

Personal Teaching Statement

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Every student deserves a learning environment in which each one can be successful in mastering the course material and incorporate that information into a foundation of lifelong learning. This philosophy is appropriate for both music majors and non-majors and is applicable to the students working towards a performance in Chamber Strings, as well as the freshmen I teach each semester in music appreciation. My work at Lander University is exciting because I am able to wear many hats. As a musician, I have always lived in a spherical world, moving in many directions and taking many paths. The “straight and narrow” is not in my lexicon as a musician. This spherical approach has allowed me to gain expertise not just as a pianist, but as a violinist, a singer, a director, but most importantly, a teacher.

As an undergraduate music education major, I was taught this mantra by my professors: “structure for successful experiences for your students.” To do this, I ask two questions: what do I want the end result for my students to be; and, how do I get them there? While working towards being a public-school music educator, the answers to these questions were fairly obvious. I wanted my students to successfully learn new music and to perform with confidence, therefore, I needed to run efficient and well-planned rehearsals. Now, almost fifteen years into my career as a music educator, helping young musicians become more skilled in their craft is second nature to me. I have trained my ear to hear when a vocalist has too much tension in the tongue or neck, trained my eyes to know when a violinist or cellist lacks a proper bow hold, and honed my skills as a pianist and collaborator so I can effortlessly follow a singer through a memory slip, or a violinist who gets nervous on stage and rushes through a passage of music. I often tell my students that I never regret being a music education major. Even though I chose a path that led me towards higher education, the skills I learned in pursuit of that degree are invaluable, and I use them daily. “Structure for successful experiences” isn’t just for me as a teacher, but also for me as a self-led student of music. During my subsequent studies in graduate school as a collaborative pianist, I realized to be a successful teacher, my first pupil needed to be me. Once I completed my studies, I became a musician without a teacher. I guided myself through mastering new music and new skills, while learning to play in different musical styles and genres.

When I began my appointment at Lander in the Fall of 2011 as the accompanist (a new position for me and Lander), I relied heavily on my spherical existence as a musician to navigate the demands of my new job. I used my experiences as a freelance accompanist and as a collaborative piano student and applied them to my primary job as an accompanist. My official title of “staff accompanist” at Lander may imply that I am to “follow” or even “fade into the background.” However, nothing could be further from the truth. From the beginning of my work as a collaborative pianist, both before and after my appointment at

Lander, I've often served as a musical guide and coach. As any vocalist or instrumentalist will tell you, it is their pianist who often helps them get out of the weeds of minutia and discover the bigger picture of a musical composition. Pianists, as collaborators, are trained to see music on the page vertically (interpreting and playing many notes at once) and horizontally (how the notes fit together through time). I bring this unique perspective to the music at Lander in our weekly rehearsals. Whether I am working with a soprano, saxophonist, or cellist, it is not my job to help them play that individual instrument better, but it is my passion to help them play *music* better. Each meeting involves coaching them through interpretation, expression, appropriate style (which changes depending on when the piece was written), rhythmic integrity, and ensemble with the piano. Above all else, I make sure they see the thread connecting the very first note of a piece to the very last. Performers try to make the audience hear what we decide is important. This is up for interpretation, but those decisions have to be made, and it takes a mature artist to make them. The average 18-year-old college freshmen might not have the skills to step back from their piece and realize it is a complete work of art, so it is my job to guide them to that end. My goal is to teach the student to create a complete and continuous line from beginning to end. Not only does this make them a better performer but learning that skill will make them a better teacher when the time comes, because this knowledge is necessary to conduct a choral or instrumental ensemble, as most public-school teachers do during their career.

In addition to my primary role as an accompanist, I took on roles as pianist and music director in musical theatre productions. I applied my violin background to teach string ensemble and assisted the Chamber Strings ensemble. At the time, Chamber Strings had eight members, consisting of four students, three community members, and myself as either violinist or violist, as needed. Seeing an opportunity for growth, I worked to increase student and community member enrollment. I attended Lander open houses to recruit incoming students, attended the South Carolina Music Educators conference to recruit ensemble participants and string majors from South Carolina high schools, and worked with music teachers in the community to recruit pre-college students. I recruited string students who were already on campus in numerous ways: encouraging word of mouth from students already in Chamber Strings, emailing the student body each semester inviting participation, and placing flyers in dorms to encourage student enrollment. I attend music auditions and make decisions on the awarding of scholarships to incoming string students. Last semester, I was privileged to become the full-time director of Chamber Strings. Under my leadership, the group members significantly increased, and currently twenty-two are enrolled. Eleven members are current Lander students and the rest is comprised of community musicians. I am grateful that my skills as a violinist and an orchestral music education major enabled me to fulfill this need and provide a valuable service to the Department of Music and the University. To capitalize on this momentum, I plan to invite soloists to play concerti with Chamber Strings, and provide opportunities for percussionists, winds, and brass players to participate in full symphonic works. This provides invaluable opportunities for our students, as the symphonic repertoire is some of the richest in classical music literature. Since many high schools in South Carolina have active orchestra programs, these enhancements will provide the Department of Music with

a more well-rounded strings program, which in turn will increase enrollment of majors and non-majors in this area.

Not only do I serve as an accompanist and teacher of music majors, but I am now in my third semester as an instructor of Introduction to Music. Teaching this course has been perhaps my greatest challenge at Lander. The subject matter itself does not present an issue, because I have always been passionate about music history, its composers, and the theory behind musical compositions. The challenge is translating this information to students with a limited music background. Many take the class because it is a general education requirement. In preparing to teach this class, I started with my trusty mantra of “structuring for success.” I decided that at the end of the semester, I want students to walk away hearing music differently than they did before. To that end, listening to music is a primary component of my class. I ask guided questions throughout this process, such as “How does the music make you feel?” or “Can you associate an emotion or an image to this music?” My favorite lecture is when I spend the entire class focused on a single piece of music. I distribute a listening guide that I create, which asks them open ended questions about the music. Last fall, around Halloween, I used the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns’ orchestral work *Danse Macabre*. As the title suggests, the music represents the dance of the dead, a mythical night where all those interred in the cemetery are awakened and dance from midnight to sunrise. Helping students hear a story told in music, not words, is always challenging. But with some guidance, most students can hear the sounds of the skeletons’ bones rattling, the wind howling, the ghosts and witches flying through the air, and the final breakdown before the rooster crows indicating that morning has come and peace is restored. Perhaps my students didn’t leave that lecture wanting to go home and listen to Saint-Saëns’ “greatest hits” but they garnered valuable insight into compositional techniques. More importantly, they learned how to think abstractly. Music for all my students is subjective and deeply personal. What some students tell me they love, others say is their least favorite piece they’ve heard all semester.

Whether I am collaborating with a senior voice student on her final degree recital, teaching music education students how to lead middle and high school orchestra, teaching fifty or sixty freshmen in music appreciation, or preparing Chamber Strings for their concert, the thread that runs through all of my work at Lander is that I always help students understand music in a deeper way. Similar to the way we are taught to look for symbolism in a book in our college English classes, there is always so much beneath the top layer of music. Teaching students to actively listen and evaluate music isn’t a skill to just apply to the music of years gone by, but to the music we hear every day. As a lifelong student of music, I can hear the deeper complexities in a Beethoven piano concerto, but I also hear it in a song by Radiohead, or in the *Hamilton* soundtrack. I encourage my students to hear classical music as the music that sets the ground work for music we hear today. We would not have The Beatles, Prince, Lizzo, or Lin-Manuel Miranda if we hadn’t had Bach and Mozart. The more one hears music, the more one realizes it is based around the same constructs: major and minor scales, rhythmic stabilities based on set meters, and harmonies that support distinct and memorable melodies. We must appreciate where we’ve been to know where we are. A

strong music education helps us think about our world of musical sounds in a deeper way. I hope to always participate in the education of Lander students, whether musician or non-musician, in their expanding appreciation of music and the world of sounds.