Making Music.

Making Connections.

by Allan McMurray

As I write this article I have just encountered the news of the day: brutal attacks have left a stunned America grieving for innocent people who needlessly lost their lives. Tragically, acts of violence seem to be increasing in their ferocity and their frequency. It is in this world in which we find ourselves teaching music. And every day that we go to our schools, we need to remind ourselves that we have a responsibility to recognize and encourage the ways in which our art can help bring students together in a shared, communal spirit. Music has the capacity to expose the depth of our grief and the power to offer hope, and we must exploit that potential.

Music can challenge us to consider new possibilities or remind us of our world. Music can be written for purpose or for pleasure, but music is connected with the human condition and the human spirit. Music lives because we live.

When one imagines how music has served as a reflection of humanity, many examples come to mind. Songs and dances have stirred emotions and set people in motion. Sacred music has served as a tribute to belief and connection with the supernatural. Opera and music theatre have highlighted a myriad of human interactions ranging from the humor and antics of Mozart’s Don Giovanni to the conflict, love, and tragedy of Bernstein’s West Side Story. Music with text creates interplay with artful sounds and artful words, while instrumental music’s evocative potential stirs the imagination with wordless expression. And whether it is a lullaby, a national anthem, a school song, a wedding march, or taps, many meaningful moments in a lifetime are shared with music.

It is not surprising that people are moved by music, but what is more important is that life’s experiences need music. Joy needs music! Celebration needs music! Grief needs music! And even conflict needs music! Yet, in most music rehearsals, it is not music of the heart that is being explored. It is far more common to find rehearsal priorities focused on cleaning technique instead of striving to awaken students to the passion of an art form that could be relevant and meaningful to their shared time together.

The kind of meaning I am talking about is the connection with the world around them in an evocative way.

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hall from the world outside, we are not serving music or our students. When we focus our energy and attention on playing a technically challenging piece of music that requires thinking without feeling, we miss the potential of connecting with music's ageless power. When we avoid bringing the tragedies of today's world into a purposeful rehearsal of a poignant composition that speaks to the conflict—the intensity and the hope that we all feel—we miss connecting our students to the relevancy of our art.

Some wonderful conductors and teachers have commissioned works as living memorials to a student or a teacher. Other commissioned works have provided windows into the emotions following a school shooting, a military conflict, a lost loved one, or an oppressed people. There is no topic, deserving of reflection, for which a piece of music will not deepen that meaning and unite a community of musicians together in a shared enriching, living experience. It is through expressive music that reveals, where the greatest opportunity for teaching art exists. And it is in times of greatest strife, when that experience is needed the most.

Throughout my life, music has been a caring soul mate, listening to my thoughts, welcoming my feelings and encouraging me to seek a connection with the world around me. For me, music has always been relevant because I have sought to find a spiritual window in every composition that has its source in human experience.

It is in this context that I believe every music teacher must ask: “Is there an opportunity in the music I have selected to explore human experience and emotion with my students? Is there music in our folder that can embrace the grief we feel, or the conflict we abhor, or the hope we desire?”

Music with words or music that has been inspired by words offers us the introductory and most obvious opportunity to engage our students in the relationship between descriptive word and the imagination of musical sounds. But just as composers of opera portray characters and events in evocative sound, performers can bring intent to wordless music by seeking a personal, artistic connection with each composition.

As we prepare a score, we digest the composer's compositional language and prepare an informed point of view that transforms the music from organized sound to an artistic, evocative experience. We are supersizing the inspiration of the composer and seeking a personal, passionate connection with that inspiration. This is called “interpretation,” and it is the conductor's creative opportunity to awaken the ensemble to the heart of the music and to awaken the music to the hearts of the ensemble. I believe that every conductor must form a spiritual connection with the music and the ensemble.

Measuring success in the arts is a difficult proposition. Some believe that awards are the reward. Others believe that, in music, the number of students involved measure the quality of the teaching. For me, it matters little what is on the shelves or on the walls of the rehearsal room or how many chairs are on the floor.

For me, success is when music students have learned to use the language of music to express something they feel deeply about and strive to give that gift to the people around them so they can feel it too. Success in music is not about being impressive; it is about being expressive. And success for the music teacher and the music student is not about getting love; it is about giving love. It is the way that music helps the world heal.

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