

Life In The Fast Lane

Larry Livingston

*Taken from his Keynote at the TBA Virtual Convention.**

Yes, we are living in a crazy time! It is both harrowing and without precedent. Like having no rehearsals and sight reading the concert! No one has any reliable answers, or a forecast when it will be over. We are all staying home, practicing physical distancing, wearing masks, so surreal! It feels like time has kind of frozen. And I am aware that each of you is facing endless new challenges in your quest to teach and inspire your students. Huge kudos to all of you for your resolve and commitment in a circumstance that is vastly different from what you signed up for. In such situations, humor may be a useful tonic.

I said to my wife, “Let’s finally tackle all the stuff around the house we’ve have been waiting to get to. Unfortunately, this appears to be harder than it looks. So the heck with it. Actually, I am forming a procrastinator’s club. I’d love to have you join. We put off every meeting until the next Wednesday.

My first contact with music education was through my father, a public school band director, jazz player, composer, pianist, saxophonist, clarinetist, and owner of a music store. He wrote Eastern Michigan’s Fight Song. More to the point, he was my school band director. Said simply, I grew up in the band culture. (Yes, I made the same mistake many of you made—choosing clarinet, red lining on the “nerdomoter!”) I went

to Michigan where I was the first freshman to buy and wear the wool Marching Band jacket in the heat of late summer in Ann Arbor. I did not care about the discomfort. I wanted the world to know I had arrived. As a senior I led the Band out of the tunnel in the Big House and was essentially a Band fanatic through and through. William D. Revelli deputized each of us in the band program to go out and make our high school bands the simulacra of the Michigan Band. My first job was an elementary and middle school band director in Saline, Michigan, a town so small the train stops there for laughs. I drove the school bus so the 7th and 8th grade kids could rehearse together. Then, at age 23 I went on to teach at Luther College where I conducted the Varsity Band and served as Weston Noble’s assistant with the famed Luther Band. I launched a life as a music educator which was anchored in the band tradition and, to this day, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to those many conductors, educators, and musical mentors who sent me down that road. I have spent much of the last fifty years of my life working with school age students, conducting hundreds of All State Orchestras and Bands, including 12 such appearances at TMEA. In point of fact, I have spent virtually my entire life as a teacher. While my professional life has morphed to and through ever-

changing terrain, at the core I have never lost my love and reverence for band. So it is thrilling to once again be addressing band directors. Feels like home. Because I sense such an organic kinship here, let me speak to you from the heart.

In this challenging time, you are all looking for ways to sustain and revalidate your programs, programs you have invested in with such zeal and determination. Yes, it is very troubling that, for now, the vast majority of you cannot have band as we have known it. So, what can we do to keep the flame lit? What are some forms of music making that can help, and as well resonate with present day realities? Let me offer some possibilities.

1) Chamber music. When students graduate, they may or may not be able to find bands to play in. One way to maximize their chances to make music in the future is through chamber music. If you facilitate a dynamic chamber music program, your students will be engaged in the kind of music-think that is core to understanding how music actually works. And if you trust them to rehearse on their own, they will cultivate leadership skills and learn to function separate from you which is core to life-long music making.

2) Composition and arranging. We spend our time in band re-creating music written by others. It is now a

****A replay of this Keynote and all the 2020 Virtual Convention sessions will be available to registered attendees through December 31, 2020. Online registration will remain open as well. Let your friends know they can still register for \$100 and have access to all the replays.***

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great time to encourage student composers and arrangers. I know this is already happening in many of your programs. Why not make it a priority? If this becomes a *raison d'être* for your students they will become CREATORS, not simply executors of other peoples' music.

3) Inclusion. I am sure you are deeply committed to social justice. There is music out there by people of color, women, and nonbinary individuals—lots of it. It comes in various styles from classical to rock and roll to hip hop and in various hybrid forms. Commission pieces and educational works. Urge publishers to provide music by underrepresented minorities, women, and nonbinary individuals. Once word gets out that your school is eagerly looking, you will be amazed at the amount of rep available.

4) Downsizing. Several, and I expect, more and more composers of fine band literature are making transcriptions of their pieces for chamber size ensembles. This is a repertorial resource which is likely to explode. Ticheli, et al not only want their music played, they live for the connectivity with young people that their music uniquely provides.

5) Improvisation. Here I am not talking about jazz or style-based improvising, all of which is perfectly fine. I am talking about free improvisation in which the imagination and inventiveness of the players is key. No boundaries, and no style strictures. Years ago I led an improvisation rehearsal with the Thornton Symphony with NO MUSIC STANDS. It was 90 minutes of free expressiveness. It freaked out some players at first who wanted to know where the music was. I said, "Like written music, it is really all in your head." And then we jammed. It was an epiphany.

I understand that these ideas require some new or adaptive thinking. They also can only work if we are

willing to search the rapidly emerging internet platforms which are necessary to implement these ideas. I pretend no technological expertise and I rage against the machine like many of you. But it is the hand we have been dealt, and I know that everyone of you loves a challenge! So let's go for it.

I live with the idea that we are all in this together, an ECOLOGICAL VIEW. And you are all to be commended for your commitment to carrying the magic of music into the lives of the young, the bedrock of why we teach. I am quite sure you did not choose to become a music educator by analysis of predictable futures. Nor for the money, or the short hours.

There are only two kinds of teachers:

Group One. Those who work assiduously to provide their students every possible opportunity to learn

and grow. These teachers are deeply committed and spend many hours including weekends on the goal of being a good teacher.

Group Two... mediocre.

Like music, teaching is a calling.

In fact, each of you, every one of you by your dedication and passion is already the hero of your own life.

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So why did I choose to speak about Life in the Fast Lane? Because I want to pose a simple question: *How is it that by teaching music we provide something other?*

We live in what might be described as the attention economy, where every moment someone is demanding our time and/or money, we are addicted to cell phones, and obsessed with multi-tasking. How can we counter the "shoutocracy" where noise is everywhere? Of course it is great that we have developed such amazing machines and devices, and we all depend on them. We can do more in less time, act instantaneously to solve problems, send complex messages across the ether fast and accurately and

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nearly for free. Therefore, this is not about technology as the enemy. It has incredible value. Witness how we are able to deliver content in this troubling environment. Thank God for technology! But, I argue that such a life of pervasive dependence on technology is incomplete and leaves humankind without what I call neurological equipoise or balance.

And here is the punch line: Our students have never lived in a world without cell phones and the endless paraphernalia of the modern techno zeitgeist. They have no prior experience. They are to a large degree trapped. Where do these children find an antidote to the oppression of technology? How do we counter this technological mania?

You are the Antidote

Close your eyes and think back about how you got started in music. What was it that ignited your interest, inspired you to follow the yellow brick road? Without exception it is always about a teacher. Now open your eyes to the realization that you are the life-changing force in the lives of your students.

You are an antidote to the trap of technology. YOU DO IT EVERY DAY by the sheer power of what and how you teach, by the messages which are imbedded in everything you teach, a counterweight to the canon of speed, noise, and multitasking. Yes YOU are an antidote. Let me say why.

1. First of all what we do as teachers is personal!

We live in a transactional society where the goal is do it fast, get it done. I am sure you have heard it said, "It's just business, nothing personal." What we do is not business, it is strictly personal. We are not just teaching music but rather we are teaching the child through music. Because music encodes the story of each of us. It holds an

encyclopedia of emotion. The greatest composers know everything about us and they reveal it in their music. When we play it or listen to it, we enter the emotional crucible of the heart, and not just us but the hoi polloi as well.

Our joy, our anger, our jokes, our tender moments, our exquisite sadness, all of it is nested in the sonic miracle of music. What we do is strictly personal, and the efforts to master the instrument are driven by the realization that music-making is actually an exploration of the self. The better one's skill, the deeper that excavation becomes. By the way, let me disabuse you of the mistaken idea that the most important teacher in the system is at the high school. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL teacher is most important! For it is in that cathedral of innocence that children are first introduced to the power and magic of music, and to the importance of developing good habits.

2. Neuroscience tells us much about music and the brain. From a Harvard study published in 2011: "Music is a fundamental attribute of the human species. Virtually all cultures, from the most primitive to the most advanced

make music." We know that oxytocin and dopamine are being sent by the neuro-transmitters in the brain every time we do music. Studying and performing music builds neurological power, leads to better grades, higher SAT scores, higher graduation rates, crime abatement, and drug abatement. The evidence is overwhelming from numerous studies, which by meta-analysis confirm the sentient value of doing music. Meeting with your principal or supervisor about this issue? Need a new tuba? If the response is that doing music is coincidental not causal to improving grades, ask if he or she smokes. Actually there is no absolute causal data that proves smoking causes lung cancer. However,

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through meta-analysis, the coincidence is so high that most people do not smoke. Similarly the co-relative evidence of music's impact on the brain is convincing. You might also point out a school nearby whose students have better SAT scores, higher graduation rates, and more of whose graduates are getting into premiere schools. And they have a nice set of new tubas. "So I am offering you a chance to improve the academic performance of your school! Read Oliver Sacks' *Musophilia*. Trent Cooper's Dekaney High School Band program in Houston is a great example. Mostly single parent families, living below the poverty line, free lunch programs, and the school has significant drug and crime issues. Despite that, 100% of Trent's students graduate and many go on to top tier colleges. Music's inherent power on display!

3. Homework for your students means practicing, an endeavor that must be done alone. I want to introduce a new term: **Mono-tasking**. Practicing means communing with the self. A task which requires immense powers of concentration. Away from the noise. Practicing is a form of MEDITATION! And the practice space becomes a sanctuary. Practicing is a form of dialog with the soul which becomes defining.

4. What happened to quiet? Resurrecting the importance of quiet. Everything beautiful comes from quiet. Doing music means not only putting away the external world and its myriad distractions but really LISTENING! Recently, I have been starting lessons, rehearsals, and classes with a minute of silence. You would be amazed at the level of concentration and focus which this induces. Imagine a world filled only with the sound of nature. And it is musical instruments, played by breath, and fingers, by the hands and arms, and the inimitable shaping of the face, which provide young people the chance to evoke sonic images at once personal and profound. The term *haptics* (great to

impress at the cocktail party) comes to mind. It refers to the interface between the human body and a machine. In the world of physics this is simply a concept and there are no technological devices which require such nuance of touch as that required by acoustic musical instruments.

My youngest son was a virtuoso player of the internet game, *Counterstrike*. In this game, fast reflexes are everything—BUT not the quality and subtlety of the touch—just its velocity. Musical instruments are capable of magic, of weaving beauty into the quiet and it can happen every time a child begins to take the instrument out of the case.

5. The value of hard work. I have heard it said that more and more of our children come to school with a sense of entitlement, expecting things to be given to them, that hard work is an anathema. My wife Karen, who teaches in a Waldorf Elementary and Middle School, tells me that increasingly young students come to school with a sense of what they are owed rather than what they can learn. Music holds meaning for us in ways we cannot fully describe but feel intuitively. However, to do music one must apply the sweat of the brow. No life of meaning can be achieved without hard work for it is hard work itself which develops neurological power, is fueled by a sense of purpose, and delivers deep rewards.

Here is a story to illustrate my point. I had this graduate student in my conducting class. He was at the outset, very unnatural, physically awkward. However, he had a phenomenal work ethic. Subsequently, he gave a minor field conducting recital doing the Mozart *Gran Partita*, without score and it was stunning. Hard work is essence in music if you want to derive the deepest take away. And it is likely more important than talent! In his seminal book, *FLOW*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi uses the term "autotelesis" which means that the value of the work inheres in the work

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itself. I am sure that from time to time you hear from your students, “I don’t want to practice. It’s too hard.” Tell your students that a diamond is a lump of coal that stuck with it.

6. Learning the art of SLOW, the best things in life happen SLOWLY! Our daily routines invariably include rushing, urgently dealing with problems, appointments, obligations, like a spinning top. But music unfolds on its own clock, is a profound explanation for the passing of time. You cannot compress a Beethoven symphony, Grainger’s *Irish Tune from County Derry*, or a Ticheli band piece.

Some time ago I came across a woman cellist who was playing professionally and she told me the following story. She auditioned to become a student of Gregor Piatigorsky, the renowned artist and pedagogue who taught at USC. She played for him and he was not impressed. Seeing that she was crestfallen that he did not take her into his studio, he told her to play an A major scale as beautifully as she could. At a certain point in her playing he said, “STOP. That’s it. That’s the sound. Practice to make everything you play sound that way.” One year later she returned to once again audition. Piatigorsky did not remember her. After she finished he said, “Excellent. I would love to have you join my class! But I have to know who have you been studying with? And she said, “I have been studying with you. Every day for long hours of slow diligent practice.” Fast is useful and we depend on it but it does not answer a core question.



Until we can once again find opportunities to make music together, in person, and in real time, I applaud your erstwhile efforts to use every technological device to help sustain the teaching of music in all of its modalities. What amazing things you are doing to try to compensate! The work of every one of you in this troubling time borders on the heroic and is key to where we will land once the blight of COVID is over.

How does the human brain find its most profound thoughts? Through contemplation and calm, through weighing carefully and deliberately matters of consequence, by taking the time necessary. Such forms of behavior cannot be rushed or shortened out of the press of just trying to get done. It is from the painstaking process of practice and study that the neural networks of the mind develop new, rich and provocative pathways.

7. Being present in one’s life—a unique key to the kingdom! The intimate and visceral act of playing magical instruments, of singing, of doing music on any level means being immersed in the moment. Not observing life, but acting out your own adventure. When I conduct All States, I am often confronted by parents who asks why they should let their child learn to play an instrument or take voice lessons. My answer is quite simple. I explain that the culture we have created provides endless opportunities to while away time watching other people as they navigate life through television, the internet, DVDs, MP3 players, etc. I

tell them, “If your child gets involved DOING music, he or she will begin to participate in life, will open the door to a lifetime of doing so, and your child does not have to become FIRST CHAIR to get the payoff. Being good at music is wonderful, but just doing it at all provides rewards that no amount of vicarious pleasure can rival. Not a passenger but a driver. Not an observer but a doer.”

8. The unique value of the social contract. Having spent a great deal of time meeting with music educators all over

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the country I discovered a metric for accessing the music or band program: KIDS HANGING OUT IN THE BAND ROOM. Not just during class but before school, at lunch, after school, weekends. They crave the value of social interaction which in your case the band has provided.

During this difficult time, we as musicians are more aware than ever of the importance of doing music together. Oliver Sacks mentions the term, “neurogamy,” the special neurochemical dividends shared among a group of musicians when they are rehearsing or performing. Neurogamic sensations can even be felt by the audience. Until we can once again find opportunities to make music together, in person, and in real time, I applaud your erstwhile efforts to use every technological device to help sustain the teaching of music in all of its modalities. I am aware that some of you teach children who do not even have internet access. What amazing things you are doing to try to compensate! The work of every one of you in this troubling time borders on the heroic and is key to where we will land once the blight of COVID is over. But it needs to be said and recognized that ***no amount of virtual music-making can duplicate or replace the nearly sacred experience of making music together.*** For your students, who will one day venture into the adult world, practicing the kind of empathic, deep attentiveness and listening required for ensemble music-making is a recipe for building a better world. A learning environment which is all about collaboration, shared goals, and teamwork is both rare and never more needed than now.

These then are the gifts you bring to your students, not just about music, but more important, *through music about life*: to know the sacred nature of quiet, the merit of concentrated mono-tasking, the priceless value of patience, the extraordinary neurological impact of doing music, the importance of tenacity in acquiring that which cannot be mastered quickly, the role of focused contemplation, the cultivation of social empathic, collaborative behavior, and the invitation to a life of doing. Thanks to you, your students will have these essential ways of being in the world forever and they will turn to them time and again as they negotiate the adventure ahead.

Why do we do this? Why do we commit to the endless and complex challenge of teaching music? Let me share a final story. Some time ago I was conducting in the summer at Interlochen with a high school orchestra. A few weeks later, I received a letter from a parent of a cellist who played in that orchestra. She said, “You may not believe this, but my son is out in the driveway shooting baskets. He has his portable jam box on and he is listening to your performance of Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* and he has listened to it virtually every day since camp.”

Go forth now with renewed energy, inspired by the very miracle of what you do, look yourself in the mirror and say, with quickened resolve. “Yes, this is my calling, and I welcome it with full heart.”

THANK YOU!

Mr. Larry Livingston has appeared with the Houston Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Green Umbrella Series, at the Festival de Musique in France, with the Stockholm Wind Orchestra, the Leopoldinum Orchestra in Poland, the Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra in Rumania, and the Pan Pacific Festival Orchestras in Sydney. The lead jurist for the Besancon International Conducting Competition in France and the Winnipeg Symphony International Conducting Symposium, Maestro Livingston is also the Music Director of the Festival Orchestra at Idyllwild Arts and the Music Director of the Music for All National Honor Orchestra. Since 2004, Mr. Livingston has served as guest conductor at the College Band Directors National Conference in Alice Tully Hall, led All-State Ensembles across the United States including Texas, where he appeared for a record ninth time. From 2004 to 2012 Mr. Livingston was Music Director of Thornton School Orchestras. In 2014-19, Maestro Livingston will conduct the All-State Ensembles of Arizona, New Mexico, Kentucky, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Iowa, Texas, Michigan, Washington, and California, as well as the Katowice Academy Orchestra in Poland. Mr. Livingston has held positions as Vice President of the New England Conservatory of Music, Dean of the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, and Dean of the USC Thornton School of Music, where he Chairs the Conducting Department. In 2019 he became the Interim President of the Westminster Choir College Acquisition Corporation. Mr. Livingston leads the national educational quest, ALL IN, is a consultant to the Conn-Selmer Company and heads the Education Committee of the Quincy Jones Musiq Consortium. In 2013, Mr. Livingston appeared in the “Lights Out” episode of Glee and was featured as a mentor in the USA Cable Network Television series, “The Moment.”