

MY TRUMPET TEACHER IS A POET IS THAT COOL?

When I was first asked to write an article exploring the links between being a poet and a trumpet teacher, my first reaction was panic. How could I possibly link my poetry life and my teaching/music life together? In my head they occupy two very separate spaces. Whilst pondering this, I grumpily thought of how often they seem to leech time and energy from each other, and it was this thought that made me realise they *must* be linked in some way and gave me the confidence to start writing.

I've only just started telling pupils that I write poetry – they often just look at me strangely. Then they ask what I write about – I usually change the subject and make them play a scale or something – because what poet likes to be asked what they write about? Especially when you are asked by a ten year old who is not going to be impressed by an airy flourish of my hand and a vague reference to gender politics.

At the beginning of 2012 I told one of my teenage pupils I'd got a job working as a poet in a men's prison for ten weeks. He looked at me in disbelief, then did that clicking knuckles thing that's all the rage with young people, before exclaiming with delight 'You're gonna get stabbed!' followed by another click of his knuckles. When I appeared the next week with no puncture wounds, triumphant, he'd forgotten about the conversation already.

I've been working as a full time brass teacher for seven years – but in September 2012 I decided to reduce my contract down to four days a week to give myself more time to write. I teach in about 16 primary schools a week delivering a programme called 'Wider Opportunities' where every child in the class gets a brass instrument as well as the teacher and teaching assistants. I also run two brass bands and teach small groups of children as well.

I think the most important part of my job is to show both adults and children that music is for them. I can relate to thinking that it is not – being the only child in the school not allowed in the choir age eleven. The same thing happens in poetry – people think it is not for them – but it is surprising how many people in conversation will admit they have written a poem or 'always wanted to learn to play a musical instrument'.

As I'm writing this article, I can see more and more connections. The role of peripatetic teacher is always that of an outsider – I'm not attached to any school and this loneliness is reminiscent of the work of being a poet, or a writer. My two worlds creep closer when I think of the way I had to learn as a new teacher that my hope of guiding young players who spent every spare minute practising (as I did) off to music college was unlikely. I had to learn to let go of what I wanted, to understand that if my enjoyment of my job, my success, was measured by how much my pupils practised and whether they went off to music college, I would be a Very Miserable Teacher. I had to learn to listen to what my pupils wanted – and this transaction is often non-verbal because sometimes they don't know either. Doesn't this sound like poetry? The act of letting go, of relinquishing control is precisely what writing is to me. I learnt as a poet as well, that if I measured success by publication or prizes I would be a Very Miserable Poet.

Another part of my job is conducting a junior band. This is going to sound harsh, but conducting is all about imposing your will on the group. There is no room for anyone else to be creative. In fact, rehearsing is more like editing a poem – practising the same section over and over again, breaking the band down into parts so you can hear the weakest links – is exactly like reading your own poem over and over again, to find a line that will give way under scrutiny.

Teaching music and writing poetry are ultimately an act of balance – they both have that feeling of walking a tightrope, of words being vastly important. I often find myself using the same catchphrases when I'm teaching – they almost become your own personal clichés. I made a list of mine and turned

it into a poem – it made it into my first pamphlet at the last minute and on the advice of my editor, Ann Sansom, rather than any passion for it on my part – maybe it reminded me too much of work – but it is often the poem that people comment on – the most surprising people will confess they used to play a brass instrument or will say ‘I remember my trumpet teacher saying that to me when I was young’. And of course, the lines in my poem are not mine at all, really. They were given to me by my trumpet teacher and I remembered them, and repeated them to my pupils, like a poem, learnt by heart.

Teaching the Trumpet

I say: imagine you are drinking a glass of air.
Let the coldness hit the back of your throat.

Raise your shoulders to your ears, now let
them be. Get your cheeks to grip your teeth.

Imagine you are spitting tea leaves
from your tongue to start each note

so each one becomes the beginning of a word.
Sing the note inside your head then match it.

At home lie on the floor and pile books
on your stomach to check your breathing.

Or try and pin paper to the wall just by blowing.
I say: remember the man who played so loud

he burst a blood vessel in his eye? This was
because he was drunk, although I don't tell

them that, I say it was because he was young,
and full of himself, and far away from home.

Kim Moore



Paint

by
**Anne
Stewart**