

# Ryan Kerwin

## Values and Beliefs in Music Education

By engaging with others through music, a person participates in a human tradition that has existed for thousands of years. Though I still learn new things every day, after almost a decade of study I have cultivated my skills so that I can make music in ways that are intrinsically appealing. During my studies, I observed that this sense of empowerment within music is relatively exclusive, and remains inaccessible for the vast majority of students. When I reflect on my student experience, I am fearful that the empowerment I found through learning music in schools is becoming less accessible for average American children due to institutional barriers including the cost of equipment, narrow curricular offerings, and the attitude of teaching/learning. I have chosen to pursue a career in music education to help improve the accessibility of school music experiences so that more students discover a sense of individual empowerment through music learning.

### What Makes Music Meaningful?

In order to provide meaningful music education experiences to students, we must first consider our definitions of music and the meaning of music in our lives. Since I first started listening to music, I have had eclectic musical tastes. I was drawn indiscriminately to styles from jazz to chamber music to hip-hop to 20<sup>th</sup> century classical, and found joy exploring their unique values. As a result of this background, I came to define music broadly -- music is an art form in which a person manipulates sounds to communicate impressions of thoughts and feelings.

I believe that the meaning of music in our lives comes from *doing music*. Because I have been influenced by diverse musicians who *do music* very differently (performing instruments, manipulating recorded sound, writing about music to contextualize it within history, and teaching music to others), I developed a broad concept of the musical process. A person can be musical by **performing** (e.g. playing an instrument, singing, or conducting, etc.), **creating** (e.g. recording, composing, improvising, etc.), **responding** (e.g. analyzing, critiquing), and **connecting** (e.g. reflecting on the broader meaning of their experiences with music). Though *doing music* in each way provides unique opportunities to learn about the art, *doing music* through a combination of all of these processes provides the most value, helping students to use music to learn more about being human.

### What Makes Music Education Meaningful?

I have been a formal student of music since I was 10 years old. When I reflect on the learning experiences that have profoundly impacted my identity as a musician – playing and studying the trumpet, listening to new kinds of music with my teachers, recording original music, collaborating with my friends to share performances in the community – the common element is *agency*. I was free to make choices about the means and ends of my music-making.

As a result, I believe the enrichment derived from music education is proportional to the student's influence regarding the *content*, *process*, and *product* of teaching/learning. For example, if a student becomes motivated to sing folk songs in the style of Bob Dylan, and then accesses the resources to achieve their goals on their terms, they are having the most enriching experience you can have learning music. Likewise, if a student wants to design a playlist for an event, and then can vividly describe, recall, and select music that inspires the feeling they want to share with their guests, they are also having one of the most enriching experiences you can achieve learning about music, though their experience does not involve music performance in the traditional sense.

### **How Should Music Be Taught?**

For many students, I believe the ability to achieve musical agency is largely dependent on the attitude of the music education a person receives while they are young. In my life, my most influential teachers were those who “met me where I was” and patiently worked with me to find the best way to grow according to my own goals, rather than telling me what I *needed* to know. As a result, I believe music education should be a collaboration between the teacher and the student that begins with *dialogue*. At first, the content of the dialogue may be lop-sided, so that the teacher can learn about the students through activities that foster musical skills. However, my ultimate objective as a teacher is to provide access to resources that enable a student's musical self-sufficiency – in other words, teach, learn, and participate in music on their own terms *without my oversight*. This means acting as a role model in musical processes, encouraging students' pursuits, challenging students to consider new perspectives on music, and drawing on my experience to help solve technical problems – all while allowing ample space for students' to influence the aims and means of their music learning.

A teacher can spark *personal artistry* by facilitating experiences **performing**, **creating**, or **responding** to music, but the most direct way to engage young people with music is through the first-hand experience of **performing** and **creating**. This is because performing and creating are processes that require students to use sounds to express their ideas. Finding your own musical voice provides a crucial frame of reference for accessing meaning in the music of others that is not immediately obvious through listening alone. Just as debating the implications of foreign policy in “Model UN” club at school might improve a student's ability to construct meaning from relatively abstract current events, **performing** and **creating** music can enhance students' ability to construct meaning from **listening** to music and enhance their ability to perceive the meaning of the sounds. Constructing this meaning allows a student to make an informed decision about how they want to be musical in adulthood, even if they don't want to be life-long performers or creators.

### **What is the Responsibility of a Music Teacher?**

In my family, I am the first and only career musician. Growing up in West Virginia, very few of my peers had the means to pursue music as a career despite tremendous talent. Though very few people close to me earn their living as musicians, almost everyone I know finds value

and meaning in *doing music* in some form. My mom would never be able to do the dishes without singing a tune, my dad would never be able to get through a workout without a motivating soundtrack, and my brother would never be able to survive a long car ride without a perfectly curated playlist. My best friend and I still debate our favorite jazz recordings though he hasn't played his saxophone in several years. Simply put, I believe teaching music begins with acknowledging the largely avocational role of music-making in contemporary American life. Very few students will become professional performers who rely on virtuoso musical techniques as a means to a livelihood. Many more students will spend their lives pursuing other interests and careers - *doing music* independently or in small groups, in settings that do not require virtuoso technique.

I believe a music teacher has the responsibility to help any interested student find a meaningful way to *do music* within their unique cultural context and lifestyle. Often, I think this means music education needs to go beyond training to execute instructions in large ensemble repertoire. Rather, technical training should be a means to an end that is influenced by students' ideas. After students have the training and information they need to comfortably and reliably perform music that matters to them, the remaining instructional activities should provide opportunities to situate music in the context of their everyday lives through **responding** and **reflecting** on performances they share with their community. Situating music in our personal lives results from the alternation of experience and reflective inquiry towards over-arching questions of purpose: Towards what ends should we develop and use musical skills? How should we share our music with others? How should we use our experience to appreciate the music others share with us?

### **Where are we going?**

I believe arts/humanities education provides indispensable opportunities for students to learn about what it means to be a part of a community. A music education program is a success only to the degree it can be accessed by the average student who wants to participate. Therefore the curriculum content and formats should be as diverse as is practically possible in order to provide immediately accessible, relatable, and inspiring points of entry to the largest numbers of school students. In practice, I believe this should be approached by expanding the breadth of existing ensembles to include spaces for learning popular music styles and contemporary music technology. Alongside these courses, a school should cultivate a robust variety of general music offerings designed to engage students who don't have the means to perform. When possible, music teachers should schedule these courses during the school day, to make them accessible to students unable to participate in co-curricular ensembles due to logistical circumstances.

Many of these solutions are radical changes that take time to build into a program. Ultimately, each program exists in a different community with different values and means. The final choice of curriculum should occupy a middle ground between the student's inherent interest, the expertise of the teacher, and the existing expectations of the external community.