Incorporating Music into a High-Performance

One music educator in Nashville has made it work—and work well.
Making Music an integral part of a high-performance academic curriculum, rather than just adding it in as a check-the-box elective, can be tricky. But ask Rich Ripani, director of bands at Hume-Fogg Academic High School in Nashville, Tennessee, and he'll tell you it's worth every bit of blood, sweat, and tears.

Helping Ripani’s cause is the fact that everyone at his magnet school, from the administration to the teaching staff across departments, is on board. “Everyone in the building thinks of the music program as integrated,” he says. “I talk with our principal quite often and we find ways to have band students be part of the overarching mission of the school.”

This is more than just talk: Ripani co-teaches select lessons throughout the year with his Hume-Fogg contemporaries, particularly the American studies and foreign language teachers. Crossing academic lines “is an important thing to do,” he says. The topic is gaining momentum in music teacher circles, and was highlighted in a session at the recent NAfME In-Service Conference.

Here’s what crossing academic lines looks like in
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action: Hume-Fogg’s German students are learning about the writer Goethe as part of their cultural studies. Ripani’s band students are learning to play “Der Erlkönig,” a piece by composer Franz Schubert adapted from a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

“The German teacher brings their students to my class and we teach together. She presents it in German for the German-speaking students, and then I introduce the music, which is Schubert’s interpretation of the text. Then, we all discuss: ’How is Schubert using the musical elements to tell the story?’” When students approach the lesson from different angles, all benefit. “Obviously, not all the kids in German class are in music and not all music kids take German, but they are all learning about Schubert and how musical elements can be shaped to tell a story.”

Not only does an integrated music curriculum benefit the students, it’s become an expectation among parents, according to Ripani. After nine years at Hume-Fogg, he’s come to a realization: “Teaching at the academic magnet school, very few of the students I’m teaching are going to pursue music or music education as a career. Students are here because their parents want them to focus on higher-level academics and get into medical school or some other profession like that. But does that mean they don’t need to study music? Of course not.” In fact, although the state of Tennessee requires one year of arts education in high school, Hume-Fogg students have a two-year arts requirement, and the majority stay on for four years.

“It’s important for kids at our school to have a well-rounded education, which may seem ironic,” Ripani says. “Even though a lot of school systems around the country seem to be getting rid of fine arts, you will almost never see that in a private school. In Nashville, that’s how they sell the school—the athletics and the fine arts. Of course they have the English and history departments, but that’s why parents are spending their money to

Q: What do you know to be true about teaching music that you didn’t know when you started? That learning music is much more important to the overall development of a person than almost anything else they can do.

Q: If I weren’t a music teacher I’d … Be an anthropologist. That was my first major in college and I still have roots in that area. My PhD is in ethnomusicology, which is the study of music in culture ... a sort of anthropology of music.

Q: What’s the biggest lesson you want your students to learn during their time in your classroom? How to be creative adults who can lead a team, work in a creative cooperative environment, and think for themselves.

Q: The music education profession would be better if … Everyone simply understood the importance of what we do for young people, and quit creating obstacles for us.
send their kids here.”

Even the best intentions sometimes get mired in scheduling conflicts. “Scheduling is by far the biggest challenge” to students staying with the music program, Ripani says. “If kids can’t get music in their schedule, they can’t advance with the program.” The predominance of standardized testing doesn’t help matters. “Testing puts so much stress on the kids,” he says. “These last three weeks of school, I have had half of class gone for every rehearsal because of testing.”

Speaking of stress, another issue that crops up in schools that place such a high emphasis on academics is pressure—both externally from parents and teachers, and internally from the high-achieving student body. “It’s a continual problem,” Ripani says. “These kids want to do really well at their music, and at some of these schools they stay up until 11 o’clock doing homework, and don’t get a chance to practice.”

In the end, he suggests striking a balance. “Sometimes, as a director, I think, ‘Gosh, this is just not working.’ Then, I realize they are so swamped with academics. At first I push them to make sure they’re not being lazy, and then I realize that sometimes they just can’t get to it.”

Ripani recently adjusted the roster for an upcoming band concert, dropping two challenging pieces. The students “just weren’t getting there, and I found myself being crabby and pushing them too hard, so I let go of the pieces. If I push too hard, they aren’t going to have a good band experience and they’re going to leave. The bottom line is that they have to pass AP physics. If I’m not careful, they’ll say they have to quit band next year because they just don’t have time.”

An open-door kind of guy, Ripani also spends a lot of time helping his students figure out their optimal band placement. He has found that being crystal clear on his expectations helps with the decision. “I put in writing what I expect them to do at the different levels. We have a top group, and then one that’s far less rigorous. If you don’t think you have time to commit to that, you might be better off taking this second group and having a good time with it.”

“It really has nothing to do with the music, it has to do with everything else that makes it so they don’t have time to do their music well,” he adds. “But on the other side, I can’t allow the ensemble to go downhill just because some students don’t have time.” Interestingly, very few kids opt for the lower-band placement, Ripani says. “They are over-achieving kids and they want to be at the top. But if they can’t practice, the music’s not as good. I can’t solve that problem for them, but I try to help.”

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