

Etude Symposium: Motivating Your Musicians to Practice



About the Etude Symposium

Encore Tours is dedicated to supporting music educators; through professional networking events and music educator resources, we help ensemble directors develop and maintain strong music programs.

The Etude Symposium was created to provide music educators with both some inspiration and some resources that they could use in their everyday professional practice. On Sunday, May 17th, 2015 Encore Tours was proud to welcome over 60 people aboard the yacht *Elite*, for a seminar on 'Motivating Your Musicians to Practice'. While enjoying a scenic cruise of Boston Harbor, the audience of ensemble directors from across New England heard a panel of experts share their experience and ideas.

Speaker Biographies

DR. CAROLYN WATSON is Conductor of the Interlochen Philharmonic and Interlochen Arts Camp at the renowned Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. She is the recipient of the 2013 Brian Stacey Award for emerging Australian conductors and was awarded the coveted Sir Charles Mackerras Conducting Prize via the Australian Music Foundation in London. Carolyn has also been awarded Opera Foundation Australia's Bayreuth Opera Award and Berlin New Music Opera Award and the Nelly Apt Conducting Scholarship. In 2010 she debuted with the North Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, one of four conductors selected for Interaktion with musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, also working with Sir Charles Mackerras on his final two productions.

GERALD J. DOLAN, JR. is the Director of Fine Arts for the Ipswich Public Schools in Massachusetts. Mr. Dolan has studied conducting with Malcolm Rowell and Frank Battisti and holds degrees from St. Michael's College and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Gerry is a Director of the Northeast MA Youth Orchestra (NMYO) and teaches Instrumental Conducting at Gordon College in the Graduate Summer Degree Program. Mr. Dolan received the 2003 Olmstead Award for excellence in secondary school teaching from Williams College and was honored by the MMEA with the Lowell Mason Award. A 1993 Fulbright Scholarship recipient, he served as Head of Music at Speedwell School, an inner city high school in Bristol, England.

JARED CASSEDY is the 2015 GRAMMY Music Educator Award recipient. Jared began his career as the band director and teacher of music appreciation at Windham Middle School, New Hampshire. He has been Windham High School's director of bands since 2009. Cassedy has also been appointed director of the New Hampshire Youth Wind Ensemble and the director of K-12 fine arts for the Windham School District. He received his bachelor's degree in music education from the University of New Hampshire. Cassedy is currently focusing on attaining his administrative certification in curriculum and instruction with a focus on educational leadership at Southern New Hampshire University.



DR. ROB FRANZBLAU serves as Associate Professor of Music and Director of Bands at Rhode Island College, a position he has held since 1997. In addition to conducting the Wind Ensemble and Chamber Winds, his duties include teaching courses in music education at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Dr. Franzblau earned the Bachelor of Music from the University of Iowa; studied conducting with John P. Paynter at Northwestern University, earning a Master of Music; and received his Ph.D. in music education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is the founder and conductor of the Rhode Island Wind Orchestra, a chamber wind ensemble of professional musicians. For the past three years he has served as Assistant Conductor and Acting Artistic Director of the Metropolitan Wind Symphony, a Boston-area adult community band. Rob is author of *So You Want to be a Music Major*.

Dr Carolyn Watson

Carolyn spoke on the topic of repertoire selection, and how it links with motivating students to practice. She began by saying, **“To be completely frank I feel that when you choose the right repertoire the motivating, the practicing—it tends to take care of itself.”** In terms of selecting the right repertoire, she illustrated her point with a quote from Leonard Bernstein, who said “To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan, and not quite enough time.” For those who work in schools, colleges and university this probably encapsulates the situation in which we work; there may be a plan, but is there enough time? Absolutely not!

Carolyn said that it’s helpful to consider why we—artists, musicians, educators—go to a concert, go to an opera, go to see a film, or read a book. We’re interested in a great work of art. Similarly, music students are interested in a great piece of music. If it’s a Sandra Dackow arrangement for string orchestras, or the first 12 bars of the Can Can theme it is nevertheless drawn from a great orchestral, band or choral work. Perhaps it’s a tune they know from a movie—well then, show them the movie. Perhaps it ties in with a book or something else they know. Try and tap into that cross-cultural inter-disciplinary references. For example, if you’re doing Pictures at an Exhibition, don’t only look at the music, show them the pictures, talk to your visual arts staff about tying in what they’re doing musically with what else they’re doing.

Playing your favorite work or something you’ve seen on TV or in a commercial is a huge thrill for many young musicians. That’s not to say that your entire repertoire should only be drawn from pop culture, or the Best of Beethoven, but a little bit of that is a very good way to start.

Carolyn spent two years at the Kodály Institute in Hungary. Zoltán Kodály was against adapting repertoire and/or educational materials for students. He was adamant that they should be given the best, highest quality materials. He said, “For the young, only the best is good enough. They should be led to masterpieces by means of masterpieces.” **Our interpretation, as music educators, of what masterpieces is, falls to our own expertise and knowledge of our ensembles, the students’ ages and abilities and so on.** But the underlying principle is a very good one.

Another thing that Carolyn does is to include her students’ thoughts and opinions in her own repertoire selection. This gives her students a voice in the ensemble. And while not all suggestions will be practical (she gave the example of a student suggesting doing Mahler Eight), you could take inspiration from these suggestions—try an excerpt or a theme. It shows that they are being listened to, gives them a voice and gives them ownership of their ensemble.



When you tell your young orchestra, band or choir that you're doing a Beethoven symphony or a Stravinsky ballet you're not only telling them what's coming up in the next concert. You're also telling them you think they're good enough to play this piece, that they've got the skills and that they're on that level (even if they're not!). Carolyn said **"I tend to set the bar high. Not so high that it's out of reach and people are going to fall flat, but just a little bit too high. And just show them at every step of the way that actually they can do it."**

What we learned from Dr. Carolyn Watson:

- Repertoire selection is key in motivating students to practice.
- Look for inspiration in cross-cultural references—films, books, art—that will fire your students' enthusiasm.
- Get your students' input in choosing your own repertoire; make them feel their voice is heard.
- When choosing pieces, set the bar a little too high, to stretch your students and to show them that you believe in their ability.

Gerald Dolan

Gerald Dolan started by re-iterating Carolyn Watson's point about the importance of repertoire selection: **"It's probably the most important thing we do as teachers in an education setting. It's the entire curriculum for us."**

Gerald focused on how to motivate the least experienced members of an ensemble or students. He told the story of the fourth year he was teaching in Ipswich, when Gerald's teacher Frank Baptiste was visiting for the week to work with the students and the ensembles. One evening there was a night for the parents and a parent asked Frank Baptiste, 'How do I get my son to practice?' and he replied, 'That's not your job,' and pointing at Gerald said 'that's *his* job!' As a teacher Gerald found that a little frightening, but realized he was right of course—**it is the job of the teacher to get students motivated to practice.**

Gerald shared some things that he's done with his least experienced students, in his own high school band. His ensemble numbers anywhere between 150-170 students and encompasses a huge range of experience—from students who will go to conservatory to students who are only just starting instruments. Gerald feels that having run the ensemble for some time he has built up a level of trust, which is helpful. The ensemble doesn't compete for seating, so for example roles such as first trumpet aren't assigned to a single student for the season but rather students are moved around. Depending on the literature they try to keep moving students around, to give less experienced students the opportunity to be boosted up by taking on second or even first parts. This constant moving helps show students that you trust them to take on the role. It doesn't always work out, but most of the time they will rise to the occasion.

How to practice is also another key element that Gerald works on with his ensemble. It's an important part of almost every warm up; Gerald develops warm ups based on the literature in front of the ensemble, and also looks to develop practice habits to help with the technical demands and the sound quality demands that might be inherent within the music. Gerald's school has 'Weekly Evaluations for Excellence in Performance' (or 'WEEP exams' as the students affectionately call them) so every Friday a schedule is put out for the following week,

saying which measures and scales will be covered in the following week, and which will be part of the WEEP exams. Then every Friday, five to 10 students are selected to play each week. While this does cause a little anxiety for the students, Gerald tries to select students to make it a successful experience so that students playing will be positive examples. It could be the best student, or a student that he knows has been working particularly hard and has been making lots of progress so that it's an opportunity to celebrate that. Gerald tries to keep it positive, and while it's not human nature to like to be tested in this way, it does get the students comfortable with performing and playing in front of their peers. The level of performance has definitely increased because of this, as well as the amount of pride and preparation that students put in. **“When I’ve had some difficult moments I’ll quietly take that student aside before the end of rehearsal and say we’ll try that again next week. And 90% of the time students come back well prepared, and their sense of pride and success is obvious.”**

One of the main things Gerald learned from Frank Baptiste was that we usually take too much time preparing music, particularly at high school level. So his school takes 6 weeks to work on each piece of music, and Gerald maps out his schedule accordingly, from introducing the piece to his students, to being performance ready 6 weeks later. That forces everyone to prepare, both teachers and students, as they know they only have a certain amount of time and the level of preparation really improves.

With younger students, it's a very different approach; rewarding students for practicing works very well. In Gerald's school, they learn songs, singing the melodies, learning the chords and baselines, and so he introduces an element of competition, to see how many songs they can learn, and can play. Students are really motivated to learn songs, comparing themselves to how many songs their peers have learnt.

What we learned from Gerald Dolan:

- It is the job of the music educator to get students motivated to practice.
- Keep moving students around in roles within the ensemble, to give less experienced students opportunities. It challenges them to rise to the occasion.
- Have regular, scheduled tests of progress—but keep it positive. Use it as an opportunity to celebrate success.
- Don't take too much time over each piece. This focuses everyone's mind on becoming performance ready in a set period of time.
- For younger students, rewards and an element of competition can work wonders.

Jared Cassedy

Jared spoke about parental involvement in motivating students to practice. Jared starting teaching at Windham High School in 2009. It was a brand new high school, and so there was a responsibility to not only establish a wonderful music program at the school, but also to create a foundation that would enable the students to develop as learners and to develop as part of the community. Along with that, when it comes to practicing specifically, Jared has made it part of the culture. He realized early on that it is about investing in the relationship with the students, the parents and the community. **The emphasis is not just on practicing for the sake of the individual, but for the benefit of the whole ensemble.**



Jared has had conversations with parents, as many music educators would have done, who say 'I don't want to force my child to practice, I want them to enjoy the music for the sake of it.' **So there's the need to educate the parents as well as the students, to help them provide time and space for practice, in the same way they would for other school activities, such as sports or science homework.** Parents do need to be interested and involved with their child's practice, encouraging them and working with them on weekly goals.

At Windham they don't necessarily focus on the amount of time spent practicing, but rather the quality. Each week the student sets themselves a goal and at the end of the week reflects on if that goal has been achieved. Parents can play a very positive role in that process. It's important to emphasize the *why* of practicing.

What we learned from Jared Cassedy:

- Emphasize that practice is not just for the benefit of the individual, but for the whole ensemble.
- It's important to establish good relationships with both the students and parents, and educate both on the importance of practice.
- Parents should be educated on the why's and how's of practicing.
- Focus less on the hours spent practicing, but on the goal, the *why* of practicing.

Dr. Rob Franzblau

Rob Franzblau reflected on some of the ways that practice is different than rehearsal, and how music educators can use that dichotomy to help students understand more what practice is. He also raised the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It's great to start with extrinsic motivation—competition, rewards, stickers—it's direct and works right away. It also has some down sides, and so it's great to move to intrinsic motivation as soon as possible.

Rob emphasized the importance that students realize the well know aphorism that rehearsal is not the time to learn your part, it's a time to learn everyone else's part. **"You can't listen to the other people's parts and learn their parts if they haven't practiced. So the goal is to be able to share your part with everyone else through their listening and it becomes a group effort."**

Teaching students how to practice in the middle of rehearsal can be overdone. Many music educators have witnessed music rehearsals that are 'drill and kill', going slowly through the music, small section by section, drilling each section to resolve problems before going on to the next section. Rob suggested a 'sideways hourglass' model for rehearsals, where you start with the big picture, focus in on specific problems and issues before bringing back out to the big picture. That way, students can see how the small sections they worked on contribute to the larger musical context. They can see that they need to practice so that it all works together.

Rob talked about some specific tools that he's found useful in the middle of rehearsal. Firstly, *slow it down*. Students sometimes struggle with this, but playing at a really slow tempo means that students have to retool their whole way of thinking about how they play a piece. In rehearsals, he suggested getting someone to keep a slow rhythm going using the butt end of a drumstick on the rim of a snare drum, like a metronome. Then using this slow tempo you can work through difficult parts of the music with different members of the ensemble. What happens



is that a certain mental state occurs when working in this way, getting into that zone or what's known as flow, where you're not aware of the passage of time, but you are focused on the job in hand and all distractions go away. Students can replicate that at home, using a metronome app on their cell phones.

Another tool is singing. **For an instrumental group, singing is by far one of the most effective ways to bring students' focus on to what they're doing musically. It's the most direct route from their ears into their head.** Rob also finds the use of a drone in practice to be effective. Just as a metronome is an effective tool for time, so is a drone an effective tool for pitch.

The concept of mental practice is important—either singing, or even just hearing what you want to sound like can be as effective as actual practice, and sometimes more efficient. **“The mind can't tell the difference between an actual event and one that is imagined vividly”.** The mental practice of singing or silent singing can be a helpful tool for students, and one you should encourage them to use at home.

Rob's final point was that practice time isn't the issue, but *practice goals* are the issue. **“You have to create the desire in your students to sit down with their instrument and sit down with a purpose.”** The focus should be on achieving a specific goal, without paying attention to the time it takes. It's the best way to motivate students to practice, and to move to the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation.

What we learned from Rob Franzblau:

- It's great to start with extrinsic motivation (e.g. competition, rewards, stickers) but the aim should be for students to move to intrinsic motivation as soon as possible.
- Rehearsal is not the time to learn your part, it's the time to learn everyone else's part.
- Consider a 'sideways hourglass' model for rehearsals—start with the big picture, focus in on specific problems and issues before bringing the focus back out to the big picture.
- Slow down the tempo during rehearsals and practice to help concentration and to produce a state of 'flow'.
- The concept of mental practice is important.
- Specific practice goals are more important than practice time.

Panel Discussion

The audience was then invited to ask the panel questions.

What role should competitions or competitiveness play in motivating musical students?

GD: When I was building a program in Ipswich we started with the jazz festivals and so that competition the students really enjoyed, and it really got things moving really quickly. At this point when we do competitions with our jazz ensemble and they sound great, every time I leave there I think 'why am I doing this?'. I don't need it to motivate students. The students seem to enjoy it and take pride in the fact they're doing so well, but there's no difference to how they would sound with or without the competition. I don't like the competition part of it, but I have to be honest and say it really helped us at first.

JC: We had a similar situation, when we first started the high school we went to our first competition in 2012 in New York City and it got the ball rolling. But I soon realized after that that I didn't want this competition festival band. I didn't want the students to rely on where they were placed or where they were ranked to determine the validity of what it is they were doing. At that point I changed things around a little bit. If we were going to participate in festivals it was going to be about the procedure of getting into a festival where it's not ranked or based on competition when you're there. It's about the experience, the educational experience.

CW: I maybe have a slightly different experience and/or opinion. Another one of my favorite quotes is one you that you might have heard of from Béla Bartók on the subject of music and competitions. Bartók said 'Competitions are for horses, not for musicians.' When I was in Hungary a sage piece of advice was given to me by one of my chamber music teachers. I was young, impetuous, frustrated, ambitious and I was in a chamber music group with an older lady who had taken a year off from her private teaching studio and had in her fifties gone back to school. I was 23 and so of course I knew everything. I was driven to want to put on the best possible standard of performance, and I was a little bit frustrated with my colleague because I felt perhaps had I been matched with someone else our performance would've been better. And my teacher took me aside after one lesson that didn't go particularly well and said, "Everybody has a time in their life to learn something. The time for you was 15 years ago. The time for Rosemary is here and now." And that's something that has really, really stayed with me. I fell into conducting by accident, and when I look at myself I think I was kind of a late developer. I think at every step along my path as a violinist, a pedagogue, a teacher, more recently a conductor, there have been people who have given me time, who have been understanding of where I was at that particular point in time, who have measured me against myself and my improvement and not against the best person in the class or in the ensemble. And that's something that made me reflect on my approach to ensembles. So, competition, yes is a very healthy part of any career and a part of life. But I think we have to be very careful, because often it's the *hare and the tortoise* thing and perhaps if someone is exceptionally good at something it might not mean anything to them. But there's an awful lot of achievement in really having stuck at something and just worked hard. They're the ones that stick with it, and they're the ones that 10 years later it really did make a difference. That's not to say that competitions are only for horses, but not all horses are created equal!

RF: When I was teaching high school, a great music program in Wisconsin, the first year I was there a trip had already been planned, to this festival, and the kids played very well and were really excited to find out how well they did at the festival. When the results came in—I was conducting the second band at the high school—the only band that placed better than us was the first band at the same school. So the kids were really excited by that and of course as a young director I was really excited by that. But in retrospect we were waiting for the results of the competition to find out how we felt. It was a great confirmation of how we felt. And I think that young students and teachers often need that confirmation of what they're thinking they feel or how they think they did or their judgement of how well they played. It's a very comforting thing for us. However if we're not sure of how we played until the scores come out, then I think we've probably not prepared that well enough for the event. I think competition can serve a great extrinsic purpose of confirming what you think you already know about how well you did. To depend on somebody else's opinion, or worse—to depend on the comparison between yourself and some other band, to make your own value judgement on what you did and how much you value how far you've come, well that's rampant in our society. It's the human condition to compare ourselves to others. That's something we all need to teach our students, so that's something we need to learn for ourselves.



How do you help students who don't have instruments to practice on?

GD: Depending on the instrument, in our town we have been able to build up a number of instruments through scholarships, through grants from local banks, we have a \$1,500 grant each year to purchase instruments to use for elementary students in exactly that position. So you have to be creative about it, and you have to have some resources or create a need for resources. People want to help, particularly if there are students in need, people within the community really want to help.

JC: What we've done in our town, we have instrument drives so we set up a day that people who graduated beyond high school who don't play their instruments any more, or who have switched instruments, we have a day where they can bring their instruments in so we can use those.

As a follow up to that, how do you fundraise to support for your programs?

GD: It's something that's taken a long time to develop. First of all things have changed in public schools, but if there were instruments to be purchased or equipment to be purchased I refuse to let other groups to come in and purchase those instruments in the past. I said that was the responsibility of the school system, not of parents to be purchasing instruments for the school. Things have changed. In our town we have an extremely active music, art, drama, theater parents group. Initially it was just band parents, but it expanded to music, art, and drama, so there's power in numbers. They're a very organized group that does fundraising for theater, visual arts and music. We are always encouraged to look for grants, so there are people in the school system who will give us information on where we can get grants. And locally we have a number of businesses—two banks in fact seem to compete with each other on the amount of money they can give to the school system.

RF: When I was teaching high school in Wisconsin we didn't do a lot of competition but we made darn well sure that we looked really good at the homecoming parade and the Memorial Day parade. And for a band that's easier to do than an orchestra in those public events, but the ability to get in front of people who don't have children in your program at events like that—whether it's the football half time show, or parades or playing at the senior center, or playing in the lobby of the bank—putting your best foot forward is not just gratifying to the ego, but it's giving back to the community and teaches students that they have a responsibility to give back to the community that supported them.

