

“Competition in Music is a Lesson in Life”

by Anthony Enslow

Jessica Lizak, WCMS faculty flute instructor, recently sat down with me to share some ideas for this issue about music lessons, learning, and more. As we spoke, a theme emerged centered on competition. Since WCMS is on the heels of having conducted a successful mock-audition for Massachusetts Music Educators Association (MMEA), and the fact that WCMS students did well, it seemed like a great topic.

Jessica, an accomplished performer herself, has had numerous students place and win in auditions, especially at the MMEA district competitions. In addition to her impressive music credentials, she has had experience with both dance and sports, and understands the pulling forces of all that is available to young students today.

AE: We’ve brought up competition a few times and it is clear you believe this is a critical part of music learning.

JL: With music lessons, students gain incredible insight into how to successfully and healthfully practice—for enjoyment, recitals, goal achievements, personal interest, and performance in ensembles. Entering into competitions and auditions allows students to use this information and overcome musical challenges from an enhanced perspective. The pressure of a deadline encourages students to focus their attention on the task at hand, just like an exam at school or a project at work. The skills involved in the process provide a lesson in life. You spend time preparing to the best of your ability (even further!) and then present it all in what feels like a flash of a second. In this sense, music study parallels familiar life skills, like preparing for a job interview or thinking ahead. Mastering skills in music helps build confidence. You learn more about yourself.

AE: And the process helps students work through strong emotions...

JL: One has to be able to objectively (and emotionally) know how to break things down to build them back up again. Laughter, tears, frustration are all a part of the learning process. Music becomes an expressive and powerfully communicative way for someone to channel emotions. Probably the greatest benefit of competition is the chance to embrace a higher set of standards. Without a clear goal, it is hard to define achievements. I truly believe in striving for excellence with all I do. I pass on that energy, encouraging my students to do the same.

AE: I noticed you said “excellence,” as opposed to “perfection,” which I infer means excellence is always attainable, while perfection is not. Do you agree?

JL: There is a quote by Harriet Braiker: "Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralizing." Perfection does not exist. The concept of perfect varies between one person and another. Of course, there are a certain set of qualities and items on a check list that must be at such a high standard before one can present convincingly and with confidence. It is the act of perfecting the details that leads to capturing excellence.

AE: In my own experience performing as a child and later professionally, I know there are many levels of competition in music, from auditioning for an orchestra to aiming for first chair in middle school. What other forms of competition in music are obvious, and not so obvious?

JL: Many students have auditions within school for placement in music ensembles. Typically they are tiered based on levels of musical ability. Then there are MMEA district and All-State auditions. These are one-time-only honor band/orchestra experience. There are also regional orchestras, and youth programs such as BYSO, NEC Prep, MYWE, are elite and competitive. Other than that, students must learn to compete with themselves. Play every note and every day to be better than yourself the previous day.

AE: What are some of the standards you set for your students?

JL: I encourage conquering at least one audition/competition and performing in at least one recital per academic year. But I also consider the individual student and his or her particular level and needs. Sometimes a student benefits more from further individual attention from me before going out and presenting. Aside from music skills, I also incorporate information about how to behave in a professional manner, including how to present with confidence, complete the appropriate applications, write accompanying essays, and in general present themselves as musicians and as people. Poise is essential and is found when you are true to who you are. Don't try to play like someone else; play the way you have practiced and be YOUR best. You may be the exact person the judge has been looking for all day.

AE: You mentioned how some students have amazing achievement in one area but perhaps are failing at something in a lesson. Can you share your insights?

JL: I always use sports analogies. The path to achievement in sports is similar in music. We use our bodies to make our instruments sing. I love sports myself and many of my students excel in a sport. I am an avid runner, okay tennis player, and former ballet dancer....these are easy avenues of comparison for me, enabling me to relate. Other instructors excel in other ways they can relate. The key is to focus on something the student has achieved elsewhere in his or her life and relate it to a point being made in the lesson. Take breathing as an example. Sometimes I have to remind students that an instrument is just a piece of metal without us. It needs our energy and air! I sometimes tell a student to just go outside and do a mad dash for a mile or so. Then, immediately come back to the flute and just blow. This frees up the air flow and allows them to fill the instrument with a more natural feel. It is all about being as creative as possible and using all one's resources to excel.

AE: I have on occasion seen children persuaded to pick an instrument based on the chances they might have playing more down the line.

JL: A student should always choose the instrument that intrigues him or her most. You have to love the sound of your instrument and have a desire to pick it up every day. You have to love the challenges that come with your instrument. Never choose an instrument for a superficial reason. It will be your voice, your means of wordless expression. You can only do this well when it feels natural to you. The competition among flutes is extremely high, especially in the Boston area. To be accepted into an elite program or ensemble is quite difficult when there are only three or four positions in a symphony orchestra. A violinist may have more opportunity to be accepted in an orchestra simply because there are more seats – but that is not meant to downplay the challenge. I help all my students prepare seriously and healthfully so that they have the greatest chance of success. I also lend them support and credit when they work hard and deserve it, despite the outcome.

Loving the sound of the instrument and making the effort to play as much as possible are far more important in the long run than winning a single audition in the short term, but winning because you are passionate about your instrument is immeasurably gratifying in so many ways

AE: Thanks for your time and your thoughts. Final question: “Flutist” or “Flautist”?

JL: For me....flutist. :)