

Transcending the ordinary through the search for learning and the art of music-making

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The following is a speech I wrote several years ago for our campus convocation. It has little to do with multi-cultural music, but a lot to do with our journey as musicians and trying to define how we communicate our art. Finding our path in life is never easy but the journey itself can be the most rewarding.

Teaching at the University level was not something that I had in mind when I was younger. When I think back, thoughts of being a pharmacist or a sports broadcaster were also part of my dreams. But throughout my life, my main goal was always to become a professional trumpet player. As a young student, I spent hours each day practicing the trumpet.

At age 11, I began spending 8 weeks of every summer at the National Music Camp in Interlochen, Michigan. In addition, my parents took the time to drive me an hour and a half each way to Mankato State University for my weekly trumpet lessons. My senior year of high school I attended and graduated from the Interlochen Arts Academy, a private high school for young artists.

But it was during that year that my trumpet playing began to change. I was at the point where I was playing in ensembles and practicing nearly 6 hours out of every day. We had our school wide concerto competition coming up and I was really prepared. I performed my piece two weeks before the competition. Still to this day it was one of the best performances of my life. Then came the competition. My concerto was in four large parts. I performed the first section very well. Then I started the second section and after a line or two, my mind went blank. I had a memory slip, one that would change my life forever. From that point on, my trumpet playing skills lacked the confidence that they once had. My lips would give way to tiredness and my mind was a mess.

I continued to play the trumpet, but at the same time I was singing as well. I had always been a singer, but I never really thought about singing. When I was young, and still a soprano, I would go around the house singing Mozart's Alleluia, a piece I often heard from our living room while my mother was practicing with some of her high school students. I'm sure the high school students did not appreciate a little 5th grade boy singing the final high C with ease.

I began my college education at Oberlin College Conservatory of Music. I was admitted as a voice major, though I continued to take trumpet lessons for a few years as well. I am sure at one point I had ambitions to be a professional singer and during my first college years, I really was not sure what I wanted to do. At one point, my mother said to me, "Peter, maybe you should think about being a choir director." I believe that my response was something like "Yeah, right Mom." But little did I know; my mom was right.

I tell you the story of this journey because many of us do not know what we are called to do in life. The calling maybe an opportunity that is given to us, and sometimes it is an opportunity that is related to a current or past experience. If we are lucky enough to act at the right moment, then we may also discover that our passion has finally been found.

When I conduct, I place myself into space that is filled with only musical ideas. Time virtually stops, my confidence level is very high, there is no second guessing of myself, and I maintain 100% concentration without even trying. The idea of giving and receiving is in full force. What effect then does this act of re-creating music have on both the mind and the spirit?

Peter Berger writes in his book *A Rumor of Angels*:

Human life gains the greatest part of its richness from the capacity for ecstasy, by which I do not mean the alleged experience of the mystic, but any experience of stepping outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life.

I feel very lucky that I have been able to find the capacity for ecstasy and perhaps more importantly, found the ability to share that with my students. I constantly urge my students to make sure that they do not let any opportunity of the heart or spirit pass them by. As this new year goes forth, I would encourage all students to find the passion in their own lives and begin the technical as well as emotional process that allows you to share it with others.

Often as faculty members, we do not realize times or situations that have a direct effect on our students. Several years ago, I walked into this theatre late one night and found one of my former students, Jeff Davis, working hard on a specific lighting design for our Holiday Music Festival performance. I asked Jeff what he was doing and at the time, I received a rather technical response on how the shadows would be placed on my head and how it would relate to what the audience would see.

While I was writing this speech, I asked him one more time and he said the following:

We were on our way to Portland on my first choir tour, and we stopped at Taco Bell for lunch. As I was waiting in line to order I saw you walking

down the corridor to the bathroom. While you walked, your hands and arms were conducting. I remember thinking "Wow! I wonder what that music sounds like," meaning, the music in your head that you were conducting. As many beautiful sounds as you were able to pull out of all of us (Actors and Chemists included), we obviously had our less than beautiful moments. I imagined that the music you were conducting on your way to the bathroom didn't have those same undesirable sounds, and I have ALWAYS been jealous that I can't hear music that is that perfect.

With that particular lighting concept I wanted the audience to feel like we were all given the gift of a few moments inside an amazing musical mind. We could see you conducting, but we could not see the rest of the choir. I wanted it to look like we were spying on a private moment when nothing else existed but you conducting the music in your head.

My response as a professor, is that I am thankful that I could open up a level of thought that was far greater than anything I had originally intended.

Learning comes from both example and experience.

But students should know that not all learning will take place in the classroom. In fact, I once heard the following, "Do not let your classes get in the way of your education." Now, that does not mean that you don't need to go to class. But it does mean that learning will happen whenever, and wherever, you allow yourself the experience.

In closing, I normally am not a lecturer. In fact, the less a conductor speaks the greater the ability to communicate during the musical process. As I prepare for choir each day, I may consider how I am going to teach notes, the concept of how to listen, how I might connect with a particular student during the rehearsal, or how we can move one step closer to performing as an entire ensemble.

When I do lecture, however, it normally comes at a moment that is called fondly by my students as "family time." It usually comes to the surface at a time when progress has been halted, or it may come because of one of those many musical moments that has just taken place and I want to make sure the awareness of the mind and spirit has been felt or understood by all.

Whatever the case may be, I cannot emphasize enough how the search for learning and the art of music-making can help us transcend the "ordinary" in our everyday lives.

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