

# A PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST (TEACHER-SCHOLAR) AS A YOUNG SAX PLAYER

by

MELANIE HOWELL

STUDENTS WHO EXCEL IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED NOT TO 'DILUTE' THEIR PERFORMANCE TRAINING BY TAKING COURSES DESIGNED FOR MUSIC TEACHERS OR SCHOLARS; CONVERSELY, THOSE WITH LESS POTENTIAL IN THE PERFORMANCE ARENA ARE OFTEN RELEGATED TO THE MUSIC EDUCATION DEGREE PROGRAM.

— L. SCRIPP AND R. SUBOTNIK, 2003

When I first came to Lawrence University in the fall of 1997, I declared a major of Music Education with an emphasis on classical saxophone. However, I soon became aware of the discouraging class distinctions that were being made between Music Education and Performance majors. While a full, hour-long recital and an upper-level jury were required for Performance majors, as a Music Education major I was only required to give a 30-minute recital and to go through a lower-level jury. Why? I wondered. Was it because the school believed that the Music Education majors would have neither the time nor ability to finish the full recital? Was it because they couldn't meet the high expectations of the Performance major? I found those questions rather disturbing. My goal was not only to achieve a high level of expertise in teaching, but also in performance.

So I felt somewhat short-changed to begin with—a second-class citizen—but the feeling soon got worse as I began to notice the negative attitudes some of the Performance majors had toward those of us who were tracked to, or who chose, Music Education; in not-so-subtle ways they implied we “couldn't hack it” as performers. Unfortunately, some of the Music Education students themselves reinforced that attitude by admitting that that was precisely they were becoming teachers. Even my Performance majors friends also sometimes asked why I was “wasting my time” with all of the education classes.

By the end of the first term, all of these attitudes really began to grate on my nerves. I felt intuitively that in order to be an excellent teacher, one should also be able to become an excellent performer; encouraging or enabling mediocrity in any way would only create a tendency to teach for mediocrity. After finding out that adding the Performance major requirements wouldn't take me any longer to graduate, I decided to make a change. I was determined to break the negative stereotype of the Music Education major. I wanted the same opportunities as the Performance majors.

Still, I admit I was a little apprehensive about making this change. Would I be taking on too much? Could I “hack it?” Perhaps I had internalized some of the negative attitudes after all. However, I had the good fortune (as others do not, unfortunately) that my saxophone professor at Lawrence, Steven Jordheim, was fully supportive of my efforts. He fully understood my desire to be at the top of my game not only as a teacher, but as a performer; in fact, he was the first person to demonstrate to me that artistry and teaching are intertwined on many different levels. Although at the time neither of us



MELANIE HOWELL IS A RECENT GRADUATE OF THE NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY WITH A MASTER'S DEGREE IN JAZZ PERFORMANCE. SHE HAS ALSO RECEIVED A BM IN MUSIC PERFORMANCE-SAXOPHONE AND A BM IN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC EDUCATION FROM LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY. A JAZZ AND CLASSICAL MUSICIAN/EDUCATOR IN THE BOSTON AREA, MELANIE WAS ALSO A RESEARCH ASSISTANT IN THE NEC RESEARCH CENTER FOR LEARNING THROUGH MUSIC IN CHARGE OF DATA COLLECTION AND DATA DISPLAYS FOR PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND MUSIC TESTING AT THE CONSERVATORY LAB CHARTER SCHOOL.



*MIE Guided Internships at NEC link students' professional work with opportunities for individual teaching and learning. Many students enrolled in the MIE Concentration program are concurrently involved and mentored by the Conservatory's Performance Outreach program headed by Tonya Maggi. In this picture, violinist Erin Hauch performs for students at the Children's Museum in Boston, as part of an artist residency/internship she was doing there. (Photo: Tanya Maggi)*

had heard the term that I have since become so familiar with at NEC, he was my first mentor in the idea of the “Artist-Teacher-Scholar.” As an artist, he had won a number of major competitions in classical saxophone; as a teacher, he made sure all of his students upheld the highest quality in their performances, whether they majored in Music Education or Performance. During our studio performance class, we would perform our solos, quartets and groups in front of all of the other saxophone students, and then be critiqued by our peers and by our professor. Sometimes, he would have a student come up to coach the performer and we would then discuss the coach's teaching techniques. Prof. Jordheim always made a point to remind the performance-only majors that they would, at some point in their lives, also have to teach—and what's more, that they would probably even *want* to teach. As a result it was important that they be able to coach groups and teach lessons as effectively as any Music Education major.

As I progressed in my dual focus, I became more and more interested in private teaching and teaching in higher education. I also developed an interest in working to build community music programs that would involve college level music students. Although I knew some college music professors were hired because they were excellent performers whether or not they could teach, I now knew for certain that in order to reach my goals, it was absolutely necessary for me to continue my Music Education background. I began to look for important connections between how my education classes and my performance opportunities were actually working together to further my artistry, instead of conflicting as was generally believed.

One of the first important connections I noticed occurred in my percussion techniques class, a Music Education requirement. My biggest weakness as a sax player had always been reading rhythms; in fact, back in high school, I used to estimate and gloss over passages that had more

THE FEELING SOON GOT WORSE AS I BEGAN TO NOTICE THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES SOME OF THE PERFORMANCE MAJORS HAD TOWARD THOSE OF US WHO WERE TRACKED TO, OR WHO CHOSE, MUSIC EDUCATION; IN NOT-SO-SUBTLE WAYS THEY IMPLIED WE “COULDN'T HACK IT” AS PERFORMERS. UNFORTUNATELY, SOME OF THE MUSIC EDUCATION STUDENTS THEMSELVES REINFORCED THAT ATTITUDE BY ADMITTING THAT THAT WAS PRECISELY THEY WERE BECOMING TEACHERS.

complex rhythms. However, in that percussion class we worked out the strangest and most complicated rhythms I'd ever seen. All at once something finally clicked inside my head. I started taking to the percussion class some of the more rhythmically complex and challenging saxophone pieces I was planning on performing. That class taught me to treat complex rhythms more as a puzzle to be logically figured out,

---

**PROF. JORDHEIM ALWAYS MADE A POINT TO REMIND THE PERFORMANCE-ONLY MAJORS THAT THEY WOULD, AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES, ALSO HAVE TO TEACH—AND WHAT’S MORE, THAT THEY WOULD PROBABLY EVEN WANT TO TEACH. AS A RESULT IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THEY BE ABLE TO COACH GROUPS AND TEACH LESSONS AS EFFECTIVELY AS ANY MUSIC EDUCATION MAJOR.**

---

instead of simply guessed at. Not only did I gain valuable information about how to read rhythms for myself, but I also gained new techniques for teaching rhythms to students—techniques I doubt I would have discovered myself. Such techniques classes are typically treated as just another tedious requirement toward the degree; however, because I had been alerted to how artistry informed teaching and vice versa and was now actively engaged in the dynamic myself, I was able to see the class as a great opportunity to approach and refine my own practice and teaching techniques.

Another class I found very valuable to both my teaching and artistry was *Rehearsal Techniques*, a year-long requirement for the Music Education degree, in which the students learned how to teach by practicing on each other. Several of our assignments included choosing an instrument that we weren't as comfortable with and teaming up with a classmate who was proficient on the instrument. We would then hold "mini-lessons" in front of the class. The student would begin by playing something he/she had worked on for the week as an assignment, and then the teacher would pick out something to work on during the lesson, such as sound, posture, hand positions, and basic principles of the instrument. At the end of the lesson, the other members of the class would give suggestions to the teacher—e.g., ideas for effective warm-ups and how to order the lesson, ways of being concise and of teaching by demonstrating instead of lecturing.

This dynamic interaction benefited everyone involved; the teacher got valuable ideas for how to make his/her instruction clear, and the student—especially for a performer and teacher who actively doubled on other instruments—gained new suggestions and insight into an instrument that was not their primary one. I found the class not only improved my techniques as a saxophone teacher and player, but also improved my ability to play the clarinet; in fact, after taking all of the techniques classes and learning a little about each major instrument, I found it a great deal easier to write and arrange for those instruments. For example, because I've had a little experience playing the trumpet, I now understand what the comfortable range of the trumpet is, and perhaps more importantly, what is not. One could certainly read about the ranges, as well as the tricky nature of brass instruments in general, but there is no substitute for the experience of actually having played that instrument.

All these new ways of understanding the interweaving of artistry and teaching informed the way I taught young musicians at the Lawrence Arts Academy. The Arts Academy hired students as guided teachers. During the first year of teaching, we were all required to submit a tape of our teaching as well as fill out progress reports every semester for the students and parents to see. One of my most interesting teaching experiences involved my first ever student, a 7th

grader named Lisa, whom I ended up teaching for the next four years. This experience made it even more clear to me how essential it was for me as an artist to teach. Most of all I learned that it is just as important that the teacher learn from the student as it is that the student learn from the teacher. When Lisa and I first started working together, she had more bad practice habits than I could count. However, interestingly, I found that observing and correcting her bad habits made me realize those that I needed to correct too. For example, Lisa was intimidated by performing in front of people, but working with her on her approaches to both practice and performance helped me sort out ways to deal with that issue in my own preparations for recitals. Crucial aspects of performance like posture, attitude, and focus began to define themselves more clearly in my mind. Being able to define and articulate my thoughts on how to practice in a way that obviously helped someone else reinforced my personal approaches and made me vastly more efficient in my own practice time. In short, as a result of working with Lisa, I soon began to take my own advice. It became increasingly impossible to tell Lisa to sit up straight and then not to do so in my own practice sessions. As Lisa

---

**BEING ABLE TO DEFINE AND ARTICULATE MY THOUGHTS ON HOW TO PRACTICE IN A WAY THAT OBVIOUSLY HELPED SOMEONE ELSE REINFORCED MY PERSONAL APPROACHES AND MADE ME VASTLY MORE EFFICIENT IN MY OWN PRACTICE TIME.**

---

became a more confident and proficient performer, so did I.

After I graduated from Lawrence, I decided to attend New England Conservatory for a Master's degree in Jazz Performance. As I had primarily studied "classical" saxophone in my undergraduate years, I was now seeking to expand my knowledge base and diversify enough to be a successful musician. Although I chose to be a Performance major (as there are at present no graduate Music Education Majors at NEC), I wanted to be sure that I was still involved in teaching at some level, so I contacted the school's Music-In-Education Department to find ways I could become involved.

As it turned out, the MIE department that year happened to offer a fellowship through the Conservatory Lab Charter School in Boston. To my delight, the principles and practices of the MIE program, designed to foster the development of performers who are also excellent teachers and scholars, fit perfectly with the ideas and methods that I'd started to formulate at Lawrence. I worked for two years with Dr. Larry Scripp, Founder and co-Director of the Conservatory Lab Charter School (CLCS) and Founding Director of the Music-In-Education Program at NEC, as his research assistant. Further, during the course of the fellowship at the CLCS, my identity as a researcher developed as well. I was able to begin to see how much thought and effort goes into the development and implementation of an assessment program in a public school. As I became more familiar with this process, I was able to formulate my own ideas on assessment issues, such as the importance of using student portfolios in conjunction with testing to evaluate a student's progress. My work at the CLCS also raised for me an interesting question about the value of using small portfolios and/or practice journals for private students too.

This experience was enhanced the following year as I was exposed to more in-depth research into the student portfolios, examining among other questions how music was being used to enhance other academic area lessons. This

---

**ALTHOUGH I ENTERED NEC THINKING I WAS DESTINED TO BE FAIRLY ALONE ON MY PATH TOWARD DEVELOPING MY IDEAS ABOUT HOW EXCELLENCE IN PERFORMANCE IS BOTH INFORMED BY AND RELIES UPON EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING, I GRADUATED SURROUNDED BY OTHER MUSICIANS WHO SHARE A SIMILAR PHILOSOPHY AND ARE ACTIVELY SEEKING OUT WAYS TO WORK WITH LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO DEVELOP THEIR MUSIC PROGRAMS IN PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS. AS A RESULT I SEE A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR THIS APPROACH TO MUSIC, WHICH PROVIDES A CLEAR WAY FOR PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS TO GIVE TO THEIR COMMUNITIES WHILE BUILDING LARGER, MORE EXCITED LISTENING AUDIENCES.**

---

research, as well as the creation of MIE portfolios for each of my classes and one cumulative portfolio, sparked a number of other ideas of how I could use them in future. For instance, after I finished up my cumulative MIE portfolio, I found it useful that when I applied for teaching jobs, I could hand them a CD of myself as an Artist-Teacher-Scholar. The portfolio includes samples of myself in performances, personal statements about my teaching philosophies, scholarly research, as well as other examples of myself in the ATS model.

Although I entered NEC thinking I was destined to be fairly alone on my path toward developing my ideas about how excellence in performance is both informed by and relies upon excellence in teaching, I graduated surrounded by other

musicians who share a similar philosophy and are actively seeking out ways to work with local school districts to develop their music programs in partnerships with local arts organizations. As a result I see a bright future for this approach to music, which provides a clear way for professional musicians to give to their communities while building larger, more excited listening audiences. While even at NEC there is still a bit of a false dichotomy between the Performance major and the Performance major who is also pursuing the MIE concentration, the gap is closing. In fact, as more programs focusing on the Artist-Teacher-Scholar model, community outreach, and effective arts and education partnerships are introduced to higher education communities across the country, the distinction may no longer make any sense at all. ¶