

Go and Shine!

Part 2: Eight Strategies for Cultivating a Positive Rehearsal Space

ELIZABETH WEISMEHL

Elizabeth Weismehl teaches general music and choir to grades K-5 at Avoca West School in Avoca District 37 in Glenview, Illinois, and is the director of Voices Rising at the Midwest Young Artists Conservatory in Highwood, Illinois.

Author's Note: I was asking students for celebratory words, and "Go and Shine" was a third grader's response. I was inspired to use it as the title for this article, as this is my hope for your students.

The strategies included in this two-part article are influenced by my work with Dr. Matthew Arau, author of Upbeat! Mindset, Mindfulness, and Leadership in Music Education and Beyond, associate professor of music, chair of music education and associate director of bands at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. He is also president, founder, and CEO of Upbeat Global.
www.upbeatglobal.com.

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Focusing on joy and gratitude can cultivate a positive music room culture, creating space for kindness, connection, and trust. The purpose of this two-part article is to provide strategies for finding joy by practicing gratitude and positivity. As I shared in part one, mindfulness practice helps us to be comfortable with what is out of our control. This can help us to remain calm and think more clearly in

stressful situations and inspire our students also. Part one explored practicing mindfulness and gratitude for our own benefit. Here in part two, I will share strategies for use with students.

Introduction

My Concert Choir was singing on the high school spring concert, an opportunity that would take their choral experience to the next level. Outwardly I appeared excited and confident; inwardly, I was apprehensive. The choir had the potential to be good, even great, in a few years when they had been singing together for a while.

Before the pandemic, the choir consisted of advanced musicians in third through fifth grades. As I rebuild the choral program, the ensemble starts in first grade. The choir had not sung for an audience since the freshmen who were singing with us were in fifth grade. Before the concert started, we needed to practice standing on risers and get a sense of singing in a large space with others. I had spent time tuning the ensemble for balance and blend in a five-row formation to fit in the music room. That night, we shifted to three rows. I had no idea what impact this would have on the ensemble.

As we warmed up, my worries dissipated. The sound was glorious, and the students exuded a confidence beyond their years. Students noticed that I was emotional and asked if I needed an emergency group hug. In that moment of vulnerability, we became more deeply connected. I could not have anticipated how much heart, beauty, and confidence they would sing with that night. I believe part of what allowed the magic to happen are mindfulness and gratitude practices that are integrated into each class and rehearsal.

My goal in this article is to offer eight strategies for cultivating a positive rehearsal space. The following strategies can be modified for any teaching situation. Begin with positivity to create an environment favorable for learning, and give students agency to create a culture of collaboration.

Strategy #1: Good Vibes!

The fourth graders created a chain of kindness activity called Good Vibes Compliment Tag. It is a fun way to kick off the year or whenever the group energy feels off to help students make connections and feel valued.¹

It is important to discuss what a compliment is and sounds like. As students get to know each other, I encourage compliments about character. Play a “good vibes” song, maybe even something you are rehearsing or planning to teach, as students move musically around the room. When you pause the music, a student (chosen ahead of time) gives a compliment to someone nearby. The next time the music stops, both of these students compliment other students. Continue the activity until everyone is giving and receiving compliments. Take a moment to soak up the good vibes!

Strategy #2: Happy Dances, Heart Keepers, and Partner Connections

Every student in my class has their own class number. Throughout the year, I choose students randomly for different needs by using a small box filled with numbered wooden hearts. The “Happy Hearts Treasure Chest,” as I call it, keeps the environment childlike and playful. I introduce it by sharing that each one of us is a treasure to be valued and that I treasure our time together.² Using hearts is a symbolic way to remind students that they matter and are cared for.

First graders suggested a Happy Dance to ensure the hearts are well mixed, and a Heart Keeper to be in charge

of the dance and choosing hearts. The dance is a fun opportunity to let everyone, including me, cut loose, generating smiles, laughter, and connections. Students are adept at dancing with great spirit and energy and being still when a dramatic musical cutoff is given. Such joy!

Using the treasure chest to choose partners ensures all students feel included. When two hearts are selected, the students ask “<Name>, will you be my partner, please?” They respond with, “I would be grateful to be your partner” or “Yes, thank you.” Sometimes they add a personal touch. As long as the communication is done in a welcoming way, including facial expression, body language, and tone of voice, anything goes. Children need opportunities to practice what kindness looks, sounds, and feels like.

Strategy #3: Connecting through Joy and Gratitude

Another way of creating positivity and connection is to have students write down something or someone that they are grateful for or makes them happy. The possibilities for sharing their joys and gratitudes are limitless! Students give their note to the person or place them in our Joy and Gratitude Jar. We look at responses or add to the jar whenever we need a lift.

You could create class, grade level, or individual containers or envelopes. One year our Gratitude Wall was in the hallway. Students can write on sticky notes, bulletin board paper, or create a paper chain.

Practicing gratitude is positively impacting the music room culture. One morning I noticed writing on the dry erase board and wondered why it had not been cleaned. My frustration turned to deep appreciation when I realized these were messages from fourth- and fifth-grade band students thanking me for the use of the room. As I expressed my gratitude, I could tell they felt a sense of pride.

Strategy #4: Breathing In, Breathing Out

When students show up for class or rehearsal, they may be emotionally unavailable. Breathing is integral to singing technique and instrumental in regulating emotions. If one’s breathing is calm and relaxed, it will positively impact one’s state of mind and ability to focus and the music room environment.³ To encourage this, we say the mantra “Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile”⁴ as students enter.

Focus Breath

We then practice mindful breathing, sometimes called the Focus Breath.⁵ Have students sit tall. If comfortable they can close their eyes or invite them to find a space to focus their gaze, perhaps outside if there are windows. Inhale and exhale through the nose for four counts each. Do this at least three times. You will likely notice a settling of the energy. Breathe with the students and use it as a moment to recharge.

Renew and Release Breath

After vacations, I like to introduce students to the Renew and Release Breath.⁶ Inhale through the nose for four counts while thinking “renew” to rejuvenate. Exhale for six counts and think “release” to let worries go. Stay in this breathing space as long as you need.

Musical Scarf Breathing

A kindergarten class entered the room in chaos. Unable to garner their attention, I was on the verge of reacting from an emotional place. I turned on a placid piece of music as I slowly passed out colorful scarves, giving myself time to breathe and think. By the time every student had a scarf, I had a plan.

I invited the class to inhale and exhale as we moved the scarves in an arc to musical phrases. They quieted down and were soon creating their own scarf breaths. Their creativity was boundless! I moved from exasperation to joy. One of my favorites is the Flower Blossom. Squeeze the scarf in your hands as you inhale. As you exhale let your fingers come apart slowly. It really does look like a flower opening! Scarf breathing quickly became a requested activity in many grade levels.

Visual and Aural Cues

Students may benefit from a visual and/or aural signal to help them to pay attention to their breath. This is what Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh refers to as “a bell of mindfulness.”⁷

• *Breathing Ball*

There are breathing balls and animated visuals online. I like the Hoberman Sphere, which I also use to help students learn breathing for singing as well as for musical articulations such as crescendo and decrescendo. Mine glows in the dark, creating light on dreary days.

• *Sounds*

In Plum Village in France, which Hanh founded, there is a clock that plays music every fifteen minutes. Everyone stops to focus on the music and their breath.⁸ I play chimes to gather attention. Sometimes I use an ocean drum (Ocean Breath) or a rainstick (Rain Breath). What sounds can you find in your room?

Students enjoy being leaders of the breathing ball and instruments.

Strategy #5: Silence, Awareness, and Dancing Leaves

Sometimes a change of scenery is needed to reset. Students walk silently and pay attention to their surroundings. When we return to the classroom, we have a discussion about their observations, including the power of silence and its significance in music.

We may walk inside the building looking for things that bring us joy or peace so that students can come back to this on their own. I show them my favorite spot in the school—a hallway with windows that look out onto a beautiful garden and courtyard. How often do you walk in the hallway and pay attention to your surroundings?

Other times we go outside to find inspiration in nature. During the pandemic, I took a class outside. As we listened to Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*, the wind picked up and leaves started falling off the trees. A first grader called out, “The leaves are dancing!” Indeed, they looked like they were dancing in the wind and sunlight. It was an unexpected moment of joy that would have been missed if the student had not been paying attention. The superintendent, who happened upon our class, witnessed this, and I was grateful to share the moment.

The dancing leaves became an integral part of lessons. I brought leaves into the room to use as a visual for leaf breathing and musical movement. Bringing nature inside helped the students to recall the beauty we experienced that day. What is an unplanned teaching moment that turned into magic for you and your students?

Teaching students to become aware of what is happening around them is an important part of developing empathy and living life in the present moment.

Strategy #6: Listen In

Active listening is at the heart of being a good musician, ensemble, audience member, and communicator. Think of the game Telephone. Participants need to pay close attention if the last person is to receive the original message.

To practice this skill, we do an activity I call Listen In.⁹ This is a great way to start the year to help students get to know one another or any time you want to practice listening skills. It can be integrated into your music curriculum by focusing on music concepts.

Everyone has a partner and is given the same question. It can be as simple as sharing a favorite song or might require a more thoughtful response, such as what kindness looks or feels like. You might also play a piece of music and ask students to think about what the time signature is and why.

The speaker has a set amount of time to respond, usually twenty to thirty seconds. The listener does not talk even if it seems as if the speaker is finished. This can be challenging, even for adults, but is important, as it gives the speaker time to think and the listener time to practice not responding or reacting too quickly. Students switch roles and then share their partner's response with the whole class. As students share, ask the class to discuss what went well and where there is room for improvement.

Strategy #7: Choose Happy

As choral educators, we are fortunate. For many of our students, singing is often what gets them moving, and may even be the best part of their day. I have had parents tell me that their child is typically not a morning person, but on choir days they jump out of bed. Yes!

When a student seems stuck in that "I'm tired" or "I don't want to do this" frame of mind, I encourage them to think of something that they are grateful for or looking forward to. Research shows focusing on this for at least seventeen seconds will positively impact their day and ultimately, the climate of the music room.¹⁰ I have the number seventeen posted in my room as a reminder to focus on happy thoughts and gratitude.

Strategy #8: Looking Forward with Joy

Returning to school after a long break is an opportunity for all of us to begin again. This is a part of a mindfulness practice. When we realize we are distracted, we reset and begin again.

I used to ask students to share what they did during vacation. Now, I invite students to think of something "that brings you joy, gratitude, comfort, or something you are looking forward to."¹¹ My shift in teaching with an intentional focus on joy, gratitude, and positivity has deepened my connection to students and is creating a calmer and happier community of musicians. This does not mean that we will always be happy. But if we choose to focus on finding things to be happy about, it will improve the quality of our lives and those around us.

As we prepare for a new school year, I wish you and your students joy and many magical moments. I hope these ideas inspire you and your students to "Go and Shine!"

NOTES

¹ Inspired by Dr. Arau's "principle of value" and Positive Bumper Cars. Matthew Arau, *Upbeat! Mindset, Mindfulness, and Leadership in Music Education and Beyond* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2021), 314-317.

² Ibid., 64.

³ Ibid., 79.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 23.

⁵ Matthew Arau, *Upbeat!*, 80.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 33.

⁸ Thich Naht Hanh, "Telephone Meditation," *Buddhism Now*, May 3, 2014. <https://buddhismnow.com/2014/05/03/telephone-meditation-by-thich-nhat-hanh/>,

⁹ Matthew Arau, *Upbeat!*, 306-308. Inspired by Dr. Arau's description of Tim Lautzenheiser's Communication Circles.

¹⁰ Esther Hicks and Jerry Hicks, *Ask and It Is Given: Learning to Manifest Your Desires* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2004), 109.

¹¹ Matthew Arau, *Upbeat!*, 76.