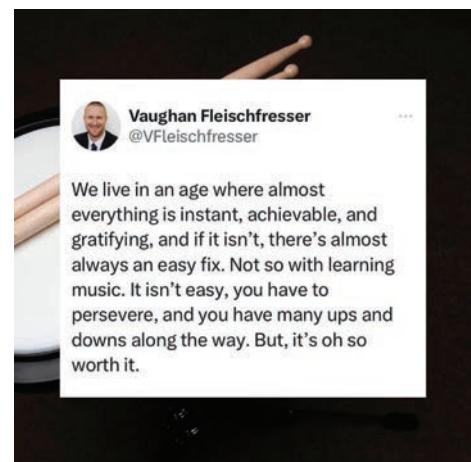
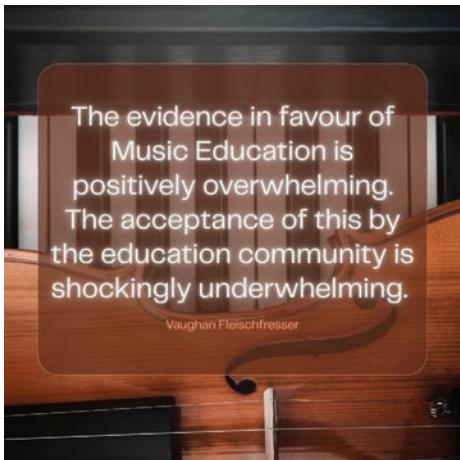


ON INSPIRATION AND INCLUSIVITY: A CONVERSATION WITH VAUGHAN FLEISCHFRESSER



Social media isn't exactly a wellspring of positivity. In fact, anyone who's spent even a few minutes on any one of those platforms is probably chuckling about what a gross understatement that may be. But let's be real; it's not all arguing and doomscrolling. There are those who buck the trend in social media, serving as a source of light and hope for others who stumble upon their thoughts. In the world of music education, Vaughan Fleischfresser is one such figure.

A globetrotting member of the ranks, Fleischfresser first drew mass attention when one of his Tweets went viral. It read as follows:

The Music Department is an alternate universe where pupils are often unrecognizable from who they are outside of it. The shy become confident. The agitated become calm. The lonely become included. The quiet become heard. And the lost become found. Music reveals the real child.

That statement struck a chord with so many, drawing a sizable following for Fleischfresser, and his vitalizing thoughts have become a source of comfort and strength for those in need. Prone to sharing pithy truisms about the importance of our profession, he's developed a seriously devoted fanbase across the globe. Composer Eric Whitacre openly praised Fleischfresser, noting that his social media feed is "an essential reminder of why we do what we do," and so many others have said much the same in their own special way.

Speaking to *School Music News* in late 2025, Fleischfresser was every bit as agreeable as his online profile paints him. What follows is a lightly edited transcript of the conversation that took place between the Editor and Fleischfresser — an illuminating talk with the man behind our favorite motivational memes.

School Music News (SMN): Can you share a little bit about your history?

Vaughan Fleischfresser (VF): I grew up on a farm in rural Australia. I was meant to be a fifth-generation farmer, but my parents wanted me to pursue music so they gave me a saxophone and I just fell in love with it from day one. Very early, when I was 11 or 12, I decided I wanted to be a music teacher when I grew up. So, I pursued that. I [earned] a music degree in Australia, and then an education degree, and I started to work. Then I decided I wanted to travel, so I moved to Scotland for what was meant to just be a nine-month working holiday. I didn't realize it, but my [future] wife lived there, so

I met my wife and lived there for five years.

During that time period I did a master's degree at VanderCook [College of Music] in Chicago, which [was] a summer residential program. So, I lived in Chicago for seven weeks every summer over the course of three years, and then I was back in Scotland during the year, and then I came back to Australia for a couple of years. Then it was back to the UK for another 10 years, and then I just moved back to Australia about a year ago. So yes, I've been all over — Australia, the UK, and America.

SMN: Where is your current teaching focus?

VF: So, the music education system here in Australia is different from North America. Band, choir and orchestra aren't individual subjects in their own right. Essentially, what you have in America with elementary music [or general music] extends on here in Australia for the entire 12 years of education. It's called classroom music.

So, most of us over here work in both classroom music and instrumental music. I teach classroom music, but I also conduct bands and choirs and teach instruments. And I've also had the pleasure of working in universities. So, I've seen the whole student journey, basically from the age of three right through to the end. It's been a broad, versatile experience which I've been very blessed to live, and I'm still enjoying the ride.

SMN: How did you find yourself in the role of a motivational figure on social media?

VF: The whole social media journey came about because of all of the moving that I was doing. I have quite an unusual name, and I've moved around the world a lot. I think to most people I actually appear to be a made-up person. In fact, I once had someone listed as a reference for a job and they were contacted and told that some made-up person was listing them on a CV! So...

When I moved to Scotland for the second time, I just wanted to connect with the local music education community. I connected with people online, and I joined a few campaigns that were trying to save music programs in different parts of the country. There were a lot of challenges in music education in Scotland at that time, so I just wanted to lend my support and share my thoughts.

One thing led to another there in terms of what I was saying, and it seemed to resonate with a lot of other people, so I was asked to go to speak to music teachers around Scot-

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Education is not putting square pegs through square holes ...

land and try to help them to express the benefit of what we do within [the frame of] a broader curriculum/school system.

As I made my way into the community, I just kept conveying these ideas. I think it became a way of sharing the joys of what we see each and every day. I'd go home, and when the dust had settled and I was relaxing, just thinking back on the day, all of these ideas would come out. And I just found myself Tweeting at 8:30 or 9 o'clock at night, sitting on the couch.

The number of people who shared my thoughts grew; having lived in the UK and Australia and North America, I have friends all over the place. So, as they shared these things, the network expanded. Then there was one Tweet in particular that set the wheels in motion, so to speak. And the next thing I knew I was being flown to Canada to talk, and down to England, and back to Australia. Things haven't really been the same since. It's been a wild ride — and so incredibly nice.

Though teaching music is my main love, getting to speak to music teachers and reminding everyone of the importance of what we do is also a real love of mine. Sadly, I don't think the challenges we face are ever going away, so we have to continue to find a way to stoke our own fire, to keep fighting for the cause and to keep influencing the lives of as many people as we can.

SMN: How do you respond to those who question the importance of music education?

VF: I often find myself asking them a lot of questions. I'm a big fan of the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, having encountered it while at VanderCook. One of the habits is to seek first to understand before being understood. So, I love to ask, "What was your music education experience like?" or "What was school music like for you?" Sadly, more often than not, when you really dig down to the root of what these people are thinking, they've had quite a negative music education experience in the past, either something that was completely unengaging, like having to sit and play the same song on the recorder for years, or being told by someone that they should just pretend to sing rather than actually sing.

So that's one thing that I find is often the case: people have had a negative experience themselves. But also, I think it's just a matter of education. I think a lot of these challenges that we face are not going to go away, so we have to just try and get the message and truth across to as many people as possible. I have a lot of people challenge me about what I explain music has to offer. They'll say, "Well, I got the same thing in theater" or "I got the same thing in sport[s]." And I say, "Yes, absolutely." People find many of these things that we create through the environment of music education in other avenues, but for some people it's only in music where they can find it.

If we're after this true sense of inclusivity and this true sense of trying to do what's best for each and every child, then we have to look to all these different ways to accommodate that in music. Education is not putting square pegs

through square holes, you know? We're trying to put multi-faceted shapes through a square hole, and we just have to make that square hole a bit broader so that everyone has a chance to fit and shine.

So, as I said, I often try to dig down to the root of what someone's music education experience was like. Nine times out of ten it wasn't a good one, and I like to assure them that things have changed. And then I often just share my own experience. When I'm speaking to people who work in schools and they're trying to deal with things like this, I tell them to ask their students to share their experiences, ask the parents to share their experiences, and then share their own experience(s). When you have that triangulation of understanding and benefit, things become a bit more compelling.

SMN: In your thinking, where and how does music education fit into the greater present-day scheme of things?

VF: I think that music is for everyone. And while the nature of the music education system in Australia and the UK and America focuses on what I call the holy trinity of band, choir and orchestra, that doesn't necessarily appeal to everyone. I might have a bit of an easier life in our system in Australia, where I have the ability to readily form rock bands and form chamber groups and things of that sort. It's the *Field of Dreams* outlook — I say, "If you build it, they will come." So, if you have a kid who plays the guitar, let's form a group for them to be making music with others. If you have a student who loves GarageBand, let's form a music production group where they can start creating their own music and doing DJ sets at lunch time.

Gone are the days of just catering to those who play the traditional instruments. I think we really need to work to make ourselves appealing to *everyone*. And that can be difficult. How you approach this depends upon the environment in which you work, and we all work in very different environments.

I believe that to stay relevant in today's educational environment, we need to realize this idea of inclusivity, and music being for everyone, and trying to touch as many people [as possible] in a positive way. But also, to go back to those *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, I talk about beginning with the end in mind. What are we wanting our young people to leave our care with? Are we wanting them to be outstanding musicians? Are we wanting them to have a love of music? Are we wanting them to have had a positive experience? Are we wanting them to go on and study music at a university?

I think so many of us as music educators have different visions of what we want people to leave us with. And I think we also have to hold an open and broad concept of what that end might look like, and the fact that success is different for each and every person. So, yes, I strongly believe in this idea of inclusivity, and just having as many people as possible come through our doors in whatever way possible so that we can give them this love of music. ||