Teaching Philosophy

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When I recall the most influential moments in my own education, I see myself in my old high school choir class. I did not think of myself as the most gifted singer – but that was okay. I also happened to be the secretary because of my organizational skills, and my classmate Grace was the dance captain, Eric the president, and everyone knew you could always count on Bella to make you feel better. See, the music classroom was the place where I learned about initiative, responsibility, cooperation, and community. I realized that everyone brought their individual strengths to the table, and yet every day we came together to experience the one-of-a-kind process of making music. Since coming to this realization, my goal has been to give my own students their own memorable and one-of-a-kind experience – a chance to grow and learn more about themselves in every subject, with music at the heart of the journey.

To achieve this mission, it is important to establish *why* exactly music is the heart of the journey. *Why* do we like music, and why is music appreciation important? On top of improving linguistic development and mathematical skills (Brown, 2012), Professor Emeritus of Music Dr. Paul R. Lehman from the University of Michigan suggests that there are five main reasons humans like music. (1) Music is universal, (2) a form of storytelling, (3) a part of our physiology, (4) full of patterns, (5) and uses familiarity to create belonging (Lehman, 2021, p. 60). Therefore, the need for music education is clear, but that does not mean I wish to raise classes full of music majors. Instead, Professor Emeritus of Music Education John Kratus from Michigan State University actually calls for a return to amateurism. Kratus (2019) traces the etymology of the word "amateur" to the Latin word "amator," which means "lover" (p. 32). And so, having a stigmatic distinction between amateur and professional in music classrooms is problematic and undermines the nature of music education. The needs and aspirations of every student are different, and each is valid and must be equally valued in the music classroom. In my very first college practicum experience, I observed 6th grade orchestra students practicing for their first concert. One student struggled to make it through a single phrase, while another was ready to teach the class themself. In my eyes, both students are valuable music lovers who are on different journeys.

Paulo Freire's teachings on Critical Pedagogy also strongly guide my teaching philosophy. Rather than following a language textbook and dispensing information to his students, he posed problems for his students that would bridge the gap between what they understood about the world and the overarching goal of literacy (Abrahams, 2005, p. 3). Education is by no means ready-to-wear, and this applies to music as well. Rather than being a container for knowledge, my students are in a tightly knit partnership where we share our roles as educators and learners. If one of my students struggled to perform a rhythm from sheet music, but I knew they could beatbox like nobody else, then this is a win. According to Critical Pedagogy, this is an opportunity for that student to connect their knowledge of beatboxing to sheet music, and for me to learn more about beatboxing. Rather than teaching that student's innate musicality out of themself, they are encouraged to inquire, challenge, and innovate the ways in which they understand music and the world around them. To students, education becomes freedom.

At times, musicians can be taught into boxes that inhibit them. In pursuit of perfection, it is not uncommon to see "no pain, no gain" mentalities arise in young students as they get increasingly motivated to become high-achieving musicians. I can recall times in my own music

education in which I pushed myself too far. However, English musicologist Anthony Kemp suggests that these unhealthy mentalities of attaining perfection are comparable to self-punishment. On top of this, Kemp emphasizes the danger of not being able to separate your personal identity from musical ability (Pierce, 2012, p. 156). Music is beautiful and I would encourage everybody to study music, but the reality of stress, disappointment, and burnout is also present in the current culture of education, work, and the world. I have personally faced burnout in my own education, and so it is so important to me to look out for its warning signs. It is well known that the music classroom is often a safe space for students, but as music teachers, we must be aware that that same classroom may also become dangerous for the student if we are not careful about the mentalities we encourage.

Building a safe space for students to learn about themselves cannot be done without also encouraging a safe space for students to learn about others. In my own musical upbringing, I have found the debate between what is "real" music to be entirely problematic. In my classroom, I appreciate all genres, styles, and cultures, and welcome studying all traditions of music. As Kate Fitzpatrick (2012) from the University of Michigan puts it, "When a student sees, for instance, that the music that he or she enjoys and values at home or with friends is ignored or degraded by institutions, such as schools, it creates cultural conflict" (p. 54). While it is beneficial to have a wide repertoire of diverse concert music, the *key* to incorporating a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is not fulfilling a diverse performance goal. The key is seizing "teachable moments" — opportunities in which students and teachers can significantly interact with different genres of music, different cultures of music, and understand what music truly looks like to achieve a more informed, complex, and global musical identity (Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 57).

People, like music, are inherently cultural and this must be honored. As Gloria Ladson-Billings said, "But that's just good teaching!" regarding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. As the world and its music develops and changes, music education must also continuously adapt to create a safe, engaging, and modern learning environment. The only way to achieve this is to promote a healthy, diverse, and accessible interaction with music. This means teaching healthy habits and expectations. It means enabling students to use music as a vehicle to access their best self. It means being able to encourage in-class dialogue on how using rap to teach lyricism and rhythm is just as important as using Bach to teach harmony and counterpoint. By allowing students to have such critical experiences, they can grow to become more nuanced thinkers, individuals, and musicians.

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