

Music Education- Influential Teacher Project *Transcription of Interview*

Nadia: What made you want to be a teacher?

Mr. Brown: I guess probably first and foremost is that the positive influence that Mrs. Potheir had on my life and opening my eyes to the real world of music and music education and what music did for me as an individual. First and foremost, she took me under her wings in grade 9 and she had said to me one day, in fact she hates hearing this story, she told me she never wanted to hear this story again. In vocal music she had all the boys singing a solo line in the choral piece we were working on. And when I finished she was like that was good and I kind of looked to my left and right because I thought she couldn't possibly be talking to me because no one had really told me I was good at anything before. She said no, no you and shortly after she said I think you should sing a solo in the music festival this year but she said I really think you should take lessons and I know your parents can't really afford it. So every Saturday morning, I woke up, oh god it was some awful hour like 7am or something. She would pick me up 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 housecleaning and at the end of the day she paid me because she said I had done more work than what my lessons cost. This went on for all 5 years of high school. She also introduced me to singing in a community choir that was compromised of singing only works by Bach and you can imagine in high school singing nothing but Bach motets was....you know she introduced me to people who allowed me to have a voice apprentice with the Niagara symphony and from there it was my earliest conducting experiences and then you know its kind of a small world one of the people who worked their , their husband was the president of Ontario choirs association which I later became president of. So he suggested I audition for the Ontario youth choir and then it was just the whole fact that choral music was my everything. It made me feel so good inside and out and music gave me an opportunity to express myself. Growing up, being a male singer, often being bullied and put down, music was always my escape from reality. I could go to the school and practice and it gave me a voice. I just wanted students to be able to experience things that I experienced because I know how much it did for my life and I always have said if I can impact one person in my entire teaching career, my job would be done. I just want to share my experience and what music has done for me with others and hopefully inspire them through a pursuit of music or whatever they choose to do, just what they love to do.

Nadia: Do you feel that she affected the way you teach?

Mr. Brown: she would probably say no because I don't do sight singing or ear training. No certainly 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 but she I guess she taught us to be very disciplined. She was a real stickler with intonation, with pronunciation and all the technical aspects. She gave us that foundation for. And so I think a lot of that transferred from highschool and then I continued with Daryl Johnson at Western and um not only did I study with him for four years at Western, I was also one of his church soloists so it was kind of like an extension from one to the next and it was you know Mrs. Pothier and I never discussed that I was going to be a music teacher it was just I was kind of pushed in that direction it was just something that happened. So I would certainly say she gave me the real foundation as a singer, all the technical aspects and the love of choral singing and getting to Western and getting through choral conducting in third and fourth year and as I started choral conducting. I had only been successful as a singer really. And then when I started conducting in third year, Daryl Johnson was praising me in the same way that Mrs. Pothier was and so I discovered hey, I'm good at this conducting thing and I feel good when I'm conducting. And for me there's this feeling that's hard to describe when you're conducting because the song and musicality and everything that's coming at you is a direct product of what you taught your students and for me there's no finer I don't want to say prize but finer example seeing if what you teach works and is successful um I would certainly say and then there was a time I remember I was hired to do a weekend choral concert somewhere north of London, it was a small community, several conductors like Daryl Johnson, Kevin Fleet, these were all Western people and other people from the area and I was hired to do workshops on breathing the whole weekend and Kevin Fleet had been hired to do the mass choir. So everyone was waiting there ready to do the mass choir rehearsal and the conductor wasn't there and so someone called him and he had totally forgotten it was that weekend so Professor Johnson said he would do the rehearsal and I hadn't seen him conduct for a while and I was out teaching at the time and as I sat there and watched him I was like oh my god I'm a clone. Because I realized everything in the way he acted and things he said was what I did and now do. And at one point he turned around during the rehearsal and he just looked at me and he was like you, you're doing the next piece and he just made me conduct the piece which thank God I knew. Those experiences that Mrs. Pothier and Professor Johnson I always say I couldn't have been any luckier. Mrs. Pothier gave me the whole foundation as a singer and Daryl Johnson as a choral conductor. In many ways I feel obligated to go out and continue their word. It's like what we say in St. Catharine's and I said in the speeches the choir was really hers too because everything she taught me I was now able to share with you guys, it was kind of like the evolution, the cycle continues through the next person. I was blessed to have two great mentors. I'm forced to continue that cycle so it doesn't disappear.

Nadia: do you feel your teaching methods have changed overtime?

Mr. Brown: Yes, for sure. You know as a young teacher and as a young conductor um I started getting involved in the Ontario choral federation which is now Chorus Ontario and started moving up the ranks and became president and same with the association of Canadian choral conductors moving up the ranks and becoming

president. That so much of your early career is focused on climbing the ladder. You want to be successful, you want to be known. So you're always doing things in a strategic way to get your name known. Sometimes I tell my sister when I read my name in a bio of a program I almost sit and cry because I can't believe I have accomplished anything on that page. I say carol I've fooled them all. Sometimes I feel like I know nothing and ive just been in the right place at the right time. And my sister says no there's skill there, there has to be or you wouldn't be successful. Um but the last number of years ever since oriana and I departed ways for the first time in my teaching career I felt like I could give 100% of my time to my students. It's no longer about what I have to achieve because I don't have anything left to achieve I don't have anything to prove to anyone anymore. I know what I am capable of doing. I know what music has done for me and so my focus shifted more to being student centered. I don't want to sound like it was me-centered before but when you get to a point in your career when you don't have anything left to prove, you've accomplished a lot and you're confident in what you do. I don't know if you relax more and as a result more than just the music is important. I always say to you guys I teach life skills through music and I think that comes after you yourself get to a point where its not only about the music anymore. It's about affecting and changing the students' lives in a positive way. If I can show them through hardwork and perseverance that they can be successful and the feeling at the end where you get praised or rewarded they can take that and apply it to their life. So it's not just music as being the primary source its using music as the vehicle for a life that flourishes and is successful. You know you're constantly refining your own teaching techniques in the way of what new exercises are there that could work, how do you approach a rehearsal, type of repertoire you do.

Nadia: What do you feel has worked in your classes and what has not?

Mr. Brown: what has worked? Well, I guess gosh, I guess now the last number of years there isn't a lot that doesn't work because you've already been through the trial and error phase and I think the reason why we've been so successful these past number of years is because of consistency and knowing. So what works? Great repertoire works, um pieces I'm able to introduce students to all different styles of music, music that engages the student, singing in several languages keeps the student alert and learning. Singers want a challenge and want music that not only teaches them to sing well but touches their heart. What doesn't work? Choosing repertoire that is too difficult.

Nadia: well how do you know if you're getting through to your students?

Mr. Brown: well then evaluations. The best way to know is to listen individually, listen in quartets. I always say that the best test is a concert performance. When you're under pressure, when there's people listening, you'd hope that you've taught your students everything technical about singing, how do interpret the piece so the audience is touched and moved by the performance. Your best rehearsal is a concert because it really shows what you do and don't have. I think its my responsibility to

make sure my singers are prepared. I think that if you're a teacher and you've had great experiences yourself then you don't know other than always being on top of your game. Sure, as an early teacher, you might get a class trying to test you if they don't know you well and certainly the worst thing you can do is lose it with them. What else doesn't work? I think a lot of it comes down to is really the right repertoire, the right vocal technique behind you, making sure they're prepared, you just need to know how to pace and that students peak at the right time. And if you want to talk about theory and history, you need to make sure you teach interesting areas of history and make sure all students understand the theory. You know not all students learn the same way. You need to consider all learning styles such as visual and audio learners. We get reports on all students with IEP and we need to know what their strengths and weaknesses are. we need to consider every single student in the class. You have to really know what you're teaching and the best way to get through to your class based on your clientele and if you're meeting their needs.

Nadia: what is the best part of your job?

Mr. Brown: the best part I would say aside from music, well maybe not aside from music, it's to see the powers of music and how the skills one can learn can lend themselves to anything they choose to do in life. Music can give everyone a voice and give them confidence they didn't previously have and because they are a part of an ensemble they become part of a family. Just like the one I had. You think back to aurum two years ago, and the success we had last year, and that doesn't come without having confidence in one self. And I come back to life skills, the skills I'm teaching you through the music, the skills about being punctual, being disciplined and you having to work hard and push yourself are things that probably help you in many areas besides music. There's just so much you can gain from music. I used the whole philosophy this year, that if you sing in a choir, your psychological, emotional, physical and social wellbeing will improve. I did so much research about the chemicals released in your body when you sing and it just creates such a positive impact on the body. People do not really understand the power of music. And I would say that my direction has changed as a younger teacher from all about being successful an ensemble to now making sure that my students are prepared for life. I've just used music as the vehicle to do that. I think many teachers nowadays also forget that students thrive on expectations and consequences if things don't go right because that's the real world. We need to set expectations for our students. Students need to know that failure is okay because students nowadays don't know how to fail. They don't know how to deal with it. If you don't fail now, you won't be successful down to the road. I think I know that when I give my students a compliment, they know its real, I don't sugarcoat anything and I can give them compliments and still give positive criticism.

Nadia: Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me, it was really nice talking to you!