

Influential Teacher Interview Synopsis

Introduction

Mr. William Brown is not only a well-accomplished musician, conductor, and incredible teacher, he is also my mentor and one of the biggest reasons why I chose to study music at a post secondary level. I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing him because it allowed me to reflect on his teaching methods and how they have changed my life. In our interview, I used a combination of semi-structured interview questions and probes. Though structured, I strived for a feeling of a free-flowing discussion. We explored a variety of topics and the four prominent themes that resulted were: motivation, mentorship, legacy and challenge.

Motivation

During the interview, we discussed questions that explored the concept of motivations. Particularly, we discussed Mr. Brown's motivations to become a teacher and he shared two thoughts. The first was the positive influence his music educators had on his life. In high school, he had a music teacher named Mrs. Potheir who truly cared for him and wanted to nurture his talent. She took him under her wings in Grade 9 and offered him private vocal lessons outside of school. Mr. Brown told a story of how a typical Saturday would unfold. I quote "every Saturday morning, I would wake up, oh god it was at some awful hour like 7am or something. She would pick me up and I would have an hour piano lesson and then for about four hours I would do her gardening and house cleaning. Then I would have a singing lesson and during lunch I would have a music history and theory lesson and we would do more gardening and house cleaning. And at the end of the day she paid me because she said I had done more work than what my lessons would cost. And this went on for all 5 years of high school." This dedication shown by his teacher is the same kind of dedication Mr. Brown shows to his students today. He sacrifices extra time for rehearsals, hosts additional fundraisers and always goes above and beyond the expectation of a teacher. The second point Mr. Brown brought up was that he decided to become a music teacher because of the joy and happiness he felt when playing music. He wanted to be able to spread this passion and his experience to his students. Mr. Brown shared another story about a time in Grade 9 vocal music when all the boys had to sing the solo line in the choral piece they were working on. When Mr. Brown had finished singing, his teacher replied "that was good". Mr. Brown said that he almost did a double take and was confused because no one had ever told him that he was good at anything before. He had finally found his passion. Later when he chose to study at the University of Western Ontario, Daryl Johnson repeated this feeling during choral conducting class. Daryl Johnson told Mr. Brown that he was good at choral conducting and Mr. Brown really enjoyed it. Therefore, he felt that this was the path he was destined to be on. Because of the positive

experience music had on his life, Mr. Brown hoped he could share what music had done for him with others and inspire a love for music in them as well. This made me realize that the reason Mr. Brown really nurtures his students and praises talent when he sees it is because of the nurture he experienced from his two teachers. He constantly shares stories about what music has done for him in hopes of inspiring other students. His passion for music is something I have always admired.

Mentorship

After Mr. Brown had shared his motivations to begin teaching, I asked him if he felt that his mentors influenced the way he taught. Mr. Brown shared that he felt from both Professor Daryl Johnson and Mrs. Potheir he learned a lot about technique. The technical foundation that was laid out to him has now been incorporated into his present day teaching style. He said that Mrs. Potheir was a perfectionist and stickler for great intonation and pronunciation. She constantly pushed all of her students to strive for excellence. Mr. Brown said and I quote “she was pretty much a perfectionist. In the sense that most musicians become perfectionists, always striving for excellence, never feeling like they get there and always wanting more”. He also said that she taught them to be disciplined and the importance of hard work. He said in many ways he feels it is his obligation to continue to spread their words and knowledge that they shared with him to other students because he was so fortunate to study with two amazing teachers. When Mr. Brown shared this, I realized that the reason he pushes us so hard in rehearsals is because of the way his music educators pushed him. He stresses the importance of discipline and does not tolerate being late. I found that he was always really picky about all of the technical aspects of our pieces. He put great emphasis on cutoffs, shaping phrases correctly, and hearing the end consonants on words during rehearsals. All of these aspects were things he carried over from his music educators.

Legacy

Next, we discussed the legacy Mr. Brown wishes to leave on his students. He shared that in the beginning of his career, he was really focused on getting his name out there and making sure his ensembles were perfect. However in the last number of years, in the later part of his teaching career, he felt that he’s shifted to putting more emphasis on the students. Now that he knows his strengths and his capabilities, he feels that he doesn’t have anything to prove to anyone anymore. Now, he focuses on changing the students’ lives in a positive way. He shared that his goal is to prepare students for life. He teaches them valuable life skills and he uses music as the vehicle to do so. He teaches the importance of discipline and punctuality but above all the importance of hard work. He pushes his students to work harder and achieve more because he knows that after all of the hard work, the feeling of praise and reward feels much greater. I remember in my Grade 11 year, we had to learn a piece called a Jubilant Song by Norman Dello Joio. This piece had complex rhythms and harmonies we were not used to singing. Our choir had a lot of difficulty picking up the piece.

However, Mr. Brown continued to push us and scheduled extra rehearsals to help prepare us. At the end of all of our hard work, it really paid off because we were invited to sing in a prestigious competition called the Ed Bolsby Showcase and ended up winning best choir in the competition. I remember speaking to my friends in the choir afterwards and we all shared that the success and accomplishment we had achieved was so much more rewarding because we realized how much hard work it took us to get to where we were.

Challenge

Finally, we discussed what Mr. Brown felt has been successful in getting through to his students. The main point we talked about was his desire to positively challenge his students. He shared that it is very important to pick music that is engaging and provides his students with a challenge. However, the repertoire cannot be too challenging that it frustrates the student and makes them want to give up. It has to be the right balance of difficulty and attainability. He also said that it is important to make sure every student feels comfortable and prepared. He stressed the importance of taking every single student into consideration and all of the various learning styles in a classroom. He said that he tries to cater to his clientele and make sure he is meeting all of their needs. This response made me realize why Mr. Brown got us to sing in so many different languages. He wanted to provide us with a learning opportunity and challenge. Singing in a variety of languages always kept us on our toes and engaged in what he had to say.

Self Reflection

By conducting this interview, I was able to reflect on the skills Mr. Brown taught me. Mr. Brown emphasized that his goal was to prepare his students for life and he uses music as his vehicle to do this. I think this is the reason I chose to study music in the first place. During my high school music career, I realized that I learned so many valuable skills from my peers and educators through my various experiences in music. In music theory, I learned skills similar to the ones we use in math and science. In music history, I learned how to write a well-structured essay. Finally, in my repertoire and choir rehearsals I learned about discipline, punctuality and the power of hard work. I think because Mr. Brown instilled these skills in me, I was able to apply it to other areas of my life. Such as in my academics, where I constantly pushed myself a little further. I went above and beyond what my assignments asked me for and graduated with an overall average of 94%. This meant I graduated as an Ontario Scholar. I also achieved the top mark in Families in Canada and Vocal Music. This allowed me to win the Elgar Cup of Vocal Music. I also learned the importance of time management and participated in a lot of extra curricular activities and performed a lot of volunteer service. This work resulted in me winning the Lieutenant Governor's award for Volunteer Service. I also won three other scholarships including the June Kim Memorial Scholarship, the Western Entrance Scholarship for an overall average above 90% and the Western Music

Scholarship of merit. I could not have achieved these accomplishments without the basic skills my music educators taught me.

Conclusion

This is why I strongly believe in a music education. Music is my passion and I love the feeling of performing in front of an audience. I feel that music teaches you an innovative and creative way of thinking that cannot be reciprocated in any other discipline. Additionally, I am so thankful for all of the life skills I have learned during my musical journey. I hope that no matter what career I find myself in, even if it is not in music, that I carry the valuable lessons Mr. Brown has shared with me. I also hope that even if I do not become a teacher, I can share my experience and love of music with others. I hope to affect a student, in the same way Mr. Brown has affected me.