

PRINCIPAL THEMES

Chris Trinidad



ADVENTURES IN TEACHING: REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST YEAR [AND THE YEAR BEFORE]

"Those who can, teach. Those who can't, do other things."

Alright, so I twisted the famously coined adage regarding the popular theory that musicians who are not able to forge a career for themselves as professionals turn to music education as a fallback position. Certainly I had that idea in my head going through my undergrad in jazz studies.

Preface

Early in the fourth year of my jazz studies training, I had run into a colleague who had mentioned that a mutual friend of ours had been admitted into the music education program at a local university in spite of missing a couple of prerequisite courses. Because I was in a different stream, I had not taken those courses either. That night, I did some serious thinking about whether or not a career shift into music education would be likely. What were the turning points?

I realized that the music industry was in a state of extreme flux given the rise of technology and the lack of a scene in which to support creative musicians. I was also determined to sidestep the fight between those who believed that music should be free and those who argued that music should continue to be consumed and paid for like any other commodity.

I was tired of constantly being on the road and having relationships breakdown as a result of extended periods away from "home." As a result of working several contracts as a musician and entertainer with cruise lines, I came to the conclusion that a permanent "life on the seas" carried with it little sense of adventure or challenge and that those patterns of predictability would infect my soul, hence, rendering it dull, useless and uncreative. After all, who could get sick of getting paid for playing music, the free room and board, the endless sunshine, the white sand beaches, the clear blue seas and all that free time to write music? I needed a change and I longed for stability and permanency, two things I would not have found had I continued with that lifestyle.

After some intensive soul searching, I deduced that I was and am a lifelong learner, an admirer and lover of knowledge - any kind of knowledge. I needed to feel that I had an impact and influence on others through music. Teaching high school would provide me the opportunity to work towards reaching my goals. With steady income, I could realize my artistic goals by continuing to record and produce creative discs and give them away if I should so desire. By being permanently in one place, I could concentrate on developing [and in some cases redeveloping] the various personal and professional relationships in my life. I knew that being a music educator would be a rewarding profession given the malleability of curriculum implementation [in BC anyways] and would allow me to remain a creative musician albeit applying myself in a slightly different fashion. So therein lays the key to educating a new generation to the wonders of all different kinds of music and to be more cognizant of what they are listening to. Did I already mention that I enjoyed challenges?

Armed with the aim and the reasons, I inquired into the possibility of entering a music education program and the results were promising. With this knowledge, I did my due diligence and found out that if I applied I would probably have an equal chance of being accepted despite not having the prerequisite course. Following graduation, I worked another cruise line contract in order to help finance my teacher education. I remember the day I received word that I had been accepted into the program. I was notified via email and subsequently registered for my courses online in the middle of the cerulean Caribbean Sea, cruising at eighteen knots.

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Teacher Education

The teacher education program for me was an intensive twelve month blitz of theory, practicality, fun, work and play. After a number of theory and methods courses, I embarked on my practicum - an exciting time in any educator's life. Here, I put into practice what I had learned with the guidance of some very wonderful people. I was fortunate to have two wonderful sponsors. One is an experienced instrumental music educator and the other a younger and equally passionate choral specialist. From the more experienced one, I learned about patience, the importance of the development of musicianship in student-musicians, and probably most importantly, taking things in stride. I drew from the choral specialist the constant quest for excellence, intensity of approach, creativity and a relentless open and caring attitude toward nurturing student-musicians.

Through a website, I found out that an opening at a local private school was available for someone willing to build an entire program from the ground up. That weekend, I travelled as a chaperone with my practicum school to an out of town music festival and lo and behold, I ran into my former high school band teacher. Over dinner, I mentioned the fact that I was applying for this position and he was more than happy to put in a good word for me. I applied for the position and out of approximately fifty applicants I was the lucky duck who got the job.

Returning from practicum, most student-teachers grumbled at the thought of having to go back indoors with the beautiful sunshine outside taunting them as they took in more theory. I relished at the opportunity to continue learning even more strategies and ideas especially knowing that I would be gainfully employed in the fall, but still, the thought of an international jazz festival happening simultaneously and me being unable to attend was a little tough to swallow.

I finished the program. Apart from the theory and practice, probably the most useful part of the program was how it enabled me to be self-analytical and self-reflective. It set me up with the tools necessary to nurture my own development. It allowed me to make the necessary "course corrections" to stay on the path and to improve as a music educator.

A few days before school was to commence, I gave myself an ultimatum. The plan was to have achievable yet challenging goals in mind for the year and since this was my first year setting up a program from scratch, I had to be deliberate about meeting those goals by taking baby steps, one day at a time. I figured that the idea was to plan weekly and have relaxed deadlines to meet those goals. On a personal level, I was determined to maintain a separate life where I could concentrate on maintaining relationships, artistic and professional endeavours, and my health.

Getting Started

I had the advantage of coming to a school where no music program was in place. Having gone through a rigorous regimented excellence-oriented jazz studies program that emphasized sight reading, ear training and instrumental or vocal proficiency, I wanted to build my program that had its basis in practical, proficient musicianship. This way, whatever theory, concepts or warm-up exercises I would teach would have direct relevance to repertoire we would run through for the year. I wanted to enable my student-musicians the same way that my education equipped me with the necessary tools to maintain sustainability. In other words, the tools that I wanted to give them would be the tools that they would use to overcome the musical challenges they would have to face.

To add to this plate, I also took on the responsibility of teaching two junior English courses in addition to my music load in order to meet the full time position. I was expecting to be teaching another subject area and I was looking forward to the challenge. I had been given a grade eight beginner band, an "intermediate" band consisting of grades nine to twelve, an unauditioned concert choir with a total eleven members and a jazz choir whose composition was yet to be determined, but was credited class offered off the school timetable. I had to arrange for auditions.

The first day I had the audition sheet up, a grand total of five people were signed up. I continued to spread the word using the school public address system. Luckily for me, I had a number of guys sign up and included amongst them was a badminton enthusiast and a web designer. What does this have to do with jazz choir?

Recruiting Tactics

As athletically-oriented the school was, there was no badminton program. Upon mention that this badminton enthusiast was interested in forming a team, I jumped at a recruiting opportunity. I struck a deal: if he was able to corral three other guys to join the choir, then I would

agree to sponsor the team. I had not played badminton in nearly ten years, but I took it as an opportunity to at least get some regular exercise. The athletic director for the school agreed to pay for a coaching clinic and my girlfriend and I joined a recreational league where players more than twice, or in some cases three times, my age kick my butt on a regular basis. Now, I love badminton and continually strive to better my own personal game. More than that, it balances my drive in the music room with something different.

The web designer, in addition to being an incredible tenor, showed me his work and I was agreeably impressed. He agreed to produce the website that would continually keep our school community in touch with what we were doing and are trying to produce in the music room. By the way, you can find it at <http://music.stmc.bc.ca>. By advertising the website around the school, word quickly spread of the things we were doing with music and more students wanted to come on board.

Our school teachers work six out of eight blocks with one block for lunch and one block for internal coverage. On the opportunities where I have had the privilege of covering for another teacher, I used it as an opportunity to talk about the music program and recruit! In keeping with the idea that music is available to anyone, I have taken in stu-



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dents who have had variable experiences with music. The only condition was that they were willing to work hard. With their efforts in place, it was my job to turn them into student-musicians.

It appears though that nothing beats one-on-one word of mouth recruiting. I got to know students outside of the music program through teaching junior English [a third of whom I successfully recruited into my band program] and "hanging-out" at lunch. I open the music room for lunch and have my microwave available so that students do not have to wait in line in the cafeteria. Other students got wind of this and started hanging about in the music room. From day one, I wanted the music room to be a safe haven where students and student-musicians alike can be themselves and relax before they have to go to ... math class.

A Program They Could Call Their Own

In my opinion, it was necessary for my student-musicians to feel a sense of responsibility and to share in the joys and the growing pains

that would be associated with the upstart of a program. I certainly had my expectations of excellence and professionalism and they were meeting them. But for student-musicians to feel connected to the program, as if they had invested more than just their time and talent, I felt it necessary to consult them on many matters. In particular, I gave them the opportunity to pick their own performance attire.

Having their own gear along with giving each ensemble a name promoted a sense of distinction and identity above the multiplicity of activities going on in the school. When the student-musicians heard the name of their ensemble over the public address system commemorating their return from a successful festival trip, they felt a sense of pride knowing that they belong to something important.

When it came time to prepare for festival season, I shared with them the opportunity to pick pieces [pre-selected by me, of course!] which seemed to strike them in a certain way. I also deemed it particularly important that they be exposed to music from different genres and periods within their capabilities so that they would experience success.

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With a large number of student-musicians with Filipino backgrounds in the choir, I arranged a tune that I had previously recorded and coupled it with Tagalog lyrics. This, I dedicated to my students.

I also hold an open door communication policy such that student-musicians are free to approach me about concerns and in turn, I can do the same with them. Learning how to nurture peer, personal, and professional relationships was something that I wanted to teach them through the music program and it is hopefully something that they can transfer into their own lives.

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Equally important was communication between myself and my students' parents. We keep the lines open by sending home monthly newsletters as well as keeping in touch via the website and email. I am blessed to have wonderful parents supportive of the program that we are trying to build and to that end, they have started a support group as a division of the larger school parents association. To date, they have helped with transportation, fundraising and in many other facets. This, in turn, allowed us to concentrate completely on the music.

Expert Opinions

Having come from a jazz studies background, I felt that it was not only for the student-musicians' benefit that I bring in master conductors and teachers who specialize in instrumental and choral ensembles to work with them, but that seeing them in action would further enrich my own teaching methods and tools. To this end, I organized a retreat in November before our Christmas concert and in April before our Festival field trip to rejuvenate and give us additional ideas about our approach and the pieces that we were to perform. I think more importantly, since the student-musicians span a number of grade levels and might generally associate with other groups of friends, it was a time for them to bond and to grow together as a group. Perhaps the real reason is that they got free pizza and pop.

The Tests

Our first major event was our "Celebration of the Arts" evening which we held at a local theatre. In consultation with the student-musicians, we decided that we wanted to include the drama, studio art, and the

unique guitar building program in addition to our band and choirs. It was a resounding success having sold out the theatre and having made an impression with the administration and board of directors.

Our festival field trip went without a hitch and I think that the key was our team preparation. The student-musicians made sure that they knew their music and I made sure that all the scheduling was together. I remember in particular that during the whole trip, it seemed as if I was in a perpetual state of calm. The student-musicians and I talked about making sure that we enjoyed ourselves and I ran particular scenarios with them about what constituted infringing each other's enjoyment. I trusted them and they trusted in me.

Our year end closer "Celebration of the Arts II" included the choirs of our elementary feeder schools. As much as it was about giving them an opportunity to share the stage with us, the strategy was really two-fold. Firstly, it showed the elementary student-musicians the kinds of things we were doing and accomplishing at the secondary level. Also, I wanted to solidify the relationships with the elementary music teachers. We ended the evening with a massed choral piece that showcased the talents of all involved.

There were also the tests of resolve, the tests of time management, and the tests of relationship maintenance, among many others. I could not have done it without a support network of people. I watched the experienced teachers at the school deal with things, their light-hearted nature, their quick wit and their joie de vivre. I figured that if they lasted this long in the profession, it was because of those qualities and I wanted to instil in myself those attributes. One teacher in particular mentioned to me that I should aim to control what I can, and what I cannot, I must leave be. I am lucky to have a girlfriend whose stability and willingness to listen allowed me to get through the tougher times. I am also lucky to have a mom who allows me to come over and eat dinner when I am too tired to cook for myself.

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When the going gets tough, I am also reminded that there are no mistakes or problems, only opportunities for excellence. When things go wrong, who cares? It really becomes a shift in mindset. At the end of the day, I remind myself of what is really important in my life: badminton ... just kidding.

The Reasons Revisited

Given the stable income, I am now able to produce music that makes

me happy. I can make records, take my time with them, duplicate them and give them away for free. Given the stability of remaining in one place. I have been able to concentrate on developing meaningful relationships. Finally, given my love of knowledge, this first year has been an incredible learning experience. It is true that student-musicians can teach the teachers so much about those humanistic virtues of patience, understanding, kindness, tolerance, and humility. Perhaps the greatest gift for me is letting them in on the fact that I am still continuing to learn. We laugh collectively when I make a mistake, and believe me that it really is okay to make a mistake in the classroom. I think that it allows us as teachers to be human and it is important for the student-musicians to see us as one. Learning can be an equal exchange if we let it be.

As this first year draws to a close, and in concluding this reflection, I am reminded that though I am new to this profession many people seem to think that teaching is something that just about anyone can do. The above quotation aims to modify the thinking and mindset of people who attack our profession or invalidate music education without any

regard for the kind of work that we do or the effect that we have with our students. My reason for writing this was not to show off much of what I have done or what I aim to do. My motive is so that we can take pride in the fact that each day we have the possibility of enacting positive changes in the lives of those we teach through our work and, in the process, meet our artistic goals through music education.

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