

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 musical skills so that I can be musical in ways that are intrinsically appealing. During the same time I have noticed that this sense of empowerment within music is relatively exclusive, and remains inaccessible for the vast majority of students (and even for many music students). When I reflect on my student experience, I am fearful that empowerment through musical experiences 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 have an impact on improving the accessibility of school music experiences in order to help more students discover a sense of individual empowerment through musical experiences.

### What Makes Music Meaningful?

In order to provide worthy music education experiences to students, we must first consider the meaning of music and music processes in our lives. Since I first starting listening to music I have always had diverse musical tastes. As I pursued these interests playing/creating/listening in diverse styles from jazz to chamber music to hip-hop to 20<sup>th</sup> century classical I 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 is found through *doing* music. Because I have been influenced by diverse musicians who do music very differently (performing instruments, manipulating recorded music, writing about music to share their reactions and help make sense of it) I have 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). I believe these each of these forms of *doing* music have equal potential, but that music experiences take on the most meaning through a combination of these processes.

### What Makes Music Education Meaningful?

I have been a formal student of music for almost 16 years. When I reflect on this time 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, performing and recording original music for my master’s degree, collaborating with my friends to write/record songs – the common element is *agency*. As a result, I believe the enrichment derived from musical education experiences is proportional to the student’s influence regarding the content, process, and product of teaching/learning. For example, when a student becomes motivated to sing folk songs in the style of Bob Dylan and have the resources to achieve their goals on their terms, they are having one of the most enriching musical experiences possible. Likewise, when a student wants to design a playlist for an and can recall and select music that inspires the feeling they want to achieve for their guests, they also have one of the most enriching musical interactions possible.

### How Should Music Be Taught?

For many students, I believe the ability to have musical agency is largely dependent on the attitude of music education opportunities 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 goals, rather than telling me what I *needed* to know. As a result, I believe music experiences in schools should be collaborative activities between the teacher and the student that begins with *dialogue*. At first, the content of the context 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 learning.

A teacher can spark personal artistry by facilitating experiences with any musical process, but I believe the most efficient way to cultivate purposeful musical engagement for young people 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 in listening or connecting. Just as an experience with a “Model UN” club at school might improve a student’s ability to construct meaning from relatively abstract current events, acting as a musician within the social can enhance students’ ability to construct meaning from musical experiences and reveal ways music impacts their life. Constructing this meaning allows a student to make an informed

decision about how they want to be musical 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. Even 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* and it adds meaning to their life. 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 make through 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 role of music in everyday 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/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. In general, I think this means music education programs need to go beyond training to execute instructions in large ensemble music. Rather, technical training should be a means to an end that is partially determined by students. After students have the training and information they need to comfortably and reliably perform, the remaining instructional activities should be provide

opportunities to situate music in the context of their everyday lives through performing, creating, responding, and reflecting on music they share with their community. Situating music in our personal lives results from the alternation of experience and reflective inquiry towards over-arching questions such as: towards what ends should we develop and use musical skills? How can we share our music with others? How can we use our experience to appreciate the music others share with us?

### Where are we going?

A music program that fosters meaningful music-doing 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 (such as band, choir, and orchestra) to include popular music styles and non-idiomatic repertoire, as well as cultivating a robust variety of general music courses that receive the emphasis as performance-oriented classes. When possible, music teachers should strive to include new ensembles and experiences that make school music accessible to students unable to participate in traditional 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. Therefore 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.

