

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Seth Biderman

Teaching Music to Children

Mid-morning there's a knock at the door. The music teacher.

I look at my calendar and see that it's time for our monthly check-in, a half hour session in which I, as his principal, supervisor and evaluator, am supposed to Monitor his Performance and provide Timely & Actionable Feedback. That I know jack about teaching music to children in schools is not pertinent.

I wave him in, and while he gets settled at the meeting table, I open my laptop, find the Google doc evaluation sheet with his name on it, and look it over.

All I have typed into it, since our last meeting, is "improve instrument distribution."

I rise from my desk and sit across from him. He's a friendly guy, this music teacher. Never misses a day, never complains, not even when we kicked him out of his sunny room on the first floor and relegated him to a shared room with the theater teacher in the basement.

He folds his hands on the table in front of him. Asks me how I'm doing.

"Hanging in there," I lie. "How's it going with the instrument distribution thing?"

"A lot better," he says.

"Good," I say, noting that in the Google doc. Typing slowly.

I think back on my visits to his classroom, which have been infrequent. I try to come up with some more Timely & Actionable Feedback, but I draw a blank. My overall impression has been that it's a miracle this man shows up for work every day. Every 45 minutes or so, groups of kids come spilling into his room, now horny 6th graders, now kindergartners with shoes untied and bladders full, all of them bursting with energy after hours spent quietly laboring through English and math, eager to finally be in a space where they can move around and make some noise. They come once a week, which means they've totally forgotten whatever it was he taught them the week before. The older students have figured out that the course isn't really graded, nor is it mentioned on the official standardized tests they take each spring, which means the whole thing is sort of an indoor recess. Somehow, through it all, this music teacher manages to wrangle and cajole them into learning a few songs that are performed, surprisingly well, at the end of each semester.

Such is the state of music in school.

As it always has been.



In fourth grade I signed up for band class at my elementary school and my mom took me to the music store to rent a saxophone. There is something spiritual about getting your first instrument, a passing of the flame,

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but the instrument salesperson treated the event as more of a transaction than a rite of passage. He clicked open the hard plastic case, showed me and my mom how to attach the little wooden reed, and handed my mom the bill.

Back at home I brought the case into my room, set it on my bed and opened it up. This was it, the start of a new life. God had given me freckles and unruly hair and made me Jewish, all insurmountable genetic obstacles to me ever becoming Tom Cruise or Harrison Ford, but I was going to be compensated for it all by being the best damn saxophone player in the school.

I wet the reed, fastened it to the mouthpiece with the little metal screw, brought the instrument to my lips and blew, and that was the end of that fantasy. I spent the evening making all sorts of noises, none of them musical, until for the first and last time in my short music career one of my parents came in and gently asked me to stop practicing.

I lugged the thing to school the next day and at the scheduled time followed all the other black-case-carrying kids down to the basement and sat on one of the little folding chairs until in walked the teacher, whose name was really Mr. Damgaard. He was already legendary in our household for being a high strung, nervous wreck of a music teacher, the butt of many cruel jokes by my brother, made worse by the fact that he moonlighted as a waiter at a local restaurant, and so now and then you would find yourself in the awkward and somewhat delicious position of telling him to get you some food.

That first class I still harbored a bit of hope—I was not a natural musician but maybe with some instruction I could be a decent saxophonist. Such hopes dissipated quickly. Mr. Damgaard spent the first class going over rules; and when in the second class we actually took out our instruments and played them, the result was no more promising than what I had experienced in my bedroom, only amplified by twenty of us doing the same thing. I don't know what Mr. Damgaard had been expecting, or what he heard, but I was surprised he did not run out of the room and cancel band for that year.

I began to suspect that there was something wrong here, clearly we sounded awful, and in the weeks to come we did not get any better except that we learned to play our off-tune squawking noises more or less at the same time as Mr. Damgaard waved a little conducting wand at us. In front of each of us were flimsy music stands, which always fell over at key moments, and on the stand a booklet with notes we had all learned to play, so that a C meant you push down this or that finger before you made your squawking noise. The mechanics of it weren't all that hard actually, but it had nothing to do with music, nothing to do with human expression or love or beauty.

At the end of the year, during which I competed perhaps two and a half of the nightly assigned homework practice exercises Mr. Damgaard gave us, I put on a rumpled collar shirt and long pants and got in the back seat of the car to drive down to the school with my parents and brother one evening for a performance. I lugged that plastic case into the gym and sat with the rest of the band in the chairs that had been set up beneath the

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basketball hoop while all of our parents and siblings and sat before us. Mr. Damgaard walked in after we had settled, like a real conductor. He donned an actual bow tie. He bowed to the parents, spun on his heels to face us, lifted his little wand, and we started blowing, and it was clear to everyone in the gym, and likely to anyone unlucky enough to live nearby, that we sounded terrible. After the concert I told my mom I was done and she did not argue. When we returned the saxophone to the instrument store that summer, the salesperson seemed not in the least disappointed or surprised. He wiped the saxophone clean, set it in its case, and lifted it back onto the shelf it had come from. I have not touched a saxophone since.



Later that year, I ask the music teacher if he will play some music for one of our weekly middle school gatherings.

He is not particularly excited by the idea, but he agrees, and one morning I watch him set up his keyboard before 80 or so 7th and 8th graders in a sort of expanded hallway space we call our common room.

Standing in the back of the room, I realize I have never heard him play before, not really, apart from accompanying students during their end of year performances. It occurs to me he might not be all that good. Perhaps this is why he became a music teacher.

In front of me, the 7th and 8th graders are their typical sleepy, fidgety selves. The teachers stand beside them, watchful for contraband Takis and cell phones.

At the front of the room, the music teacher clears his throat. He seems a bit nervous. He looks out at the audience, then closes his eyes, and his hands come down on the keyboard, and goddamn if the room doesn't fill with a flawless, heartfelt rendition of "Blue Monk" that classic jazz piece by Thelonious Monk, in all its grace and syncopation and beauty.

The music washes over us, and as happens in the presence of any great artistic performance, we all drop into silence. Even the most ornery 7th grader is rapt.

From the back of the room, I watch the man's hands move across the keyboard, his eyes closed. This is music. Forty years I've spent in school buildings, as a student and teacher and principal, and here it is, finally, here is music at last.