

THE VAULT: VOL 4

The official newsletter of CSU Middle School Outreach Ensembles (MSOE) 2026

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MORE PLAYING, MORE TALKING

CAELAN HERK, TEACHING ARTIST

I have spent the past two years in MSOE as a trombone section coach, trying-on-teaching mentor, and band conductor. I have performed almost exclusively in wind bands since middle school and have become used to the way a wind band rehearses, socializes, and sounds. Wanting to broaden my skillset, I applied to conduct the MSOE orchestra and it has been the best year of MSOE yet. I have already learned so much about the string ensemble and I cannot wait for everyone to hear this group at the concert. It has not been easy, however, teaching strings has challenged me in ways that I did not expect.



Band students are focused, eager to learn, and exemplary to work with. I would sit down in the MSOE band for the past two years and immediately strike up a conversation with any student I was around, most students were excited to talk about whatever was on their mind. During peer discussion activities, most students would talk about the topic at hand for a few seconds and move on to something else, prompting the conductor to use a refocusing tool such as a call and response. This is my perception of band. Orchestra students are also focused, eager to learn, and exemplary to work with. They are not as talkative, however. In the same discussion activity in orchestra, the students discussed the topic for a relatively short period and then became silent. This made my job easier because I did not need to use any refocusing tool, but something was missing. I realized that I wanted the students to talk more; to socialize. That night in sectionals, there was hardly a word from the students. Orchestra students were steadily becoming more talkative over the next three weeks, but this did not happen overnight. Adjusting to a new environment and having to perform with new students and teachers can be intimidating for a middle school-age student.

Two years ago during the MSOE after party, a section coach had a recap statement of their lesson where they misspoke, stating: “more playing, more talking.” Though this comment was swept aside as we continued the conversation, I thought

it was noteworthy. Because I believe ensemble skills are dependent on how the ensemble functions as a social group, students must not only get along with each other, but trust each other in order to develop ensemble skills such as communication and listening. As a result of this discovery, I have been using more peer discussion activities this season; students play and then they talk to each other about what they just played. In other words, more playing, more talking. For example, in week five I had the students play a chunk and listen to their stand partner to give them a specific compliment. The goal of this activity was to build confidence, listening skills, and collegiality—all of which are important ensemble skills. I waited for around 30 seconds—at which point students had stopped talking earlier in the season—to observe students’ interactions with each other. All students looked invested in what their stand partners were saying and continued talking. During sectionals that week, the students were more energetic and excited to work on the music than ever.

Teachers should be musically encouraging figures in the classroom. This is a model that places all of the emotional and cognitive load on the teacher. A classroom in which the teacher and the students are musically encouraging is not only easier to teach in, but more effective at building ensemble skills in students. During this season of MSOE, I have found that students feel most comfortable performing with students and teachers that they feel comfortable with. By being interactive as a teacher and employing “More Playing, More Talking” exercises, students have developed ensemble skills that are integral to their music education.

MUSIC IS BIGGER THAN ITSELF

GRACE SPENCER, TEACHING ARTIST

Throughout my music adventures I have come to understand that music is so much more than just notes on a page. Music is a way for people to create, express emotion, communicate with each other, and to be a part of something bigger than themselves. All of these aspects of music point towards one subject: people. I believe people are the most important part of the music we make. Music is made for people to play, listen to, feel, experience, and connect through.



My high school band director, Garren Cuthrell, showed me the true importance of music. Music is a safe place, especially for students, to be themselves, to create, to make mistakes, to have fun, and to be real. He made it obvious that for him, his students always came first because people are the only reason we do music in the first place. I watched him show up for me and for my peers in ways I have never seen a teacher do and he had an immense impact on everyone he taught. MSOE has

highlighted even further this importance for me. Middle school students are learning who they are, and it is so important that they have a safe outlet like music in order to learn about themselves and make mistakes without being judged for them. Music gives them a chance to feel accomplished and learn teamwork. It inspires creativity and gives them the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves. I know that as a teacher, my biggest goal will be to take care of my students first and to foster a classroom that supports creativity, making loud mistakes, kindness, and learning. Students deserve to feel safe in a classroom being themselves and learning new things. Without mistakes, we wouldn't learn, and we wouldn't be able to figure out who we are as people. Music gives people the chance to experience a language unlike any other, one that gives us the chance to learn how we communicate and students deserve to feel safe learning things about themselves. As Stevie Wonder once said, "Music is a world within itself, with language we all understand, with an equal opportunity, for all to sing, dance and clap their hands."

THE POWER OF STICKERS

OLIVIA HOO, TEACHING ARTIST



I love stickers! They are fun to look at, sometimes shiny, sometimes smell good, and can always act as a way to bring joy. For many, stickers as positive reinforcement stopped at a young age. They were given out for the little things like tying shoes or sharing a toy. While those actions may feel small to adults, they can be big steps in growing as a person and deserve to be celebrated with a sticker.

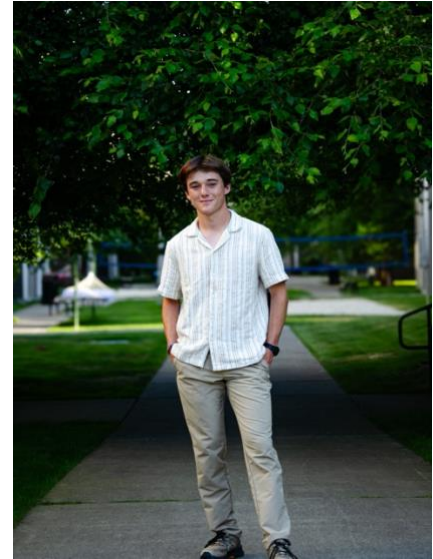
The young musicians in MSOE are learning to balance many responsibilities. From classes and ensembles to late nights at MSOE, students work hard at building good habits along the way. These are things like caring for their instruments, bringing their music, practicing pieces, or even just showing up with a positive attitude. All of these acts may feel small, but they add up to create amazing, responsible, and resilient musicians. As a teaching artist, I'm so grateful for the work these students are putting in, because without them, I would not have such an amazing opportunity to hone my teaching skills. As such, I try to find many ways to show my gratitude to these growing musicians. From past experiences, I understand how sometimes students may feel "babied" by excessive praise, which is why it is important to find ways outside of verbal communication to express pride in their dedication. As a teaching artist, I can not control what a student's week has looked like outside of MSOE, but I can make sure that the time they have in

MSOE is meaningful and brings a smile to their face. With the power of stickers, all students can feel proud of their work, even the little things.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

ALEXANDER STROBEL, TEACHING ARTIST

Recently, in MSOE, I taught a sectional where I focused on a very technically challenging section of music with quick changes from half position to extended positions, shifting, and awkward hand shapes. I was using my cello to demonstrate and play along as we pushed through the challenging section. The students accomplished a ton and were quite successful with that tricky section by the end, but I still walked away feeling there was something wrong. After sitting with that feeling for a bit, it hit me. Where was the joy? Where was the fun, connecting, expression, and all the other things that make music so great? While demonstrating with my cello was a major help in teaching and showing these new positions, it also confined me to my chair and created a barrier between myself and the students.



During the next sectional, I made sure to stay out of my chair, move around, and feel connected to the students I was teaching. It did not take long before I was flapping my arms like a bird as I described a ridiculous scene to get the students to play a certain way. Laughter and smiles flooded the room and the students played with so much more joy and character than before.

As music teachers, our job is not just to teach music, but also to engage the students. This can be done in many different ways, but one of the simplest and most universal ways is through the use of theatrics. No matter the concept being taught or the age of the students, theatrics can be used in some magnitude, even just in the way one talks. In my example, theatrics engaged the students and helped to produce better results, and all it took from me was flapping my arms.

Not only is using theatrics a great tool for engaging the students, it is also a great tool for fostering a fun and safe environment. By being theatrical and silly, you break the ice and open up the space for the students to be silly and authentic in their own ways and feel more comfortable doing so. As music is a subject that derives from self-expression, having that safe environment that lets students be authentically themselves opens up a world for potential for pure and beautiful music making.



STUDENTS LEARNING LESSONS, TEACHERS LEARNING STUDENTS

TREVOR WOODCOCK, TEACHING ARTIST

Growth is the largest objective of the Middle School Outreach Ensembles. It's at the center of our operations and professional development, our lesson planning and weekly actions; it's the core purpose of our program and profession. Student growth is what our teaching artists plan to foster with engaging activities, tools like repetition and scaffolding, and a clear goal for

what the students will be able to accomplish by the end of our time together. When everything goes according to plan, that's great, but reality is rarely that perfect. What's most important to me isn't that students just learn what the teacher wants, instead that students learn what they need. That's the lesson we teachers learn: making adjustments to meet the needs of each student.

This past week in MSOE, a fellow teaching artist described to me her sectional and how it went. The plan was clear for a portion of music: refine the rhythm of these measures and move on to another piece. When a student described he didn't know how to play those notes yet, the teacher didn't say, "we'll get to it next week" or "how do you not know?" Instead, she pivoted the lesson to help that student grow where he needed, while maintaining challenge for the others by giving them a separate task that would help them improve. That was a situation where the students were still learning a much-needed lesson, and the teacher learned to recognize what an individual student might need, compare it with the rest of the group, and create that equitable learning environment. As a 5th year music education student, I find it so inspiring to hear stories and see lessons just like this every week, and to find ways of creating that same environment for my students, peers and self.

VOICE AND CHOICE

JUNO OKINS, TEACHING ARTIST

Recently, I read an article called “Inclusive Spaces in Our Music Places” by Joyce Click¹ in the NAFME Music Teaching Magazine. This article discussed the many ways that current in-service teachers are adapting their classrooms to fit the needs of all students I would recommend reading Click’s article as there is a lot of strong insight, and it inspired me to write this article for MSOE-specific application. I try to read a NAFME article at least twice a week (sometimes more), as there is so much progress being made in our field professionally that often goes overlooked. This particular article came to my attention at a very useful time for me. I find that the start of the MSOE season is always a good time to learn new things, and I think part of what makes teaching middle schoolers so valuable for me is getting to see what different students can do. This age group seems to be, from all my experience, the most unafraid to challenge my previous conceptions or notions.



Middle school is a tough time for any student, but especially students with exceptionalities who are just learning how to “fit in” to a large ensemble for the first time. Let us as music teachers recognize this and lead with empathy. Maybe it is our time to realize that it is not our students who need to “fit in” to our activity, but rather we may be the ones who need to adapt our activity to reach all students. All students want to feel seen and heard, and the music classroom is the exact right place for them to be. If we truly believe that music is for all, it is important to recognize what works and what doesn’t. If music making is to build community, let it include all students in the community it is trying to build.

Some ideas for differentiation include: giving outspoken students regulated time to share their ideas, giving active and creative students time and resources to improv, and giving them regular breaks to talk to each other to ensure they can stay focused in short bursts when you need them too. Overall, these strategies should help you honor your students’ “voice and choice”. A healthy classroom exists when the students feel heard, so they should have a reasonable amount of input into their environment (a voice), and reasonable accommodations so they can participate in activities as they see fit (a choice).

By honoring their “voice and choice”, you make sure every student can participate to their full capacity, whatever that may be

Students with exceptionalities will need more specification with what is appropriate for them (we call this differentiation), and may also need other accommodations. I would recommend trying to visit the schools your students attend and learn about what classroom environment each student is used to. This is not necessarily for you to “replicate” or copy exactly everything their school’s music teacher does, but it can be a helpful tool to gain insight and help your students in your classroom. This also shows students that you care about them and that you are willing to put in work to see them outside of your weekly MSOE visits

Lastly, do not shy away from peer collaboration! MSOE is a very valuable time to collaborate with the other Music Ed students in this program, and it is one of the very special things about MSOE. In fact, I have consulted many friends for their ideas for writing the very article you are reading right now. I wanted to have a cohesive and strong piece of writing, so of course I asked others for help. If you want to be a strong teacher, why not ask for help in that as well? My peers have helped me come a very long way, and as I continue to progress, I discover that everyone has unique ideas. In the end you will need to find what works for you, but considering the perspectives of others is a fabulous step in this journey.

As the coming weeks progress, I would encourage you to reflect inward and ask yourself how you are including all students this week, and how you are adapting to fit their needs. As Joyce Click said at the end of the article mentioned above: “Music Classrooms that mirror the community flourish and bring out the best in all of us”.

Notes:

¹Click, J. (2026, January). Inclusive spaces in our music places. NAFME Music Educators Journal.

MEET OUR STAFF!

MSOE TEACHING ARTISTS (UNDERGRAD AND GRADUATE STUDENTS)

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Isaac Schell	Trevor Woodcock
Olivia Hoo	Andrew Ressetar
Emma Edwards	Freya Underwood
Claire Ardoin	Olivia Berg
Elise Renner	Anna Dunn
Nadine Bliss	Audrey Farrar
Elliot Miles	Malia Muller
Olivia Zenzinger	Michael Reeder
Amber Mills	Willem Schutte
Cameron Becker	Nick Hailey
Juno Okins	Cora Larson
Connor McDonald	Zuzu Davis
Evelyn Swank	Alex Strobel
Will Schuh	Caelan Herk
Ethan Barker	Ray Barrera
Ben Redding	Kathryn Carlos
Hunter Wells	Grace Asiala
Grace Spencer	Lamarana Baldé
Jack Burton	

MSOE ADMIN. STAFF (CSU FACULTY AND GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS*)

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 Dr. Seth Pendergast
 Dr. Christina Herman
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 Avan Leffler-Herzberger
 Emery O'Brien
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 Liam McArthur
 Rayya Saleeby
 Alexander Johnson (Xander)
 Melinda Fullenkamp
 Collin Carlson
 Toby Cain
 Mikkie Palmer
 August Warner
 Jocelyn Gabel
 Jean Loma
 Ian Rose
 Sienna Vogel
 Rachael McReynolds
 Tiare Patricelli (Tia)

A NOTE ABOUT THE EDITORS

JESSICA WARNER: EDUCATOR, PERFORMER, AND ADMINISTRATOR

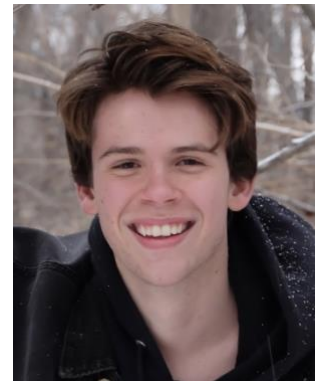


Jessica Warner is a passionate arts advocate, educator, and oboist based in Fort Collins, Colorado. Holding a Master of Music from the University of Texas at Austin and a Bachelor of Music from the University of Michigan, she is a licensed Colorado educator who inspires students across grades K–12 through choir, strings, and modern band programs. Warner actively supports arts education and outreach, mentoring young musicians, coaching ensembles, and creating inclusive programs that foster creativity and accessibility. As a performer, she has held orchestral positions and performed internationally as an oboist and English horn player. She brings her professional experience to her advocacy, using music to expand opportunities

and inspire the next generation of artists.

WILLEM SCHUTTE, TEACHING ARTIST

Willem Schutte is a second year Vocal Music Education student at Colorado State University, studying voice under Dr. Tiffany Blake. He is currently a Baritone in the CSU Chamber Choir, under the direction of Dr. James Kim. He has been a vocalist for 10 years, and shares his love for choral singing with the students of the Middle School Outreach Ensemble. In his free time, he likes to record and produce music and spend time with his friends!



MICHAEL REEDER, TEACHING ARTIST



Michael Reeder started his musical career as soon as he could make noise. He grew up constantly making music, which he very quickly came to love. At the age of 11 he started play the alto saxophone, and by 14 started playing the oboe. He continued to play both instruments throughout high school, making multiple honor ensembles, and becoming drum major his senior year. Beginning his sophomore year, he joined choir and took voice lessons with Heather Romig. During his high school choral career, Michael made multiple honor choirs, All State Choir, and All State Jazz Choir. Mr. Reeder is currently a second year Music Education student with an emphasis in Voice at CSU where he has the opportunity to be a part of the MSOE program and "The Vault" editorial team. He spends his free time acting, ice skating, baking, and making memories with family and friends.