I would submit to you that if we want to firmly establish ourselves in the mainstream of essential education we need to “get to the art of the matter.” We need to be more engaged with the emotional elements of music and the intangible essence of why music is core to a well-rounded education.

So what to do? I think there are a number of strategies that can help us enhance our focus and perhaps expand our culture to embrace the artistry of what we do as passionately as we embrace the craft of what we do.

First and foremost we must accept the reality that you can have craft without art, but you can't have art without craft. ‘Nough said! The nuts and bolts must be addressed. Yes, they do count, but they are not the end result or culmination of our efforts. This is not an incremental process that follows a predetermined predictable regimen. Band in tune...check! Rhythms correct...check! Balance addressed...check! Tone quality

refined...check! OK, it a week until contest so let's start making some music. How sad.

Let's begin with the premise that we don't wait until a child is potty trained, can walk and talk, tie his/her own shoes and feed him/herself before we introduce that child to the abstract but incomparable, human qualities of love,

respect, selflessness, compassion and so on. I would argue that is exactly what we do when we worship at the altar of accuracy, precision and craft without any deference to the human, emotional, artistic qualities of music. I submit to you the notion that we should be about the business of artistry and “making music” from the very beginning.

So what can we do to recalibrate our trajectory? What are some elements in our culture that we can tweak to deepen the musical experiences of our students? In short, how do we cut through the clutter of notes and rhythms and give students a truly musical moment?

One possibility is to consider slightly modifying our point of view when standing before our students in a rehearsal setting. To be honest I resist the temptation of going to a rehearsal obsessed with technique, rhythm, tuning or any other elements of craft. While important—and yes, essential—they are not my first priority. As a result I like to believe that my ears hear differently. I am immediately listening to and for the music. How does it go? What are the musical qualities and emotional underpinning that must be paramount if we are to go beyond the notes on the page and give our students “goose bump moments” that are the essence of musical artistry? My quest is to instill those emotional qualities in the students from the very beginning even as I address the objective, quantifiable and measurable issues of musical performance.

**TBA Featured Clinician
Richard Floyd
will present
“The Three E’s of Rehearsal:
Better Ways to
Work Your Band”
and
“Do You Hear
What I Hear?”
with the Austin Symphonic
Band demo group
at the TBA convention.**

Artist Teachers

I think one way to do this, at least for me, is to offer guidance in a musical context as I rehearse. I strive to include subjective, emotional adjectives to justify the need for objective refinement. The goal always is to give students an artistic, emotional reason for correcting flaws. Here are a few examples:

Instead of saying “Crescendo more leading up to Letter B” perhaps reframe the comment to something like, “Let the dynamics of the music grow in anticipation of the majestic Eb chord at Letter B. And, when we arrive at Letter B make sure there is beauty in your sound.” Yes, it’s a few more words, but they paint a picture of what we hope to achieve musically. It has been my experience that students retain more if your challenges are presented with a musical purpose.

Or possibly, instead of “Clarinets, you are rushing the phrase that begins in Measure 34” consider, “Clarinets take more time and love every note beginning in Measure 34.”

Or maybe an alternative to “Brass, don’t be so loud and heavy at Letter C” might be, “Brass, can you play with less volume and let the music dance with happiness.”

In summary, strive to use words that are filled with feelings and emotions that instill an awareness of the humanness of the music as opposed to the dispassionate approach of simply chipping away at obvious flaws. For some this must be an acquired skill but it is well worth the effort.

Another strategy one might embrace is the utilization of the bountiful, technological resources at our fingertips. I couldn’t imagine preparing Frank Ticheli’s *Cajun Folk Songs* without the students hearing the original Lomax recordings of the haunting melodies that served as the inspiration for this Grade III masterpiece. Such resources are out there. Playing Eric Whitacre’s *Lux Arumque* or *Sleep* without exposing students to the powerful text or the virtual choir performances of these pieces is incomprehensible. How could you rehearse and perform *Movement For Rosa* without encountering accounts and footage of the events that were the stimulus for this emotional work? Or how could you begin the process of learning *Do Not Go*

Gentle Into That Good Night without hearing that timeless poem by Dylan Thomas read by Richard Burton, and that the piece was written to honor the loss of a young life. The opportunities for artistic enrichment and human connections are limitless. They should be core to our message to students.

One other thought I would submit to you would be the notion of occasionally performing easier music. You heard me. Play less technically challenging music. Prepare and perform music that is expressive rather than impressive. Instead of continually ratcheting up the technical performance demands from time to time, prepare a piece that simply allows students to enjoy their musicianship. Select a piece of music that is immediately accessible without repetitive drill and tedious attention to technique, range and tuning issues. Repertoire under this heading affords students the opportunity to immediately explore the interpretive beauty and expressive qualities of the music.

When we are together at the TBA Convention/Clinic this July, I hope to expand and explore in greater depth those strategies we might employ to elevate what we share with our students to the highest level of artistry. Together we can deepen our culture and our students will be the beneficiaries. I hope you will join me.

I began this rambling with a quote from John Steinbeck. Let me close with an excerpt from the equally inspiring words of the composer Warren Benson.

**....I wish I could hear more wind conductors
and instrumental teachers, using better and
larger vocabulary that relate to beauty,
to gentleness, strength and power
...the exultation of great happiness
...the sweetness and purity of lullabies
....the resonance of history
...bringing something to life from cold print
...living music
...moving music.**

—WARREN BENSON