

A New Life Symphony

By Nathan Dame

Teaching music is about much more than the notes our students see on the page. We not only have to be expert musicians, lecturers, and motivators, we also must complete serve as accountant, counselor, secretary, copier technician, travel agent, and CEO. While I am convinced that music educators have a Ph.D. in multitasking (grading exams while typing an email to a parent and inhaling a sandwich during our lunch "break"), we often forget to take care of one of the most important people in our classroom: ourselves.

Teachers, by the very nature of our profession, possess a servant's heart. So, we muster up the energy even when challenging to serve students, teach curricula, and appease administrators, but at what cost? Music educators often burn both ends of the candle trying to balance administrative tasks with our desire to create musical mountaintop moments. This practice can send us into crisis management, as we attempt to deal with stress, which if not taken care of can lead to bigger problems such as burnout, attrition, and/or physical or emotional troubles.

In order to discuss how to effectively manage time, we must define its importance. In music, time can mean tempo or duration; however, does time (or lack thereof) define our teaching attitudes and perspectives? We frequently exclaim: "there aren't enough hours in the day!" Yet we have the same amount as those before us. One need only look to the past to see how the world has changed. Beethoven began his day with coffee at breakfast, which he prepared with great care using 60 beans per cup, counting them one by one. The next eight hours were spent composing, followed by one

hour eating dinner, a two-hour walk with pencil and music, and four hours reading the newspaper (Currey, 2013).

I know what you're thinking. Beethoven would never last with my thirty kindergarten kids, my non-varsity girls' choir, or my beginning band that can't seem to play concert B-flat in tune. But Beethoven found a way to achieve the coveted work-life balance, through adequate amounts of work, leisure, and introspection. Charles Buxton once said: "you will never "find" time for anything. If you want time, you must make it." So by using Beethoven as our tutor, let's compose a *New Life Symphony*.

Movement 1: *Adagio* (Morning)

The early morning hours offer the ideal opportunity to ready the mind for the day's tasks, challenges, and surprises. We constantly seek external stimulation, and instead of spending a few moments practicing stillness through meditation, prayer, or other means, we peruse social media, send emails, and watch television, while inhaling breakfast and getting ready for school. This lack of introspection can lead to cognitive overload, as our ability to think creatively, plan, solve problems, make decisions, remember information, and control emotions is compromised (Goleman, 2013). Instead of thinking about how we need more time, we must think about how we can find more stillness. The morning "power hour" can be the perfect time. Try waking fifteen minutes earlier than usual to make more time for morning walks, savoring meals, or stress-free commutes. Appreciate the most important meal of the day by eating a protein-packed breakfast, which revs up metabolism, keeps you fuller longer, and provides energy (Ferriss, 2009). Clearing the mind by allowing time for stillness can lead to more joy and gratitude in life, as we become more in touch with our emotions.

While moments of introspection can seem timeless, the school day approaches each day without hesitation. Early morning hours at school can be prime time for productivity with limited distractions and few students. To maximize efficiency, music educators must identify their own energy levels and when they work best. Doing so requires knowledge of one's circadian rhythms, which are controlled by nerve cells in our brain and influence sleep-wake cycles, hormone release, and energy levels (NIGMS, 2014).

The morning hours can be ideal for analytical tasks, as the morning rise in body temperature increases blood flow to the brain (Shellenbarger, 2012). Begin the morning by organizing your life. What are the most important tasks of the day? Once the daily to-do list is compiled, sort by difficulty and block off time to achieve those tasks. One helpful tool is the *Getting Things Done* (GTD) method, where each task is assigned to one of four categories: do it, delegate it, defer it, or drop it (Allen, 2002). Schedulers and planners, paper or electronic, can be beneficial in organizing important tasks and deadlines; however, use technology with caution as it can often be a "time-sucker," leading to procrastination. Instead, time-shift communications by establishing set times to send email, write lesson plans, etc. (Barker, 2014).

The Grand Pause: Taking Breaks

Important e-mails, last-minute visits, and unexpected phone calls often cut into planning, bathroom breaks, lunch, and personal time. Stress levels and attitude can filter into your classroom teaching. Including periodic breaks in your daily schedule can allow for decompression and alter the brain's natural rhythms of attention. Focusing on a task

for no more than 90 minutes and taking strategic 5-10 minute breaks can amount to more efficient teaching during the day (James, 2011).

Movement 2: *Scherzo*: Midday

Around lunchtime, research has proven that alertness slumps as our digestive process saps energy (Shellenbarger, 2012). As energy levels fall, refer back to *GTD*, which stresses creating lists of tasks that can be easily completed in two minutes or less. The gratification found in completing these seemingly insignificant tasks can be psychologically beneficial as it builds efficiency muscles and gets the ball rolling for bigger tasks (Allen, 2012). While energy levels may be low around midday, this can be the perfect time for novel and creative thinking. If you are blessed with time in the middle of the day, creating innovative lessons rather than completing monotonous tasks may be a more efficient use of time. Be open to change throughout the day by being calculated and conscious, flexible, productive, and ready to pivot (Nguyen, 2014).

Being mobile can offset low energy levels, keep you flexible, and be beneficial for your health, as exercise positively affects efficiency. Muscle strength, lung capacity, hand-eye coordination, and joint flexibility peaks between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. (Nunn, 2012). Walking around the hall, visiting the school weight room, doing a few sit-ups, or even cleaning the music room at the end of the day can be valuable, both physically and emotionally.

Movement 3: *Rondo*: Home

By the time you leave school, you hopefully have inspired many students and cultivated relationships. Relationships, both personal and professional, are the foundations of effective leadership. Seek to develop more “we” time and less “me” time

by valuing relationships *outside* of school, whether they be through date nights with a partner, cuddling with your kids, or creating leisure plans. Be careful to avoid drama and cut out people who bring you down, as the more you dwell on the negative, the more obsessed with it you become. In his speech at the 2014 University of Texas Commencement, Naval Admiral William urged: “if you want to change the world, find someone to help you paddle.” By being grateful to those who help you personally and professionally, you then can help others in return and change the world one person at a time.

As the day reaches nigh, relaxing the mind can often be difficult. Keep a notepad near the bed so that when those important to-dos interfere with sleep, you can get things on paper and out of your mind. The importance of sleep cannot be overemphasized. Exhaustion can lead to mistakes in teaching, and if compounded, can lead to depression, aged skin, and forgetfulness (Romero, 2014). Eliminate the electronic “glow” by shutting off electronics or setting them to “do not disturb.” That e-mail or text can wait. Some of the best self-care can be spent in reflection. As you approach the end of your day, remember: “only your best is good enough.” Give thanks by counting your blessings, speaking words of affirmation, and thinking positively.

The Coda: Work Can Wait

Upon her retirement, Cecile Johnson, dear friend to so many and successful Texas elementary music teacher, adopted a philosophy that changed my world and showed me how to truly be grateful. Each day, aim to do at least one thing for yourself, the family, the profession, and one act of kindness for someone else. I keep a gratitude journal to keep myself accountable; you may choose to do the same or reflect at the end of the day.

This allows me to cultivate different parts of my life and appreciate how little things can make a big difference. Your “New Life Symphony” is not truly *new*; instead, it is sharing the melodies and harmonies that structure your own work, adding dynamics to bring excitement to your life, and truly awakening personal and professional relationships so that your actions model a spirit of giving, serve the profession, and inspire the next generation of musicians.

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