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Bell teaches students art of music conducting

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Regional

Bell teaches students art of music conducting

There is a stereotype about most professional musicians that their love of music began at a very young age. John Bell, professor of music and director of bands in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is no exception.

"My dad played trumpet," Bell said, adding that his father, a clinical psychologist, never pushed him to become a musician. "He just said that all he wanted me to do was to follow my heart, to do the best of my ability and see how far I could go." So it was in fifth grade that Bell joined the school band. "I had just gotten braces so I couldn't play the trumpet," he said. "I came home and said I need a clarinet by tomorrow."

Born in New Orleans, La., Bell obtained his bachelor's in music education from Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, and his master's and doctorate in music education from the University of Illinois. But it was much earlier than college when he decided he wanted to be a music educator.

"I had a fantastic teacher," he said of his middle and high school music teacher. "She had a passion for teaching and I thought how better can one spend one's life than making music and teaching the love of music to the next generation. So that really inspired me to follow in her footsteps."

A common practice in music education is the "master class," when an accomplished artist meets with students for specialized classes. SIUE's music department regularly brings in professionals to interact with students. Bell said it's wonderful how students respond to these opportunities.

"I think there is an excitement there," he said. "Obviously, when one rubs elbows with a world famous conductor or musician of any variety, there is a sense of awe and respect for the work that they have done. Not only do the students learn, but I continue to learn all the time."

As director of bands, Bell does a lot of conducting. It is a common misconception of people without musical training, he said, that the conducting is superfluous to the performance. After all, the musicians do have the score in front of them.

"In our conducting class the other day, I was speaking to them about this very same subject. In reality my goal in training my wind ensemble is to get them to the point where they could perform by themselves, because I want them to be independent and thoughtful musicians," Bell said. "I think that the conductor's role in an educational setting is especially in the rehearsal aspect. You are dealing on several levels. You are dealing with musicianship, training musicianship, and training students to access their innate musicianship."

The role of the conductor is also to interpret music. An important lesson music educators like Bell teach their students is that the same piece of music may be interpreted in different ways, played with different tempos, emphases, even speed.

"It is important for students to get in their ears different ideas about how a particular piece could go, and as they develop their own insight then they make decisions for themselves about how a particular piece should go," said Bell. An additional pressure that is sometimes on a conductor is when the composer of the piece is actually present at the performance.

"It is wonderful to have the composer present during rehearsals," Bell said. "It is inspirational for the students and it also puts a little extra edge on the performance, because they know that the person who puts those black dots on the paper is sitting out in the audience."

Bell has worked hard to provide students with extraordinary opportunities to perform. In 2011, SIUE students performed at the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles conference in Taiwan.



John Bell

Photo by Bill Brinson

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

"It was a life changing experience both for me and our students," Bell said. "We were the only university from the United States to perform at this event. Having the chance to hear musicians from all parts of the world making music was stunning. The second part, of course, was having the chance to perform, and the concert was fantastic. That was the focus of the trip. What we didn't know is that the most exciting day was going to be two days before the concert, when we had a chance to visit the National University of Taiwan. Each band performed for each other, and students had a wonderful time. It was a terrific day."

And what does it take to become a great conductor? During his years at SIUE, Bell said he has seen students develop into great conductors.

"Sometimes you don't know until several years down the road," he said, of which students will become great. "I think that someone has to be coordinated. Sometimes the left hand is doing something different than the right hand. I think that the person has to be perceptive. There are a variety of things that I look for, and actually there is more a subtle feeling that I get when I am working with students in the conducting class when I know that they understand what they are doing. There is a sense of innate energy inside of them that is attractive when they are on the podium."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.