

# A Mosaic on Music Education

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## **Introduction**

Music educators have a profound impact on a student's life. Over ninety percent of schoolchildren in America have the option of taking a music class, which is an overwhelming majority (Give a Note Foundation, 2017). This gives music educators a unique opportunity in the schools to introduce the joy of the arts into their students' lives. This exposure can prompt these students to carry on with music, even when they graduate from school in areas such as church choirs, community bands or choruses, or even becoming professional musicians themselves. However, like every profession, music education involves various components, both seen and unseen to the public eye. It is easy for inexperienced future music educators to feel overwhelmed, but through the experience and guidance of other music educators, they can prepare for excellence in their future career.

However, musical experiences vary greatly from situation to situation. For example, a community choir has to operate differently from the professional symphony in order to achieve excellence. Therefore, properly representing different music education settings is essential to present the entirety of music education in an accurate format. The four music educators I have chosen for this project all reflect this idea of collecting information from contrasting situations.

These educators were also selected based upon their ability to achieve excellence within their spheres of influence. Excellence, in this

study, refers to both the high level of achievement music educators' students attain and the students' and community's overall satisfaction with the musical experience. The four music educators I picked for the purposes of this project have proven themselves to be excellent educators indeed, and short biographies of each educator are provided below.

Dr. Susan Tomkiewicz is the oboe professor at the Schwob School of Music at Columbus State University (CSU). Tomkiewicz has taught at CSU for eleven years and has recently been named the Associate Dean of the Honors College. Each week, Tomkiewicz teaches lessons and holds reed classes for the oboe students, as well as teaching other university-mandated classes. I felt compelled to interview Tomkiewicz because of the competitive, enriching studio atmosphere in CSU's oboe studio. Oboists under Tomkiewicz's instruction regularly win prestigious competitions and attend the nation's finest music programs. This amazing feat attests to the high quality of Dr. Tomkiewicz's teaching.

Mrs. Katti Waller is the chorus teacher at Midland Middle School in Columbus, Georgia, where she has taught for the past five years. Throughout the day, Waller teaches five different classes of chorus, each of which have their own struggles and challenges. However, these choruses continue to receive superior ratings at various evaluations, which is the highest rating a chorus can receive. Waller's commitment to teaching at a high degree is admirable, which made this educator an amazing candidate for this interview.

Mr. Daniel Varner is the middle and high school band director in the Telfair County School System. Varner has taught there for the past seven years and has received straight superior ratings for five of those years in both the middle school and high school programs. I chose to interview Varner because the attention to detail in these ensembles is impeccable, and the ability to foster a strong sense of com-

munity within the band inspires me to want to do the same.

Mrs. Marcia Clark is the choir director at the McRae United Methodist Church in McRae, Georgia. Clark has led the congregation and choir in worshipping the Lord there for a year and a half. Throughout the past few years, Clark has led various types of different choirs, from small chamber choirs to large ensembles. With an extensive knowledge of handling different situations and a welcoming personality, Clark made an excellent addition to this study.

With keeping both diversity and excellence in mind, I selected these four music educators for interviewing purposes. All educators were asked the same four questions that pertained to four important areas of music education: the goals they have for their student, how they engage their students, their personal struggles as an educator, and their favorite part about teaching music. Each fifteen-minute interview has been transcribed and is included below for the reader's aid. After careful analysis of their answers, I have written this paper, detailing the similarities and differences of these educators' answers, for the sole purpose of informing future music educators.

At first glance, the educators' answers seem very different from each other. This disparity could very well make future educators wonder why this is so, for all educators mentioned achieve excellence. However, the fact that so many differences occur while teaching music can bring hope to the future educator, solely by assuring them that there is no singular way to achieve a desired result. There may be times where one course of action does not work, prompting them to switch to another one, and because of the varying answers in this study, this switching is deemed acceptable.

### **Individual Analysis**

For example, by analyzing all of the educators' answers, different

values were discovered in each of them. Dr. Tomkiewicz emphasized the fact that teaching students is well worth the cost of not being able to practice the oboe as often. Having fun in lessons was also a top priority, alongside molding students into being the best musicians and people they can be. This is accomplished by giving students standard foundational works and concepts for them to use outside of the music school. Sometimes, Tomkiewicz has to contradict personal beliefs, such as claiming that a poor performance of a piece sounded nice (alongside providing constructive criticism), in order to encourage the student to keep working. Even so, it furthers the ultimate goal of making students love music more and more.

Mrs. Waller's answers naturally look different. Highlighted attributes include the importance of flexibility in her classroom, from the presentation of repertoire to students, to the class structure, and even with the lesson plans for a particular day! Waller also highlighted the importance of fostering good relationships between all people in the classroom. Waller's goals for the choir outline a desire to have children experience and enjoy music for themselves through use of any means necessary.

Mr. Varner's beliefs heavily revolve around musical and personal development. Varner's favorite aspect about teaching music is the ability to create something from nothing with students who previously did not know each other. Varner focuses on strengthening the weakest areas of the band and keeping students engaged through the repertoire. Personal concerns included lacking in-depth relationships with students and putting personal accomplishments over the joys of musical development. Varner also emphasized the need to effectively manage time so that music educators have a chance to reach out of their bubble.

Lastly, Mrs. Clark consistently stressed the importance of worship and the spiritual aspect in her music. Clark strives to engage both her

choir and the congregation with praising the Lord through music. Clark's struggles included accommodating lots of different types of choirs and managing the struggles that come as the result of people moving. Clark also noted the hardships that come from the limitations of a volunteer choir. However, Clark is always prepared, and the joy of having a choir who enjoys what they do is refreshing to this choir director.

### **Comparisons**

Throughout all the interviews, the common thread that holds these educators together is their common love and interest in music. Their passion in music attests to the reason why they chose their career and why they continue each day to work hard and progress in it. It also prompts them to teach their students in a way that encourages them to pursue music under their direction. Many also highlighted their desire to equip their students with the tools necessary to make music more personal to the student, enabling them to engage in it outside of their instruction. This type of forward-thinking promotes an autonomous relationship to their musical experience, with the educators guiding and suggesting along the way.

Another commonality between these teachers is the idea that music is much more than just a mere performance. Those who are not engaged in the music-making experience (such as audiences, congregations, viewers, administrators, and parents to an extent) often only see the product of the rehearsals rather than the rehearsals themselves. Thus, an emphasis on the need to please these categories of people is obviously present. Additionally, the age of standardized testing in schools has heightened the need for schools to perform well, which may have trickled down to the performing arts as an added pressure to host spectacular performances. Research suggests that an overbearing emphasis on performance, in both the musical and general class-

rooms, has damaging effects on the instructional quality of the material (The National Association for Music Education, 2011). Therefore, the need to look beyond the scope of performance best nurtures the students, which is what all of these educators do. They cite using the performances as a way to showcase what is being learned, not as the sole purpose of the class. The students benefit and learn to love the music itself, which furthers their lifelong love of music.

Yet another common theme among educators is the ability to change what they are teaching to accommodate the students. A “one size fits all” approach would be easier to plan and manage, but it unfortunately does not work, especially when dealing with other individuals. Students all have unique qualities that influence their levels of motivation, attention span, and learning (Felder & Brent, 2005). Not recognizing these areas can lead to behavior problems, limited musical growth, or high drop-out rates. Educators, in turn, have to recognize the needs of the students and use them to best further their program. Examples of these accommodations come in the form of goals that change from year to year or motivation strategies that are personalized for each student. It could even take the form of having multiple lesson plans readily available, so when students are restless with one lesson, the educator can switch to another while still keeping them engaged. In everything, the educator should be acquainted with the fact that a singular approach to teaching students will not yield the best results, and the educators interviewed understand this concept and have adjusted accordingly.

Lastly, all of the educators desire to foster good relationships between everyone involved. Large groups of people working together naturally require some sort of bond between members to accomplish a certain goal, through the aspects of cooperation, coordination, and connection (Greene, 2016). Trust needs to be established and maintained in these types of environments, making the case for building strong relationships all the stronger. Furthermore, the amount of time

that the educators have with their students is much more than compared with the time that any other teacher may have. Dr. Tomkiewicz, Mrs. Waller, and Mr. Varner are required to teach their students until they finish their coursework in the school, while Mrs. Clark may potentially teach the same students for an extended amount of time. In comparison, other teachers only have a semester or year with their students. Therefore, the music classroom is the perfect place to foster strong relationships, and all of these educators strive to make them as positive and uplifting as possible.

### **Contrasts**

Since the educators interviewed teach various different ensembles, it is to be expected that their values and challenges are somewhat different from each other. Upon first glance, Mrs. Clark teaches in the most distinct situation: Clark is the only one not to have taught within the school system. Clark works with adult volunteers, rather than students, which has its own advantages and challenges. For example, Clark cites that church choirs often do not work hard enough to meet the director's expectations. This may be because church choir members have prior commitments (such as jobs, families, other church responsibilities, etc.), or because members are not graded for their performance, or simply because there is no risk of being kicked out (other than attendance-related issues). These issues may make it harder for church choir members to engage at the level that Mrs. Clark expects. Meanwhile, students of the other three educators have little responsibility, as compared to their adult counterparts, and are held accountable through graded performances and attendance records. Directors must note these disparities between ensemble dynamics in order to best prepare and engage their respective groups.

Mrs. Clark's choir is also notably different in regard to its musical purpose and audience. Dr. Tomkiewicz, Mrs. Waller, and Mr. Varner

teach music in a public-school setting, where the ultimate goal of the music course is to develop the students' understanding, appreciation, and skills required to be successful, both in music and in life. Their students come to their classrooms expecting to learn about and perform music, while their audiences come to their concerts expecting to be entertained and to encourage all of those who made the concert possible. However, the setting of the church choir is much different, as explained by Mrs. Clark. Although one of Clark's goals is for the choir to attain a high musical achievement level, the ultimate goal is to connect everyone involved on a spiritual level. A higher sense of community is attained because all of the other aspects of a musical experience are present (development of choir members, support and expectation from audience) with the addition of communal worship. Educators should note upon the expectations in place within the distinct settings in order to best suit the needs of the students and audience.

Of all the educators that were interviewed, Mr. Varner placed the most emphasis on developing students to become more responsible. As mentioned in the interview, Varner does this by giving advanced players authority over the other students in order to better facilitate instruction and encouragement among the band. Responsibility was echoed by many of the other educators as well, but it was especially emphasized in Mr. Varner's because of the unique role of high school teachers. Varner is expected to equip his students with the tools necessary to be successful in a job or in college. Therefore, teaching responsibility to students is not only a useful tool in his classroom, but a tool that will help students throughout their own lives.

The joys in flexibility and creating meaningful relationships permeated Mrs. Waller's interview. Granted, the rest of the educators referred to these values as well, but Mrs. Waller mentioned freedom and camaraderie in response to every one of my questions. This may be because of the nurturing and fragile environment of middle school. Many middle school students are enduring tumultuous times associ-



ated with exiting childhood and entering puberty. Research has shown that the further along children are in their pubescent journey, the less self-efficacy they have in school (Martin & Steinbeck, 2017). Therefore, the caring environment and the personal relationships Waller creates in the classroom serve as a tool to encourage and motivate students. Meanwhile, the flexible aspect of Waller's class tailors to their moods each day and engages them to do the given activity. By making the classroom a positive experience, Waller can serve as a catalyst for students' musical experiences.

The mention of standard curriculum and providing opportunities for students to audition and perform were unique to Dr. Tomkiewicz's interview. Since a large majority of the musical instruction is given through private lessons, Tomkiewicz has the advantage of personalizing the curriculum to her students' particular needs. Tomkiewicz can therefore accurately gauge where students are, prepare them for auditions and performances, and encourage them to pursue these great opportunities. Tomkiewicz also assigns students standard curriculum and teaches them through it, since these standards might be audition material for graduate school or a job. It also serves as a tool to equip these students how to teach the standards in the future, since most students will teach oboe privately when they graduate. Ultimately, everything Dr. Tomkiewicz does in the studio prepares students to pursue music outside of the music school, but it looks differently than the other educators because of the different challenges of teaching collegiately.

## **Conclusion**

All of this information points to the fact that there are numerous wonderful opportunities for the music educator, and they have to adjust and prepare for the specific situation they are in. They should examine their beliefs and goals to pick which setting they want to teach

in based on their responses. For example, if they want to provide a nurturing, caring environment, an elementary or middle school setting would be the best fit for them. If they want to work with people from all age groups, then a musical community group would be beneficial.

This data also suggests that music educators should do everything in their power to spread their love of music in their classroom. By equipping their students to become successful musicians inside and outside of the classroom, their musical legacy will live on. Teachers should also be prepared for whatever comes their way, due to the ever-changing nature of the music classroom. Lastly, in order to be most effective, they have to get to know their students and care for them as individuals. At the end of the day, music educators teach so much more than music: they teach important life skills, such as teamwork, respect, and responsibility that impact students for the rest of their lives (McClung, 2000). Therefore, music educators have the chance to impact the future of their community, just through a music classroom.

Teaching music can be a daunting task. There is much more to the craft than meets the public eye. However, future music educators should not be afraid. The most valuable resource available is the wisdom from experienced and successful music educators, like the ones interviewed for the purposes of this paper. By heeding their advice, equipping themselves with necessary tools and tactics, and bringing new, creative ideas to the classroom, the future teacher should be well-prepared to tackle any challenge that they face.

### **Interview One: Dr. Tomkiewicz**

**Author:** What specific goals do you have in place for your ensemble and/or students, and how do you accomplish this?

**Dr. Tomkiewicz:** Wow, that's a big question! Ok: so, obviously within, well, let's just do oboe studio as our main focus, there is a sort of standard curriculum that we work through with the students. For example, we're doing major and minor scales, and then we'll move to thirds, and then we have our scale books and all of that stuff. There's kind of a plan of what we need to accomplish with regards to the scales and the fundamental books and the Barret. Repertoire: we want to make sure that we cover the standards in our repertoire and then leave some room for doing some different things, kind of like what we're doing moving into the second half of the semester. It's like being sure that we cover those bases so there's a good foundation of fundamentals and an understanding of what is important in the development of an oboe player and an understanding of standard repertoire, but then also being sure that you guys have the tools to be able to work outside of my studio, so when you go into the practice room, you have this arsenal of oboe tools that you can use to continue to progress in your playing without having me there holding your hand every step of the way. That's the ideal situation: we give you the foundation and we give you the tools and we help guide you in the right direction, but ultimately, we're trying to set you up to be successful outside of our studios. Like when you graduate and you don't have a teacher anymore, you can still function and practice and make progress and all of that good stuff. That's really what my overall pedagogy and philosophy is.

**Author:** In what ways do you engage and motivate your students?

**Dr. Tomkiewicz:** A good old-fashioned butt kicking! No, just kidding! Well, I like to have fun, right? I mean, there's stuff: you like to do scales. Most students grumble and groan when they have to do scales: that's like, you gotta do the stuff that might be less appealing to build that foundation that we were just talking about, but ultimately I like to have fun in our lessons, because if it's not fun, then what's the point, in my opinion? But still, be serious enough that

we're working and we're growing.

I think that, and it works a little different I suppose for every student, but I feel like the way that we organize our lessons and the degree of transparency with everything shared online: (the grade sheet being accessible by you, you see exactly how you're being graded) that in itself is motivation because you understand what my expectations are so you know at what level you have to work (to say, if you want and A at the end of the semester, you have to do this level of work and get all the points to do that), so I think that the grading is super picky, but helps in that way. For some students, it's a little bit daunting, but ultimately, I think that the transparency there is important.

And then doing things like when we can do our chamber music units and having studio recitals, you guys auditioning and getting good parts and solos in stuff in the large ensembles and stuff I think is part of it as well.

**Author:** What struggles have you encountered in your career as a music educator, both with students and personal struggles?

**Dr. Tomkiewicz:** Wow, ok. So let's do the student side first: so that would be like what we were just talking about with motivational elements. For the rare student that those don't work for, that becomes really challenging because, normally, if a student is not working and just not really producing and progressing in their playing and in their lessons, like normally you have a little one-on-one moment and you say, "Hey, this is no longer cutting the mustard. You really gotta step up and you need to go in the practice room, or whatever", or like "Make a practice journal and tell me exactly how much time you're spending in the practice room and exactly what you're trying to accomplish". Normally, those sorts of scenarios will work, but I have had students in the past where it does the complete opposite and the student gets even more resistant and they're like totally shut down and you're like "What the heck do I do now?" And so I have found,

maybe like once or twice in my time, even here, that I've had a couple of students where I had to do the total opposite, which was very against everything inside of me. Had to give false praise and build the student up when they didn't deserve it, because that's what motivated the student, and so it was really hard for me because I'm telling the student they're doing a great job and they sound awesome, and really they do not sound awesome and they've not practiced! So it's just like, "Why am I praising this student?" but the other way didn't work. I had to adapt in a way that was uncomfortable for me, but better served the needs of that student at that time. It's been a while since I've had one of those. Hope to not have any more of those.

For me, on the personal side of things, I think that what's the most challenging thing is just finding time to practice and keeping up with my reed supply. We're pulled in so many different directions-you guys have no idea! You kind of see the surface of things, but under the surface, there's twenty-thousand other things that you guys have no idea we deal with almost on a day-to-day basis that just.... There are days when, unless I've played an example in your lesson, that might be the only time I touch my instrument that day. That's the biggest challenge; just carving out a little bit of time to be able to practice my instrument, because ultimately that's what we're trying to do, but there's days when it's impossible.

**Author:** That is so sad!

**Dr. Tomkiewicz:** It is a little bit sad! But the tradeoff is, like, I do this other thing that I really love, and I make it work as best as I can. That would be my wish: if I could have more hours in the day, that I could just practice my instrument!

**Author:** Well, that brings us to our final question: what is your favorite part about teaching music?

**Dr. Tomkiewicz:** I love teaching, period, and that was something that

I discovered when I was in my doctorate. I was going to school to advance as a player because I was going to be an orchestral player, and that was my plan! But in my doctorate, I had my teaching assistantship, so I taught the undergrads when the teacher was out of town and I taught secondary students or non-majors, and then I taught the freshman reed class. I found that during my time there, I just had this love of teaching the instrument in addition to playing. And so I started to gravitate towards that instead of the orchestral experience. I also did a six-week orchestral summer festival where it gave me a taste of what that life would really be like: rehearsals every day, concerts every weekend, gouging cane, making reeds all the time: I'm like "I don't know that this is for me anymore!" But then, at the same time, I was finding this teaching thing that I felt that I was good at and I really liked.

So I think the greatest thing is... I have these students that I get to help shape and mold, not into only great musicians and oboists, but I have a little bit in a part in how you guys develop into adults. Especially through undergrad, because it's a one-on-one relationship, so we have this on-on-one thing where you can't help but to get to know each other a little bit, because you spend an hour alone in my office every week, and then we also have reed class, which is super small. So I think it's not only helping each student kind of find their individual voice as a musician and an oboist. I don't want all of my students to sound exactly the same because that would be really boring, so it's helping you become the best version of Hannah that you can be. But it's also fun to just watch you guys develop as people and see where you end up! Because you guys change a lot in four years, especially undergrad. The grad students are a little bit different, but the undergrads: you guys change a lot from freshman year to senior year. It's a lot of fun to watch... most of the time!

## Interview Two: Mrs. Waller

**Author:** What specific goals do you have in place for your ensemble and/or students, and how do you accomplish this?

**Mrs. Waller:** Overall, or do you mean concerts, or just in general context?

**Author:** In the general context.

**Mrs. Waller:** Over the course of the year, we have to have performances, but I want for their performances to not just be a show. I want it to be that they have learned their music and have developed individual skills themselves. The end goal is that they don't need me: I facilitate and they're able to learn their music. Now that's of course a dream world, and we want to do music that is not just on their level of sight-reading when they begin. I learned the Takadimi system in the last two years, and that does help them learn their music quicker and to actually understand their sight-reading and rhythm. End goal is to help them to enjoy music and to become an individual musician so that they can take it and it's a lifelong skill that they can learn.

That's my end goal. We're working on spring concert music now, and that is the goal for this semester. We just finished LGPE and they did my advanced class that I pieced together from three different classes—learned their music mostly on solfege and Takadimi rhythm and did a good job. There were places that I had to do some rote teaching. But the end goal is for them to enjoy music and to take those skills with them, but of course we have the performances that happen as well.

**Author:** In what ways do you engage and motivate your students?

**Mrs. Waller:** Always ready for whatever is coming my way! Being flexible and, like today, I had something completely different planned for second and third period, and just their demeanor was different, so we did “Friday Listening” and we talked about how, you know, just different tone color when you're singing. We listened to a gentleman

sing and he had no accent, and when he spoke, he had a thick accent, so we just discussed the difference in that. We did kind-of blind audition stuff where they would not look at the singer, but they would listen to them and guess what they thought their age was, and that sort of thing, and then that proved that it actually wasn't true, because when you use a particular technique, what you're hearing is not necessarily what you see.

But being flexible in the lesson plans! As far as them being engaged, with every class it's different. So first period, they're so eager to do stuff on their own, to play the keyboard with their singing, to piece together their own stuff, to put their own flair with it. Second period, on the other hand, is sixth graders, and there are like thirty-five of them in here, and hardly any of them want to sing, or are bold enough to sing out, and so that is just very much trying to help them to feel more comfortable around their peers and build that rapport with them and that relationship with them in the classroom so that they see me as a human and I start beginning to understand who they are and their strengths and weaknesses. For them, their motivation is at the end of the year, they love to play a game called "Silent Ball", so I give up ten minutes of instruction for them to play that game, but really, what they don't know, is that I'm making them look each other in the eyes with it (because you have to make eye contact). It's team building in itself, but it motivates them to sing for me. So, every class is different, and you have to mold and move with it; otherwise, you're gonna be a stick in the mud and they're gonna get to you! They come from all sorts of different places!

**Author:** What struggles have you encountered in your career as a music educator, both with students and personal struggles?

**Mrs. Waller:** Students: my biggest one is getting them to sing! That second period class, the silent ball seems to work for them, but now we're like fifty days out from the end of the year, and I wish that I had



discovered that at the beginning of the year!

And then third period is a group of seven or eight guys and then there are about seventeen girls. And so, one: getting the girls to sing, because there's four eighth graders, and the rest of the girls are seventh graders. The eighth-grade girls are just in my class, not because they like to sing, or because they even care about learning it, but because they're just placed in my class. So my seventh grade babies, who really do want to sing, feel really shy or intimidated by the eighth grade girls, so trying to get them to build relationships across grade levels in order to feel comfortable to sing has been a large struggle, and I am still trying to do something different every single week to see what will help and work.

The same thing goes for having guys in classes with girls. I have asked to have an all-boys chorus because we need to talk about their voice change and the middle school life, and I'm not able to do that with the ladies in the room! So I do try to break them off into groups and talk to them about it, but I would say that that is the biggest struggle there is having males in the same group. Because sixth period, there's only four guys, and then there's sixteen girls. They don't care to sing, and that's supposed to be my advanced class who goes to LGPE. For them, that's challenging. You just can't make them sing; you can't force a child to sing, and they just gotta feel cared for and loved in your classroom before they'll open their mouth and do something vulnerable like sing a note. That's, I would say, professionally in the career, that's the biggest struggle. And personally, just taking it home, and trying to figure it out, and kind of all fold it together.

**Author:** Oh yeah, that would seem challenging, but you've got this!

**Mrs. Waller:** Yep! Just keep on rolling with the punches! It keeps you on your toes and it's never a dull moment, I will say that! You don't get bored.

**Author:** Alright, and that brings us to our final question: what is your favorite part about teaching music?

**Mrs. Waller:** I guess the best thing is that there aren't lines: you are free to be creative and develop your program into what you want that to be. So, if that is, that you're that sergeant teacher and you want them to be this way and you want to file out music that is high in the learning spectrum and that you're rote teaching and that's what your idea is, or if you want them to really delve into learning the sightreading and the notes and the musicianship and what it takes to be an individual musician. You make it whatever you want it to be, and of course we have curriculum and guidelines and that sort of thing, but I love to concentrate on relationships in my classroom and I feel like teaching music gives me time to do that and also to get into them personally and how/what music moves them, and where they come from and how they can use music to help them in those areas of life that might be a struggle, or when they're feeling joyful, and just get to know them and the boundaries are what you make it and you get to do the fun things with them and help them to find that joy of music.

**Author:** Oh yeah, definitely! That is so awesome!

**Mrs. Waller:** It's good, it's good. It's always changing, for sure!

### **Interview Three: Mr. Varner**

**Author:** First question: what specific goals do you have in place for your ensemble, and how do you accomplish this?

**Mr. Varner:** In general or for this year?

**Author:** In general.

**Mr. Varner:** Ok. For the high school ensemble, my goals each year are to see if we can develop one area of our musicianship. If we have younger kids who are really, really good, that are emerging, then we

try to pick literature for them: see what we can do to try to get better in that area. If we have an area that's deficient, like last year, our low brass was very deficient, and so we were hoping that by the end of that year that we would have a stronger section so that this year we would be stronger in our low brass. A lot of times it's about development of certain areas of the ensemble that I do just because outside of festival, everything we're doing tries to focus on a certain area of our ensemble growing. Or, if we're good everywhere, then just being as good as we can on the music that we play. Usually that's what it is. Every year, there's an area that's some type of rebuilding, in some type of whatever. This year for us, it's the clarinet section.

**Author:** Alright: in what ways do you engage and motivate your students?

**Mr. Varner:** Uh, I don't know if I do. [Laughter.] I engage my kids: for us, we try to make sure that we kind of keep it, like the literature and the stuff in class, moving, to where there's no section that's sitting around waiting a long time on everybody. I think that's the biggest thing with band, with that the longer you wait, the more boring it becomes while people are working on different sections. So I try to do what I can to be strategic with that.

The biggest thing that I do engagement-wise: I try to engage kids through the literature. So if I can choose things that will capture their interest, that they actually enjoy playing, and that kind of thing, the literature can help. Like, "I want to come to class because I want to play XYZ," or like "I want to do this because I want to play." I've always used the literature as being my carrot. Like in marching band, we play a lot of the pop thingies and that kind of thing, but if you really weren't into pop music, I think the only thing is that if you're really into country music, then there probably wasn't anything for you here. But other than that, you probably could find a little of something that you might have been interested in, like with the marching band stuff.

Same kind of thing when it comes around to the concert literature. I always choose something for me and then I try to choose something that will engage people to where they want to play it; maybe like your section's featured, or it might be a little more challenging, or you just like the way it sounds. The literature's been the way that I've tried to get people to want to play or to want to practice or to want to... that sort of thing.

With motivating kids: it's really tough for the kids that are at the top of the band. A lot of times, kids are motivated by moving further up in their section. The kids who are already the top, there's not really an awful lot of motivation for them except for the literature. But for the kids in the middle, it's progressing to no longer be on second part, or progressing to be able to have more responsibility musically. I think that the way our band is set up, being from eighth through twelfth, most eighth graders, in some type of way, are gonna go through that process. There's some that are gonna be close to the top the whole time, but then there's some that are actually gonna go through that process, and the more that they go through that, there's gonna be more meaning, and there's gonna be more responsibility, and band will mean more because they're doing more. But I think the more responsibility they have in the ensemble gives them more for that.

**Author:** Next question: what struggles have you encountered in your career as a music educator, both with students and personal struggles?

**Mr. Varner:** I'll do the student one first: there's some kids that I think I never reach, and that's hard, because you hope that what you're doing, and the kids being part of the ensemble, and especially a lot of the bands I've had have been fairly successful, so it hasn't been like musically we haven't done well. But I want everybody to have a similar band experience. You want everybody to be like, "Man, I really enjoy band! I really love band and I love being a part of this," but there's some kids who just don't have that. And I try to engage each of

my students, like to talk to all of them, try to meet them wherever they're at, with what they're into and try to see if I can develop a relationship that's more than "play the note I need you to play". But there's some kids where I just don't get. That's hard: that's hard for me because ultimately, I feel like I have more time than most directors to be able to achieve that, so when I don't, that's really upsetting for me.

Personal struggles with me as a director: I will tell you a struggle that is present, but I don't really have it because I'm really stubborn. Because I really love band: I don't have any personal struggles with what I do that bother me. Like, when I was younger, I had a struggle of trying to keep up with some of my peers. Social media is weird because if people are involved in the activity of being a music educator, everybody's posting what they're doing, right?

And so, it's cool. If you're winning, you're winning. Your kids got trophies, you got this, and you got that. It's really tough: earlier on, I had issues because I was doing a lot more of that and I was missing a lot more of the process with the students. Some of the students I had during those times didn't necessarily feel about me like my students feel about me now, but I think a lot of it was that my goal wasn't for their maturation as much as it was for my accomplishments. It's a really tough thing.

Everybody views it differently: like, I'll give you a prime example. So the middle school made a two this year. Some of those kids are never going to remember that they did. Even if I stayed here and they get superiors for the rest of whatever, some of those kids will never remember that they got a two. It just really doesn't impact them that much. But as a director, if you're severely out of balance, that can be a devastating thing to where you're in mourning about it. It's like, "Who died?" "I did-I just got a two." But for real!

So I think that that's a personal thing: I don't necessarily have that at all now, just because my perspective's really different and I think a lot

of that is because I'm teaching in middle Georgia, and I think that there's a lot of bigger things. Take this year for instance: this year as a whole for Telfair has been kind of a tough year as a community. That gives you tons of perspective: two's not a big deal in the scope in all of that, you know what I'm saying? Teaching, in middle Georgia, for me personally, makes it easier for me to have perspective. I think it would be a lot harder for me to have perspective if I were around a lot of my friends teaching band, because I think that would subconsciously drive a lot more of my decisions than they should.

Another personal thing, which this one doesn't affect me (that one has affected me before, the one that I just mentioned, but now, it really doesn't as much). The other one would be the balance of time as your life progresses as a person. I'm a person severely out of balance with music, so it wasn't a problem until I got married, had a family, and all that kind of stuff. Then you need to find a way to find more balance. You have to rework how you think because I really don't see what I do as work, and I can truly do it all day long. For me, I do what I do band-wise here. I think about band when I'm at home. Sometimes I'm dreaming about band! It's that kind of thing. It's really tough because it's fine if it's just you and you're in your band bubble. And even if it's just you, you're still missing out on humanity around you, and your family, and everything else.

But for me, personally, I never had an issue with that, because I was just doing my thing. In my whole career, I've made subsequent moves for either family or those types of things. I started teaching in Pennsylvania, and the only reason I'm in Georgia is because of how far that was from family. And the only reason that I'm in middle Georgia is because of its proximity to family. I think a lot of those things have informed a lot of things, but I guess for me, the management, the balance of career and what you're doing, family and whatever else, and then the people around you: that has not always been in balance for me.

**Author:** Thank you. This brings us to our last question: what's your favorite part about teaching music?

**Mr. Varner:** It's changed. At the core, for me, the best thing about teaching music is taking something that is not in its completed form and going through the process of refining that. The process of refinement, even as an individual musician, like taking a piece that you're working on, and just trimming it away until you get it to the way you want it. Getting it to where you really can master it and own it, and own the nuances of it, has been the thing that I love the most about music from the very beginning. For me, before I did it with band, I was doing it by myself. And that's it.

Now, the thing that I love most about band is bigger than that. The kids in our program, though they go together at school in Telfair County, would never, ever be together doing the same thing in any other thing if it were not for band. There's some people that are in the same class with each other that would not talk to that person, even though this is one of the smallest schools in the state of Georgia, they would not have conversations, barely even know the person, if they were not in band. For me, I love creating that group and advancing that group over the years and then doing what I'm talking about with the music with that group. To me, that's the big thing. The most beautiful thing is whenever you have something that you play and kids commit to doing that at the highest level possible that they can attain and they're all doing it together, and they really don't have a lot in common other than the fact that they're in band. It's special in a lot of situations like this.

It's different in college. In college, everybody that's in your ensemble is at that level musically. They're into music like that, and they're at that level musically, and they're into that, and they're doing that, as opposed to... There's kids that are in band that are in band for various different reasons. They're getting different things out of band for

different reasons, but you get to create that type of environment and that type of structure for a lot of kids who otherwise wouldn't have that in their lives. That, for me, gives an awful lot of meaning and an awful lot of importance to teaching band. That's kind of the thing I like the most.

#### **Interview Four: Mrs. Clark**

**Author:** Ok, so, first question: what specific goals do you have in place for your choir and how do you accomplish this?

**Mrs. Clark:** Well, can I talk about when we are in a usual time? [referring to COVID-19's effect on everyday life]

**Author:** Yes, please!

**Mrs. Clark:** Alright. My goals for my choir always are, basically, a year in advance when I'm thinking about big programs that we're going to do. Are we going to do a Christmas cantata, or are we going to do an Easter cantata? So those questions have to be answered immediately. And then, after I've decided about that, then I take a look month by month, and I try to always be a month ahead, having already planned out exactly what we need to accomplish for the month. And as far as rehearsal goes, we have to have at least three rehearsals per piece of music, and more than that if it's something complicated or very new to the choir. So I know that's a real skeleton approach to how I do it, but that's basically what we do. I give my music to my accompanist well in advance, three months in advance, so that they're having time to practice and be ready for when the choir has to begin rehearsal.

**Author:** Alright, next question: in what ways do you engage and motivate your choir?

**Mrs. Clark:** Ok, that's a wonderful question. My main purpose as a



choir director is because I'm a choir director in a church, the spiritual aspect of what we do is the primary goal for me. Of course, I'm a musician, and I want our music to be as perfect as it can in a volunteer setting. But the spiritual aspect of our music is the most important. Ask me that question again.

**Author:** In what ways do you engage and motivate your choir?

**Mrs. Clark:** Ok. We always, after we have our initial musical delving into the music-when we have our initial practice on the music, and we begin to learn the notes, and when we have a general idea of the music-then, at that point, we put our music down, and we talk about what it is spiritually. What are we trying to convey to our congregation? How will we engage them in worship, and how will we, particularly, how will we worship? And what is it that this particular piece of music, what does it do for us in our walk with the Lord? That's the first and most primary thing for me as a director.

**Author:** Ok, next question: what struggles have you encountered in your career as a choir director, both with the choir and personal struggles?

**Mrs. Clark:** Well, with the choir, I've been directing for around thirty-eight years now, and I've seen a lot of different choirs throughout my career. I've had choirs that have been close to forty voices. At times, at musical festivals, it's been up into the fifties. But then I've also had very, very little choirs, more of like an ensemble group, which is what we have right now at our church.

And people coming in and out of choir programs has been a difficulty. All of the sudden... I suppose it's like being a schoolteacher, you know. All of the sudden-you've got a great blend of parts; you've got all your tenors and basses and altos and sopranos, everything you need-and then boom! All of the sudden you don't. And so you have to shift gears and completely be willing to just change your total ap-

proach. And that's been difficult: that's hard.

As far as personally is concerned, I think it's the same thing. I think, as most musicians, I have a lot of little emotions in me that are involved, and so sometimes I take it very personally when people drop out of my choir program. I'm... mmm, how do you describe it? I'm very driven for excellence, and I think in a volunteer situation, a lot of people aren't willing to work as hard as I would like them to, and that may be the reason why people come in and come out of choir.

**Author:** This all brings us to our last question: what is your favorite part about teaching music?

**Mrs. Clark:** Oh my! Oh, I just cannot express the joy that it gives me when my choir just gets it! I mean, not just musically, but the whole realm of... dynamically, when they get the emotion of it, when the text comes alive! And you can see it on their faces. Like, "Oh, wow! Yes! This is what she's been talking about for all this time!" That's what gives me the greatest joy! And when I feel like we have done something that has blessed our Lord, for we try our very best to bless Him with praise!

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