
“Realities of Music Teaching: A Conversation”

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A Response

By

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Each year as part of the application interview for the music education degree at my institution, high school seniors write a short essay in response to the question: Why have you chosen to pursue a career in music education? Phrases such as “I love music,” “it’s my passion,” and “I can’t think of anything better than making music every day of my life” fill these essays. The students also talk about “making a difference,” “sharing their passion for music with others,” and “passing on to kids what their teachers gave to them.” I would guess that many of us embarked upon our music teaching career for similar reasons. Thoughts of uncooperative students, angry parents, indifferent administrators, insufficient resources, meager compensation, too little time, unproductive meetings, and excessive paperwork were nowhere to be found in our initial idealistic concept of music teaching.

My mother was a jazz pianist who traveled with territory bands throughout the Midwest during the 1930’s and 1940’s. She raised me to believe that there were no

barriers to my future. Highly idealistic and optimistic, I set out to be a high school band director but was cautioned by *my* high school band director that I would never be accepted, let alone respected, in that almost exclusively male profession. The first serious encounter with reality came when I learned that women weren't allowed to participate in marching band at my university, even though college marching band experience was important to my future career. Despite the challenges, or perhaps because of them, I was able to fulfill my dream and spend fifteen very rewarding years teaching instrumental music in the public schools. Many of the realities that Estelle enumerates such as a modest salary, heavy workload, and inadequate instructional time and resources were present, yet the personal satisfaction of working with young people and seeing them grow as musicians and human beings far outweighed the challenges. To be perfectly honest, I must admit that there was also great satisfaction in "proving" that I could do the job. In her chapter, Estelle speaks to women teachers about the importance of drawing boundaries regarding what can and cannot be done for others. She encourages us to give ourselves permission to say "No, I cannot do that." She refers specifically to service in this passage, attributing the difficulty women have in saying no to having been socialized to help others. I sense that women who work in professions dominated by males also may feel a great deal of internal and external pressure to prove their worth and do not set realistic boundaries on their workloads because they fear that they will be viewed as weak or incompetent.

My career path followed the hierarchical model Estelle outlines. After fifteen years as a teacher and department chair in the public schools, I went on to college teaching and administration, first as Director of Jazz Studies at Purdue University,

another interesting venture into a male-dominated profession. Subsequently, I worked as a fine arts supervisor for a large school district and am currently a music education professor. Along the way, I married and my husband and I have two young boys. Our reality includes juggling a two-career household and raising children.

As I work with pre-service music teachers, I often grapple with the question of how much of my personal reality to share with my students. I knew little of my teacher's lives and struggles and am often reticent to talk about mine. I have learned though, that students, particularly women, want and probably need to know. Several years ago one of my students asked if she could go with me when I conducted a district honor band. She went on to say that she had never seen a woman rehearse a high school band; the observations of men didn't provide the model that she was seeking. I quickly realized that part of my responsibility was to open every aspect of my professional life to my students, so that they could see and feel what it was like to teach instrumental music.

I have also discovered that young people embarking on careers as music educators are concerned about more than whether they are adequately prepared to teach. I have had many music education students stop by my office with the future on their minds. They are looking for advice about how their personal lives might take shape given their choice to embark upon a career as an instrumental music teacher. The conversation often begins with "Can I ask you something that isn't really related to class?" The subsequent questions range from "How did you and your husband find jobs in the same place?" or "Whose career comes first, his or yours?" to much more personal questions like "Do you regret not having children when you were younger?" They want to know if I am happy,

if my life is fulfilling, if I am able to successfully balance my professional and personal life.

I am reminded of Vernon Howard's discussion of learning by example (Howard, 1992). We are "examples" of music educators for our students. Specifically, I am an example of a woman with a career in instrumental music and jazz education, who is married with children. Among the faculty in my department various other specific and unique examples exist. We can choose to allow students to learn what they will through observation. Or by engaging in open dialogue about the realities of our lives as music teachers we can clarify, refer to, and enhance the example. Howard states "One of the aims of instruction in any field is to enable the learner to distinguish symptom from substance: to see the difference between the romantic social image and the reality that lies behind it" (Howard, 1992, p. 127). To enable young teachers to cope with the actualities of music teaching and live rewarding lives as music teachers, we must help them distinguish symptom from substance. To this end, it may be necessary to be more forthcoming about our personal struggles and coping mechanisms. Those carrying on the profession need to know that they are not alone in the struggle; others have encountered similar challenges before them.

Reference

Howard, V.A. (1992). *Learning by All Means: Lessons from the arts*. New York: Peter Land Publishing, Inc.