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Welcoming a Jehovah's Witness into the Band Room

Questions to Ask and Practices to Implement

By NAFME Member Brian Weidner

Can we treat students who are Jehovah's Witnesses like any other students by accommodating for their unique needs and ensuring a quality educational opportunity for all students within a performance music classroom?

"Alice"* and I first met at her eighth-grade audition for the McHenry High School bands. As I sat down after the audition with the middle school band director to discuss individual students' needs and concerns, the first student that came up was Alice. "She is a Jehovah's Witness, just so you know. She's awesome about it, and her mom's awesome about it, but make sure you start the conversation early and often. We haven't had any issues together."

Before the school year began, I sat down with Alice and her mother. She was my first Witness student in 11 years of teaching, and I had little knowledge of what I should expect. I had talked with other directors and recalled one saying, "I just do what I always do. The problem takes care of itself when they drop out after the holiday concert." I was determined this was not going to be the case. Selfishly, Alice was a great freshman clarinetist who we sorely needed, but even more importantly, she was a student who just wanted to play in the band. Starting from that conversation, I found that it was not difficult to accommodate her needs as a Witness student in the band, provided we maintained regular and honest communication and I considered the implications of my repertoire selection. Due to these conversations and small accommodations, she was an asset to the band who fully participated on a daily basis along with the other students in the ensemble.



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As a caveat, I am not a scholar of the Jehovah's Witness faith, and I do not intend to speak as a believer of their faith. I collaborated with Alice on this article to provide an example of how a Jehovah's Witness student can be accommodated in public school ensemble music programs in a way that respects both the student and the curriculum. (For additional background, I found "[What Do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe?](#)" and other resources at www.jw.org to be very useful resources regarding what questions to ask and what concerns to consider.)

What I found in working with Alice can be summarized in a single statement—treat a Jehovah's Witness student the same way as any other student. An unfortunate line of thought commonly seen

on internet group chats or overheard in the director banter at regional band festivals regarding Jehovah's Witness students is, "I'm not going to make changes based on one student." But this happens all the time. The band that has one weak bassoonist probably does not program *Children's March*. The band with the super talented clarinetist finds solo opportunities to feature that student. When you have a student who is wheelchair-bound in your marching band, you find ways to include her in parades and on the field. Your curriculum and instruction meet the needs and demands of the students you have within your band. The same is true with Jehovah's Witness students. While there are pieces that they cannot play because it violates their religious beliefs, they can play the majority of the repertoire for the band.

Core Beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses that Impact the Band Classroom

Witnesses assume an apolitical position when it comes to engagement with the rest of the world. The Witness student who does not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance or refuses to play the National Anthem is not expressing defiance or disagreement but rather a conscious, religious decision to remain unaligned in matters of government and worldly associations. Witnesses have an allegiance only to the Kingdom of Jehovah and believe that engaging in patriotic displays could mislead them from their beliefs. Alice noted the difficulty she has maintaining this neutrality at times, as she has strong opinions but chooses to remain neutral, even when she is anonymous or part of a group.

Typically, Witnesses avoid situations that could potentially come in conflict with their own beliefs, particularly within a public forum. This wariness of worldly association leads many Witness students to avoid active participation in public school music programs, as they are concerned with being expected to associate with activities or performances that do not directly align to their personal beliefs. Alice spoke of how she often encountered concerns from Witness peers who saw her involvement in a high school band as a conflict with the core principles of her religion, since the band often involves a very visual display of loyalty to school and government. The fact that a Witness student wants to be involved in your ensemble is a departure from their shared culture in many cases.



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This wariness of worldly association and need for political neutrality led Alice to be very aware of the meanings and associations behind the music we performed. Obviously, patriotic music assumes a political position, and she described its performance as contrary to her "allegiance to Jehovah and the perfect heavenly government in His Kingdom." Similarly, religious music of any type is seen as worship of the beliefs of that religion, akin to participating in their religious practices. This includes

music of other Christian faiths as well, since their beliefs and practices regarding God and Jesus are not the same as those of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

While patriotic and religious music were in clear opposition to Alice's faith, other pieces of music were not nearly so easy to discern. When music was repurposed from or for a patriotic or religious function, Alice and I closely discussed the music and its application in our class. For example, while *Salvation Is Created* has its roots in the Russian Orthodox tradition, I intended to use it in our curriculum to develop balance, focus on intonation, and manipulate timbre. We spoke only fleetingly of its religious character to situate it in the music characteristics of the Russian Orthodox church. Alice felt that we were performing this as a piece of absolute music, not as a religious work. By contrast, when we concluded the December concert by performing and singing the *Hallelujah Chorus*, which was a long running tradition at the school, she excused herself from the performance as it maintained its meaning as a religious piece, even though we never acknowledged it as such explicitly in rehearsal or performance.

Making the Music Room a Welcome Space for the Jehovah's Witness Musician

Alice found that many of her Witness friends were apprehensive about joining music ensembles in public schools, as they often saw bands unwelcoming and inflexible. Alice noted that she felt like our band program made a space for her to engage fully in the activities and performances of the band with the accommodations that were made for her. The key accommodation was starting an open and frank line of communication early between Alice and her family and me. It is important to realize that while all Jehovah's Witnesses are committed to honoring and giving sole allegiance to Jehovah's Kingdom, the way this is interpreted and practiced is highly personal. What works for one Witness family or student may not work for another. Important early questions are:

- Can you explain your faith to me as you practice it?
- Who should I talk to about questions that I may have about your faith and how it relates to our class?
- What concerns do you have about music that we might perform?
- Can you give me examples from your music education in the past?

For Alice, she wanted to be the one I was communicating with, not her mother or father. Regularly and casually, this line of communication remained constantly open. When I was putting together plans for a new concert cycle, I met with her to explain the music and why I had selected it. I also provided resources for her to research the music's background so that she could investigate the music. When Alice had concerns about specific pieces I was presenting to the ensemble, she brought them to me.



Photo: Howard Rockwin, Musical Memories Photography

Above all, the decisions about whether or not she could rehearse or perform a piece remained entirely hers. In some cases, when she came forward and let me know that she could not study a piece because it violated her faith, I chose to use another work that met curricular needs and did not violate her beliefs. For example, when studying march-trio form, I substituted the *Washington Post* in place of other Sousa marches as it has the same structural characteristics but was written about a newspaper contest. She performed *Washington Post* on the fall concert but sat out of its performance on Veterans Day, opting to coordinate behind the scenes for the community concert. In other cases, such as the *Hallelujah Chorus*, Alice sat out of the rehearsal and performance of the piece but remained in the room during rehearsal so that she could still participate in our discussions about Baroque performance technique and form.

Accommodating Alice's special needs for repertoire in the classroom was no different than accommodating the needs of any of the other 140 students in my bands. At no point in my work with Alice did I feel like I was compromising the integrity of my ensemble and the educational experiences of the other students. On pieces which Alice chose not to participate, she proposed alternative assignments that met instructional objectives. For example, instead of playing the *Hallelujah Chorus*, she researched its history and background for the program notes while preparing her music for the rest of the concert that included *Festive Overture*, *Salvation Is Created*, and *Sleigh Ride*. Because of our early discussions, she sat out of only two programmed pieces of music over the course of a calendar year (the *Hallelujah Chorus* and *Armed Forces Salute*) and was a non-performer in extra performances on Veterans and Memorial Day. I planned rehearsal so that on any given day, she would not be apart from the other students for more than 15 minutes. For weeks at a time, she was involved in every activity. In her first year, the band performed a wide range of literature including canonic works such as *Folk Song Suite*, contemporary music such as *Give Us This Day*, and novelty pieces such as *Walking Frog*. I did not see her needs as a limitation on what we could study but rather a consideration for teaching every student in my classroom as best I possibly could.

If we carefully consider why we program specific pieces of music, we likely can find pieces that meet our curriculum and programming requirements while also allowing Jehovah's Witness students to engage in class and perform. If there is a programming reason for including pieces that the students cannot play, then we need to consider what it is that the students will be doing during that time and how their educational needs are met. Can the patriotic music for the Veterans Day presentation be worked on at the same time as secular music that the students can play, allowing them to participate actively in daily rehearsal and just sit out of the Veterans Day performance? Can important music concepts still be addressed using music that allows all students to perform? Can we treat students who are Jehovah's Witnesses like any other students by accommodating for their unique needs and ensuring a quality educational opportunity for all students within a performance music classroom? Alice's engagement in the band room provides one example of how the music classroom can be welcoming and inclusive to all students, including those whose religious beliefs impact their participation in music activities.

*Alice, who is now a college student, asked that her identity not be revealed for personal reasons. She was an active contributor to this article's creation and editing, with complete editorial discretion in its final copy.

About the author:



NAfME member Brian N. Weidner is a PhD candidate in Music Education at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University and is currently a lecturer at Lake Forest College. He holds bachelor degrees in Music Education and English Education from Illinois State University and masters degrees in Music Education from Northern Illinois University and School Leadership from Olivet Nazarene University. Prior to his studies at Northwestern, he taught for 12 years at McHenry High School (IL), serving as its Fine Arts Coordinator, Director of Bands, and Music Theory Instructor, and is a National Board certified teacher. He has had articles accepted for publication in the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, *Music Educators Journal*, and the *Illinois Music Educator*, was a contributing author of a chapter in *The Music and Literacy Connection*, and has presented nationally and internationally at conferences including NAfME, RIME, SMTE, and CMS. His academic interests include investigating the relationship between music and literacy and the development of independent musicianship through large ensemble instruction.