Make it the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Regular readers of this column may recall seeing articles by a similar title in SBO Magazine in the [December 2018](http://digitaleditiononline.com/publication/?m=27488&i=549773&p=48) and [December 2019](https://sbomagazine.com/current-issue/1454-inservice/6784-the-most-wonderful-time-of-the-year.html) issues. The first one included reminiscence about holidays spent in far-flung places around the world during my military service. Last year was a reminder that not all of our students live in a world where the holidays bring joyous memories and we must be the “safe space” for them.

The year 2020 has certainly been “unique.” By the time this is published, more than a quarter of a million Americans will have died from the coronavirus and many survivors will suffer long-term health problems. Millions of Americans have lost their jobs, thousands of businesses have closed, and the fiscal impact on our schools has been dramatic. Research about how the virus spreads identified singing and playing wind instruments as particularly hazardous. So, how do we make the end of this horrible year wonderful? Through music, of course! But more specifically, rediscovering what it is that makes music so magical and finding the silver lining in what may seem to be a dark cloud.

Since retiring from the Army, I had found tremendous satisfaction in a busy schedule as a guest conductor, clinician, and adjudicator for bands and orchestras but of course, that mostly disappeared during 2020. I was named Music Director of a great community band just as they were shut down and we have yet to make music together. The result for me was similar to what many music educators and musicians experienced. Depression, self-pity, and lots of other unpleasant things that happen when your “purpose” has been taken away. In a recent video call with some colleagues, everyone shared their disappointment that this seems like a “lost year” where the great ensemble they were building toward would never actually meet as a group. But great educators are finding ways to still teach music by focusing on individual skills and spending more time teaching students how and what to practice. This shift from ensemble-centric teaching to a musician-centric approach reminded me of two somewhat similar situations in my past.

When the U.S. and allies launched Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, I was commanding the Army band in Europe. Because the threat level was so high, we were prohibited from performing (sound familiar?). We also were assigned 24/7 guard duties that would make ensemble rehearsals nearly impossible. We devised a schedule that would allow some small ensembles to continue to rehearse and also allocated specific times for individual practice. Months later when we held our first rehearsal, the band sounded better than ever! Instead of using rehearsals to “stay in shape,” they each improved by focusing on their individual performance.

This spring when America “shut down,” the ballet school that I operate (don’t worry, my daughter is the teacher!) cancelled all live classes but continued to produce two video classes per day that students received for free. When live classes resumed, those students who had worked on their own with the videos had actually progressed. The takeaway is that if we focus our efforts on helping our students to practice the right way and motivate them to improve personally, we are not only succeeding as educators, we are helping them develop and appreciate the intrinsic value of personal music-making.

Many of my colleagues have been stressing that we need to reimagine ourselves as music teachers, not solely as band, orchestra, or chorus directors. As someone who spent most of his professional life working with incredible adult music professionals, it took me a while to figure out how (or if) that applied to me.

In June 2018, my SBO article was titled, [Substitute Teaching: Making it a Win for Everyone](https://sbomagazine.com/current-issue/6204-substitute-teaching-making-it-a-win-for-everyone.html). So, as the new school year started, I began to accept “sub jobs” outside of my comfort zone by teaching K-6 General Music. This has allowed me to rediscover what it is that makes music so vital in all of our lives. How it helps us to loosen our inhibitions and can “move” you with the sheer joy that only a 1st Grader can possess. I saw the awe in their faces when I was able to share the magic of music. How finding ways for 5th graders to compose their own music and collaborate with others online truly made them part of the magic. Imagine if you will, a mid-60’s, retired Army Colonel describing how Smetana’s “Moldau” starts with just a trickle of water in the mountains and gathers more water as it flows toward Prague. But – the description included my “interpretive dance” of the movement of the water. My ballet dancer daughter would have been horrified but I can’t wait to add some “childish abandon” to my conducting! Imagine that same senior citizen veteran acting out all of the parts to “Wheels on the Bus” as we sang it together. Then, imagine my joy when the teacher asked if I could come back because her students said, “We liked the crazy guy!”

During our years of college and professional experience we studied music, gained expertise and credentials, and probably became more specialists than generalists as music educators. However, we all started as elementary school kids who thought singing, moving, playing simple percussion instruments, and improvising was fun. Recently, I was teaching a 3rd Grade class and showing them some videos of terrific players in order to demonstrate how different instruments had different sounds and pitch registers. Before each clip one boy asked, “Can I dance?” After several attempts to discourage him so that he could achieve the “learning objective,” he wore me down and I said, “If you want to dance, go ahead.” The result was a room full of students interpreting “Paganini Variations” in movement and loving it!

So, if you are struggling to find your purpose this holiday season, find a way to renew the childish joy of music in you and your students. Focus on the students in a year where we don’t need to worry about scores at contest or marching band competitions. You and your love of music can make this the most wonderful time of the year.

*Colonel (Retired) Thomas Palmatier was formerly Commander of The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own” and The United States Army Field Band. Get access to many free resources and contact him at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.*