‘Why We Do What We do...’
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I am very fortunate to have been teaching at Albany Hills State School for the past 23 years. The students are keen, enthusiastic and the parents are very supportive. It is a perfect environment to teach the Arts, as I feel blessed to have played a part in the students’ education. At Albany Hills I believe it is vital to understand each child’s personality and to become familiar with their family situation - this is a huge task in a large school. Clear and frequent communication with classroom teachers and parents is necessary to achieve this goal.

I have a firm philosophy when teaching music. If I have enjoyed a lesson, then the students will enjoy it. They will eagerly look forward to returning next week. Every child is special and it is our job to find their hidden talent. I always try to vary my teaching methods. Every class will be different. Our job can be very repetitive but teaching music should be exciting and stimulating.

Performance is an essential part of any music program. Performing enables students to develop confidence and self-esteem. At my school, we have a senior musical, a junior musical, a whole school talent quest, a fancy dress ball and grandparent gala luncheon concert every year. The musicals incorporate all the components of the Arts – dance, drama, music, visual arts and media. Our choirs, three dance clubs and drama groups all participate in our two musicals. Senior students take on leadership roles as dance tutors, backstage crew, as well as sound and lighting technicians. Students are also involved in the painting and construction of backdrops and props.

The whole school community works together as a team. I really emphasise the importance of being a team member to all students who participate. My philosophy is simple. Always give 100 percent, cooperate, and never give up. At the end of a musical production my proudest moment is watching all the students walking onto the stage, bowing, smiling and looking so proud in front of their families and friends.
At this time of year in Term 4, being asked to write an article on “why we do what we do” is probably not what any of us want to think about. With so many out of hours commitments, from competitions to speech nights and concerts, it is easy to forget why we continue to put in the hours we do. And at times maybe even why...

So while I was thinking about this and trying to work out what to write, I figured it was worthwhile to remember where I’ve come from and what put me on this career path. I have to say, I never really was someone who had it all planned out before I left school; there was no real calling to be a teacher, unlike some of my friends and colleagues. I studied music after school because I figured it was the thing I was best at, and as I seemed to spend much of my spare time in rehearsals before and after school it was something I really enjoyed. I didn’t really know where it would lead to from there. What I did learn in my undergrad degree was that I was obviously not cut out to be a professional musician playing in an orchestra, and whilst I enjoyed classroom music at school it wasn’t something that interested me greatly as I’d probably end up teaching something like English or Drama as well. I did however learn to play cello as a second study and was occasionally thrown into the viola section on short notice when there was a lack of players. Then I had the opportunity to have a few lessons in conducting – now this did get me thinking!

My education post grad year was probably the hardest year of my university days, but also some of the best days! I had finally found something I was good at and being on prac and seeing the job from the other side, really did cement for me this was something I wanted to do. That year, combined with my experiences in high school with some amazing instrumental and music teachers, really set me up to go into the big wide world and teach. Then being sent to teach regional Queensland and being the only full time string teacher in town for much of my first three years, did mean it was sink or swim, however the learning curve was immense and I developed greatly as a teacher through that experience.

I also realised during that time I greatly enjoyed taking ensembles and conducting. This has become something of a passion and is the aspect I still enjoy the most about what I do week to week. I often joke that I teach instrumental music so I can take string orchestras and conduct. I know I am now very lucky to teach where I do, work with amazing, passionate colleagues and teach talented students, but then it has taken 20 plus years to get to this point. We didn’t start out where we are now.
When I sit and think of the things that I enjoy about my job and which inspire me to continue every week, there are 3 specific things that come to mind immediately. Firstly, my amazing senior string orchestra at Mansfield State High School. They are a bunch of talented, driven and committed students who are so excited by the music and what we do together I often have to kick them out of the building and tell them to go home at 5pm after rehearsal. I did say recently to a colleague they are an ensemble that has been 18 years in the making and I think it certainly has taken that amount of time to develop that culture, appreciation and understanding. They are excited about playing anything from Vivaldi to Bartok, then a Scottish reel followed by heavy metal. So many of them are musicians that learn only in groups at school too, and I have seen them grow from little timid year 3’s to confident musicians and young adults. I find that truly satisfying and they make me very proud!

Then at the other end of the spectrum, the group of year 3’s I teach every year at Mansfield State School can quite astound me. I find it mind boggling that these little kids can get up at their end of year concert and play pieces so confidently. Sometimes it’s even (sort of) in tune, with a reasonable tone (ish) and some even have decent bow hands! I often wonder if they learn it by osmoses – how do we manage to get so much done in half an hour a week in a group of 8!

Then there is my Mansfield State High School Celtic Strings which has become a great outlet for me. They are a unique multi-level group who learn everything by ear. It is quite satisfying to see younger students inspired by the older players, and all working as a team. The joy of their music making is evident on their faces whenever they perform. I love to see past students continuing on with their music after school. I am lucky that there are now some past students playing with me in the Brisbane Celtic Fiddle Club and really holding their own as musicians. They inspire me to play better and now I am learning from them. One past student’s father told me recently that it “was all my fault” his daughter was passionately involved in folk music and travelling the world going to festivals and summer schools and that I had started her on that path. Well at least he was smiling about it!

So in a nut shell, I guess I am very lucky that I do enjoy what I do, even if the hours are extreme at certain times of the year. I think as music educators we get to know students and their families on a whole different level, just because of the nature of what we do and how we do it. Reminding ourselves that their achievements are truly remarkable no matter how big or small is something we should all do more often – and take pride in.

Lisa Stevenson is a Project Officer (Strings) for the Metropolitan Region in Brisbane. She has been instrumental music teaching at Mansfield State High School and Mansfield State School for the last 18 years. Lisa is a performing member of the Brisbane Celtic Fiddle Club and plays fiddle, cello and celtic harp.
There is a television show on Foxtel I used to watch with my son entitled “Life after Humans”. The premise of the show is to detail the decay of the man-made world in the event of a sudden extinction of our race, going from a few weeds in footpath cracks in the first few weeks to the elimination of any physical trace of our existence in x million years. I used to wonder if they could invent a super long life CD perhaps a small snippet of our story might be preserved for any bug eyed intergalactic archaeologist of the future and if so which bits do we include – what’s in and what’s out?

According to science we are due for extinction in about 500 000 000 years when the sun finally conks out so it’s not urgent but the problem of ‘what’s in and what’s out’, what goes on my CD seems important to ‘why I do what I do’.

In an article I read last year Dr Paul Monk - a noted sinologist and polymath but no musician - nominated the musical canon as the crowning achievement of western man. This seems at least controversial given the advances in medicine, science, engineering, our political and legal systems, Shakespeare, Newton, Christopher Wren, Marie Curie and Lincoln. Yet what other discipline tells our story so succinctly yet also captures the passion and intensity of who we are and have been? What other activity communicates so intimately yet universally? Since we began the process of inventing musical notation, in the 1200s, the best of who we are and have been is most truthfully told (albeit in abstraction) via our musical heritage. For example, the facts of the French revolution are one thing, Beethoven’s 3rd symphony truly captures the spirit of the age. Ditto for Mozart and the enlightenment and for Bach and the reformation.

Of course everyone will have their own story of engagement with music and their own priorities. Mine begins with an encounter with Beethoven’s pastoral symphony when I was nine and really sick. I still have the recording (Van Otterloo with the Vienna Symphony). When completing my undergraduate degree with a well-developed sense of awe at the sheer scale of our musical heritage, I was aware that I
had only scratched the surface. Thirty years later I feel the same. The western musical canon is a colossal achievement collectively as well as by creative individuals. Beethoven Symphonies, Mozart piano concertos, Allegri ‘Miserere’, the Barber adagio, Porgy and Bess, A Night in Tunisia, Firebird, Mahler 2, Duke Ellington… It’s a big list and they seem as substantial and essential to who we are in terms of their meaning and the sheer pleasure they give as any bridge or building. It is both a pleasure and a major responsibility of ours as instrumental teachers to pass on in some small way an appreciation of the musical arts as we individually perceive them. It will be therefore no surprise to anyone that I regularly use orchestral transcriptions (this year including music by Bartok, Handel, Offenbach, Elgar, Holst, Beethoven and Vaughan Williams) as well as the predictable band composers and movie themes in my repertoire choices.

While it is necessary of course, to measure one’s effectiveness as a teacher against the prevailing pedagogies and syllabus objectives, I suggest checking the number of A, Bs and Cs is only one part of our job. Another way to measure our effectiveness is whether our students will treasure their memories of the early morning rehearsals years after finishing school. Whether they will whistle those great tunes and sing them in the shower. Or whether they will turn up to a testimonial 30 years later as I noted at Ralph Hultgren’s recent surprise concert, or whether they will see the music block as a refuge not a classroom while they are at school. Whether, under the pressure that performance and competition provide, there emerges a deep and intense love of the repertoire we guide our students through. While day to day life for an itinerant instrumental teacher such as myself can sometimes leaving me feeling drained and under-appreciated, the bigger picture of nurturing a love for our musical heritage amongst my current ‘flock’ is a challenge I find emotionally exhausting and intoxicating in equal parts. That is why I do what I do.
Jeff: I have seen a few of your ensembles perform recently and was really impressed by what I heard! I thought it would be good to interview you and find out some of the tricks you use to set a solid foundation with your percussion students, starting at the primary level.

What do you think are the biggest challenges with teaching percussion in primary schools?

Sam: Apart from the obvious fact that percussionists are required to learn a family of instruments while making the same rate of progress as other students learning only one, they also lack having the proper equipment at home to practice on. A drum pad is not the same as a snare drum and a student glockenspiel is a far cry from a concert xylophone.

There is also a lack of context when practicing at home. Learning a snare part without any melody is a lot more difficult than people realise. The idea of learning to play rhythms without melody is quite an abstract concept. We don’t teach kids to say the alphabet to a rhythm, we teach them to sing it as a song.

You’ve mentioned quite a few issues that I’m sure resonate with many multi-instrumental teachers. How do you, as a percussion specialist, address each of these problems?

Don’t be afraid to tackle mallets from the very first lesson. The key that I have discovered is to use (and loan to students) desktop xylophones, NOT glockenspiels. They are around twice the price, but are infinitely better than student glocks.

I use these to teach the fundamentals of reading music, which is universal for all percussion instruments. In this way, rhythm and melody are inherently linked from the very beginning. I use drum pads to develop snare drum-specific technique, though it’s important to use actual snare drums as often as possible. Even if this means a class of 8 students rotate around 1 snare drum and 7 pads. Of course these snare-specific techniques are also applicable to other percussion instruments as well. Using desktop xylophones enables students to feel the same sense of accomplishment other instrumentalists feel when they learn a song, not just the rhythmic backing for
a song. I have also found, due to the additional size of the instrument, students have a greater sense of pride in their instrument as it is on par with the quality of the other band instruments. This in turn leads to more practice!

That sounds like a very effective way to motivate students to learn mallets and feel a greater sense of being a part of the ensemble. How then do you address the issue of practicing snare drum on a pad at home?

Practicing snare drum, on either a drum or a pad is all about context. This means playing along to recordings. Always. Not only does this provide context, but also substitutes for a metronome. Percussionists are often required to play autonomously in the ensemble, so playing along with recordings greatly helps to boost their confidence and precision.

It is also vitally important to customise percussion parts for students / sections. Rarely do concert band percussion parts fit neatly into your pre-established percussion section with player and instrument limitations. Don’t simply hand parts out and hope for the best. This is a sure-fire way to destroy your primary concert band. Simplify, combine, add or scrap parts as necessary, but ensure that every student has an interesting and achievable part to play.

I think that’s great Sam, but how do you deal with percussionists learning a family of instruments at the same rate as other students learning only one?

Assuming your recruitment processes is well sorted, focus on snare and mallets equally in lessons. Also, create as many opportunities as possible to play auxiliary instruments – ensure these techniques are taught explicitly. Auxiliary instruments should not be seen as the B-team!

That’s great Sam. I would strongly encourage anyone reading this to try out some of your strategies. It’s a simple plan that clearly works.
There are many reasons why teachers choose to do what they do. One of the main reasons I teach is the reward you get from seeing your students do well. But while it can be one of the most rewarding careers available, it can also be one of the most demanding. With Term Four upon us it really is one of those times of the year when we can get overloaded – and it’s not surprising when you look at your calendar and see all those performances, awards night, recruitment, reporting, spending deadlines, planning for next year, the list goes on. So to keep you doing what you do (and enjoying it) what can you do to make sure you don’t wear yourself out? Below are a few options.

**Prioritise**

This is vital when things start to get busy. When I find myself getting stressed and I’m under the pump, I ask myself “do I really need to be doing this right now?” If the answer is yes, I keep going. If it’s no, find a job to do that will help to reduce your stress levels once it is done. It might be a two minute job or an all-day thing.

The main thing is to get it done and off your mind. You might also find making a list useful.

**Delegate**

This can tie into the point above. Is there someone else that might be able to help you with the task at hand? One of the best ways to alleviate the stress of a big job is to have a team to help you through it. We all know the saying “many hands make light work.”

What happens at school, stays at school; Now I know it’s not always possible to not work at home, but if you can avoid taking work home, this can really help. Your own personal down-time is important and for us to be at our best, we usually need to be our happiest. I like to allocate some time before or after school when I don’t have rehearsals to stay back and get some work done. The school is quiet, there are fewer interruptions and the photocopier may even be free! Getting work done in this time can save you having to take it home.
Socialise with colleagues

Often your teaching colleagues will be feeling stressed at the same time and having a chat with them at the lunch table can really help us to feel like we are not struggling through it all by ourselves. I try to make a habit of getting to the staff room once a day to talk with other staff. As an itinerant teacher it is very important to be seen around the school and to get to know your colleagues. I have also found they can be more willing to send students to lessons more promptly if you’ve spent the time to build a relationship with them. Many schools do drinks on a Friday afternoon, take some time out to attend these a couple of times a term.

Try not to take it too seriously

It is a serious job educating children, but as Instrumental Music teachers we are lucky that we have a subject that is considered fun – and it should be fun. Have a joke with the students and ask them how they are. Many of them have fun and interesting stories they can share. Be sure to tell them some of your interesting stories as well. When it comes to performances, I often find myself worrying that things are just not quite right. I have to remind myself that they are children (not the QSO!) and that they will make mistakes and things may go wrong. It’s all part of the experience and a casual debrief afterwards to point these things out is usually is all that’s needed to rectify the problem for next time.

Have fun!

If you’re having fun, they will have fun. Do some repertoire you’ve never done and that you actually like. I liked Mickey Mouse March when I was in grade 5, but I have heard it enough. There’s plenty of other stuff out there that helps to keep things fresh. Have a joke ready to go for rehearsal. Tell them a funny story. Make fun of someone (professionally of course) or yourself. Keep them smiling and you’ll keep smiling. Teaching should be rewarding and I find one of the best rewards is that students want to stay at lunch time and play for you. My students seem to enjoy coming to their lessons and I’m sure it is because they have a bit of fun while they are there. Hopefully the points above will help you get through the rest of the year mostly unscathed. Some of them (OK, all of them) are obvious but sometimes we all need a little reminder to not sweat the small stuff and just try to make the most of a busy and stressful situation.

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Horn, Oboe & Bassoon Program in 2015!

The Music Resource Centre supports students and teachers in Metropolitan Region by offering an Extension Program for Double Reeds (Oboe and Bassoon) and French Horns. The Extension Program allows students who are already learning oboe, bassoon or French horn through their school Instrumental Music Program the opportunity to attend free extension lessons with a specialist oboe, bassoon or horn teacher. Students benefit through learning instrument specific techniques from specialist teachers and also by meeting, learning and performing alongside students on the same instrument from across the region. The Extension Program does not aim to take the place of the students’ normal Instrumental Music Program or lessons at school, but to extend each individual’s knowledge and musicianship, which enhances their own school Instrumental Music Program.

Specialist teachers in this program will also be offering professional development for staff wanting to expand their skill base in teaching these instruments.

For more information please contact Karen Ruprecht (bassoon), Katherine Zorzetto (oboe), or Karina Bryer (French horn) at the Metropolitan Music Resource Centre.

Professional Development Opportunities:

**Aboda Q—2015 Program Launch**
November 29 3pm-4pm 2014, free but please book a ticket online.
Community Meeting Room, Brisbane Square Library; 266 George St, Brisbane QLD 4001

**Royal School of Church Music—Brisbane Summer School**
Church Music in Practice, January 3-10 2015, St John’s College, Brisbane plus other venues

**Sound Thinking Australia / The Cuskelly College of Music**
Summer School Music Program, January 4—16, All Hallows School, Brisbane

**ANCA—Choralfest**
April 10-12 2015, Wesley College, Melbourne
www.choralfest.org.au

**AUSTA National Conference**
July 3-6 2015, Brisbane Grammar School

**MTAQ—workshops for studio teachers**
- Rhythm, Pulse of the World Workshop — February 21 2015
- Sightreading for Advanced Student Workshop—March 22 2015
  - The Business Side of Running a Studio—May 3 2015
- Piano Masterclass (Grade 5 & up) in Preparation for Exams June 14 2015

Professional Associations for music educators:

**Australian Band & Orchestra Directors’ Association (ABODA)**

**Australian National Choral Association (ANCA)**

**Australian Society for Music Education (ASME)**

**Australian Strings Association (AUSTA)**

**Kodaly Music Education Institute of Australia**

**Queensland Orff Schulwerk Association**

Other recommended providers of professional development for music teachers include:

**Crescendo Music Education**

**Futura Music Education**

**Sound Thinking Australia**

**Solavoce Choral Conducting and Musicianship Courses**

Further information is available from Damian Hoey, 3552 7440,
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