

Mirror, Mirror On The Wall, ...Am I Providing Opportunities Reflecting All?

Expanding diversity by featuring diverse conductors, composers, and clinicians.

SINCE 2001 I HAVE STOOD on the podium before numerous bands and thought I was enough. I thought the gender diversity I offered as a respected female conductor of secondary bands was significant, and enough for the growth of my musicians, audiences, and colleagues. I was proud to demonstrate that women can equally master the job of band director. I thought this was diversity, but I was wrong. Although I was providing gender diversity *on* the podium, I was not promoting diversity *off* the podium.

The composers whose music I chose to perform appeared the same. The guest conductors I selected to lead ensembles appeared the same. And, the clinicians I enlisted to adjudicate ensembles appeared the same. My students only saw white males inspiring them. I chose quality music, engaging conductors, and motivating clinicians, but I hadn't connected, until recently, that all of these role models looked the same to the very diverse population of students I served.

I didn't recognize the disconnect, so I didn't speak up about it. There was a need for diversity in my program, school, community, county, state, and nation, and I didn't appreciate it. However, my vision has evolved, my values have grown, and my voice has emerged. I understand why students must hear, see, and experience diversity throughout the world and specifically in their music classroom and rehearsal space. Our students need to see a reflection of themselves and others in the role models who stand before them. It is crucial for acceptance, development, and unity.

The Reflection of the Conductor

In my four decades performing music, a female band

director has never conducted me—ever. My performances playing saxophone in school, college, honor festivals, and community bands have all been under the direction of white men. Most of these conductors were remarkable in their leadership, musicianship, vision, and compassion, but, if their batons were removed, and I simply looked at the person



standing before me, I would not have seen anyone who looked like me. My peers of various races also never saw anyone who looked like them. We were not provided an opportunity to see ourselves, or one another, in the reflection of our conductor.

The Reflection of the Composer

In January 2019, I interviewed Rob Deemer, Director of the Institute of Composer Diversity for the State University of New York (SUNY) at Fredonia (Fredonia, NY) for a publication. “The Institute for Composer Diversity is committed to the promotion and advancement of music created by composers from historically underrepresented groups, including women, composers from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, LGBTQIA+ composers, and disabled composers.” Deemer’s reasoning for intentional repertoire selection caused me to reflect



Lori Schwartz Reichl is an author, educator, and consultant. Visit her at MakingKeyChanges.com.

“Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”

— Stephen R. Covey

on my own past and future programming. I decided to review the countless concert programs I conducted throughout my career. I was disappointed to find that I had selected very few female composers and even fewer composers from other underrepresented groups. I had not provided an opportunity for my students to see themselves, or one another, in the reflection of the composers.

The Reflection of the Clinician

I have had the unique experiences of serving as an adjudicator, clinician, conductor, and speaker throughout the country to music students and educators. At first glance, some had preconceived thoughts about my ability to instruct and influence. However, after my task was complete, the feedback was usually positive, with the experience often described as “refreshingly different.”

Think about who hires the clinicians for your preparatory rehearsals, festival adjudications and professional development sessions. Often, similar looking people are invited to serve in the role of clinician to adjudicate, facilitate, present or speak. Once again, students and educators are not provided the opportunity to see themselves, or one another, in the reflection of the clinicians.

Magnifying the Lens

In teaching my graduate course, “Making Key Changes: Refresh Your Music Program” through the University of the Arts in Villanova, Pennsylvania this summer, I referenced photos, videos, and advertisements from institutions, professional organizations, social media, and even my own website displaying only white men serving as selected adjudicators, clinicians, composers, conductors, and presenters for district, collegiate, county-wide, state, regional, national, and international events. “The lack of diversity in our profession is obvious, especially in the band world,” I told them. You could hear a pin drop in the classroom.

For this particular lesson, appropriately entitled “Get With the Program,” I asked my students to sit facing someone of the opposite gender. This seating, along with the content of the lesson, resulted in an honest and emotional conversation about the lack of diversity in music education and methods for diversifying music and leadership without sacrificing quality.

Sharpen Your Vision

When there’s no diversity represented in clinicians, composers, and conductors, how often have we explained, or heard someone explain, “I selected the best [adjudicator, clinician, composer, conductor, presenter, music, etc.]” or “I tried asking [so and so] but he/she was not available”? At one point in history, such responses would have been acceptable. However, these responses are no longer enough. The first response displays a lack of knowledge. The second response displays a lack of effort. Furthermore, they both display a lack of analysis and consideration.

Cultural diversity is defined as the existence of various social or ethnic groups within a society. It can also be represented by age, gender, race, or sexual orientation. Superior music, exemplary musicianship, and motivational leadership exist in all cultures and ethnic groups. It is our duty to acknowledge this, educate ourselves, and provide a diverse representation of conductors, composers, and clinicians as a reflection of *all* students.

Jeff Gross, music educator at Shady Side Academy in Pittsburgh, PA has been inspired by members of his English Department to consider this phrase: “When we pick our literature for each of the grades, we want our students to have both mirrors and windows, so they can *see themselves* and *see into* other cultures reflected in the work.” As music educators, are we using this same philosophy when we select a conductor, clinician or composer’s repertoire?

Diversification does not equate to sacrificing quality. I have recently refined my thoughts and selection process in regards to the music I choose to program and the people I place in front of students, audiences, and educators. Although much of the same music and people will remain in my instruction, I am making a conscious effort to expand my knowledge beyond the familiar to explore diverse examples. I encourage you to do the same. Before selecting repertoire, inviting a guest conductor, or scheduling a clinician, look in the mirror and ask yourself one simple question: “Am I providing opportunities reflecting all?” **T**

Advocacy & Resources:
composerdiversity.com/advocates