

# **Summation and reflection: my music education and conducting**

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A REPORT

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to present my teaching philosophy, a lesson plan driven by the goals from the National Standards for Music as applied to the lesson, what the ensemble learned, the instructional strategies I used, what modifications I made, and a reflection of my growth and development as a music educator and conductor . Submitted with this report is a video presentation of a reading session, rehearsal, and performance of “Celebration of Life” by Australian composer Ralph Hultgren. This project was completed as a part of the requirements to meet the Master of Music degree, “Music Education Master’s Final Report” course at Kansas State University.

As I reflect on the course of my studies in this Master’s program at Kansas State, I realize the profound impact my experiences have had on how I teach now compared to how I began my professional career in music education and conducting. This impact is most noticeable in my thought processes. I consider the ensemble’s instrumentation and ability, their background, and the way they learn, in-depth score study, and how I now design the rehearsal for greater efficiency.

In my teaching, I strive to consistently share my passion for music and teaching while making everything I do for and about my students. The foundation of my philosophy of music education is “do your best, learn something, and most importantly, have fun.” I believe in music for everyone.

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my children Katie (1993-2006) and Ben, and to Tom Sullivan. I am who I am because of you.

## **Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy**

Music is everywhere and affects us all in different ways. It can consume us. Music education should be accessible to everyone. In organized education it must start in the primary years and continue to be available to students of any age. I believe music education needs to be provided through a comprehensive program which should include history of music of multiple genres, music theory, arranging and composing, musicianship, instrumental and vocal rehearsals and performances, rehearsal techniques and conducting, music technology, music therapy, and guidance and preparation for careers in music. Any educational environment should always be about the students first. Ideally, music education of this nature would be available worldwide.

My primary goal in the classroom is to create a conducive learning environment for the students. Instructional goals must present a balance of what I want them to learn and the rationale behind such learning, coupled with the feelings, emotions and perceptions that might be engendered by the music for all of us. This interaction between us and the music will allow the students to understand what I am asking them to do. I believe in challenging the musicians to do and be their best, to be prepared, to learn something each day, and to have fun. This philosophy allows me to build a comprehensive music program from the ground up, if necessary, through my own passion and experiences as a student musician and music educator. It permits me to create an environment which is inviting, educational, organized, and fun. I share with my ensembles the interaction between the music itself, the composer, my students, their skill and instrumentation, and the relationship between us and the audience.

My philosophy maintains my focus through organization, training, and planning of the rehearsal environment from my personal experiences, particularly from the time I began as a music educator until the present. Efficiency and efficacy of rehearsal is as essential to quality

instruction and time management in the music classroom as it is to any educational environment. I believe in thoroughly preparing for each rehearsal by diligent study of the scores I will be conducting. Dr. Frederick Fennell was often heard to comment, “Never get onto the podium without being prepared, knowing the ensemble, and knowing what you want from them,” (F. Fennell, personal communication, March 1990). Playing the music should comprise the major part of a rehearsal period, with explanatory comments by the conductor kept brief and used as enhancements to the students’ understanding of the background and purpose of the piece being learned. “Quality planning increases chances for quality rehearsals,” (Tracz, 2018). Music education should meet the needs of all musicians and allow them to develop their creativity. Like my mentors, I continue to practice, rehearse, and perform. I further my training as a musician, performer, conductor, adjudicator, and clinician through independent research, collaboration, and professional development. I have a passion for music and teaching and believe that I am a lifelong learner. I believe it takes a village to raise a musician, and that through ongoing support of parents, educators, and administrators any student can succeed to the best of his or her ability. That is why I chose this profession and believe in the concept of music for everyone.

### **How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching**

This philosophy is reflected in the rehearsal techniques I utilize in the lesson I present. These rehearsal techniques are: the recognition of the skill and instrumentation of the ensemble, the selection of the piece to be performed based upon analysis of the skill and instrumentation of the ensemble and the relationship between myself and the musicians, in-depth score study, the background of the piece and the composer, parts of the initial reading session with the ensemble,



succinctly addressing sections of the piece that might be problematic or challenging, parts of subsequent rehearsals, and the final performance.

My rehearsal techniques are deliberately chosen to help all students understand basic musicianship, which is at the core of my philosophy. To gain a clear understanding of what it is to rehearse any musical selection, the students must be presented with a cohesive and consistent procedure. For example, students need to be able to play the right note, at the right time, in the right way. Nowak and Nowak (2002) addressed such issues:

If a problem occurs during a rehearsal, we must be able to determine what is causing the problem and help the musicians overcome their difficulties with a workable solution.

The solution should include both the technical and the expressive aspects of the problem.

The problem usually occurs due to lack of understanding of what the music is meant to say (p.1).

This is achieved during our rehearsals. My lesson plans speak to that purpose.

## Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan

### Lesson Title

- “Celebration of Life” by Ralph Hultgren (1995)

### National Standards for Music Education (NAFME, 2014)

- **Creating**
  - MU:Cr3.1.E.IIIa
    - Evaluate and refine varied draft musical works based on appropriate criteria, including the extent to which they address identified purposes and contexts.
- **Responding**
  - MU:Re7.1.E.Ia
    - Apply criteria to select music for specified purposes, supporting choices by citing characteristics found in the music and connections to interest, purpose, and context.
  - MU:Re7.2.E.Ia
    - Explain how the analysis of passages and understanding the way the elements of music are manipulated inform the response to music.
  - MU:Re7.2.E.IIa
    - Explain how the analysis of structures and contexts inform the response to music.
- **Performing**
  - MU:Pr5.3.E.IIIa

- Develop, apply, and refine appropriate rehearsal strategies to address individual and ensemble challenges in a varied repertoire of music.
- MU:Pr6.1.E.IIIb
  - Demonstrate an ability to connect with the audience members before and during the process of engaging with and responding to them through prepared and improvised performances.

### **Essential Questions**

- **Creating**
  - How do musicians improve the quality of their creative work?
  - When is creative work ready to share?
- **Responding**
  - How do individuals choose music to experience?
  - How does understanding the structure and context of the music influence a response?
- **Performing**
  - How do musicians improve the quality of their performance?
  - When is a performance judged ready to present?
  - How do context and the manner in which musical work is presented influence audience response?

## Goals

- **Creating**
  - Musicians will evaluate the structure of a piece to be performed, refine their work based on their own knowledge, skill level, and established criteria and demonstrate persistent approach to the work
- **Responding**
  - Musicians response to the music will be informed by their understanding of the context of the piece and the composers intent including and how the elements of the piece reflect that intent
- **Performing**
  - Musicians will judge their performance of the piece based on specific criteria which reflect setting, cultural response, and structure

## Objectives

- **Creating**
  - Musicians will prepare for reading the piece by marking important components of the work such as time signatures, key signatures, etc.
  - Musicians will mark their individual part for problematic passages, or any other places as pointed out by the conductor
  - Musicians will include all such notes in subsequent rehearsals and individual practice
- **Responding**
  - Musicians will attend to balance and blend in rehearsal by actively listening to each other

- Musicians will understand that any section with the melodic line will need to be played out while non melodic phrases are played softer
- **Performing**
  - Musicians will and refine personal and ensemble performance, in collaboration with other
  - Musicians will perform expressively, with appropriate technical accuracy, and in a manner appropriate to the audience and context.

### **Audience**

- Victor Valley College Symphonic Band

### **Materials**

- Instrument
- Pencil
- Music: “Celebration of Life” by Ralph Hultgren

### **Activities**

- Introduce Ralph Hultgren and “Celebration of Life” (Hultgren, 1995)
- Read through selection
  - Comments about read through
    - Listen for places do not allow it to tend to drag
    - Ensemble at comfortable tempo at measure 117
    - Dynamic contrasts: come down more so you have some place to go
- Rehearse sections
  - 16<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> note rhythm clarity. Make clean measure 9
  - Listen. Blend/Balance measure 21

- More crescendo leading into measure 41
  - Tempo change, comfort level leading into accelerando at 76
  - Listen to the intervals soft section air support
  - Upper woodwinds clarity measure 98
  - More dynamic contrast at 154
- Read through selection (not included)
  - Perform selection

### **Review**

- At the conclusion of each rehearsal and at our dress rehearsal with the ensemble, I asked if there was anything that needed clarification. Any concerns were clarified

### **Assessment**

- Performance of “Celebration of Life” (Hultgren, 1995)

### **Reflection of Lesson Plan**

My goals were to introduce to the students a contemporary composer and the historical perspective that influenced his composition. The intent is for the students to gain experience in sight-reading, rehearsal techniques, and performance of challenging material.

The students learned that personal experience and historical events can have a significant effect on a composer’s creativity. They also learned that understanding the context of a piece can influence the way a piece is performed by the ensemble.

I made an in-depth study of the score, based in part upon past interviews with the composer himself and previous experience with the piece. I analyzed the piece for compatibility with the musicians’ skill level and musicianship, and the instrumentation of the ensemble. I introduced the composer and the background of the work. I conducted the initial read-through

and subsequent rehearsals using effective and efficient rehearsal techniques and followed the final rehearsal by conducting the formal performance.

I will continue to adjust instruction moving forward by continuing the following: in-depth score study of all pieces I select, conduct effective and efficient rehearsals, ask the essential questions at the beginning of each rehearsal, including the dress rehearsal, take time to play a recording of a piece, if available, at the beginning of the first rehearsal, having the musicians internalize what they hear, have a discussion with the musicians about their thoughts and impressions, and then give them the composer's actual rationale for the composition, for comparison, and finally, play the recording one more time, and then the ensemble will have the first reading. Subsequent rehearsals would no longer require me to explain background and context, and rehearsals would be able to proceed in an orderly manner.

This instruction expanded my thinking and enhanced my teaching practice by allowing me to have a concrete foundation with the NAFME standards as the music education curriculum to follow and to continue to understand more in-depth relationship with the music, the composer, and the ensemble.

## Chapter 3 - Reflections

It is routine for me to have my rehearsal environment clean, organized, set up, and ready for the musicians when they enter the room. I have found that attention to this detail allows me to focus on the rest of my rehearsal preparation without distraction. Once my environment is set, I begin the process of selecting pieces for the ensemble to play.

The criteria I use for my choices are the skill level of the ensemble and the instrumentation available. Sometimes I select pieces to fit a theme. Alternatively, I choose contrasting selections from different genres in order to educate and showcase the ensemble and to provide more variety for the audience and the performers. When it comes to the selection of pieces, Dr. Frank Battisti suggests that

Conductors back off on the technical aspects of pieces and select works that emphasize emotion and expression. There are many well-written works out there that are not technical exercises but are nevertheless complicated to play because they are so emotionally and musically demanding. "Follow the River" and "Novena" by James Swearingen are not difficult in terms of the notes themselves, but to play them with the emotional intent that Swearingen envisions is a greater challenge than one might suppose. In selecting less technical but more evocative pieces, the conductor can return to being a conductor and allow both himself/herself and the ensemble to attend to the expressive nature of the pieces and so bring that communication to the audience (F. Battisti, personal communication, March 2004).

I begin my preparation for rehearsal by studying the scores and researching the composer and the background of the selections. I analyze the structure of each piece, including such features as time and key signatures, tempo changes, themes, transitions, phrases, dynamics,



articulations, repeated sections, and passages that may potentially be challenging to the entire ensemble or to specific sections of the ensemble. In his book *On Becoming a Conductor*, Battisti points out that “conductors, regardless of the study procedure used, all have the same objective: to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the score’s content and a clear expressive conception of the work’s meaning and character” (Battisti, 2007, p. 35). I have found both Battisti’s quote and the “Tracz Grid,” developed by Dr. Frank Tracz of Kansas State University, to be useful in organizing my score study.

I create an outline of the structure of my rehearsal. The initial rehearsal begins with a listening section, a dialogue with the musicians about the feelings evoked by the recording and their interpretation of what they heard. It is followed by an explanation of the background and rationale for the piece. This allows me to clarify for them the intent of the composer and what the music requires. This discussion is followed by a second listening section, and the first read-through. I then break down the rehearsal of the piece into sections and focus on the more difficult passages or phrases individually before continuing and conclude with another reading. The purpose of the outline is to keep me in focus so that I use the rehearsal time more efficiently and effectively. This works particularly well with my ensembles because I am so familiar with the musicians.

It is essential for me to build a relationship with my musicians, to know and understand them well so that I can build an environment that is positive, nurturing, and safe. This relationship is key for students’ learning. In a conversation with Frank Battisti, he said, “The rehearsal room should be a place where students are involved in collaborating and discovering, creating, re-creating and growing in their understanding, appreciation and love for the art of music” (F. Battisti, personal communication, March, 2004). As with any educational

environment, when students feel safe and cared for and treated like a family, they become more willing to risk making mistakes. If the musicians understand that doing the best they can is of value, there is joy in the learning process. As a family, we can work and enjoy making music together. The rehearsal plan provides structure not only for me, but for the musicians as well, and clarifies the expectations for each session.

In his History and Philosophy of Music Education class at Kansas State University, Dr. Philip Payne led a discussion on why music should be a part of a child's educational life. "Why music? Not what is instructionally necessary, but what is it about music that makes our students better?" (Payne, 2018). Music makes students better by teaching them organization and structure. It provides the opportunity to be creative and to express themselves. It also makes them better because they must learn to collaborate to achieve a common goal. I want to offer my classes not only what is instructionally necessary, but a deeper ownership of their musical experience.

I believe my time in the Master of Music summer program at Kansas State University has changed me in several ways. I am more organized in my approach to rehearsals. My rehearsal sessions have become more effective and efficient. I talk less but say more. I have a better understanding of the process and organization of writing reports, assignments, and research. I have a better understanding of the analysis of music, music education, score study and conducting. The courses I have taken have been immediately applicable to my classroom.

When I arrived at Kansas State University for my first summer session, I was welcomed with a sense of family. My professors greeted me with the question, "How can we help you to be successful?" They are genuinely interested in student understanding and success. The students come first with them. They are intelligent, knowledgeable, funny, and willing to do

whatever it takes to be helpful. The sense of family that they bring to their teaching has influenced me to be the same with my classes. I have applied the same approach in building relationships with students and have seen them blossom and grow as human beings and musicians.

I am privileged and fortunate to be a musician, music educator, adjudicator, and clinician. I consider myself to be the luckiest of people. Lowell Mason, considered to be the founder of music education in this country, believed that music is “primarily a force for the upbuilding of humanity” (Scanlon, 1942, p. 24-70). What makes music education so inspiring for me is that I am always a student, always learning new things. I get to wake up every morning and go teach music to students of all ages. We get to create and learn music together. An often-quoted saying, attributed to Mark Twain, that I live by and share with my students is: “If you love what you do, you will never work another day in your life” (Twain, n.d.).

I am grateful to all my music professors, colleagues, composers, conductors, and musicians who have laid the foundation. They have dedicated and sacrificed time with their families to teach and guide me. They have instilled in me the love of music and of teaching music to others. They have encouraged me to always strive to be and do my best, to learn something, and to have fun. I hope that I can be as effective as those before me in this wonderful profession of music education.

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