

# Keep the Flame Lit

by Dr. Matthew Arau

The first days of the school year are an opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning, and an opportunity to once again ignite the flame for music. As music teachers we devote our lives to share our love for and knowledge of music with our students. We are so focused on those that we teach, that we often tend to put ourselves last and neglect to take the time to focus on keeping our own tank fueled and our own flame lit.

The success of the school year, however, largely hinges upon who the music teacher is at the front of the room. While our “why” for teaching, the “how” we teach and the “what” we teach are critically important, we should take a moment to reflect on some questions that begin with “who.”

- Who are we?
- What inspires us?
- How deep is our well?
- What are we doing to feed our own souls?
- What are we doing to stay fueled and charged?
- Do we still play?
- Do we still love what we do?
- How can we recharge and refresh so we can be our best?
- Do we listen to great music?
- Are we still moved emotionally or do we simply focus on the technique and intonation?
- How can we return to that childlike curiosity and sense of wonder and fun that brought us to music in the first place?
- What brings us joy?
- How can we find joy in our lives so that we can bring joy to the podium and to our classrooms?
- What is important to us?
- What are our values and beliefs?

Who we are now can lead to who we want to be. We ultimately control our thoughts. Our thoughts control our feelings and our feelings control our actions. We choose to smile. We can choose our mindset. We can choose to make a difference.

How do we view ourselves as conductor? Is it “I” and the ensemble? Or is it “we?” Students want to be part of an ensemble where they feel valued and connected to the conductor and to each other.

WHO we are matters so much.

- Do we bring joy, passion, and excitement to our rehearsal?
- Do we bring emotion, empathy, trust, and servant mindedness to rehearsal?
- Do we bring respect, trust, admiration and support for our musicians to rehearsal?
- Do we show our emotions?
- Are we vulnerable on the podium, showing our humanity, freeing the musicians to be vulnerable and expressive?
- Are we reliable, and responsible?
- Are we prepared for rehearsal?
- Do we have the same expectations for ourselves that we have for our musicians?

- Are we willing to go the extra mile for the musicians in our group?
- Are our rehearsals collaborative or confrontational and antagonistic?

Our personal belief in ourselves influences what we can achieve.

- Who do we believe we are?
- Who are we at our best?
- Who do we strive to be?

Fueling our passion and being at our best is so important because of the value of what we bring to our students day in and day out. We teach music because of the joy on a student’s face after working very hard and achieving a musical performance. Sometimes our music room is the one safe place in a student’s life where they feel a sense of value and belonging. We believe we can make a difference. We believe what we do matters, and we can make a difference or an impact on this earth.

Through music, we can feel a deeper spiritual connection to each other and to the world. We learn the value of hard work, effort, persistence, and perseverance, and we learn to not give up when we face struggle and failure. We learn that along the path to being great, we will fall and get back up and fall and get back up again, until eventually we can walk, run, and fly.

What we do really does matter. We lift others. We inspire others. We are medicine for the soul. Through music we teach that we are not alone in this world, that we are connected through our humanity. Music can be the bridge across cultures and differences – it can penetrate barriers and bring those that are apart together.

So as the school year begins and we throw our heart and soul into teaching, motivating, encouraging, and guiding our students, let’s not forget that in order to light a fire for music, we need to keep our own flame lit.

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