

Vol. LXIII No. 1

October 2017

# VOICE

OF WASHINGTON MUSIC EDUCATORS

## WMEA *talks* *Women* *in* *Music*

*Contributer Kelly Barr Clingan writes about the need for more girls in jazz band while Anna Edwards share her work on gender disparity in music conducting and composing.*

 Assessment in Orchestra Classes:  
From Compliance to Ownership

 Honoring Eric Lucas

 Ten Grands

 Important Dates for the  
New School Year

---

---

---

---

---

# The Educational Jazz Band: Where Are the Girls?

By Kelly Barr Clingan



*Representation matters. Consider that the lack of representation in top groups makes girls less likely to audition for all-state ensembles, or maybe even the jazz band at your school.*

In Seattle’s nationally celebrated jazz ensembles, we have a serious but often-overlooked equity problem. Where are all of the girls? Let’s be brave, let’s be honest, let’s talk about it, and let’s problem-solve. I don’t have surefire answers, but we need to start the conversation. I want to be clear about a few things before we get started. I believe that if half of your school’s students are girls, one half of your jazz band should be girls, too. Mine isn’t, but it’s close. I’m working on it. I am a female trombone player, a strong and bold female trombone player, who is actively working on this problem. It isn’t an easy one to solve. We aren’t dealing with overt sexism in most cases. Nope. We are dealing with cultural norms and habitual practices, deeply ingrained in our American fabric.

I am suggesting that structural changes at multiple levels need to occur, starting with recognizing the problem, setting goals, and planting some seeds. Here are my ideas, as a former public middle school band director of eight years in Seattle’s Central District and the current education director at Seattle JazzED, a nonprofit devoted to equity in music education.

Music education’s original sin: What is up with gendering instruments? Is there a guidebook for picking instruments that I don’t know about? Folks, the flute takes more air than ANY other instrument, excluding the tuba. Suggesting flute for tiny little kids so that it isn’t too heavy to carry home is just silly... what about actually playing the instrument with success? Isn’t that why we carry them home to practice? Little girls do not have to play the flute (and neither do little boys, or girls in general). Be subversive. Push girls towards trombone, trumpet, drums, and bass. DO IT. It is your job, because for whatever reason, the vast majority of your parents won’t do this. Elementary school teachers, the responsibility is on you here. Let’s go.

At our Seattle JazzED “meet your instrument” open house, I staffed men at the flute table, women at the bass table, and

one man and one woman at the clarinet, sax, trumpet, and trombone tables. Guess what happened? Kids selected instruments based on how they liked playing them—half boys and half girls for each instrument group. And how about the kids who were absent for the open house? They gendered themselves. This is a real thing.

Middle school teachers, you get what you get with incoming students. Still: If you have a beginning band, SOLVE THE PROBLEM. It’s on you. Now, if you don’t start kids on instruments, you need to help your elementary feeders out. Maybe a petting zoo in September with female tubaists and male flutists? If we don’t intervene by middle school, it’s too late. Meaning: If girls don’t have traditional jazz instruments in their hands, game over. And you need to MAKE all of your middle schoolers improvise. If you don’t make them do it, the majority of your girls won’t.

High school teachers aren’t off the hook, because when the hormones hit, your hetero girls will wilt into submission if you don’t create a safe learning space. Girls wanting to impress boys will sometimes not be excellent at what they do... if you outshine him, he will be threatened. Being a “competitor” against a

---

---

---

---

---

boy you like? Social suicide. It is better to blend in and not take an improvised solo.

Now, you might be skeptical. You might be thinking, this isn't really that important or something I can control. But I assure you, this is a serious issue, even one of life or death. All music teachers and musicians ought to read this excerpt from beloved saxophonist, educator, and recording artist, Rebecca Buxton's suicide note, 10/14/15.

*"If one thing can be accomplished in my passing, I'd like for more people to care, and be aware, of the unfair sexism that occurs in my field. Music is what saves us, yet the instrumental world—primarily the jazz world—is among the most sexist of any line of work to exist. I have suffered somewhat quietly in this sexist field, alone, and I know others suffer without saying anything. We are blackballed, belittled, called dramatic or ignored totally when we talk about the reality of sexism.*

*The problem starts at a very young age, as most band directors are men, and most band directors don't know how to properly educate females. This leads to what we have in the professional world—a gross imbalance of numbers. I'd guess the percentage to be around 1% female instrumentalists in the jazz world. I'm very sorry that I'm not sticking around to be a good role model for the few females we have coming up—more than we've had in the past, but still a horribly low percentage. But after all this time, I'm going to take care of myself instead, and end this painful life. I hope that perhaps, in my death, the reality of how hard female instrumentalists have it will be acknowledged."*

This is challenging work, my friends. We all have biases, none of us is perfect, and there are no clear answers. But how about a list of easy best practices to start shifting the dynamic with the students we have?

1. Matching outfits need to stop. Go all black—you can even be very specific (e.g., long-sleeved, knee-length, black dress). But do not make all your girls wear the exact same dress, and especially, do not make them wear tuxedos.
2. Instead of telling girls to "smile," suggest that they "look engaged."
3. Do not comment on your female students' outfits, hair, or makeup. This is called objectification, and it isn't cool.

A culture shift is needed in our classrooms. Create a safe learning environment. Be intentional. Hire female coaches, clinicians, and guest artists. Play music composed and/or arranged

by women. Curate your classroom artwork to show female musicians who do not exclusively play piano or sing. And don't make a big deal out of it!

Messaging matters. Be intentional with your words. Would you say it to a male student? If not, don't say it to a female student. And the opposite is important too. But it's okay to talk about what is going on. Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra doesn't have any women in the band. This is our region's premiere jazz band that plays in the fanciest venues. I think we should talk to students about what is going on with that.

Representation matters. Consider that the lack of representation in top groups makes girls less likely to audition for all-state ensembles, or maybe even the jazz band at your school. You'll find that in high-performing jazz programs, honor bands, select groups, etc., there will be fewer girls. I recently returned from the Washoe County (Reno, Nevada) Honor Jazz Band Festival, where I directed the middle school honor ensemble. We had six girls in that group. Guess how many were in the high school honor ensemble? Just one. On piano.

Create a gender-neutral teaching space. My band classroom can start to feel like Animal House real fast. I constantly need to control the vibe of my room, mostly by modeling a vibe that is chill, so that everyone can learn and feel safe. We laugh, we learn, we have a fun time while being studious, but fart jokes and burping out loud are just not going to help you retain girls. There are subtle but important cues that you are sending with your words, too. Swap "folks" or "gang" for "guys," in referring to the "crew" of kids.

As part of Seattle JazzED's equity work, I would love to hear from you and am happy to help you brainstorm ideas for your own classroom. The strength of jazz education in our region means not only that gender disparities are often stark, but also that we have a lot of opportunity to build stronger foundations for the next generation of music students and young musicians. The patriarchy sure isn't going to solve things on its own.

\*\*\*

*Kelly is the former Director of Concert Bands and Jazz at Washington Middle School, where she taught beginning in 2008. A graduate of Roosevelt High School and the University of Washington, she is rooted in Seattle's celebrated tradition of music education. Kelly plays trombone in Banda Vagos, a traditional Mexican Banda, performing throughout the Puget Sound area on a weekly basis.*