

The Quest for Comprehensive Musicianship

When Brian Bowman contacted me about three years ago with an invitation to run for the office of VP/President Elect of ITEA, I remember telling him, "I'm not sure if I'm your guy... I've always been a much bigger cheerleader of great musicianship than of the tuba as a cause." He gave me a reply that seemed to indicate that there might be room for this kind of thinking in the ITEA tent, so I threw my hat in the ring.

While one of the fundamental premises of ITEA is to promote all things tuba and euphonium, I think that there is a calculated risk in developing musicians who have this kind of isolationist approach as their only approach. What I have come to notice in my life as a teacher and as a performer is that the people that succeed as performing musicians are the ones that give themselves over to an immersion in the study of music, as opposed the study of their instrument. While my comment here might be construed as being aimed at high school or college students, I truly believe that, as long as we are playing our instruments, we are all students.

At the risk of sounding like an old codger, I do think that the art of becoming a comprehensive musician is an endeavor that takes time. Time spent listening to and being exposed to all kinds of music. Time spent in the practice room playing music beyond what might not be required at your next lesson. Time spent developing the most important part of your musical anatomy: your ears. Time spent evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of every performance you are able to hear. Time spent developing your own unique voice as an artist. Time spent attacking weaknesses that we perceive in our playing. Time spent studying with a wise teacher and actually listening to what they have to offer.

Unfortunately, in our Google inspired age of instant gratification, time seems to be the one commodity that few people want to spend. Everything that we want to know can be found within a few quick keystrokes on the computer. Alas, the codger in me sees everything in our society today happening faster -- and resists with every fiber of my body the notion that this is a positive development. Yet, my own obstinacy in this stance doesn't negate what I see as a generational shift, as I see many who are ready to frost the proverbial cake before it has fully baked. The pursuit of comprehensive musicianship is a long journey, but one that is totally worthwhile.

So, I offer a few suggestions as an invitation to the pursuit of comprehensive musicianship: Spend the same amount of time that you spend practicing your instrument listening to music that you don't know. (I suggest Ted Libbey's *The NPR Guide to Building a Classical CD Collection* as a good place to start.) Buy a well-known etude book for a different instrument and learn it cover to cover. Listen to master performers, such as Itzhak Perlman, Yo Yo Ma, Andres Segovia, Glenn Gould, Sarah Vaughan, or any other whose work you've heard of, but don't know. Don't just learn the excerpts, learn the entire piece of music and understand your context within the entire piece. Play nothing but slow beautiful melodies for a week. Listen to something other than recordings of your own instrument. Sight-read every single day. Don't be a jock, be an artist.

Undoubtedly, there are many who are already following this course. You will meet them at the audition.

Thank you for indulging me in my one “bully pulpit” moment. I have so much more to learn on my own musical journey and I wish you nothing but the best on your musical journey, no matter what stage of the journey you are in.