

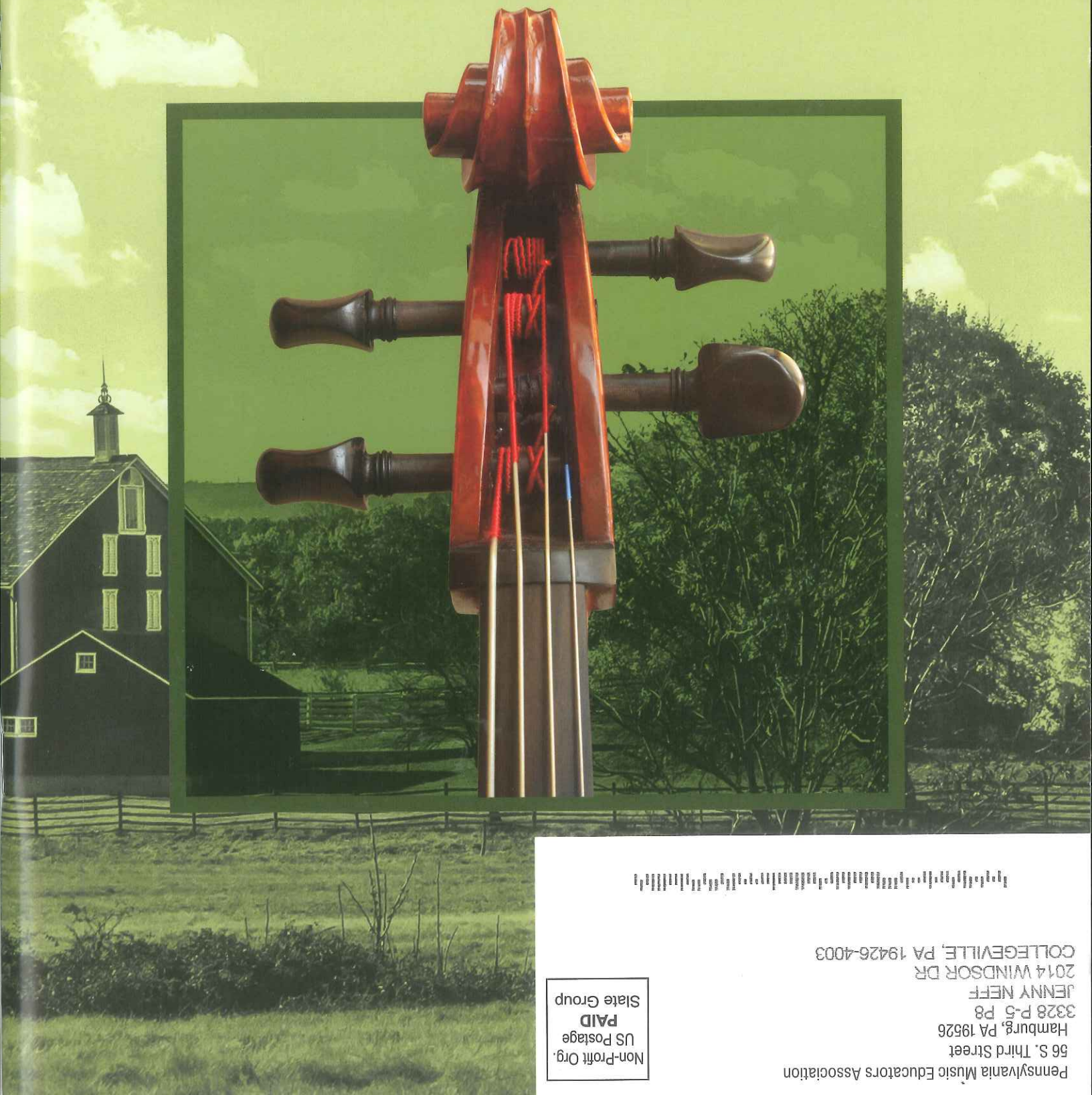
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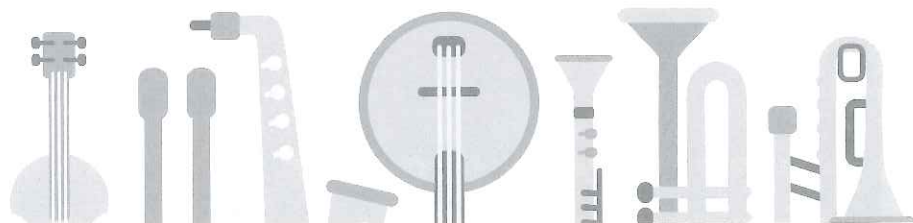
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> SOUND ADVICE

Teacher Evaluation: Spotlight on the Classroom Environment

Jenny L. Neff

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Council for Band - Eastern Division Representative for NAFME

The topic of teacher evaluation is not new, however the onset of state and federal mandates has contributed to a new culture of increased accountability in our schools. In 2010 Pennsylvania joined many other states in making changes to its teacher evaluation system, one that had essentially gone unchanged for over 40 years. New evidence-based evaluation systems contain clear indicators of performance levels, communicate expectations, and create a common language for educators and evaluators. Although there are many new facets to the evaluation process, it continues to focus on two goals: teacher evaluation and professional growth.

A classroom visit from an administrator can add worry for some. Perhaps we can put our minds at ease by focusing on that over which we have control, instead of outside factors that are beyond our control. Within the evaluation tool there are identified components that provide guidance not only for instructional planning but also areas of professional growth. Translating generalized components from an evaluation tool into music-specific action can be a challenge to the music educator (and perhaps more of a challenge to the non-music trained evaluator), but it is something music educators should explore in addressing specific planning, instructional, assessment, and professional areas for improvement.

As you reflect on your teaching, which areas are your strengths? Which areas could be better? Are the challenges you face in your classroom/rehearsal due to something that is student-created or teacher-neglected? In setting the stage for instruction, it is helpful to focus on one of the domains from Danielson's Framework for Teaching; for the purpose of this article that focus is Domain 2: The Classroom Environment. Many times when I've mentored teachers or worked with student teachers their frustrations can be traced back to the classroom environment. Even experienced teachers can struggle with these areas from time to time. Whether you are a newer teacher, have a new job assignment, or just have a challenging group of students, the following components and guiding questions may help identify areas of growth.

Create an Environment of Respect and Rapport with Your Students

Teachers create the environment in which their students learn. By treating students with respect and developing a rapport with them, the teacher models the expectations for the class/ensemble. Are your students encouraged to take risks and participate without ridicule or rejection? How do you handle students who give incorrect answers or students who have not practiced? Do you take into consideration the cultural and learning style differences of your students and provide support in these areas? Do your students respect each other? Do you engage them in conversation or simply give direction? Do students feel you genuinely care about them and model this with classmates, or feel ignored and act out?

Establish a Culture for Learning in Your Classroom/Rehearsal

A culture for learning is a classroom in which students are cognitively engaged. The nature of our content lends itself to the engagement occurring in our classrooms/rehearsals, but we can still consider reflective questions about how we communicate these ideas. Are your lessons and rehearsals purposeful and valuable, or are you simply going through the motions? Are you teaching "one and done" lessons or sequenced concepts? Danielson describes a classroom with a culture of learning as a "cognitively busy place." Is your classroom cognitively busy or chaotic? Do students understand your classroom and content expectations? Have you created a routine that communicates what you expect of your learners? Hopefully, your students are going home to practice and coming back prepared and taking pride in their progress. Have you provided the tools they need?

Manage Classroom Procedures

Once again the nature of our content often determines the procedures we follow, but classroom procedures are still worth review to make sure our rehearsal time is used wisely rather than wasted. With large ensembles the addition of equipment, limited time, and pressing performance deadlines, taking time to communicate and have students understand classroom procedures are crucial. If classroom procedures are not running

smoothly effective instruction cannot occur. Students can take part in helping the classroom run smoothly, and this is an area where student ownership can thrive. Aside from their help, are your transitions smooth from one activity to the next? Are you keeping students engaged? When students work in small groups, are they accountable with, for example, a checklist or reflection of sorts? Have you considered having students engaged in a task while you are taking attendance, or completing other administrative tasks? If you work with another adult, have you discussed your goals and how you see them supporting the students in advance, or is it an after-thought?

Manage Student Behavior

Similar to classroom procedures, learning cannot occur if students are not aware of behavioral expectations and consequences. Are your expectations clear and posted for students to see? Do you monitor student behavior? Are you proactive in preventing bigger behavior issues? When you respond to student behavior problems, is it effective or explosive?

Organize Physical Space

Last but certainly not least in our content area is the physical space. Chairs, stands, cases, backpacks, pianos, amplifiers, percussion... you get the idea. We need to make sure our space is safe and accessible for our students. I have found, especially in larger programs, more procedures are needed just to keep things running and literally free of injury, however I also think it's important to offer some purposeful areas of ownership. Not only can students follow or remind others of the routines and procedures, they can also assist with equipment and tasks to start and end rehearsals (e.g., folders, stands, percussion equipment, etc.). Additionally, I have found having different task areas available to students is helpful (e.g., an area for communication where they can get a rehearsal calendar or missed work). A former colleague of mine started the "I need list", where kids note the music they need or an instrument repair. Then when you have time, you can address these needs without rehearsal interruptions or memory overload. Other examples include an instrument repair space, or an area with a stapler, hole punch, and pencil sharpener for students. All of these are self-serve and the kids know they are available.

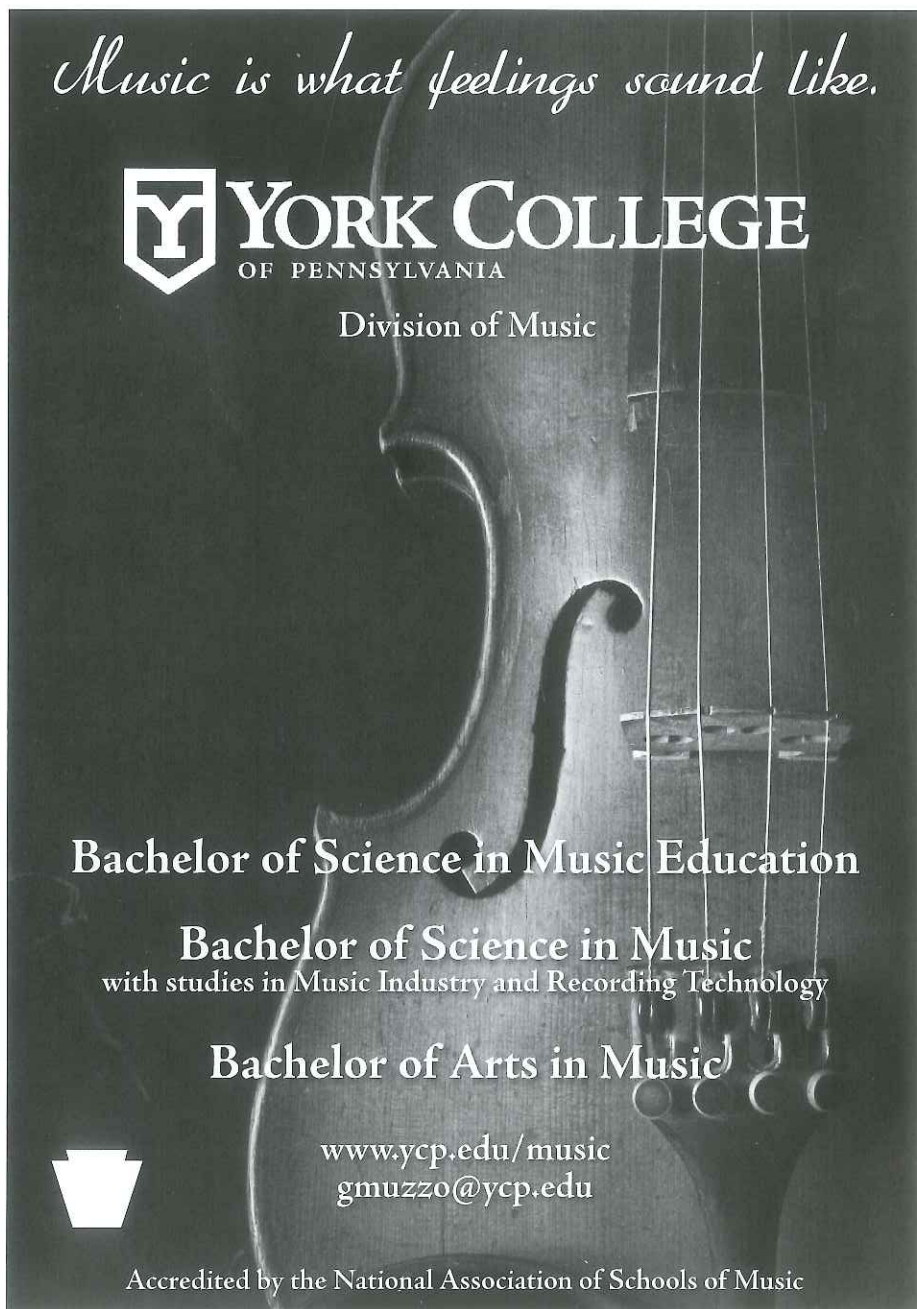
Spending a little extra time reflecting on classroom environment components, getting organized, and communicating these areas to students early on can save a lot of rehearsal time later. We become free of unnecessary distractions.

More importantly, the students become part of a rhythm and routine in the classroom that paves the way for high quality music making. ▀

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