Season 2 Ep # 11 – Fostering Focus & Intent

Intro

Welcome, welcome to the Band Room Podcast! My name is Dylan Maddix and your all staying cozy and safe inside your homes from COVID-19. Even though mostly everything is cancelled, podcasts aren't! So as I practice social distancing, I'll bring you a solo episode today.

Since our last episode, The Band Room Podcast has started a Go Fund Me page and we're asking for your help. This podcast is a labor of love - I taught myself basic audio skills and worked hard to create what I think is a unique experience. It's always been self-funded and self-motivated, which has allowed BRP to retain its independence but has also limited my travel, equipment and coverage.

The goal is to expand my output, developing resources for music teachers and ensure that the podcast has a future, while maintaining BRP's independent voice.

Thanks to your donations we are able to purchase a Zoom H6 Recorder, making interviews on the road so much easier. If that's not enough, the quality of podcast will be improved and no more crashing laptop halfway through an interview! Thanks so much for your continued support! Every little bit helps! And if you can't help by donating, please help by spreading the word! The link will be posted to our website and be in our episode description: https://bit.ly/32565kA

But before we get down to business please do me a huge favor and head over to iTunes or whatever podcast app you use and give The Band Room Podcast a rating, or even a review! This really helps getting the word out to others.

Fostering Focus & Intent in Performance

Although many of us are away from our class rooms for the foreseeable future, I thought I would talk about something you can start applying when you get back, Fostering Focus and Intent in performance, a talk I gave at the Ontario Music Educator Conference this past November.

Although we are already in our second season for BRP, I realize I've never really told you anything about my background. Before I was in my current position at Cambrian College

and Laurentian University, I worked mainly as a freelance trumpet player, conductor and adjudicator. In this role I worked with many groups, going in for that shot of inspiration with a school or community ensemble. Each time I worked with a group I found that for the most part bands could play the notes and rhythms on the page, even the dynamics, but there was something missing 90% of the time, focus and a willingness to take musical risks. I would spend the majority of my time teaching and showing the power of being in the moment.

When I started at the college & university I was shocked (not really) to find out that this problem of focus and intent doesn't stop once you start your post-secondary work. Not only do students have problems focusing on the finesse of music, polishing and such but I've found that a large percentage of them have some kind of learning accommodation, usually having to do with keeping attention, focus problem, etc. Seeing this, seeing students I having really care about, seeing students think there's something wrong with them, beat themselves up for labels thrust upon them was the reason I started doing more research in how concepts of focus can be applied to music education and specifically the rehearsal room. If musical reasons aren't enough, these ideas can be applied outside of the band room and improve focus skills in other subjects, improved listening/comprehension skills, sociability skills etc...

The argument I'll be making in this article is most of us (students & teachers) are often not focused, virtually all of the time. In the words of Dr. Ellen Langer "When we're not there, we're not there to know that we're not there.". I'm suggesting we aren't there too much of the time and we're taking away from the enjoyment of music, learning and the building up of people.

The Power of Subtlety

For many professional symphony musicians, they're sitting in their chairs bored half to death, performing pieces they've performed 100s of times. Why do they do this? Well, it's a high-status job they're loathed to give it up. This isn't so different from your school band (minus the "high status" part) that gets to festival at the end of the year and has to play *Blankity Blank March or The King with the Flaming Mountain Sword* for the umpteenth time.

In 2009, a study entitled 'Orchestral performance and the footprint of mindfulness' was created to test the hypothesis that actively creating new observations and sonically

¹ Langer, Ellen & Russel, Timothy & Eisenkraft, Noah. (2009). Orchestral performance and the footprint of mindfulness. Psychology of Music – PSYCHOL MUSIC. 37. 125-136. 10.1177/0305735607086053.

depicting them during a concert or performance of orchestral music is superior to attempting to re-create a past experience. In the study, a sixty-piece orchestra volunteered to participate under the direction of their conductor.

The orchestra was asked to perform the last movement of Brahms's *Symphony No. 1* twice. Before the first performance the players were asked to think of the finest performance of the piece that they could remember and play it that way (the control group). The second time they performed, they were told to make it new in very subtle ways that only they would notice.

They record the performances and play them back to people who are unaware of the experiment and polled the musicians about their experience performing as well. What was found, overwhelmingly, is that people listening enjoy the mindful/focused performance more and the musicians enjoy performing more. You can ever hear people's consciousness!

How can we do this with our students? Well we can do exactly what the study did. When you get to the point in the learning process, that involves the polishing of music AKA no longer teaching rhythms and notes. Tell your students to make it new in very subtle ways that only they would know. Examples might be: a subtle change in dynamic, how they articulate the staccato notes, playing to a different part in a phrase, etc...

Noticing novelty reveals uncertainty.

-Dr. Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University

The Repertoire You Pick Matters

When we're talking about focus, we often think of the ability of the student to stay on task, maybe be more goal oriented. Often, we don't consider the repertoire we choose and how that might affect their ability to focus.

This most often happens to young music educators, who just get out of school playing Holst, Grainger, Maslanka (big works) and the last thing we want to do is Air for Band, or maybe we pick a piece because we'll enjoy doing it, not considering that my band won't be able to play it. If we are picking music that is well beyond our groups ability we make it harder for them to focus, to make choices and to play with intent. Why? Because their brains are overwhelmed with the skills they don't have yet to play the piece. We also want to pick music that reinforces fundamentals, especially when we are talking grade 7-12. I don't want to be worrying about the dense colors of a grade B600 piece, when my students need to be focusing on air flow, hearing if they're the 3rd or

the 5th of the chord, not if they're the flat 16th against a raised 6th of some chord that's tonic is an e#. Musically if the phrase the student has to make is very long, it's hard for them to focus on what they need to do. So pick music that is at their level musically as well, not just technically. When we choose music that's too difficult we also run the risk of losing band members because the music is too difficult. They think they're less than and aren't willing to put the time in to achieve what can be achieved.

Too many times have I been adjudicating and I see a band director who picked music because they wanted to conduct the piece, they wanted to tell their band colleagues that they have a B500 level band, and you know what? It's not fair. It's not fair to the students who want to try their best to play the rep, they develop some kind of standard that what they are doing is "good" and that they're a B500 level band, or the opposite that think they aren't great. Pick music because it's good for your students, because its good music that is appropriate for the skills and abilities for your ensemble, not your skills and abilities.

The same can be said if we pick repertoire that is too easy. When music is too easy it's difficult for students (heck, even me) to remain attentive to what needs to be done, they get bored. I know some of you may be thinking shouldn't we want students to be able to stay focus even through an easy piece? Well, yes! But I'm talking choosing repertoire for your year or semester. They have to play this piece 1000 more times!

When considering repertoire that your students can focus on it's also important to spread the interesting part love. Imagine yourself back in grade 8 playing, I don't know, playing a 4th clarinet part made up of mostly low A ostinato, for a whole page. Do you think you would want to focus? I don't think I would. The same can be said for the tuba, whole notes the whole piece is just not going to do it. Find music that is interesting for everyone, that helps people develop into artists, not harmony machines. That might mean we have to write something out, that might mean we find a piece that the flutes and trumpets don't have the primary melody.

We need to know where our students are and be realistic with where they can get musically and technically by the end of the year. Find repertoire that is interesting, that pushes their limits but still is attainable, the 20/80 rule is a good place to start. No more than 20% of your music should push the boundaries of your students' technical and musical skill level. The other 80% should be reasonably accessible and allow for focus on the fine details. This gives you the opportunity to grow your students' skills while still giving them room to dig into the details of the music. We need to be selecting music that they can connect with on a musical, technical and emotional level.

Imagery in Action: The BIG Moment

Lots of us have had the experience of playing in ensemble or at least have been in the audience for the climactic section of a piece. The suspended cymbal crescendos, the conductor's gestures get bigger, more intense and land on the next measure and the sound of the ensemble washes over you, sending chills up your back and tears in your eyes, hopefully for the right reasons...

In the rehearsal process it's so easy for us as educators to over explain this moment, play it FFF, listen down to the low brass, TRIANGLE TRIANGLE TRIANGLE, concert eflat not too much, not that FFF, support, blow, it's a e-flat major chord with a flat 11 and sharp 16th on it. Ok, got it? Here we go. How do we think this will end up, with our new idea of focus? Well a few too many factors to be mindful of.

When I was in grade 10 I went on a band trip to New York with the senior band of Three Oaks Senior High, from Summerside, PEI, my band teacher was Mr. Mark Ramsay (now Dr. Mark Ramsay) choral conductor extraordinaire at UofT, Exultante Chamber Singers etc...We were performing at the Festivals of Music in a beautiful old theatre in Newark, New Jersey. As any festival experience begins, we were shown to our warmup room, then summoned from said room by festival staff when it was our turn ("you guys the tree school?") and we went down and played for a basically empty hall, minus our chaperones and the adjudicators. The magic only began after we were done performing when our clinician Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser joined us on stage. He worked on the usual things the adjudicators work on, blend, style, articulation but he went one place I had never gone as a young musician, my experience as a person. We were performing the wind ensemble transcription of Morten Lauridsen's O Magnum Mysterium, transcribed by H. Robert Reynolds. It's a beautiful piece, lyrical lines, beautiful harmonies that are dissonant and uncomfortable at times but open up to great moments of resolution. Dr. Tim (as he is known) asked us to play this section but this time rather than thinking of the many elements that make up the big moment of the piece, think about someone you love, someone still with us or someone you lost. He gave us a moment to think of who, and we played the section again. The whole ensemble was in tears, the audience was in tears, we experienced and gave a real musical moment, we took what was inside of us and played it through our instruments. The musical elements were more balanced, intonation was improved, chills were given and a connection was made. What was it that Dr. Tim did for the ensemble? Did he cast some kind of magic spell? Did he tell us exactly what to think about so we would be on the same page? Nope! What he did give us was, choice. He allowed everyone in that ensemble to think of their own image of love.

This is what we need to give our students if we want them to play with more focus and intent and ultimately if we want them to be better artists. It becomes difficult for the student when you try to press your image of the "big moment", "This is like being on the beach in PEI, walking in the water when a wave lifts you up and transports you to another place.", or whatever it is. Not everyone has had that experience. Real communication, real art comes from when we apply life's pain and joys to the creative process, what's inside of us comes out of the end of my bell or drum or string or voice. That's when students can play with focus and intent because they made the choice of the image, they are thinking how their pain, their joy is now linked to the music of Holst, Vaughn Williams, Nishimura, W. Smith, Shapiro, etc...

Want Focus? Give Focus!

Being in a position of authority as a music teacher or conductor gives us a great sense of power and responsibility. Often, we can fall into bad habits because of this and be quite demanding on our students (maestro-itus) and blame players because we think it's their fault. We say things like "Just focus!", we get angry with them, not even considering...maybe, it's me. Maybe I'm the reason my students are having trouble focusing in rehearsals or performance, maybe I'm the one who is not focused.

I have a colleague at the university who works in the international recruitment department and if you met him you'd know why he is immensely good at his job. His name is Benoit and when he talks to you he makes you feel like you're the only one in the room, the most important, how we should all strive to communicate. I was thinking, how does he do this? What are the characteristics that make me feel special, that make me want to focus on what he's saying? Here's a couple aspects we can think about while rehearsing and conducting:

Focused Communication in Rehearsal

- Make eye contact. Smiling eyes!
- Be expressive in your speech.
- Be yourself.
- Be humble.
- Be vulnerable.
- It's ok to have a sense of humor.
- Be in the present. (Hard but worth the work)
- People are interesting, be interested in them!

Focused Communication in Conducting

- Make eye contact.
- You're more than a metronome.
- Less is more. The left hand is a special thing.
- Be clear, not predictable.
- Score study helps focus.

Label Them, You Limit Them...

This is something I only just began to realize when I started at Cambrian College last year. The college wind ensemble was once a very strong ensemble under the leadership of my predecessor, Brenda Arrowsmith, one of the most giving, loving, caring educators I've ever met. But when she left the position, so did the ensemble, and when I got to Cambrian the band had been gone for 4 or 5 years, so I started from scratch. I made it my number one goal to put some kind of ensemble together to play wind ensemble repertoire, so we did! I think we started with around 20 people in the ensemble, very few were my college wind majors, some were voice and guitar majors who hadn't played in a couple of years, some worked at the college, librarians, retired nursing professor and community members. From the outside I had an ensemble of misfits, some had reputations in the community of playing in, let's say a not blended manner... Luckily, I had the upper hand, why? Because I was new I had no previous judgements of these students, they all started with a clean slate. I chose not to listen to people who told me who I was teaching and because of this we made great strides as ensemble.

The last ensembles concert of the year came and I was so excited to share the work we did. We played the first half of the concert so I was able to sit in the audience for the second half of the concert. At the intermission people came up to me congratulating me on the wind ensemble's success. As I went back to my seat I bumped into a local musician (who I greatly respect) who said to me an interesting compliment, one I had not heard before. They said to me "Wow Dylan, you've really woven a beautiful piece of fabric out of lint..." and I kind of froze, then said thanks. I know this person enough to know that they didn't mean anything negative from the comment and I know that this person also has worked with student's people think of as "less than", so they get it. However, this comment had a profound impact on me and I thought about it for weeks. I finally came to the conclusion that maybe my ensemble was a "beautiful piece of fabric" because I never thought of them as lint. I always viewed them as the beautiful piece of fabric. I never viewed them as less than, I always viewed them as more than and because of that was able to focus on who they could be and most importantly, they could focus on who they could be.

The problem is once we label them we are no longer able to see them in any other way. They are the C student, they are the student who can't pay attention in your

class, they are the lazy student. We as educators must be critical of the label, not the student. Since this is a presentation on focus and intent maybe I should be saying, we need to focus on what can be, rather than what is.

Conclusion

A couple of thoughts to leave you with:

- Look and listen for something new every time.
- Maestro-itus is a condition of unfocused leadership.
- Choice is a gift and we should give it often.
- You don't have to wait until Mahler to connect life to creation.
- Focused listening needs to be practiced just like an F# Major scale.
- · Want focus? Give Focus!
- The repertoire we pick matters.
- Spread the love, spread the focus.
- Be critical of the label, not the student.

Featured Piece

As I mentioned before I want give you some more recourses and ideas to bring back to your band rooms, that's why we're starting a new featured composer segment. Starting us off in this new endeavour is E.K.R Hammell, or as I know him, Evan.

A recipient of the Lloyd Carr-Harris Composition prize, his original music and arrangements have been performed by the Denis Wick Canadian Wind Orchestra; Canadian Men's Chorus; provincial & state honour band ensembles of Saskatchewan, Minnesota & Washington; Trinity Laban Symphonic Winds (UK); PEI Symphony Orchestra; Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra; Exultate Chamber Singers; Sirens; That Choir; Luminos Ensemble; Charlottetown Festival Orchestra; Central Bucks West Choir (Pennsylvania); and the University of Toronto Wind Ensemble, to name just a few.

Originally from Prince Edward Island, Evan is currently based in Toronto, having received a Bachelor of Music Composition from the University of Toronto in 2017. Aside from devising pretentiously abbreviated stage names, his other talents mainly involve playing bass trombone and being impressively bad at cooking and eye contact.

The piece I'll feature today is Skyline, premiered by University of Toronto Wind Ensemble and our friend Dr. Gillian MacKay, in 2018. In Evan's words, "Skyline is an impression of Toronto's cityscape. The piece attempts to synergize a potentially nonsensical mix of ideas in musical terms (anxiousness & coolness, order & chaos,

gracefulness & rambunctiousness, etc.), and does this primarily by building upon a basic aesthetic of perpetual motion and increasingly interlocking layers, patterns & textures.". Although I'm featuring this piece I encourage you to explore Evan's website more, where you can find many more pieces for different levels of groups. Without further ado, EKR Hammell's, Skyline.

Outro

Thanks so much for spending time with us in The Band Room! If you want to learn more, I have attached links to the show notes (found on our website, www.dylanrookmaddix/thebandroom.com) where you can find out more about what I spoke about and the music used for today's episode.

If you liked what you heard make sure to subscribe to The Band Room Podcast and give us a rating and review and tell all your friends how much you enjoyed it. If you really love the show, consider donating to our Go Fund Me Page, helping to offset podcast hosting costs, and investments into new equipment, so we can continue to bring you great content and great people! Follow us on our social media to keep up with what's on the go and if you have any thoughts on today's episode or have ideas for future episodes, leave me a comment on our website or even cooler, leave me a voice mail on out new hosting website (anchor.fm/the-band-room/message). Stay safe, stay inside, wash your hands and be well, Bandies. Thanks again for stopping by the Band Room.

Music Used In Episode

E.K.R Hammell | Skyline University of Toronto Wind Ensemble, Dr. Gillian MacKay, Conductor

Morten Laurdisen, Trans. H. Robert Reynolds | O Magnum Mysterium Columbus State University Wind Ensemble, Robert Rumbelow, Conductor

Johannes Brahms | Symphony No. 1, Mov. 4 University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Barbara Schubert, Conductor

Episode Links EKR Hammell's Website https://ekrhammell.com/

Mindfulness by Dr. Ellen Langer

https://www.amazon.ca/Mindfulness-25th-anniversary-Ellen-Langer/dp/0738217999

