

Surprise and Confusion: Making the Most of Professional Change

by Dr. Elizabeth Bucura



It is a strange time to give a keynote address, although the topic of obstacles feels like an obviously pressing concern. It seems like a funny time to do just about anything, really. There is so much uncertainty, which is of course tied up in the Covid-19 pandemic, but also in many social struggles and concerning situations, which I see many of today's writers are discussing. These topics include social justice, mental wellness, and anti-racism. These are important topics, and we must value dialogue as a way to foster understanding and perspective.

I think a lot about young people—the college students I work with, and even those I do not, who are in processes of professional preparation. Some of today's attendees fall into this category. It is a strange time to embark on one's career. It is always difficult to make decisions about a professional pathway, and it is challenging to forge ahead in coursework and internships to fulfil requirements as one steps piece by piece into the professional domain. It is necessary to formulate an understanding of norms that include social and cultural norms, but also those specific to professional practice. We typically lean on strong mentors and role models for guidance, expectations, and imagery to help navigate such change. But at this peculiar time, we *all* feel swarmed by change, including those mentors and role models, and so we may need to navigate new professional waters. There may not always be clear role modeling or assured guidance, but even without all the answers we must seek to steady the waters for those coming into the field and with one another. We must come to our own answers situated in this time and place.

The Covid-19 pandemic has now lasted more than a year and is ongoing. One remark I hear lately is that it is *such a strange time*. We know it has not been our normal, and we are inundated with thoughts and questions about it. Is this the new normal, for instance? What aspects of our former normal might we be relieved to return to and when might that happen? What adaptations might we need to make in our professional and personal lives moving forward from here? Maybe some of us are asking questions about normalcy itself: What should or could be our normal? What circumstances and influences have contributed to our prior conceptions of what constitutes normal? Conversely, what improvements to our lives might potentially be attributed to this time that we would choose to adopt, and how? Change has come and will continue. The topic of the 2021 AIME conference is *Overcoming Obstacles*. Today I will talk to you a bit about surprise and confusion in the face of change, and the obstacles—but also opportunities—it can present.

In July 2019 I left New York and moved to Austria with my young family. We traded a cozy suburb with good friends and spacious American home for a flat in the city of Graz. It was a big change. I was on a sabbatical leave from the Eastman School of Music, and I took on the role of guest researcher of music pedagogy. During this time, I was prepared for change. I was excited to embrace it. Although I had some expectations of what it might be like to live abroad, I tried to keep those expectations at bay in order to fully appreciate whatever the experience became. Nevertheless, it is no easy feat to become a foreigner; I expected to be surprised and confused. I frequently was. But I also had an incredible opportunity to gain new perspective on my assumptions, expectations, on my home culture, and on myself.

Some of these assumptions felt trivial. For instance, I never thought much about my assumption that people needed vehicles to get around. I grew up on a farm. I have driven vehicles my entire life. I remember driving tractors, trucks, four-wheelers and snowmobiles from a young age. I did realize that a vehicle-less life can be common, even for many people who did not live far from me in New York. But now that I did not use a car whatsoever—because I did not have one—the ways I went about my daily life, including how to get to work, travel kids to school, show up at doctor appointments, complete the grocery shopping, and so forth, were so changed that I could see that seemingly obvious need in my own life as not-so-obvious. But more importantly, beyond myself and my own experiences, I took note more specifically of the cultural norms that might make it more difficult to not have a vehicle in some places than in others, as well as of course less possible for some than for others.

Musically and educationally, cultural assumptions become more apparent as well. In Austria I saw students majoring in recorder, harmonica, and accordion, and popular music held a prominent role in the university music program. These were not considered novel, forward-thinking endeavors, but had historically existed in the university. Secondary schools prepared music teachers for general, comprehensive, integrated music classes that did not resemble large ensembles, whereas secondary general music in the United States seemed to be an emerging sub-field of secondary school music considered dynamic and evolving. Our assumptions are powerful things. Even when we are aware of them, it can nevertheless be painful to let those assumptions come to light. We must then potentially make changes. If we are not challenged by someone or something that likely surprises us, stops us, and maybe confuses or frustrates us, it may feel easiest to let those assumptions remain unchallenged.

I have heard colleagues refer to the substantial shift of perspective as a *decentering experience*. I am certainly decentered in Austria. I have been decentered in the United States as well. This can be experienced in a number of ways, for instance moving from one state to another, from a rural to urban setting, or from a homogeneous to a diverse population. I have also been decentered in the field of music education, moving from university student to general music teacher, from a public school to private school setting, from K-12 to higher education, solo pianist to accompanying pianist, and so on. Most decentering tends to involve a shift of role, place, culture, or more likely, all of the above. I am sure you can think of ways you have also been decentered, whether personally or professionally.

Lately we have likely all felt at least a bit decentered as music teachers, but beyond our profession as well, as we experience lockdowns, social distancing, and the necessity of online interactions. We have possibly been surprised and confused. We may have had questions and obstacles. In the face of these obstacles however (and in decentering experiences generally), opportunity exists for change, innovation, and collective growth. In an uprooting of normalcy, we can sometimes imagine new possibilities, or adapt old ideas in new ways.

As one example, many of us have recently been challenged with new technological mediums for virtual teaching and learning. These mediums, often software that functions as a learning platform and communication system, may not be new, but may be new to us or used in new ways. The educational models we use them for may include asynchronous or synchronous online learning, hybrid models of in-person and online learning, or maybe mixed classes of all the above.

While many may wonder what to do with music education in shifted learning modalities, others seem to create interesting innovations. Music collaborations exist online, that often involve many participants who make music from different places and are synchronized into a musical whole. Sometimes these videos are spliced together in a way that allow the achievements of musical balance and blend through audio production. Some display compelling visual effects as well, that complement or perhaps enhance the audio experience in satisfying ways. While these kinds of products may have increased lately, or perhaps simply sharing of them has increased, the idea of it will not likely be unfamiliar to you. You may call to mind similar examples you have seen, or perhaps in which you have participated.

These can be fun to listen to. They can inspire us, motivate us, and allow a piece of human connection through virtual musical interactions. Although the ways we define musical interactions may be in flux, such endeavors could feel like a way forward for music educators. Sometimes they are described in these ways, but this might even decenter one further. It may leave you wondering if these endeavors are *the* ways forward and it could create feelings of overwhelm and underpreparation.

These kinds of collaborations also can stir questions among those curious about replicating them or adapting them for and with students. These tend to be process-oriented questions, the *how-to* of music teaching and learning. For instance, did an experienced video editor compile separate recorded videos together, and were audio engineering skills required in order to achieve balance and blend? What level of musicianship had already been achieved through traditional means by the musicians? How would this then work with young students? What kind of learning curve would exist for someone who lacks access to funds or connections to other skill sets needed to coordinate such an activity? Can this project be achieved synchronously? What would be gained or lost? What might beginning instrumentalists gain from a real-time large ensemble experience when still focused on manipulating their own instrument and body, on hearing themselves in relation to others, and perhaps learning to read notation? And what is *my own role* then, as director or facilitator in such an environment?

These are all important questions and may point to knowledge gaps or experiences that would benefit music teachers. Perhaps they can lead to pathways toward acquiring new skills that would be helpful. When taking inspiration from the world around us and engaging new curiosities and questions, we have the potential to grow, as do students. Growth comes about as a result of struggle, which is never easy or straightforward, and for which one cannot fully prepare. Surprise and confusion, even frustration, will be present. But before jumping to questions of skill preparation, let us take a step back. Our questions may be new now (or feel new), but we have always had professional questions such as these. Before becoming lost in a tangle of *how-to's*, let us not lose sight of the purposes and values that might guide what *how-to's* we deem important. These are not broad purposes and values of our field necessarily, but of our own that are centered in our place, in our role, and with our unique students.

When I was a new music teacher, in a time obviously prior to this pandemic, I had such questions that I regarded as important. At that time I wondered, what was the *right* way to design my classes, including setting up the room and dividing up time into appropriate-length activity segments. I also wondered, what were the best curricula to use? To what extent could I do a good job covering necessary content? How might I identify and prepare good repertoire to meet the performance expectations of others? These questions reveal my assumptions and were riddled with problems, yet I did not regard them in that way at the time.

My initial foray into the field of music education involved a lot of decentering experiences that challenged me to grow. I lived in Maine. I had built a large piano studio and I loved teaching. In my senior year of college, a local Catholic School had a one-year opening for a PreK-grade 8 general music teacher. My piano students were from predominantly wealthy families and in general had highly educated and involved parents. Some of the children at the Catholic School fit a similar profile, but many others had only recently immigrated from other countries and some did not yet speak English. While I was a new music teacher, concerned with curricula, lesson plans, and assessment, I also was struck by significant language and cultural barriers with students and families that made me question my priorities. I struggled to make sense of my role there. Once I graduated, I took on full-time load of part-time positions, teaching under five separate district contracts that involved six different school buildings each week. These positions involved a diverse array of school-communities including religious, independent, and public schools. One school building was an hour's drive south along the coast, some were in the heart of biggest city in the state, some were in suburbs, and one was located on a small island to which I commuted by ferry each week.

I had expectations of the professional field of music education. I had expectations of the school communities I would encounter and in which I would participate. Although it was difficult to foster deep connections with so many, and such different communities of people, I still somehow did not necessarily expect the level of surprise and confusion that I probably should have as I went about doing my job in ways I expected I should. Those surprising, confusing, and frustrating moments decentered my prior experiences—even decentered my career preparation—and pushed me toward reconsiderations of myself and my practice.

Seemingly important questions about curricula and use of time, of repertoire and outcomes, were somewhat reinforced to me by professional resources. Some of these expectations involved time. For instance, each grade level corresponds with a time (particular years of childhood) and comes with its own expectations, like *make sure 3rd graders can accurately count and play dotted sixteenth rhythms*, or *begin recorder by 3rd or 4th grade in preparation for learning band instruments*, or *December concerts are expected and necessary*. Similar views were reinforced through curricular handbooks, teacher manuals, and district policies. These resources communicated clear expectations that I interpreted as solid, even obvious. They did not necessarily mention surprise or confusion, nor do I recall an acknowledgement of adaptations and adjustments that might be welcomed or necessary.

Some of the expectations I interpreted were reinforced by other people. I was observed by senior music teaching colleagues and arts administrators who provided me feedback on my teaching. Some noted that I ought to take Kodály training in summers, or felt I should use guitar in order to accompany groups with mobility rather than piano. Such suggestions typically came with supportive intentions.

Some folks outside the schools too, reinforced the “shoulds” and “have tos” specific to their own musical and cultural values. For example, in the religious school I should include only Christian repertoire for the Christmas concert, which must take place in the Cathedral, but could not include dance or movement. Conversely, in one of the public schools I worked, no celebration was deemed appropriate in that it might be off-limits to students of

varying religious and cultural backgrounds. The district administration's attempts to foster equality resulted in forgoing all holidays and celebrations in favor of one, week-long spring event simply named "celebration." In other places, expectations included that students would perform during specific community festivals, sometimes with particular repertoire included that echoed traditions held dear to the people there. In other places I had incredible autonomy that sometimes felt liberating and sometimes felt overwhelming. Individuals held expectations of me and my work in their communities and with their children—and rightfully so, as they were invested in musical and sometimes cultural outcomes. They anticipated that I would conform to the expectations of community culture, an expectation I attempted to fulfill. They did not expect to be surprised or confused by me. I did not expect to be surprised or confused by them. But of course, as is common in any new relationship, we had those moments and needed to negotiate our own expectations in relation to existing and expanding cultures that included new and different families, as well as to our own values.

The field of music education has been held tightly with conceptions about what has to be, sometimes what is considered *best*. We have been brought up in a culture and a system of music education that is largely unchanged and sometimes unquestioned in practice, typically adhering to traditions (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Bucura, 2020) that can include specific repertoire (Humphreys, 2004) pedagogies (Freer, 2011) and experiences in music teacher preparation (Bartel, 2004). We enter the field and may feel we know precisely what it is. We may be attracted to the field of music education by its familiarity. We know what we are supposed to do, what the outcomes are, how to personally succeed, and perhaps even who we are personally within it. We may have expectations and assumptions that may go unquestioned, and we do not always anticipate being surprised or confused. When entering the profession as new teachers, we would navigate new relationship-building and have moments of surprise and confusion, however we now navigate an entirely changed context alongside colleagues, students, and communities who may face the same questions.

Some of the traditions and expectations I recall from my early music teaching speak to the specific people and places I worked, and they were sometimes telling indications of their individual or collective values. These were important for me to learn. It helped me understand the communities in which I not only worked, but to which I gradually became a part. Values and traditions have their place, and some students and teachers achieve and feel grounded because of them—as I mentioned, they know what to expect, have clear benchmarks to indicate successes, and have familiar pathways to move forward toward them.

The support for music in some of these communities was unrivaled. Although expectations were sometimes specific, it did not preclude as John Kratus (2007) discussed, making some changes. Rather, room existed for what Kratus referenced as small acts of subversion, by which larger changes could become normalized over time. In other words, there was room for me to contribute myself, and to reflect the broader school community, particularly those who may have been new or expressed less voice than others. At the same time, the culture was something I actively sought to understand and take on, thus it also changed me in each place and in each role. Small acts in such a way can dampen the abruptness of surprise or confusion, favoring instead the subtle changes that can be accepted neither feeling oppositional to existing cultures, nor threatening one's sense of professional self. During this time, I learned rather quickly that there was no one music education culture, and that no description of the overall professional field can suffice with much detail. Not only did each community look, feel, and act differently, but I found the uniqueness of music education in each place valuable, carrying deep meanings for the school community in each setting.

Recent times have faced us with abrupt changes that demand immediate attention, which might make Kratus' appeals feel unhelpful. Small acts of subversion that take place over a long period of time? Everything has changed with such urgency that we may not feel we have the luxury of time. Kratus' appeal to change, however spotlights some of the questions we may have had all along. For instance, how *do* we make positive change in the face of longstanding and often valued traditions? How *do* we make space for our own values and views while respecting and acknowledging those of others? These are broad considerations necessary for organizing what we decide to do and our rationale for why that is so.

Music education must be considered in relation to greater social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. The world currently faces a multitude of intersecting challenges, including climate change, a global health pandemic, virtual education, political and governmental instability, discrimination and inequalities of wealth and power,

terrorist threats, and deep divisions. The work of this conference is integration. While music can and should be integrated, for instance in skills, understandings, and practices; and music education can be integrated into schools by fostering diversity and inclusion, there are other ways we might also consider integration. The integration of purposes, domains, and curiosities might be developed to fuse disciplines and negotiate meanings. The work we do might be reimagined in order to integrate domains, for instance of music therapy, music history, sociology, philosophy, and psychology, as well as visual arts, dance/movement, and the humanities broadly, that can speak to the power of music education toward identity-construction, arts and communities, and positive social change.

While divisions between people seem to be increasingly emphasized, at no other time has there been such potential to be connected worldwide, thanks to what we might often regard as a global flow of information. But *we* does not include all people, and it is not possible to be aware of information to which one does *not* have access. Information flow to those who do have access is also increasingly tailored to already-formed perspectives, providing a false sense of support, perhaps righteousness, and deteriorating opportunities to be surprised, confused, and challenged—to grow. Inequalities and division can be deeply embedded and perpetuated in these ways.

While one may *feel* connected (to others and to diverse ideas), it is appropriate to ask *to whom* is one feeling connected and therefore to whom might one not be connected? It may become less important to “know things,” involving a store of information, but to strive to be informed and thoughtful—to critically consider—when making sense of and decisions about actions to take (or not). Current schooling systems do not always communicate value for such critical awareness and thinking, favoring instead standardization. Despite a widespread focus on standardization of schooling, retention of what one has learned seems to nonetheless suffer (Regelski, 2004). In a spirit of analysis, discussion, perspective-building, and negotiation, it feels pressing to make space through the arts and humanities to seek experiences among diverse others, and the empathy and humanness it might foster.

While the experience of perfecting a piece of classical repertoire has worth and can be personally meaningful, music education can deepen far beyond that facet of traditional experience. One of these actions must be to seek perspective, actively and purposefully, and to engage in, as Sandy Stauffer (2017) prompted, radical listening, involving mindful, patient, imaginative, repeated, and intentional acts of listening. We might therefore seek understanding *with* others’ perspectives, particularly those who see things in different ways, who create art in different ways, and who interpret uniquely. Sensitive understanding, rather than agreement, is a worthwhile goal, which can result in nuance, complication, and frustration—the challenge and struggle of growth.

Musically and professionally we may feel that we are similarly connected, informed, and united. But again ask, *to whom?* And therefore, to whom are we not connected and what ideas or perspectives might we not have deeply considered or been exposed to? While I felt connected, informed, and united when I embarked on my career as music teacher, I immediately came into tension with the nuance, struggle, and complications of my roles in the differing places, values, and cultures that I encountered. It is to confront the uncomfortable that one can potentially glimpse what they have not previously considered.

We likely realize the field of music teaching can go far beyond the limits of our own professional preparation. We might all be able to name some musical practices and cultures we would like to learn more about, and we seem to readily acknowledge that we cannot be an expert in everything. But sadly, in music education, the perspectives we often lack are *those that might be the closest within our reach*—those perspectives and interests of our very students. Odena and Spruce (2018) point to the importance of students’ experiences and perceptions in music classes, noting that although it is indeed challenging to address their needs (musically and otherwise). However, curricular practices have the potential to be disempowering for students. Their feelings of self-efficacy, particularly among adolescent students and maybe particularly about musicianship, may be fragile and therefore should be of great concern for music teachers (Bucura, 2019). While students may not always clearly articulate or communicate how they feel or what they want, while they may not express interests we might consider, it is our responsibility to nevertheless seek them. This takes great sensitivity, as well as an investment in students as whole people, and experiences together that build trust and safety. This is not just that students can trust teachers as caring adults, but that they can trust teachers genuinely value their musical lives, interests, and motivations, and that they are willing and able to make space for them in music classes.

In an attempt to seek any different perspective, we must, as Stauffer encouraged, radically listen. We must listen to students as musicians and as whole people—people with their own questions. Williams (2019) noted that little connections may exist between traditional school music classes and the musical practices of one's culture, particularly youth culture. Students may regularly feel decentered in our music classes. They may struggle to understand their own feelings of surprise and confusion in the face of longstanding music education traditions that may not appeal to them or connect to their musical understandings or interests. Critical (and radical) listening skills are needed among students and teachers so that we might find music a catalyst for understanding oneself, seeking to acknowledge and gain empathy toward others' perspectives, perhaps toward positive social change. Social change is possible in all creative efforts, whether studying others' arts or creating our own.

Worldly change and potential for misinformation and disinformation becomes particularly significant when asking the kinds of professional questions in music education that I have mentioned. What might become a positive state of normal (for you, in *your* world, with *your* students) and for what reasons? How might we reimagine expectations of music teaching and learning when the ground beneath our feet seems to be shifting? In a context of change we might be emboldened to envision something new, to be created together, while the shifting context necessitates flexibility and continual reflection on these changes.

Changes can be considered in terms of place, of time, and interactions. For starters, *places change*. While one may consider the place of an island, a public school, or elementary general music classroom, now place also can include online learning platforms and virtual meeting rooms. These take shape in new mediums and come with their own limitations as well as novel and intriguing possibilities. They often surprise or confuse as we try to recreate, adapt, or perhaps imagine anew. The place of online learning may lead one to imagine students in the place of their own homes in order to counter an abstract online space with a concrete conception of what the learning place is, different for every student. Seeing students in their homes, therefore somehow experiencing bits of their home cultures, may be incredibly instructive, as we must then come to regard them in greater context and with a possibly changed perspective—as a whole human learning within the complexities of their own lives.

Times change. I do not refer here to simply the time of third grade, of middle school, the time of the 45-minute class period, an 8am-3pm school day, or the time of an August-to-June school calendar. We now include conceptions of flexible learning time, of hybridized learning and synchronized times, or of the almost non-time associated with asynchronous learning, which may interrupt taken-for-granted constructions of time itself. Flexible learning time may also unhelpfully mask the time needed to engage in learning. An assumed flexibility of time does not mean that time is not still spent. There are limits in any conception of time. Forward momentum in time may be disrupted in new conceptions of flexible learning time. Static time may be experienced, which for some can feel like a time warp. We might feel a loss of time sense altogether in state of flow, particularly when making music, or we might feel an endlessness of time emerging from a consistent scene of home, possibly resulting in boredom, monotony, or depression.

Another change, however, involves human interactions. As Shorner-Johnson (2020) recently pointed out, technological progress has brought about a concurrent sense of disconnect and disruption to human relationships. Lapidaki (2020) encouraged a countering sense of trust and intimacy that, in the face of school standardization and accountability, can communicate value for things that cannot be quantified: unpredictability, curiosity, vulnerability, empathy, and teaching and learning. These values present tensions in relationship to current educational norms, as well as disrupt hierarchical relationships that tend to structure educational experiences. Yet, it is human connections, when prioritized in all interactions—whether in-person, virtual, peer-to-peer, principal player to 2nd part, teacher-to-student, or otherwise—that can enable a shared community of meaning-making.

In change there is typically a concurrent sense of loss. One may miss an old normal and sense of togetherness, one may miss unexpected interactions and gestures or touch that bring about spontaneity and make them feel alive. This is almost certainly so in music, where interactions may be felt in particularly deep and meaningful ways that are difficult to replicate with virtual or live distances. Students similarly crave interactions, whether kindergartners, seniors in high school, undergraduates, or community music participants of any age. It is a time for creative interaction—however that is safely possible. It is a time for curiosity, collaboration, and projects, for ownership and negotiation across peoples, places, and domains that may foster a creative flow and growth of perspective. It is a time for higher order thinking that makes space for personal connections and sensitive

interactions. It is a time to value the surprise, confusion, and challenge of growth that come about in the whirlwind of a suddenly decentered world. These wants appeal to the human spirit, the interactivity of people, a collective sense of care, and creativity in teaching and learning.

The education system changes incrementally, but it has recently appeared to make an abrupt turn that may feel out of control. It is in fact out of any one's control, and we become changed within and among it. It may surprise or confuse us, we are likely decentered, and we may feel a sense of loss for a past way-of-being that has seemingly disappeared. One could be concerned about how to adapt to virtual learning spaces, how to get kids on board when interacting through technological mediation (or perhaps through masks and distancing). One may wonder how to facilitate ensembles, how to learn new technologies and skills, and how to produce concerts.

One might start by considering what questions may actually function as their own, new assumptions. No different than "*how do we get the fourth-grade recorder ensemble to master this piece in preparation for the spring concert,*" we must interrogate our questions and call out the assumptions for the limits they impose as well as the values they communicate. In a decentered experience, we might more easily confront our expectations *as* assumptions than we would otherwise. I suspect I was more ready to adapt to Covid changes in Austria than I would have been in New York because I was prepared for change and uncertainty. Perhaps the needed changes in music education that may have gone unconsidered, like issues of inclusion, access, tradition, and community, might be more readily considered at this very moment. It is a moment of opportunity. Could it be an assumption that students must be "on board," or that we must provide large ensembles, or that they must resemble something they used to, or that we must quickly learn new software platforms, or that we must produce concerts? Could it be an assumption that we must figure it out *for* students rather than *with* them?

While assumptions should be called into question, those that stand as our values should also provide us the stability to make decisions forward. We need not start from scratch. Although some conceptions of time have been expanded or adjusted, we still must adhere to *some* of them, like being prepared to teach class before it begins (in whatever way it occurs). Practical concerns need not steer all decision, but of course they will still matter.

Naturally, if one wants to organize and direct large ensembles or concerts they should find ways to do so regardless of the platform. All sorts of possibilities exist in some way despite the obstacles of Covid, or any other obstacle. Large ensembles can indeed be rehearsed virtually and synchronously, private lessons can still occur and be meaningful, students can collaborate and create, and music class can take on entirely new forms and strive for new learning and musical goals. Students can be motivated and engaged from home. In-person singing can take place outdoor and with precautions. Students can propose interdisciplinary projects and create and produce digital media that interfaces with music in interesting ways. Many are already making such decisions and some were doing so prior to the pandemic.

The possibilities are vast. If it is important for you and your students to resemble music classes pre-pandemic, then it is certainly possible to find a way. If you see gaps or problems you would like your program to address, then it can be an ideal time to imagine how that might occur. When one's values (our own and our students') become clear, program adjustments may also become increasingly clear. When assumptions are identified, decisions can be made to either disregard them, adjust them, or allow them pillar positioning. We must make thoughtful decisions about what to do and what not to do, how we might accomplish it, where to spend time and energy and where not to—perhaps *when* to do *what*.

What will benefit students in specific places and what might not? These are not the same kinds of how-to questions I began with when I was in an early career stage, but it would have been beneficial for me to ask them even at that time. Educational cultures may be shifting, and we must be sensitive to people—to students, *with* students—as we imagine what, when, where, and why to facilitate music learning. Perhaps this is an opportune moment to welcome a professional refocusing. Rather than 'how,' to do the 'necessary' things, and teach music in ways we recognize that simply adjust formats or shift things around, perhaps now is a moment to instead ask broader questions of music teaching and learning.

While these questions sometimes seem unhelpful given the immediacy of "I've got a class to teach," likewise consider the helpfulness of gaining *how-tos* when one may face insecurity about the role of teacher, of school, of

the arts, and of music, as well as what constitutes meaningful music teaching and learning at these times, in these places, and with particular people. Before one can gather skills, compose curricula, identify activities or repertoire, or consider assessments, they must first consider what it is they are doing, why they are doing it, and for and *with* whom they do it.

We have opportunities. We have had them, but now they are thrust upon us. We can view them as obstacles. For instance, we have no time to prepare, students are not engaged online the way they were in person, we cannot really rehearse our ensembles in virtual ways or asynchronously the way we would like to, and how can one manage all of the students in a class when it is a 50-person ensemble?

Or perhaps we can choose to embrace them as opportunities. Maybe large ensemble classes did not really allow space for assessing individuals in meaningful ways. Maybe smaller class sizes are necessary, or perhaps students must take up a greater role in self- and peer assessment. Maybe a few virtual platforms can be learned to some degree now that will help as we move forward, but it does not all have to become perfect, one does not have to be an immediate expert, and certainly not all at once. Maybe we do not need to provide all the answers when students can be challenged with projects and questions that they take up of their own curiosity. Maybe there are ways students can engage differently, more meaningfully, and with more autonomy than before. Maybe we can focus on the whole human self as a growing musical person in ways we might not have before, considering their home, their family, their potential for creative pathways of their own.

Covid-19 changed the world during the same time that for me, I have been living abroad. Friends remark, “That must be unbelievable to go through a global health pandemic while living in a foreign country!” But in fact, at a time and in a place where I expected to be surprised and confused, and completely decentered, where and when I was already disoriented and faced with challenging my assumptions, I was somewhat prepared for discomfort, for growth, for challenge, and for difficulty. Covid folded into my constructions of understanding, and I believe I therefore adapted. I was prepared for surprise and confusion and loss of at least some aspects of my life that once seemed so normal. I was prepared to take on elements of a new normal.

Imagine if we were prepared for surprise and confusion in music education. How might we view our field and our practice—and ourselves—differently? How might our perspectives inform innovative, people-centered music teaching that we can clearly articulate and rationalize? How flexible and adaptable might we become? How might our goals shift and practices change? How might students’ experiences change and how might their relationships with us also then change?

For those of you who are only beginning to emerge in your professional lives, consider yourselves thoroughly decentered in what can be an instructive way. You would likely be decentered anyway as you take on new roles in new places, but here and now you have an opportunity to see the world with a fresh perspective and to imagine how the field of music education might work well in a different context. I invite you to consider how this new context can work well with the students you teach. In some ways colleagues may look to *you* to lead the way—and I invite you to not have the answers, but to look to your students for inspiration and collaboration.

For those of you who have been in the field for some time, I similarly invite you to consider the gift of a decentered experience. While it is certainly overwhelming and unnerving to experience such shifting, it is you who can help steady the waters for new colleagues and students. We must make things work and get creative in doing so. I invite you to look to—and with—your students for inspiration, as well. Band does not have to look like band, lessons do not need to resemble traditional lessons, you can set new goals and adjust as you continually reflect on what works well and for what reasons. We should hope for a lifetime of musical meanings in students’ futures that inspire and motivate.

Perhaps this is an opportune moment to disrupt what constitutes music learning in the lifespan. Adults can and should learn, music learning can be in students’ hands, and they can continue to claim it for themselves and to further their abilities, their creativities, and expressions of humanness throughout their life. Music should be made among generations and in diverse places and moments, with diverse repertoire and diverse others. As I discussed recently (Bucura, 2020), “Rather than a static tradition . . . we might view culture as dynamic. In this way, culture can act as a reflection of students here and now as well as in their varied states of becoming. That

is, the culture of music in any school can and should look unique as it reflects the people who are there in [that] time and place. When teachers and students instead conform to static cultural traditions, they conform to fit the structure rather than actively shape their own” (p. 13).

We must refrain from quickly asking how, and instead articulate why and what. We can forge a collaborative plan by seeking solutions to those questions that are impossible to respond to without the very people we teach. We cannot know the answers but must find them together. In specific places (including virtual places/spaces), in specific times (including asynchronous flexible time), and with specific people (now and in their states of being). Among great changes and challenges, we can address pathways forward in a spirit of togetherness and care. We can liberate ourselves from traditions and expectations in order to collaboratively embrace surprise and confusion. We can demonstrate value for the wonder and possibility of a decentered struggle that moves us to grow together.

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