A Story of Sound

“Every Good Boy Does Fine, F-A-C-E. E-G-B-D-F. These are your fundamentals for success. You cannot get anywhere from here without first knowing these things.”

I can recall my first day in middle school band class, almost as if it was yesterday. As I walked into the large room, I felt excitement. Rows upon rows of black plastic chairs sat facing a single podium at the front of the room. Behind all those chairs sat several instruments: marimbas, xylophones, vibraphones, timpani drums, snares, a bass. My mouth went dry as I took in all this new information. All I could feel were goosebumps running up my arms. The bright yellow-white fluorescent lights glared down at me, making my head buzz in protest. Mr. Bullard was my first band director. He greeted us as a group and then called each of us to the front of the class individually. My stomach lurched in anticipation.

*What was he doing with us on an individual basis?*

“Blow into this mouthpiece like you’re making a buzzing noise. Then, try to blow into the end of this flute mouthpiece, like you’re whistling down instead of out. Don’t actually whistle, though.”

Time passed with student after student, placement after placement. I sat and waited patiently. As a person with the last name starting with “W,” I had a good bit of waiting to do.
After a while, I felt sweat begin to dot my forehead. I felt myself start to pick at my nail beds; the quiet *scritch, scritch* of my nails scratching against each other became slightly methodical. My leg bounced in anticipation, *up, down, up, down*, in rapid succession. Finally, my breath grew short and my chest tight. *What if I didn’t get the placement I wanted?* I had my sights set on percussion, but I wouldn’t be too mad if I received a spot in “trumpet-land.”

> “Watford. You can come up to the front of the class, now.”

I felt excitement and fear course through my body like ice. I tentatively made my way to the front. He handed me the trumpet mouthpiece and repeated the same cantations he had made thirty times before. I blew, making a feeble noise, a noise nonetheless. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up in the briefest of smiles. He handed me a drumstick next, asking me to tap out a pattern after he demonstrated it. I reciprocated it almost exactly. He nodded.

> “Percussion it is, Joshua Watford. You’ll be at the back, behind all of the chairs.”

The moment is ingrained in my memory forever. Moreover, it was a defining moment: I am a percussionist. *I will be a percussionist.* Mr. Bullard decided that for me. Later, he taught us all the fundamentals of reading music. These lessons were geared to those who played wind instruments and keyboard instruments (like marimbas or vibraphones). Through these lessons, he taught note names, key signatures, and the essential musical scales. Even though I was in the non-pitched percussion section, I paid attention nonetheless. I was intrigued.
Why did notes have names? Why are they placed where they are? Lines? Spaces? What was a treble clef?

This moment would not last. I never had the opportunity to apply the idea of note names. I was a non-keyboard percussion student. I played snare, bass, suspended cymbal, triangle, etc. All I had to comprehend were rhythms. I understood the ins and outs of eighth notes, sixteenths, and triplets. I could figure out a rhythm if I wanted to. However, if you placed mallet sheet music in front of me, I was closer to a deer in headlights than I was a musician.

I saw this as my first encounter with a sponsor that withheld literacy. Deborah Brandt, the author of “Sponsors of Literacy,” expands on this idea, explaining that a sponsor is not just someone or something that provides literacy. However, it can also be something that restricts the opportunity of literacy (166). Due to his inability to place me in other areas, I could not expand on my musical literacy, and he left me with only the basic knowledge of music. Although he withheld this literacy, I do not believe it was intentional. He understood that my strengths were in non-pitched instruments. He explored and expanded those strengths but left me vulnerable to other, more vital areas of musical literacy. I craved more. I wanted to understand. It was not until right before my freshman year of high school that I finally received a portion of that sponsorship.

Mr. Ketter was my eighth-grade band director. Unfortunately, I was never informed about what happened to Mr. Bullard, but I assume he went to teach elsewhere. This instance was not my first time encountering Mr. Ketter, however. I have brief memories of him teaching me in fifth grade. We would play “kiddie” instruments like “boomwhackers” or recorders. He inspired me to get involved with music, and now, here he was again. He pushed me out of my comfort zone of non-pitched instruments. He was the first person to look at me and see my yearning for
more. Although extremely uncomfortable, I was excited to hold mallets and have the ability to finally play notes. Then, there was the dread. I did not know how to read music. E-G-B-D-F. F-A-C-E. I strained to remember what those minuscule letters meant. The sheet music swam in front of me. The lines that held those dots that represented letters became tangles of intangible nonsense. I remained resilient. I was determined to play the instrument in front of me.

This cycle of turmoil would continue until the first week of my IB Advanced Music class. Previous to this moment, I managed to make it through five years of concert band, and I remained ignorant in the art of reading music. Besides memorizing where I was supposed to play for my scales tests, I struggled immensely with understanding how to look at a portion of sheet music and understand what was going on. Finally, Ms. Olson, my IB Music teacher, changed all of this.

I walked in on my first day and was overwhelmed. The bright fluorescent lights remained buzzing and annoying, unchanged from middle school and anywhere else on the high school campus. Records hung from the walls, blues and greens splashed the tables around the room, and string lights hung above the entrance into her office. Her brunette hair fell mid-length, straightened, and she stood tall with such a welcoming smile. I walked through the doors, aggravated to even be in that class. I knew my strengths in music were subpar, and I set my mentality up for failure. Ms. Olson remained unphased, determined to change my mind. In two weeks, I would know how to read music. She was correct; after a lot of frustration, tears, and confusion from my end. After two weeks, not only did I know how to read notes, I understood the difference between treble and bass clef, I knew what key signatures were, and I learned different primary triads. She saw my potential.
This instance was my first interaction with a sponsor that held an interest in my potential for more. The two years I spent in that class grew my musical literacy in ways I never knew was possible. Deborah Brandt covers the topic that literacy is more than just reading and writing, and those who implore these literacies are sponsors. She refers to sponsors as people or things that “enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (166). Whereas Mr. Bullard suppressed my literacy, Ms. Olson implored my education within the music language.

Within two years, Ms. Olson tested my abilities in various ways. Through musical analyses, I developed the ability to hear music and separate it as individual parts making up a holistic piece. I explained the differences in how music “moved” within sheet music, and I could explain how this changed the piece’s structure and how it flowed. I learned the extensive and continuous history of music through multiple tests and lectures. Ms. Olson taught the basics of composition, and this exposed a whole new world to me. I found a different love for music. I could create music I heard in my head but did not exist. I could create stories through sound. My musical literacy continued to expand, and I absorbed knowledge like a dehydrated sponge.

It was not until my last few weeks of IB Music that I realized how much I grew in my musical literacy. Ms. Olson exposed every area of music that I was insufficient in and filled those gaps with extensive knowledge in surplus. Multiple factors exist in this journey toward musical literacy, but Ms. Olson provided the most significance. Without the extensive pushes I received from this teacher, I would not have nearly as much musical knowledge as I do today. In addition, I have progressed in my playing abilities through marching band, pit orchestra, and concert band. However, my musical literacy remained unchanged other than my skill increase. IB Music as a class opened multiple doors that held shelves upon shelves of knowledge, but without Ms. Olson,
I would have roamed through these books like a toddler that only understood pictures. She decoded the confusing language that enveloped music, translating it for my understanding.

Ms. Olson was motivated as a teacher, of course. However, I believe she was also encouraged to teach me as an individual. Brandt describes teachers, specifically, as “figures who turn up most typically in people’s memories of literacy learning” (167). These individuals are “more knowledgeable” and “more entrenched than the sponsored,” and these sponsors tend to gain benefits from teaching (167). Benefits can have multiple meanings, as teachers can benefit directly from earning money for solely being a teacher, or they can gain benefits indirectly through simply being associated with the sponsored (167). I choose to believe that Ms. Olson received satisfaction in making sure that I left that classroom with more knowledge and confidence than I walked in with initially. At the end of my senior year, a note she gave me tied all of our time together to a close, and she expressed her pride in me.

Jersh!
My goodness, you will be missed in my classroom. Thank you for your dedication to music. You have really grown so much in the past two years, both musically and extramusically. I have seen you thrive, struggle, and overcome, and I feel so lucky to have played a small part in your high school experience. I am excited to watch you thrive in college, and to hear your awesome future compositions. I am so, so proud of you.

Love,
Ms. Olson
Through extensive support and encouragement, I received multiple opportunities to learn and expand in many ways throughout my journey with musical literacy. This literacy is not perfected, as I have many areas I can develop and continue to learn on. However, instead of finding this intimidating, I now find enthusiasm in having the ability to learn more. Musical literacy has helped in more ways than one. Not only do I now have the ability to read music, but now I can analyze, compose, inform, and combine everything I know in multitudinous ways. I found confidence in my abilities, which I had not previously had. I am forever grateful for Ms. Olson and the class she taught.
Dear Reader,

While writing this literacy narrative, I found myself encountering the discoveries of different strengths, as well as setbacks. When I sat down to write my initial draft, I sat near a window in the library. I had just gotten out of my chemistry lab, and it was starting to get dark. I had a brief outline, which covered whom I wanted to discuss and their impacts. I had multiple sponsors listed. However, I decided only to utilize three. I would have found more ways to incorporate my other sponsors if I had the time because they had just as much impact. I digress.

As I was sitting in the library, I wrote my first draft in a little over an hour. I found it easy to use introspection and indirect characterization to convey my journey through musical literacy. The words practically flowed out of me, despite some areas falling a little subpar. This decline was due to mental fatigue, as I told myself I could not leave the library until my first draft was complete.

When I got to the analytical portion of the paper, I ran into a significant roadblock. I found it slightly challenging to connect my experiences to Brandt. I knew how my sponsors impacted me, but I had trouble articulating it in academic language.

After my peer reviews, I had excellent feedback. I took a day or two away from the essay to gather my plans for the revision. I also wanted to come back to my paper with “fresher” eyes. From my first draft, I added more indirect characterization in the narrative portion of my writing. The advice I received was to “try to make it a continuous and flowing narrative.” I found that helpful, and I tried to adjust my writing and the formatting of the paper. I wanted it to be understandable, and I wanted the transition between the narrative and the analysis to be almost seamless.
The advice I received helped me construct a stronger narrative because it exposed areas of my paper that I did not realize needed expansion or revision. It also revealed areas of my writing that could incorporate more Brandt quotes.

If I were to complete this project again, I might do an entirely different literacy altogether. Before I started, I had two literacies I was thinking about covering: dance and music. I would probably do dance literacy and how it impacted me as an individual because many people in that area of my life have helped tremendously, in more ways than just dance and its techniques.