

Conor Bell, bassoon

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Teaching Philosophy

Music is one of the most profound modes of expression, unimpeded by the barriers of language. I am passionate about exploring new ways to refine my own performance and using that knowledge to inform my teaching. I strive to educate students to be complete, thoughtful musicians and to awaken their own passion for exploring musicality and harnessing their expressive qualities. Core aspects of my teaching include establishing strong fundamentals of playing the bassoon as well as reed-making, incorporating music theory and history to form a cohesive musical interpretation, meeting students as individuals, teaching efficient practicing skills, and encouraging independence.

The instrument should be an ally to expression, not a hindrance. To serve that goal, I deeply ingrain fundamental skills into the core of students' playing with a structured, progressive curriculum that has proven effective. Believing that the most important aspect of playing a wind instrument is controlling the airstream, I have developed a daily fundamentals routine that begins from a long-tone (allowing complete attentiveness to the airstream and support systems), then slowly adds layers of note-changes, articulation, and vibrato. This approach teaches students to protect their airstream and support systems from influence by any other aspect of playing.

Reed-making is another vital skill for every bassoonist. I teach younger students to replicate my reed style, while they are developing the fundamentals of all good reeds: response and stability across the whole range of the instrument. As students become consistent reed-makers, I encourage them to experiment with variables, not only to help them find their ideal design, but to equip them to understand how to adapt to changes in their playing for years to come.

A thorough understanding of music history and theory is an essential aspect of performing. While students learn these subjects in other classes, it is the duty of the private teacher to guide the student in synthesizing this knowledge and applying it thoughtfully to music. The best performances arise when the performers understand the structure of the music and the historical context in which it was written, then deliver it clearly and confidently.

I work to be flexible and thoughtful in my instruction. Everyone learns in a different way: explanations that lead to breakthroughs with one student might stymie the next. Accordingly, it is my responsibility to address each student as an individual, in the process tailoring my teaching to their needs. I have taught a variety of students, from the bassoon majors who need to focus on fundamentals, to a fantastic Pre-Med student whose fundamentals are solid, leaving us free to develop new layers of expressive potential. Still another student is an adult amateur who only

recently began playing the bassoon; with her I am laying the groundwork for musical enrichment for years to come.

Another core element of my philosophy is teaching students to practice. Far too often, music students are just told to “go practice,” without being taught efficient practice techniques. This leads to shallow, unfocused practice sessions that fail to adequately reward the student for their time investment. To combat this, I teach periodic “practice lessons,” observing students practicing and providing advice on how to practice more effectively. Such lessons can guide the student to better practice habits and greater success.

In addition to developing students’ practice skills, I encourage them toward independence. To help students self-evaluate, I require them to record their lessons as well as some of their practice sessions and to write reflections, which I review. This allows the student to be an observer to their own lessons, giving them the opportunity to hear improvements in their playing in a way that isn’t possible during the lesson when they’re actually playing. The practice of recording and reflecting also establishes a dialogue between teacher and student to identify strategies that unlock success for the student and how to incorporate them into daily practice.

To be an effective teacher, one must also be a dedicated, life-long student. The longer I play my instrument and the better I become, the more inspired I am to seek out new challenges, new ways to solve problems, new ways to affect my audiences. It is my great joy to share that quest with my students.