



Playing Good Music Well Is Not Enough

A few years ago, motivational guru Simon Sinek told us “It doesn’t matter what you do, it matters why you do it. Start with why.” Since I have only recently been entrusted with the chairmanship of College/University Affairs, I’m going to follow his advice and tell you why I teach the way that I do and why I interact with ensembles the way that I do.

Because playing good music well is not enough.

Please understand: I’m not suggesting that we should play lousy music badly. What I’m suggesting is that if ‘why’ ends at playing good music well we’re stopping far short of what the arts bring to the human condition.

Let’s look at it another way – and bear with me, this will make sense in a minute. I suspect virtually everybody is familiar with Lego. Little, colorful plastic interlocking bricks. They have been around since 1959. Here are a few statistics to peak your curiosity:

- Lego Corporation manufactured 55 billion pieces last year alone.
- 10 Lego construction sets are sold every second and they estimate that kids spend five billion hours a year playing with them.
- If you took all the Lego bricks ever made, there would be enough for each and every person on the planet to have 80 of their own.

How is it that we can spend so much time playing with these little bricks? Well, three of the eight-dot pieces of the same color can be combined in more than 1,000 ways. Make that six bricks of the same color, and there are more than 915 million possible combinations.

Amazing as all that is, just 10 years ago the company was losing one million dollars a day. Yet in 2014 they are now the most profitable toy maker in the world – by far. The story of this astounding turn-around is the stuff of legend in the business community. It’s also the allegory behind *The Lego Movie*.

If you haven’t seen *The Lego Movie*, don’t worry. Here’s a mash-up of various synopses taken from the internet:

The film follows Emmet, an ordinary, rules-following, perfectly average Lego minifigure who is mistakenly identified as the most extraordinary person – the key to saving the world – The Special. He falls, literally, into a creative and diverse fellowship of strangers known as the Master Builders. Their epic quest is to defeat the evil tyrant Lord Business who is bent on gluing all the pieces of the Lego universe in place permanently according to the manufacturer’s instructions – no deviations allowed.

Lord Business was what the Lego Corporation had become in its first 40 years. Rule oriented and very protective of the prepackaged building sets. Their philosophy was: just make what’s pictured on the box, then buy another set and make that. It was a classic modeling mentality. Make the model, put it on a shelf, make another model. They were not at all comfortable with free play, mixing and matching sets (ironically, because the genius of the product is that any piece interlocks with any other). And they turned their backs on the peculiar flights of fancy created routinely by their customers.

The word ‘Lego’ is a contraction of two Danish words meaning “play well”. To play well in the eyes of the old Lego Corporation was to leave the creativity to the manufacturer. They would think of what to do with the bricks, and you would follow their instructions. The company ‘why’ was: because we said so. Because it’s always been done that way. Trust us.

That’s a lot like what happens in most middle and high school music classrooms. The composers create the music, the publishers package it, and the teacher supplies the instructions. The students are expected – indeed rewarded for – doing what they’re told to do. “Here’s some good music (trust me). Decode it correctly, play it

well, and the concert will be a success.” It’s a classic modeling approach: play *Air for Band*, earn a superior rating, then put it on a shelf and move on. Mission accomplished.

Then what?

That’s where Lego was 10 years ago: losing one million dollars a day. A great product, and people were doing with it exactly what the company felt they should. Buy a set, build it well, buy another set. But building good models well wasn’t enough. And no amount of advocacy could dig them out of the hole they were in.

So how did they turn it around? First they hired a new CEO (only the fourth in the company’s history and the first from outside the founding family). Then they set about figuring out what Lego was uniquely about. They didn’t worry about attracting new customers (what we’d call advocacy and growing enrollment), but instead focused on serving their core customers better.

They removed limitations. Sure, they still print instructions but if you have the imagination for something different they’ll support you. The new Lego Factory online lets you design your own model and then purchase the bricks you need. If the brick you need doesn’t exist, draw it and Lego will make it for you. They now sponsor Brick Fests to celebrate the amazing and weird stuff built by Lego enthusiasts, and they began to deliberately recruit and hire Lego fans as employees.

They threw away the glue, sent Lord Business packing, and started encouraging and supplying the Master Builders. They figured out that what was important wasn’t the product, but what the product enabled people to do. To that end, they crafted a new mission statement and corporate purpose: *To inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow.*

Our ultimate purpose is to inspire and develop children to think creatively, reason

systematically and release their potential to shape their own future experiencing the endless human possibility.

That's a long way from "sit still and follow the instructions." Why is playing good music well not enough? Because it stops short of experiencing the endless human possibility, or even acknowledging that such possibility exists.

In music classrooms across North America we were taught, and have taught our students, to be Emmetts. Remember that throughout most of movie, Emmet is perfectly happy with his mundane existence in Bricksburg and he is extremely uncomfortable – even panicked – when he finds himself without a set of instructions to follow. Go into any school or university and ask an ensemble to form and **express** a musical point of view and they won't know what to do. I've tried it. If you want to see them panic, ask them to

work without notation, or to improvise.

It's just like Emmett. When faced with the challenge of creating something to save the world the best he can come up with is a double-decker couch. He reverts to what is familiar, practical, measurable, and easily explainable to anyone who might ask him what it is (like an administrator, or the school board, or a parent). His has no experience with the possibility of 915 million combinations, so his idea is...a couch. It's not that he isn't creative. It's that his creativity has been deliberately limited, put inside a box with a set of instructions.

We need to begin to see the possibilities within our medium, to realize that with the same materials we can build a couch, or a spaceship, or the CN Tower, or a life-sized bust of William Shatner. We need to view the music curriculum as the development of Master Builders, not

the indoctrination of Emmetts.

If you're thinking: "That sounds great. But how do we do it?" you've taken the first step. You've embraced WHY and moved to HOW. How do you help Emmett imagine more than a couch? How do you let go of the fear that comes from working without instructions to unlock your inner Master Builder? My term as College/University Affairs chair will be dedicated to developing and sharing the answers to those questions in collaboration with anyone who is interested, whether the words College or University are on your nametag or not. Choral, instrumental, general, elementary, secondary, post-secondary, employed, hoping to be employed, not yet graduated, retired...we are all potential Master Builders. Let's find a way to dissolve the glue.

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For information: Dr. Ken Hoppmann, Music/Humanities, SCC-Beatrice/Lincoln
402-228-8256 khoppmann@southeast.edu

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