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Editorial Volume 40: Frankly Speaking

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Cara Faith Bernard
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Frankly Speaking

Who am I?
Who are my students?
What might my students become?
What might my students and I become together? (Abrahams, 2007, p. 3)

Through his teaching and scholarship, Frank Abrahams’s work has consistently represented a prescience for change. The four questions above have created a foundation upon which Abrahams has repeatedly demonstrated that what one does in the classroom is not separate from the real world (Freire, 1970; Shor & Freire, 1987), that experience is knowing, and that education is both personal and political. This special focus issue honors the career of Professor Frank Abrahams. In this Festschrift-style collection of articles, we invited authors to share how Abrahams’s work has served as “points of departure in the discourse” and practices of music education, provoking further inquiry and connection (Abrahams & Head, 2017, p. 7). I elaborate on these “points” below, using headings from lyrics of Stephen Sondheim, one of Frank’s favorite composers. Sondheim was equally fluent in composition and lyrics—his music was inseparable from his thoughts and feelings. I see Sondheim’s fluency as a metaphor for Frank Abrahams’s career: an art, a beautiful entwinement of writing and teaching, each intimately informing the other to invite practical possibilities.

“STOP WORRYING IF YOUR VISION IS NEW. LET OTHERS MAKE THAT DECISION—THEY USUALLY DO. JUST KEEP MOVING ON.”

As a former graduate student of Frank Abrahams at Westminster Choir College, I experienced first-hand the ways his thinking informed his teaching, and vice versa. He rejected the status quo and regularly thought aloud about “what’s next,” how to move forward in the field: “If students are changing, is it not reasonable to suggest that teachers and teaching strategies must change as well?” (Abrahams, 2015). Working at an institution like Westminster—a conservatory steeped in Western classical traditions and master-apprentice models—Abrahams’s clear vision for what music making, teaching, and learning could look like always positioned him to be lightyears ahead of most around him. He consistently engaged in small (and large) acts of subversion to create a

new vision for music making and teaching. Abrahams challenged many of the traditional conservatory practices which focused on participation, apprenticeship, and training, and modeled ways for artists-teachers to help their students become active participants in their learning, to honor their lived experiences and construct meaning through music. Drawing from the questions in the opening, Abrahams put his students at the center of their music learning; he modeled what informal learning and reciprocal teaching look like in a music setting. Centering around a critical pedagogy, one which bridges reality to concept or “world to word” as Freire (1970) described, Abrahams’s curriculum became a locus for constant transformation among teacher, place, and student. He shifted traditional methods courses to focus less on technique and skill development and more on the ways in which teaching is personal, putting students and teacher together at the center. He even changed these course titles from Choral Methods and Elementary Methods to Critical Pedagogy I, II, and III to push against the traditional notion of “methods.” As a result, he transformed the music education program amidst this traditional environment, modeling how his music education students could “prepare students to foster engagements *with* music rather than *about* it” (Abrahams, 2015, p. 98).

“TEACHING IS A SACRED PROFESSION. AND ART IS A FORM OF TEACHING.”

Upon his retirement from Westminster Choir College, Rider University as Professor Emerita, Frank Abrahams was the author of nine well-known pedagogy books: *Case Studies in Music Education* (GIA Publications); *Teaching Music Through Performance in Middle School Choir* (GIA Publications); *Planning Instruction in Music* and *Planning Instruction in Music Online Supplement* (GIA Publications); *Becoming Musical* (GIA Publications); *Aligning Music to STEM: Theory and Practice for Middle School General Music* (GIA Publications) as well as editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* (Oxford University Press) and the upcoming book, *A Music Pedagogy for Our Time: Conversation and Critique* (GIA Publications). He has published over 21 book chapters, 25 articles, four dozen editorials, served as editor of this journal for almost two decades, and has traveled the world giving keynote presentations and serving as guest scholar. He has written numerous music curricula for/with school districts, served as editor of the Westminster Conservatory Youth Chorale Jewish Music Series, published by Transcontinental Music Publications (Hal Leonard), and kept an active performing career, regularly conducting festival choruses and accompanying his students and colleagues on recitals. In addition to serving as chair of music education at Westminster, Abrahams founded/conducted the Westminster Conservatory Youth Chorale and the Westminster Conservatory Collegiate Chorale, ran a twenty-year Summer High School Music Theatre Workshop, and served as Associate Dean.

However, as the contributors of this issue illustrate, what is more impressive than the quantity of his publications is the qualitative impact Frank Abrahams has

had on scholars, but particularly on his students. Namely, the ways in which he so seamlessly blended his research into his teaching to mentor so many students as they transitioned into their teaching careers and beyond. Frank Abrahams is the ultimate critical pedagogue on paper and in practice, living the motto that “there is, in fact, no teaching without learning. One requires the other” (Freire, 1998, p. 11). As a result, Frank Abrahams’s students are a reflection of him. Critical pedagogues in their own right, they are curious and inquisitive, and consistently revisit their philosophies, curricula, and practices to reflect who their students are, and who they might become. They represent Frank’s commitment to change and his vision for transformative curriculum and teaching.

Within this issue are manuscripts that focus on themes that have intrigued Abrahams and inspired scholars, teachers, and students over the span of three decades: curriculum; critical pedagogy; choral pedagogy; and mentorship. Contributors in this issue were asked to engage with these topics to extend, critique, and enrich his scholarship to give way to new paths of inquiry. Each article bridges personal experience with scholarship, further highlighting Abrahams’s inseparable qualities of teaching and learning. This issue begins by situating Abrahams as a mentor and model for change, to imagining new possibilities in curriculum and critical pedagogy. In this issue:

Patrick Schmidt inquires what it means to be a pedagogue. Drawing upon his own experiences as both student and colleague to Abrahams, he situates Abrahams’s work as a policy actor, using critical pedagogy to push limit situations in policy to enact change. Schmidt exemplifies Abrahams’ scholarship, teaching, and service as capturing Freire’s dedication to connecting reality to theory.

Ryan John draws from a prevalent theme of advocacy in Abrahams’s work, namely, advocacy for students; advocacy for teachers; and advocacy for people historically marginalized in American society. He illustrates the ways in which Abrahams has enacted these themes in his work as teacher, administrator, and author.

Gareth Dylan Smith describes the reach of transformative moments. Reflecting on his engagements with Frank Abrahams—where he observed and experienced the ways in which Abrahams enacted a critical pedagogy against the normative practices of Western classical music and music education to transform curriculum and instruction within a traditional music conservatory space—he outlines how this has served as a mode for change in his own career.

Daniel Abrahams likens the metaphor of learning to drive to describe his professional relationship with his father, Frank Abrahams. He describes the ways in which, as a parent-teacher, Frank Abrahams embodied the role of a critical pedagogue, providing moments for collaboration, reciprocal teaching, and decision-making on the journey of becoming a music educator and professor.

Conductor Ming Luke situates the importance of mentorship and teaching as key qualities of becoming a conductor. He recalls his experiences as both a high school singer and college student working with Frank Abrahams in the Westminster

Conservatory Youth Chorale and the ways in which Abrahams's pedagogical modeling and mentorship served as a basis for Luke's current rehearsal strategies as a professional orchestral conductor.

Drawing from narrative research and his own lived experiences as a student of Abrahams, Nicholas McBride recounts the ways in which Abrahams served as a model of a critical pedagogue in his own teaching, inviting space for student agency and the self-actualization of educators.

Marissa Silverman extends Abrahams's body of work on critical pedagogy to examine a critical pedagogy of love. She provides an in-depth description of critical pedagogy in theory and uses the choral program at P.S. 22 in Staten Island, New York to highlight ways that critical pedagogy can be enacted as a pedagogy of love.

Anthony Bernarducci engages with three tenets of critical pedagogy for music education—commitment, connection, and communication and applies it to the collegiate choral setting. Using these “three C's” to illustrate how they may be used to advocate for and grow one's program, in particularly when speaking with administrators.

Ellary Draper explores the intersections of critical pedagogy for music education with disability studies. Drawing upon Abrahams's strategies for critical pedagogy in the music classroom, she provides recommendations of how to implement these strategies for a more inclusive learning environment.

And, finally, Jason Vodicka examines the intersection of critical pedagogy with culturally sustaining pedagogy, namely in how both share a focus on connecting to students' lived experience to develop students' critical consciousness. Vodicka charts the ways in which his own learning and teaching with Abrahams served as a means for cultural sustainability in his current teaching and research. He then pairs critical pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy in practice through Spinifex Gum Ensemble, a musical collective of Indigenous and classical musicians; and demonstrates how the ensemble's rehearsals and mission embody a critical and culturally sustaining practice.

“A VISION'S JUST A VISION IF IT'S ONLY IN YOUR HEAD...IT HAS TO COME TO LIGHT!”

Frank Abrahams has always been someone who has championed people at every stage in their career. He has been instrumental in helping many students—many whom are contributors in this issue (myself included)—transition to sophisticated places in their scholarship and teaching. As editor of *Visions of Research in Music Education*, Frank Abrahams approached the journal as a manifestation of critical pedagogy and mentorship. Under his purview, he curated *VRME* into a publication that honors, supports, and develops author voices that have not been a common part of music education research, such as undergraduates, graduates, and practicing teachers. He created a precedent for *VRME* to be an open access journal so that any scholar, teacher, or student could contribute to and receive research. Abrahams took careful counsel of these undergraduate, graduate, and teacher researchers during the peer-review process, often

working with personally with them to revise their work toward publications. This mentorship has laid the foundation for many to become significant contributors in the field.

This journal—and issue—are a tribute to Frank Abrahams’s legacy, built on a vision for what something can be and become, amplified by the voices of those who have grown in the process. As a new editor of *Visions of Research in Music Education*, I take Frank’s vision and legacy seriously. I—along with Senior Editor Joseph Abramo—will approach the growth and development of the journal in the same way that Frank’s influence and work has allowed *VRME* to arrive to its current significance. What an honor it is to take over at this stage, to bring to light many of the visions that Frank has created. We thank Frank for entrusting us with the leadership of this journal and intend to let VRME be a place for folks to “speak Frankly.” This issue is dedicated to you, Frank, in thanks of the mentorship and care you have shown us in helping us grow as teachers and scholars.

With thanks and admiration,

Cara

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ABOUT FRANK ABRAHAMS

Frank Abrahams is Associate Dean (retired) and Professor of Music Education emeritus at Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, New Jersey. A native of Philadelphia, he holds degrees from Temple University and New England Conservatory. Dr. Abrahams has pioneered the development of critical pedagogy for music education. He has presented lectures, research papers, and classes at the Kodály Institute in Kecskemét, Hungary, and in Brazil, China, Croatia, Israel, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and throughout the United States. His topics include 21st-century skills, constructivist psychology, and critical pedagogy to adapt the Kodály concept for children in the 21st century. His most current research centers on aligning

music instruction with culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, social justice, and STEM. These are described in his books, *Planning Instruction in Music* and *Becoming Musical*, co-authored with Ryan John, and published by GIA and the forthcoming publication, *A Music Pedagogy for Our Time: Conversation and Critique*. Dr. Abrahams was senior editor of *Visions of Research in Music Education* and has been on the editorial board of the *Music Educators Journal*. He is the author of *Aligning Music to STEM (GLA)*. With Paul Head, he is the co-author of *Case Studies in Music Education*, published by GIA and the *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* (Oxford University Press).

