The Most Wonderful Time of the Year?

Regular readers of this column may recall that in last December’s SBO issue, the title was “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” (<https://sbomagazine.com/current-issue/6417-it-s-the-most-wonderful-time-of-the-year-2.html>). That column talked about my process for building great holiday concert programs at The U.S. Army Field Band and The U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own” It also recalled many times during my decades in uniform where I observed the holidays in far-flung places (like Iraq) or on frigid airfield tarmacs as fallen hero remains were brought home.

During the past year I have been able to spend many hours in classrooms of all types. Because I regularly present clinics for educators, I feel it’s necessary for me to frequently be in classrooms in order to understand the environment that educators are working in. I don’t cherry-pick by limiting myself to high school bands and orchestras in “good” districts. I’ve taught elementary general music, beginning strings, drama/theater, social studies, and even German, in addition to band and orchestra.

What has become apparent in all of these interactions is that every student has their own story, their own troubles, their own gifts, and their own challenges. The lucky ones only struggle with what to wear each day. Sadly, many worry about what they are going to eat or where they are going to sleep. Some are confused about their gender identity. Many, even (or especially) from affluent homes, lack involved parents who may spend more time looking at their phones than they do talking to their kids. These students arrive at our rehearsal rooms carrying that baggage with them and hopefully, they are looking forward to a music class where they can feel embraced, involved, and valued.

Like most SBO readers, I took methods classes, played in lots of rehearsals, and spent countless hours in a practice room. I never thought about how I would handle it if a student chose to sit and look at the floor instead of participating in a rehearsal, as happened to me recently (as a substitute teacher by the way, with no knowledge of the students). Years ago, I would have undoubtedly used coercive measures to get that student to get with the program. I was able to ask him quietly why he wasn’t playing and he tearfully replied that he was having a really bad day and just couldn’t do it. The last thing he needed was to be made to feel even worse because he wasn’t rehearsing. This young man just needed some time to sit quietly without judgment. After about 15 minutes he picked up his trumpet and joined in.

Recently while teaching a middle school choir class, the regular teacher left great instructions, to include slides for each class that would be on display telling them what tasks to accomplish. One student was not following any of the instructions and when I asked her why, I eventually found out this was a 7th grader who could not read.

My intent is not to make this a doom and gloom column, but rather to acknowledge what all of you face every day. We usually read about amazing band and orchestra programs where everything is working and the groups are performing at state conventions and at Midwest. Even at those “dream jobs” those teachers are also facing these same types of difficult situations daily. We are music educators, but because we welcome all (not just the academically gifted or the athletic) to our ensembles, we are also therapists, surrogate parents, positive role models, and lifelines for many of our students.

So, while this may be the most wonderful time of the year, for many of our students it can be even more challenging because their reality does not match the idealized images they are bombarded with. But every single day of the year, you have the chance to make their lives better by creating a music classroom where everyone is valued, where everyone feels safe, and where, regardless of circumstances, we all come together to express ourselves though music. For the countless music educators who make band and orchestra the most wonderful time of the day, thank you.

Next month, in Colonel’s Book Club, I’ll discuss “Teaching Music with Purpose” by Peter Boonshaft.