

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



Getting Back to Where You Once Belonged or, the Musician in the Music Educator

Put a bunch of music educators in the same room and watch and listen to them talk “shop.” It’s something that we’re all prone to do from time to time, and it’s surely an occupational hazard. That said, how often do you engage in a purely musical discussion with a colleague? How many of you continue your pursuit of music as a performer, composer, arranger or conductor outside of a school setting? After all, you were (or, hopefully, still are) like most of us, a musician first and foremost.

I have always thought about that classic riddle, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” and how it applies to us as music educators. At some point in our experience there was likely a music-making moment or possibly even many memorable music-making events that inspired each of us to follow our passion. We know that it’s likely the music in us came first and then came that “teaching” part. Are you with me?

The many music lives

It can be surprising to learn about the ‘other’ musical identities that many of our teacher colleagues live or once lived. Along the way I have known many music educators who taught during the day and then they exercised their musical chops after school. You might be surprised to know that some of our colleagues regularly perform on Broadway or in a community or professional orchestra, local music educators’ wind ensemble, chamber music groups, opera companies, community and professional choruses.

Then there are those among us who continue to teach and then find the time to conduct or to compose and arrange music on the side. A good friend of mine was quite a well-known and wonderful elementary band composer/arranger and the proceeds from his countless publications put both of his children through college! In most cases, these teachers had/have a perfect plan to transition into

retirement in an almost seamless manner. This is surely a “coming full circle” opportunity for those of us who have kept up a different kind of musical identity outside of school.

One of John Lennon’s lyrics that really resonates with me is this one from his song, *Beautiful Boy* in which John sings, “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.” For me as both a musician and an educator, the lyric has some extra added meaning. Life in general (and our career as music educators) takes us in many different directions and, sadly, it can take us away from that musician that was once, first and foremost, who we identified with.

Between family obligations, teaching and just trying to balance life’s unpredictability, the original musician inside of each of us can sometimes be locked away for years. Now, as a retired music educator, I have come back around full circle to that musician inside of me. It’s been a great reawakening of sorts. If I had one piece of advice for all my music educator colleagues it would be this: don’t lose touch with who you are as a musician. It’s what got you to this point in life.

Rekindle your passion

One of the really exciting events I used to look forward to each year when I was a public school music educator was the opportunity to perform and also to listen and watch my colleagues perform in Tri-M and faculty recitals. I have seen and heard all manner of performances by colleagues, including brass, woodwind, percussion, piano, vocal and string solos. Classical music, jazz music, rock, original compositions and more. Heck, I even heard a music educator once play the entire Queen *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a solo on the ukulele (amazing stuff)! He didn’t miss a lick, either!

All the commentary here points to the roots of our individual musical experience

as educators and how important it is to keep that experience as a reminder to ourselves (and others) that music is a lifelong pursuit. It’s one thing to be a music educator but we need to occasionally remind ourselves that it’s okay to demonstrate to others just how important music is to each of us personally. It’s important to exercise our own musical chops now and then and to show our students that it isn’t just about teaching.

An interesting observation: when I was a school district administrator overseeing both music and visual arts education, I quickly discovered that there is often a startlingly different philosophy among arts educators, especially music and visual arts educators. Those of my colleagues who were visual arts educators always seemed to lean toward the perception that being a visual artist is a very singular experience. While visual artists do sometimes collaborate with other visual artists, the pursuit of creating a work of visual art is a very personal experience.

On the other hand, being a musician often requires that we conceptualize the art of making/creating music as more of a social experience that often involves other musicians. I bring this up because it is important to show your students occasionally, that you, their teacher, have an innate musical talent.

Don’t be intimidated or shy about sharing your musical talent with your students. It’s important to let them know who your inner musician is and what it means to you. Simply put, for most of us, the music came first before the teacher. Let your inner musician out now and then. It defines who you are as a music educator.

Remember: “Without music, life would be a mistake.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, (1844-1900), German philosopher, prose poet, cultural critic, philologist, and composer. ||