Dan Bilawsky – *School Music News* Editor



Comment #371

Considering talent and effort

When filling out interims and report cards in my school, we're required to use canned comments. It's a largely understandable ask, given a desire for consistency in feedback language. We have no shortage of options — more than 550 in my building, at last count — and it's never an issue finding one or more to match each student. Scrolling through the list, virtually every comment resonates at face value. They're all pithy and precise, concrete and clear. Yet there's one that always troubles me: Comment #371, "Student displays exceptional musical talent."

Why, some might ask, would I give that a second thought? Well, there's a lot to unpack. For starters, let's look at the focus point itself. Talent. I've never been fond of the term and its disproportionate association with music. Yes, there are certainly those who are predisposed to pick something up at a higher and deeper level. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with telling parents that their child has a certain aptitude for the subject matter. But why doesn't talent seem to enter the conversation for subjects outside of the arts? "Your son is so talented in science." "Your daughter shows such a talent in math." "The twins are so talented in Spanish." Those statements are rarely (if ever) uttered in discussion or on paper. But if talent is simply defined as an inborn capacity, it stands to reason that you can be talented in any subject. Right?

Unfortunately, as the previous paragraph illustrates, there's a bit of a double standard at play here. I'll boil it down to its essence: if you find success in English, math, history, science, business, technology, language(s) other than your native tongue, and any other subject outside of the arts, you're a hardworking person. But if you shine as a musician or artist of any kind, you're talented. There's an old-joke-turned-meme that goes something like this:

Person 1: How do play so well?
Person 2: I practice.
Person 1: It must be an innate gift handed down from on high.
Person 2: No, it's mostly practice.
Person 1: It's such a mystery why some people have this incredible talent.
Person 2: I practice.

I've encountered and laughed at slight variations of that back and forth more times than I can count, and they're completely on the nose when it comes to how the majority of the world misses something when addressing music. That "something," of course, is effort. Natural endowment and inclination will only take you so far. Effort is necessary to harness and fulfill potential. Everyone gets that in the general discourse, just not when eyeing our specific area.

I have a particularly long view that's gifted countless opportunities to see that truth play out. Teaching 6th through 8th grade band, I oversee a three-year progression in students. And in working with our high school marching band, directing our high school jazz band and serving as the K-12 coordinator for music, I take part in a seven-year stretch of development for a decent number of those same budding musicians.

As the years go by, some things remain largely predictable while others play out in unexpected ways. What slots in the former is fixed on the extremes. Students with some sort of natural inclination who also show great effort tend to shine, make all the honor ensembles and earn all the accolades. And those who don't show much aptitude and don't put in any effort tend to flounder.

There's no great surprise in those outcomes. Things, however, get interesting with a side-by-side viewing of two other categories: students with great potential who put in no effort and those without much of a natural gift who put in serious effort. Early in their music education, those in the first category tend to eclipse their peers in the second. But a funny thing starts to happen over the days, months and years. The gifted-yet-indolent plateau and the average-yet-motivated ascend. Their positions in the hierarchy of musicianship end up flipping by the end of middle school, and sometimes earlier. And the achievement gap between the rising workers and flatlined idle grows — significantly in some cases — during high school.

I can cite numerous examples of wunderkinds undone by apathy and run-of-the-mill musicians driven to the highest levels by sheer force of will. I'm sure many of you can, too. And that's because hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. It's the same in music as it is everywhere else. We can meaningfully and accurately tag someone with a comment like "Student displays exceptional musical talent"—despite my clear reservations, I've used it here and there—but we can't pretend that a predisposition is the be all and end all. It's only an advantage, and one to be taken or squandered.

When I sit in the audience at the NYSSMA® All-State Concerts in Rochester and enthusiastically applaud the students who've earned their place on the stage, I won't be clapping for talent. I'll be praising effort — the hard work given by the naturals and less inclined alike, families who put in the extra time to facilitate the opportunity on so many levels, teachers who give their all in helping and encouraging those students, and communities that cultivate them. I hope you'll join me, showing that appreciation for what really matters. ‖

(Editor's Postscript: Putting thoughts to paper on this subject spurred me on to request that the wording for Comment #371 be changed from "Student displays exceptional musical talent" to "Student displays exceptional musical potential." The request was granted without question.)