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# REACHING THROUGH TEACHING

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A NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTING CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE AMONG KENNESAW'S FACULTY

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THE EDITOR CONSIDERS . . .



## HONORING A TEACHER

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A few years ago I served as chorusmaster for the college's production of Mozart's famous opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Doing Mozart, at any level, is always rewarding. Having prepared the chorus, I became one of its members and was cast in the role of a village peasant. Standing in the wings on opening night, even though our parts were small, my students and I waited with great anticipation for the opening notes of the orchestral overture. Finally my colleague, the conductor, took his place in the pit, acknowledged the audience's applause and, after what seemed an interminable pause, gave the orchestra the downbeat. As the opening strains reached my ears, a great flood of memories came over me—memories of the first time I ever encountered this great overture, at about age sixteen, and memories of the teacher who introduced it to me, one Turner Gaughf, band director at Lanier High School in Macon, Georgia during the 1950's.



Band directors are often accused of not teaching much besides football half-time shows, but this was not the case with Mr. Gaughf, who was usually referred to as *Fess* by the band students at this all-boys' high school. Oh, he did football shows all right, but he also did everything he could to develop the total musicianship of his students, including giving us band transcriptions of some of the great orchestral classics.

I don't remember every such piece we played, but I do remember this one, because I can still feel what I felt the day it first began to sound like music. The clarinets, taking the part of the violins, began like an excited whisper: doodle-doodle-doot; doodle-doodle-doodle-doodle, doodle-doodle-doot... My First Trombone part was a rather unimportant one, but it didn't feel unimportant. Rather, I became one

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with the other players, one with the music, even with Mozart himself. At sixteen, I had never seen a Mozart opera, or any other opera. I knew that he was considered a great composer, and that he lived a long time ago—knew enough to say “Motte-sart” instead of “Mose-art,” but that was about it. In an all-male high school, an overt interest in such things invited ridicule, and even created situations demanding that one either fight or face disgrace. Even so, when this music “clicked” for me, I knew it was something I couldn't live without.

No visible transformation took place. I didn't stand up in the middle of rehearsal and testify that I had seen the light, nor did I call up my buddies to tell them, “Hey, Mozart is great!” I continued playing and singing a little rock-and-roll and listening to Elvis's latest hits. But I also began expanding my musical horizons by signing up for the orchestra, which rehearsed at the girls' high school nearby, and by becoming a member of the Wesleyan College-Community Symphony.

“Why are you doing this?” some of my friends asked, almost scornfully.

“There are more girls in those orchestras than you've ever seen in your life,” was my half-true response.

Turner Gaughf had a number of traits which made him a fine teacher. Patience, as I recall, was not one of them. He could get mad—*real* mad. I don't fault him for this. It is quite likely that what was needed by 150 hormone-driven adolescent boys was not patience but toughness. Even so, he was never mean or abusive, and no one ever doubted his expertise or his dedication.

His most memorable trait as a teacher was, perhaps strange to say, his inventiveness. He was continually coming up with alternative ways to teach traditional skills. Long before Hungarian composer-educator Zoltan Kodaly's method of teaching rhythmic interpretation had become well-known in this country, Gaughf contrived a system of counting 6/8 time which is the easiest and most logical method I have ever encountered.

On one occasion, he built a rhythm wheel, a vertically mounted contraption which looked like a wheel of chance. By arranging pegs in carefully spaced holes around its circumference, the device, when turned, would play whatever rhythmic figure the person inserting the pegs had devised. Today, there is an electronic version of that same concept. It is technically more sophisticated, but no more instructive.

One afternoon I went to the bandroom after school and found him in the office playing the trombone—not very well. Band directors are expected to learn to play all the instruments (sort of), but the trombone was not his principal instrument, and he seemed a little embarrassed that I had caught him practicing.

“Fess, why are you playing it out the side of your mouth that way?” I had the audacity to ask. It was, after all, my principal instrument.

“I was just experimenting to see which part of the lip produces the best tone,” he smiled, rubbing the back of his neck characteristically.

“I don't think that's it,” I laughed. So did he.

Years later, I found a picture in a music history book showing sculptured angels in a cathedral, all blowing straight trumpets in just that fashion. I wondered then if he had seen the same picture, and thought the technique was worth a try. In any event, the new

technique was never mentioned again.

Fess Gaughf must have been a very young man when I was in his band, because he still works as a music administrator in the same school system. But none of us thought of him as young. When I ran into him at a music conference recently, except for his gray hair, he still looked about the same as I remembered him more than thirty years ago. I mentioned some of his teaching devices and asked if he was still experimenting. He responded by reaching into his inside jacket pocket and pulling out a plastic recorder, the flute frequently used in elementary music classes. “This thing is too hard for beginners to play,” he said, “so I've found a way to cover the thumb hole with tape. It makes it lot easier at first.” He seemed either to have forgotten or



too modest to discuss some of the things he had long ago contrived which had so captured my interest.

He may have forgotten that he gave us Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro Overture* to play, but I have not forgotten, nor shall I ever forget the priceless gift he gave me. What a subtle, delicate thing teaching is! Is the teacher ever certain he has succeeded? Does the learner ever realize at the moment the value of the lesson learned? Even now, I can close my eyes and imagine him rehearsing the band—starting, stopping, correcting, encouraging—very much the way conductors everywhere practice the art. In the midst of his dedication to Mozart's music and to his students, involved as he was in the business of getting the job done well, it is inconceivable that he could have known what was taking place within me. After all, how could even his skilled ears have heard the sound of a life being changed? ●