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The Music Behind the Notes



As the saying goes, it can be difficult to see the forest through the trees. In a musical context, the instruments and their individual parts are the trees and, of course, the greater majesty of the forest is found in their collective sum, the music. Exploring the connections and distinctions between parts and the whole is one of the fascinating aspects of both conducting and instilling an appreciation of music in others.

For Andrew Gekoskie, Langley (McLean, Va.) High School's Performing Arts Department chair and the artistic director/conductor of their nationally acclaimed Wind Symphony, delving into these connections – among musical parts,

Langley High School at a Glance

Location: 6520 Georgetown Pike, McLean, VA 22101

On the Web: www.fcps.edu/LangleyHS

Enrollment: ~1,750

Music Department Web Site: www.langleybands.com

Enrollment in Music Department: 468

Director of Bands: Andrew Gekoskie

composers and their societal context, how and why a group of musical trees has been grouped into a musical forest – represents the most challenging yet rewarding task he faces as both an educator and conductor.

In a recent SBO interview, Mr. Gekoskie spoke of the importance of his rehearsal process, which he hopes leads to exploration, discovery, and, ultimately, epiphany.

School Band & Orchestra: What is your primary instrument?

Andrew Gekoskie: I've played piano from the age of five. When I went for my bachelor's degree, I was also a trumpet major.

SBO: Was it your idea to play the piano at such an early age?

AG: Yes, actually. I played the piano and the organ. When I was nine, I became an assistant organist at the church my family attended in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, where I grew up. I wanted to play music, so I tried out for the church position and was accepted.

SBO: And you later transitioned to trumpet?

AG: In middle school when the high school bands were recruiting, I thought, "Well, you know, let's try something else, too." I decided to go for a brass instrument in addition to the piano and chose the trumpet.

SBO: And then you went on to study music education?

AG: Yes, at Susquehanna University.

SBO: What brought about that decision?

AG: My model band director was Larry Cooper, who is retired now, but was the director from my high school. I wanted to go to the same university that he had attended. He's really the reason that I wanted to become a musician and a teacher. Being a musician came first; the idea of teaching came second.

That's really how it came about... it was just a love of music. Everything that was a part of my being when I was growing up was music. Whether it was playing piano or playing organ or playing trumpet, I just couldn't get enough of it. So I thought it would be a neat profession to go into, and then I thought that maybe I could share what I know with other people.

SBO: So that's why you chose teaching rather than just performing?

Notable Performances:

- Invited Featured Band – Wind Symphony – Western International Band Clinic (WIBC) Seattle, Wash. – November 2007
- Featured Invited Guest Ensemble – Wind Symphony – New York Band and Orchestra Festival –Carnegie Hall, N.Y. – April 2007
- Invited Ensemble – Wind Symphony – Bands of America National Concert Band Festival – Clowes Hall, Ind. – March 2005
- Featured HS Band – Wind Symphony - MENC Bi-Annual National Conference – Minneapolis Convention Hall, Minn.– April 2004
- Invited Ensembles – Wind Symphony and Symphony Band - Ensemble Debut Series – Carnegie Hall, N.Y. – June 2003

New Music Commission Project – Langley Commissions:

- "TBA" – Rolf Rudin – TBA – 2007 Consortium Member
- "Mosaico Mexicano" – Arturo Rodriguez – April 2007 World Premiere – Carnegie Hall
- "Renascence" – Christopher Marshall – 2007 Consortium Member
- "Voice of the City" – Richard Danielpour – 2006 Consortium Member
- "Dusk" – Stephen Bryant – April 2004 – World Premiere 2004 MENC Convention

AG: Right, but I like to do both. I do a lot of guest conducting, which is really my first love now. I've shifted from playing piano and just doing the teaching to really doing a lot of conducting.

SBO: What did Mr. Cooper do that turned you onto music?

AG: His idea was, "If you are going to do something, do it the best you can." It was all about achieving excellence. Whatever you decide to do, dive into it and learn as much as you can. That's how his rehearsals and private lessons were, that's how everything he did was. It was that motivation, that sense that "this is really important, so let's share it with other people" that caught me. This is the approach that I've tried to carry on in my own teaching.

SBO: Tell me a little about Langley High School?

AG: It's an AP school, so the stress level is high among students. It's an affluent area, but at the same time, the attitude is one of very high achievement. There's that extra impetus from the students of, "Okay, I'm in this ensemble and I auditioned for it, and I'm going to do well." There's constant communication with the students and it's really neat because they're not afraid to try new things.

We have something called the New Music Project, in which we try to commission a new piece of music every year. Financially that's not always feasible, but, as much as we can, we try to commission a new work and then, if possible, bring the composer in to rehearse the piece. This allows the kids to find out what the music is really about, what it meant to the composer, beyond just the notes and the rhythms. It helps students explore what's behind the notes. Kids get to think about how there's a human being behind this music, and ask, "Why did he or she write it?" They actually get to sit down with the composers, often, and have lunch with them, and those kinds of things. I think that's the most exciting thing we're doing right now – we're having a lot of fun with that.

SBO: How did you end up at Langley?

AG: I was a music supervisor in Texas prior to coming here. I taught music in Pennsylvania for 13 years before that. In Texas, I had a wonderful opportunity to start building a program at a school south of Houston. But I have a wife and four young kids and we were too far away from the rest of our family, most of whom live in Pennsylvania. So I moved back here because of family, something which is very important for me.

Shortly after we decided to move up here, I received a phone call from Stan Scoonover, who is the music specialist here in Fairfax County and a man I've known for over twenty years. He mentioned that there was an opening in the system, so I applied and was fortunate enough to be selected for the position.

SBO: And what sorts of ensembles do you currently have?

AG: Our top ensemble is the Wind Symphony, which has 72 members. Our second group is the Symphony Band, which has about 62 students. We also have a symphonic band with approximately 40 students and a concert band of about 10 students, which is the ensemble for students who are just starting to learn instruments.

We do some formations for football games and pep performances, but our emphasis is on the concert bands.

SBO: Is there crossover amongst the bands?

AG: Generally, each group has their own ensemble. On top of this, we have three classes of percussion

ensemble. We also have woodwind and brass ensembles, jazz band and other extracurricular groups.

SBO: Let's talk about your Wind Symphony, which has performed at Carnegie Hall, been featured in MENC national conventions, and this year is one of two American ensembles who has been invited to Seattle to perform at the Western International Band Clinic.

AG: [laughs] Yes, it's been great!

SBO: How do these performances come about?

AG: Usually I send CDs and bios of the ensemble to these places and we hope to be selected. Our first major performance was at Carnegie Hall in 2003. We had to send materials into MidAmerica Productions, who organize the concerts. It was basically an audition process through CDs and repertoire, et cetera. The next year we were selected through a blind audition to perform at the MENC national conference. We played Carnegie Hall again last year, and that time they came looking for us. World Projects International called one day and asked us to be a feature performer at a band and orchestra festival they were putting on at Carnegie Hall. They selected us and Shenandoah Conservatory as feature ensembles. Holmstead (Calif.) was also one of the features.

SBO: Do you think that your students grasp the significance of performing at such a venerable venue as Carnegie Hall?

AG: At first, no, but when they get there and actually experience the atmosphere, you can see it dawn in their eyes and on their faces. It took us all by surprise the first time – so I was ready the second time we played there. At first they're thinking it's just a concert in a nice hall, but when they're treated like professionals by the staff and they get up on stage and hear the first chord in rehearsal, you can see their eyes light up – and that's just from the acoustics of the space, there's no one in the hall. It's an amazing experience.

At that point, you have them. At that point, the process that you've gone through becomes important. It becomes a matter of everybody rising up to the occasion. It's thrilling to see the kids' eyes light up. Those moments solidify the process of our teaching. That's when the kids realize, "So this is what it's all about."



SBO: And what do you do to prepare them for this occasion?

AG: I think it's the approach to the day-to-day rehearsals and making every single one the best you possibly can. As a teacher, I have to be "on" every day in order to give my students an amazing experience, the best that I can. I think that that process of going through all the hard work and all the rehearsals, really crafting the music, finally makes sense once the students get to a big venue.

Without that process of delving into and digesting the music in rehearsals, the concert becomes the most important thing; but, really, it should be the other way around in order to enjoy the music and the concert – the day-to-day routine of focusing on every note and making everything you do about music, how you set up, how you come into the room, how you approach challenges – you have to make it all about understanding and appreciating the music.



Competition isn't our main focus. We love to perform in front of new people and hear other groups, but our main focus is on the music making. Again, it goes back to thinking about what the music is about and playing it the best we can.

SBO: Oftentimes, the competitive aspect of festivals is used as motivation. Do try to you avoid that?

AG: At my former schools, I've used competition as motivation. I think it really depends on each circumstance – each school or program might need to use different tools to motivate its students. Here, the students really enjoy the concert aspect of our performances. They enjoy the music making and finding out what's behind the notes. It's almost a bit more intellectual. That's not to say that competition isn't intellectual, but my students like that stimulation of finding out what's behind the notes and really digging in: exploring what we can do to make the rehearsal process better, so the composer's intent comes out. That way, when we perform, we're prepared and able to simply recreate a work of art.

If I were back in Texas, I would phrase it differently and focus on the competition: "We have to go here and do the best we can, here's our competition, and here is what the judges are looking for, et cetera." You have to analyze your situation and then try to make the best of it.

SBO: What is unique about conducting and preparing a Wind Symphony?

AG: For me, the challenges are to get every one comfortable and free enough to go with an interpretation. Our motto is, "A rehearsal is not designed to learn notes and rhythms. A rehearsal is designed to learn the music and how everything relates to everything else." For instance, if I have a trumpet passage and some measures earlier there was a similar flute passage, we have to ask, "How do they relate?" or, "How don't they relate?" It's all about making those musical connections between the parts and between the instruments. Getting the students to really listen and really observe what's happening with the other members in the ensemble is the biggest challenge.

In order for us to make this musical conversation, students have to know their parts. We keep our standards very high.

SBO: How do you maintain those standards?

AG: One way we do that is by having guest artists who come in weekly. Some people call them section coaches, some people call them guest artists, but we bring them in and they will go over specific ideas with their particular instruments. It's really fun to see the students realize, "Oh, I have this and this is the composer's intent, so I can do this!" Having students make all of those connections is a challenge, but when it happens it is also the most rewarding aspect of what I do.

When kids realize the connections, when their eyes light up, when you hear them humming in the hall, when the kids even start researching on their own – "Well, he lived in this time period, so he was probably going through this when he wrote this" – that's when I see the green light and realize the light bulb has been turned on. Making it an atmosphere of connections is the greatest part. It's the most challenging, but also the best part.