

Sending Isn't Easy

Seth Gehrke

“Next to the Word of God, the art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.”

– Martin Luther

Music.

It builds community, friendships, teamwork and support.

It teaches us how to express an emotion without words.

It provides us an avenue for service.

It inspires and enlivens our faith.

I've found that music challenges and encourages adults, but it does something extremely powerful in the lives of youth. It provides them with a life skill, which they can use inside and outside of the church.

Everyone loves music. We hear it in elevators, waiting rooms, clubs, theaters, cars, headphones, gyms, classrooms, workplaces, movies, commercials, and, of course, churches.

If we are to be truly missional, we need also to consider the music found outside of the church walls. I'm not discounting the positive effect of church musicians or the necessity of them. I am a church musician and educator! Teaching people how to serve the church well is important, but shouldn't we also consider how we are equipping and discipling them to be salt and light in their musical endeavors outside of the church? Isn't that our goal? To release them?

While I was leading worship and teaching music in California, I was also teaching private music lessons on the side. Many of my students attended the church's contemporary worship service, and about half were students in the Lutheran school. Over time, it became natural to teach them some of the songs we sang in church. Many, including a number from our Lutheran elementary school, formed our Youth Worship Team. They led their peers in worship every Wednesday during chapel. Eventually, by the time they were in late junior high and high school, nine of them were playing on the Sunday morning adult worship team. We often talked about the purpose of worship, our focus on Christ, and that our aim would hopefully be translated to the worshipers we were called to lead. That is a difficult concept for young musicians to grasp, because the majority of music they encounter is a showy, performance-based, self-glorifying style. They have to draw the crowds, right?

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Teaching them how to lead people toward God, while getting themselves out of the way, filled many of our conversations. Four of the boys, who were extremely talented for their age, formed a rock band outside of church. They played shows around town and opened for a major band to a crowd of over a thousand people. It was a great opportunity to talk about how they could carry Jesus' love and His care into the world as a band of Christian brothers. The way they talk, treat people, and carry themselves will give them chances to rub up against the world and affect it positively. They taught me a lot about being a teacher and a leader.

Being a part of a musical ensemble provides enormous amounts of face-to-face time. It comes between rehearsals, after practices, during setup and teardown, and everything in between. Most things in the music realm are not isolated events. There is much time spent hanging out and working together for many hours leading up to the service or concert. I remember many discussions about friendships, faith, family, school, and even silly cartoons, which became the glue for a foundation of trust that can't be bought or forced. We experienced life together and learned together. Conversations would continue with the parents when they came to pick up their children. I will always remember being told about the impact I made in one child's life. A mom told me that her high school student's faith had grown by leaps and bounds by playing in the Vacation Bible School worship team; the joy that I felt made my heart want to burst. It made me realize that it's much more than the music; I want to see my students grow as disciples that bring Jesus to the world.

That brings up a tough subject for me: releasing people (especially youth) out into the world. I would suspect that any educator on mission who leads with a discipling-then-releasing focus may find this to be challenging. I always know the day is coming, but the difficult part finally comes when I'm standing next to someone during worship and I realize this is last time the person will be here regularly. There is a selfish part of me that says, "He's our best guitarist and worship flows so well because he can almost read my mind. Now I'm going to have to find someone new or raise up another one." I've joked with my students and told them that I'm going to find a teacher to fail them so that they have to stick around another year! We all laughed about it, but then I'd get a bit more serious and tell them how important they are to me and to God. They are a blessing to so many, and they will continue to be as they are sent out. It's that moment when I realize that I've fulfilled my mission as a musician and an educator: God helped me train and disciple them and now I need to release them. As I write this, I think about many of them, and my heart burns with joy and loss at the same time. It's a strange dichotomy. I prepared them the best I could and I pray that they hold fast to their faith and that they can be missionaries in whatever place God plants them. It may be a rock band in LA, a jazz quartet on a cruise ship, a college marching band, a fledgling worship team at a church plant, or just playing music with friends around a campfire on a Friday night. I hope that they take with them the faith, the skills, the positive relationships, the

Word of God, and the encouragement I have spoken into them for so many years. The prayer of this music educator on mission is to infect all areas of music with the love of Jesus through the disciples we send out.

A former student, now a senior in college, sings in the top choir, and he's majoring in business communications. I asked him recently what his plans were for the future. With a wide grin, he said, "My band is really good. A lot of the guys are passionate about it. We just need a good bassist. Then I think we're gonna go for it. We're gonna try and make it." I said, "You're gonna head into the pro-music life, huh?" He said, "Yep!"

Let's take a step back in time, shall we? I'm going to call him Barry. Well, in seventh grade, Barry ran into an issue. His voice was changing and he literally had about six notes he could sing. During voice checks, he couldn't sing above or below them. He voice either gave out, couldn't match a pitch, or just got airy. It was weird. I hadn't run across this in my many (ahem . . . three years) of teaching, at that point. I said, "Barry, you've only got six notes buddy. And that's ok. You'll get there. You can't control this. We have to ride it out, but I need you to do something for me. Don't give up. Keep singing through this change and you'll be stronger on the other side. Just sing those six notes strong when we get to them in each song." Barry nodded, half-smiled and kept going. To be honest, he's kind of a goofy guy with a silly grin and crazy ideas. The cool thing is that he loved people unconditionally, and everyone always knew it. I'm so thankful I had the chance to be his teacher for four years. I follow him on Facebook and watched him join choir in high school and be selected for the top choir as a sophomore. As a senior, he was one of the top in his district. His high school rock band played a lot and he taught himself guitar. I continued to see him go back to his grade school and sing for their auctions and help lead worship. I pray that God uses him mightily as he enters the secular world of rock. I have a good feeling that He will. Barry and his father talk often about being God's salt and light to the world. He will be a witness, a disciple in a foreign land. He's been trained and sent. My heart will continue to yearn for those wonderful times together, but my heart will also burn with passion as I see these young musicians bring Jesus to the world. My prayer has been answered, and I will continue to send.