

OUR COUNTRY NEEDS A MUSIC MANDATE!

Thoughts on the ways playing in a music ensemble can help reduce the ugliness and self-serving anti-social behaviors found in a post-Covid world

I don't know whether I am more depressed than embarrassed, or more appalled than I am angry. It seems every day brings us news of Americans behaving badly. Videos of people being a bully, disrespectful, vulgar, or demeaning to others is so prevalent that it seems to encourage those predisposed to this type of conduct to find ways of becoming increasingly more outrageous and despicable. With many of our elected officials encouraging this ugly and uncivilized behavior, it appears as though this horrible time in our nation's history is far from over.

While doctors and civic leaders try to protect us from the pandemic, others willfully spread lies through the media in the name of "freedom." The result is social media promoting even worse behaviors and activities, including the recent efforts by a small percentage of Canada's truckers to shut down commerce and their own government over vaccine mandates. Of course, as Randy Rainbow recently sang in his parody, *The Tango Vaccine*, "It's hard to rejoice in 'My Body, My Choice' when *your choice* affects *my body* too." This *all about me* mentality seems to have become the new standard as those promoting public health and civility are labeled socialists, and those trying to follow the guidelines are harassed and called "sheeple." Thomas Friedman recently described our current state of affairs in a New York Times headline as "America 2022: Where Everyone Has Rights and No One Has Responsibilities."

All of this made me very sad and quite demoralized, until... Band happened! After such a long period of not being able to conduct a live ensemble, it finally happened, and being with music students saved my attitude. To be a part of an activity where everyone is trying their best to work as a group in order to create fleeting moments of beauty was more powerful than any words could describe. I watched in awe and thrilled to the vision of these outstanding young musicians who were:

- sitting with excellent posture in an assigned seat next to others that they would not necessarily have chosen to sit near;
- behaving in a professional manner, not talking but listening;
- giving their upmost attention to the music and conductor, and working their hardest to be the best they could be;

- being open to suggestion and criticism without giving up just because of the difficulties and challenges they faced;
- accepting praise without exhibiting classless behavior;
- demonstrating respect, enthusiasm, kindness and positivity.

So much of the nastiness we have all experienced recently is related to being asked to wear a mask in order to mitigate the spread of the corona virus. To be sure, no one LIKES wearing a mask, but if it might help protect you and others from getting sick, is it REALLY that big of a deal? So many people seem to be (in my opinion) far too disturbed about being forced, or even asked to wear a mask. And yet band kids have not only worn specialized masks in order to play their instruments, but have used face shields, instrument covers, played in socially-distanced ensembles to limited audiences, and even moved rehearsal locations every 30 minutes to allow for air-exchange. And they have done all of this without complaint, doing what they can to make sure they can still make music with their friends.

It seems like the concept of the *Karen*, described by dictionary.com as “a pejorative slang term for an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or police other people’s behaviors, asking to speak to retail and restaurant managers to voice complaints or make demands, and being an anti-vaxx,” has become all too familiar. I believe we should have LESS KAREN and MORE CARING. I would love to see an end to ALL ABOUT ME, and the start of ALL ABOUT WE.

Seeing and experiencing so many bad behaviors in society, and then reveling in the good behaviors of music students made me realize how much better our country would be if everyone played in band or orchestra, or sang in a choir. The correlations between the experiences that music ensemble membership provides to our society as a whole is noteworthy. Many bands perform in adjudicated events where a panel of experts provide feedback on their performance. The musicians accept the adjudicator’s remarks without protest or demonstration of personal or mental injury or anguish, or need for an emotional support animal. Imagine how the topics and captions found in an adjudicated music performance can relate to general citizenship:

- *Tone/Timbre relates to the sound and the intended affect that the sound has on the listener, and it is always best if this has a pleasing effect.* Every time someone interacts with others, awareness of their own tone and timbre would make our lives so much better if we all tried to make these interactions more pleasant by monitoring the things we say them and how we address others.
- *Intonation relates to playing our instrument in tune.* How nice it would be if people would attempt to be in tune with others in order to create harmony, rather than deliberately creating social dissonance.
- *General effect is typically judged to provide an ensemble feedback on the overall way the performance is received by the audience.* Personal interactions would be so much less stressful if we all considered what our overall effect is on others, and made an attempt to be peaceful and respectful.
- *Interpretation reflects the way our performance is perceived by the audience.* Being mindful of how our words might be interpreted could alleviate a lot of conflict if we all tried to avoid conflict just for conflict's sake.
- *Balance/Blend refers to the way each individual member of the ensemble plays their part so it contributes to a beautiful representation of the overall sound of the group, making sure everyone is heard but that no one player drowns-out others.* It seems so often Americans strive to shout over others, perhaps because they think their opinion is the only one that matters.
- *Note accuracy is fairly obvious in that the adjudicators are listening to be sure everyone is playing the correct notes and rhythms.* Unfortunately, in everyday life, so many people say things or promote ideas that are not accurate because there is no standard method of getting accurate news, causing different people to believe things that are not true.
- *Expression is the way we communicate our feelings through the music.* Many people we know have no problem articulating their feelings, but just as in a musical performance, everyone should strive to be expressive in a way that does not hurt others.
- *Presentation/Department is a category that examines how the ensemble looks and behaves. A good rating here would mean that the band demonstrates pride in how they look and act.* Sadly, it seems like many people are proud of being rude, obnoxious and

hateful in order to get attention. If only they had the same mindset as a good band!

- *Poise/General Conduct/Appearance describes the professionalism and discipline demonstrated by the band. A group scoring highly here would certainly inspire respect. How I wish everyone would show respect to others, even those with whom they disagree.*

Another aspect of being in a music ensemble that correlates to societal behaviors is diversity. Since every member of the ensemble is valued for what they can contribute musically, other musicians' gender, race, ethnicity or religion is of little to no concern as it is their talent and performance skills that are important to the group. Additionally, the best outcome for any band or orchestra is having complete instrumentation, which is another form of diversity because a truly great performance is only possible when a full complement of instruments is involved. It is the wealth of instrumental colors that makes the music come alive, and that requires a diversity of instrumentation. Additionally, each individual's varied life experiences through their own personal diversity only serves to enhance the music through a greater depth of understanding leading to better expression.

Being in a music ensemble also provides an opportunity to be a part of something larger than one's self, and gives everyone a place to belong. The recognition of this aspect of ensemble membership is significant in that it fosters a network of mutual respect and appreciation for everyone involved. In a way, it is like a family; everyone is a bit different, but each member is striving for the same goals and appreciates others for the role they play. The collaborative nature of the ensemble experience teaches patience, persistence, responsibility, compassion, time-management skills, leadership and self-discipline. It is these very skills and traits that not-coincidentally contribute to music students to be among those who have the most academic success.

Perhaps one of the best things that comes out of being in band, orchestra and choir in ADDITION to the musical outcomes is that it helps to shape each individual in ways that will enhance their employment opportunities in the future. Since today's high school students may be working in jobs that don't even exist yet, future employers may find that the actual college degree someone has earned may be less important than their personal

attributes. What are some of the most sought-after traits? They are most likely people who could be described as:

- Self-starters
- Reliable
- Can lead
- Can work well with others
- Pay attention to details
- Understand the value of professionalism
- Not afraid of hard work
- Know that things worthwhile take time
- Creative
- Not afraid of a challenge
- Can change course mid-stream and adjust as needed
- Know how to listen
- Know how to present themselves
- Can be part of a team
- Can perform with passion and conviction
- Enthusiastic
- Respectful

Each of these behaviors are taught in nearly every rehearsal. Additionally, each of the commonly used learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile) are continually used by all instrumental music students simultaneously, which strengthens the weaker learning styles, making students better able to learn other subjects outside of music. Is it any wonder that music students are always among the brightest in their schools?

But the power of being involved in a music ensemble doesn't end there because it is also true that in good music programs the students are also incredibly well behaved. There are a number of reasons why this might be true:

- There is a humbling effect due to knowing how challenging it is to learn to play an instrument or sing well.
- Good musicians know there is always more to learn and always room for improvement.
- Music students learn early on that their goals, including having fun and being proud of their accomplishments, is only achieved when everyone is working together, keeping disruptions to a minimum,

being mutually supportive and doing their best for the entire ensemble.

One of the most significant values of music ensemble membership is that everyone is important ALL the time, whether they are playing at any particular moment or not. There has to be a complete trust in everyone involved that each person is doing their absolute best each and every minute during rehearsals and the performance, even when what is most required is their absolute silence. But beyond that, music promotes happiness, improves listening skills, elevates mood, reduces stress, relieves symptoms of depression, stimulates memories, and manages pain.

Being a part of any team can accomplish many of these things, but unlike athletics, in music there is no loser and no one sits on the bench. Speaking from personal experience, I know that music can also provide a safe place. It allowed me to find a place, perhaps the only place in school, where I was not bullied or beat up, and where I was only judged by my contributions. Music saved me, and I know through my 28 years of teaching that it saved countless others because my students have told me just that.

Given all of this information, I think it only makes sense that this country adopt a music mandate! Aside from the empathy and humanity that music students learn to appreciate, something as simple as understanding the importance of playing softer so someone else can be heard has enormous implications on society. And transferring the concept that *my gift to the band is making sure I can play my part well* could transform our country if everyone understood that *my gift to our country is making sure I can do my best as a citizen*. Thinking about all the experiences band members have, it is amazing to think how our nation could be improved if each citizen and our leaders would likewise show mutual support and appreciation for each other, embrace diversity, demonstrate respect for others and ourselves, exhibit decorum and professionalism in how we present ourselves, listen to others, and work toward the common good.

In other words: Less Karen – more caring.

Will it happen? No. But I am so grateful I get to experience the joy that being involved with music students creates every time I step into a rehearsal. And as I learn to appreciate this more and more each day, I can't

help but feel sorry for anyone who never experienced what being part of a music ensemble can offer, and I can just imagine how much better life in our country would be - if only...