

Interview Article

An interview with Pamela Shuler and Richard Schwartz: Identifying and nurturing musical talent

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Abstract

The identification, development, and nurturing of musical talent and abilities is an important aspect or element of the musical realm that needs to be explored. In this interview, two exceptionally talented musicians as well as music instructors respond to questions regarding music theory, music learning and musical performance. It is hoped that this interview will provide some insights to assist those involved in music curriculum, programming, instruction and mentoring.

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Introduction

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *First can each of you tell us a bit about yourselves and your background?*

Pamela Shuler: I hold a Bachelor of Music in Education degree from Youngstown State University, a Master of Music in Clarinet Performance and Literature and DMA in Clarinet Performance and Literature from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I have spent time teaching band, choir, and general music in public and private schools at the fourth through twelfth grade levels. Currently, I am an Assistant Professor of Music teaching clarinet at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico.

Richard Schwartz: My name is Richard Schwartz and I was born in Philadelphia. I grew up in a nurturing suburban South Jersey household alongside an older sister and two younger brothers. My mother worked as a Philadelphia public school family consumer science teacher, and my father a chemical engineer for the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. We had a piano in the house – which my mother would play a few times a week – and my father would sometimes play the recorder alongside my mother at the piano, but rarely. My father also owned two guitars which he rarely played. Each child was offered piano lessons, though each of us seemed to quit in a year or two or moved on to other instruments. I was a member of a few informal garage bands while in high school and college: singing and/or playing bass or guitar. I enjoy classic rock (Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, etc.) and particularly like the progressive Canadian rock band RUSH, but grew up on 1980's pop music like Men At Work, Duran Duran, Michael

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Jackson, and more. Regarding formal education, I completed a Bachelor of Music Education degree from Temple University, a Masters of Music from the University of Michigan, and a Doctorate in Musical Arts from Boston University. While a doctoral student, I offered part-time instruction for a number of classes at Boston University, offered summer instruction at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute, taught private lessons at Brandeis University, and cobbled together a private teaching studio of eighty public school students. I have been very lucky to find work as a full-time university level music teacher. My first location of full-time employment was Southeastern Louisiana University. I spent nine years teaching there as a jazz and saxophone instructor and two years serving as faculty senate president. I am now in my tenth year at Eastern New Mexico University as Professor of Music (Saxophone and Jazz) and serve as Chair for the Department of Art. Throughout these years I have worked as a freelance musician through my woodwind doubling skills, as a jazz saxophonist, or simply as a musical contractor. I am married and we have a son.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How did you personally first get involved in music and then music education?*

Pamela Shuler: My mother was responsible for my first experiences in music. Some of my earliest memories are singing in a choir and playing handbells. The elementary school I attended started both school band and choir in fourth grade, so that is when I started practicing and making music every day.

Richard Schwartz: I was offered piano lessons as a child, perhaps around first grade. Piano seemed a natural path for me as a child since my mother and older sister played the piano. And, it seemed like they had fun playing the piano. As a child, my older sister would pick on me (pulling my hair, scratching me with her longer nails, or general bullying, etc.). Since she is five years older than me, understandably as a child I could not use physical strength to threaten her and leave me alone. The only thing I could think of to get even with her was to practice the piano and get better at the piano than her – which I eventually did. My parents interpreted my intensified practicing as talent and drive. I am not certain if they would appreciate the truth. Subsequently, they allowed my older sister to quit piano lessons, since it looked like I was the one that “excelled.” Frustrating. I wanted to switch from piano to any other instrument because my piano teacher slapped my hands. My next instrument was clarinet during the 4th grade. However, in 6th grade my band director asked me to play tenor saxophone in order to cover some of the low brass parts in our band – we had almost no low brass (trombones, euphoniums, etc.). I seemed to gravitate toward musical and other creative areas in middle and high school including choir, band, orchestra, theatre, playing guitar, bass or singing in rock bands, working on BMX bicycles, etc. In my senior year of high school I felt I would like to major in music, however my father protested. He stated that the only way he will allow me to major in music was if I major in music education – so that I will have earned a degree for which I can get a job. I agreed and so began my path in music education. At 19 years of age I began offering guitar lessons. And overall, I was not a serious student. When I was 20, my father passed away from liver cancer. This was a turning point in my life. I took music and my education very, very seriously. I would practice between eight and twelve hours a day...sometimes falling asleep in morning music education classes – even with a cup of coffee in me – but I did well in school at this point.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How important is early identification of music talents and abilities?*

Pamela Shuler: Based on my own experiences working with young children in public and private schools, this is extremely important. We often hear information on how additional languages are easier to master if one starts at a young age. In many ways, we can consider music a language. Hearing the rhythms, pitches, and inflections of music at a young age can help enrich those with talents and abilities in this area.

Richard Schwartz: I believe the answer to this is a bit mixed and depends on the young individual. Some young individuals excel immediately and continue upon a musical path in the future. Some excel immediately, but find other interests for the future. My own thoughts: it can be important to not only identify musical talents and abilities, but to

nurture the drive behind why this individual wishes to continue in music - whether practicing and performing music simply brings them joy, challenges their intellect or physical ability, their desire to sound like a particular professional they wish to emulate, they wish to follow in a parent's footsteps, etc. I also wish to point out that there are "late bloomers." The "late bloomers" may have significant musical talent and ability, but choose not to, or simply cannot for one reason or another, engage in serious practice until a later date. If musical talents and abilities are identified early, obviously that offers more time to nurture. However like most cognitively demanding abilities, I believe drive and/or perseverance ultimately play a larger role in the development of musical talent.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How often have you encountered parents who have seemed to recognize that their child possesses an uncanny ability to play an instrument that is sitting at home- for example the piano?*

Pamela Shuler: When I was teaching Elementary General Music, I had more contact with parents and experienced this a number of times. Earlier in my career, I had a number of parents reach out asking for recommendations for names of private music instructors after they had experiences similar to what you describe. I do not experience this as much as I am now working with college students.

Richard Schwartz: In my experience of teaching, I have encountered many parents that believe their child possesses uncanny abilities to perform an instrument well. And, of course, these parents would like a sizable college scholarship for their talented child! For each of these instances, perhaps one out of every fifty holds true. I have worked with remarkably talented students between the ages of 10 and 26 years old through private lessons and/or ensemble instruction at the elementary through university graduate level. Each student has their own story. Each may or may not have a parent that seemed to recognize that their child possesses an uncanny ability to play an instrument. However in all seriousness, I have encountered parents that recognize that their child possesses an uncanny ability to play an instrument. Overall, these parents tend to do whatever they can to assist in their child's musical development.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How well in your estimation are the schools providing instruction for musically talented?*

Pamela Shuler: In my own experience, I remember going through the gifted and talented evaluation process in elementary school. After being told that the arts were an area in which I qualified for enrichment, my family was then told my school did not have offerings in this area. In looking at a number of schools today, I think instruction and additional enrichment can vary within each program. While some schools might offer after-school programs, such as a choir, Orff Ensemble, or musical theater, many schools simply do not have the resources to offer such programs.

Richard Schwartz: This is a difficult question to answer. For the most part, public and private schools offer a general music education with opportunities to learn and grow: that is if they offer music classes. Some schools will offer a general music class while others may offer only choir, band, guitar, and/or music theory. Some schools will have choir, band, orchestra, guitar, music theory, jazz ensemble, and more. Finally, some school systems do offer a "talented music" program, but this is rare. These talented music programs tend to offer private lessons and additional opportunities. Back to the question regarding how well the schools are providing instruction for musically talented students: I believe they are doing what they can afford, and that may or may not be good enough to best serve those individuals. If private lessons are difficult to afford, sometimes parents can reach out to family members for financial support or get creative in asking for support such as creating a crowdfunding account, fundraising, etc. Also, one may find organizations or online sites that offer inexpensive music lessons or free music theory tutorials. Finally, there may be available texts on music, music education, music theory, other musical topics, and sound and video recordings at local or school libraries.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How important are early lessons?*

Pamela Shuler: In looking at music historically, lessons are an important part of the process of musical growth. In reading musician biographies from various time periods, one often sees a list of teachers that have had an impact.

Starting lessons early provides an opportunity for not just exposure to musical content, but also a space for the student to ask questions and explore musical concepts. A qualified private instructor will be able to share enriching content and pedagogy that can lead to tremendous student growth.

Richard Schwartz: Depending on the instructor, early music lessons can be beneficial or detrimental. In the text “On Playing the Flute” by Johann Joachim Quantz, one may read how beginning students are essentially at the fate of their teachers. A student in the hands of an excellent teacher may need just a few lessons to set-up proper posture, hand position, embouchure, breath control, etc. However, in the hands of a lesser experienced teacher, a student may need years of supplemental instruction to understand and utilize such topics, let alone fix issues not addressed. While early lessons can be beneficial, it is most important to ensure beginners learn from an excellent teacher so they are set on a positive trajectory

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *Now, how important in your minds are opportunities for public performance and recitals?*

Pamela Shuler: Music is an art form that is created and consumed via performance. Even if one is in a recording studio and does not have a live audience, there is still a performance process. In working with college students, exploring the process of performance is part of our study since so many students have not yet had opportunities for extensive solo or chamber type performances. Experience is one of the best ways to gain comfort doing something. Knowing how your mind and body will react in a performance is extremely important. If these experiences are gained early on, this can be of great benefit. Once an individual has time to experience and explore the mental and physical side of performance, this can open up the chance to explore a deeper level of performance as they continue. For example, at first, someone might develop strategies for relaxation, posture, and breath support that allows them to feel comfortable. As performance experience continues, this can grow into considering dynamics for a specific performance venue or listening to intonation and phrasing at a deeper level.

Richard Schwartz: So we, are on the same page, I consider a public performance to be any performance - in front of friends, family, classmates, or even in front of thousands of people. I think any sort of public performance – for the most part – positively impacts young and musically talented individuals for it not only allows the individual to demonstrate what they are able to do (this act may feed whatever ego/desire the student performer has) but they get to share their talents with others. When offering a performance, the individual has one chance to get everything right. And if it doesn't go 100% correctly, that simply leaves room for growth on the next performance. Theoretically, performing gets easier the more often one performs. One additional and important note is that everyone has different levels of performance anxiety. Some simply cannot speak or play their instrument in front of people, while the majority tend to suffer some level of anxiety. And then a small minority – the lucky few! – feel absolutely comfortable on stage. I believe performance anxiety can improve over time with excellent preparation.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *At the college level, what is important about the curriculum?*

Pamela Shuler: One of the things I find so important and exciting about college level music curriculum is the diversity. Students study privately in lessons with faculty, but also take courses in music theory, music history, aural skills, performance ensembles, piano, and a number of other areas. Study in each of these content areas helps musicians gain knowledge and insight that allows them to make informed choices in practice and performance. Another important aspect in applied lessons is being able to develop a specific curriculum related to repertoire for each student. This allows individual students to explore and strengthen areas of their playing.

Richard Schwartz: There are many ways to answer this question, for the question may need a bit more specificity. One could read this as curriculum over the entire four years as a music major, or as applied lessons on a given instrument or voice. Regarding curriculum as an undergraduate music major, I feel that there need to be foundational

studies, yet also some areas for flexibility. Roughly four semesters of music theory and music history is a “must” for students to understand how to read and write music and how to place what they are performing in musical context. A variety of performance based classes are vital: applied lessons, marching band, concert band, jazz band, concert choir, jazz choir, chamber music, etc. Finally, some flexible content would be highly beneficial. This would include classes in music business, music technology, composition, music education, conducting, and more. Regarding applied lesson curriculum, I feel it is important to have set goals with pedagogical approaches to learn the standard “war horses” of the repertoire, but also flexibility to explore specialized works of student interest

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *How do you juggle theory and practice?*

Pamela Shuler: Personally, I find it very important within my specific field to stay up to date with current research and pedagogy. Oftentimes, I will utilize new concepts and methods with students that have a large impact. Due to the nature that much of my teaching is at the one-on-one level, sometimes I will explore a concept with a student that just does not work. For me, it is important to find the correct concept that works for each student. Each student I teach is unique and has an individual set of experiences, motivations, and perspective. While one idea or concept might work well with one student, it may fall short with another. For me to be the best teacher I can be for each student, I try to stay informed on current pedagogy and also retain teaching ideas that have historically worked well.

Richard Schwartz: Good question. With roughly 30 years of instructional experience in private lessons, large ensembles, small ensembles, and a variety of classroom formats, I tend to discuss what works “in theory” with students and then offer them a reality of what works and what does not with clear demonstrations so they see and hear such concepts and can make judgements for themselves. This may be in regard to performance practice, pedagogical guidance for future music educators, or any other content area. As a student, I appreciated teachers who were open and honest about the content area they teach. I try to do the same for my students.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: *Small group instruction- how effective is it? Or is it simply better than no instruction at all?*

Pamela Shuler: While it is extremely impactful to work one-on-one with a student in an applied lesson situation, small group instruction can also hold value. For example, rehearsing, learning, and performing with a small chamber group can be extremely effective for musical development. If the ensemble functions with one performer on each part, such as a woodwind quintet, performers will be able to work on blend, balance, independence of lines, and establishing an ensemble rapport.

Richard Schwartz: I believe small group instruction can be very effective – it all comes down to the teacher and what techniques are employed. Some techniques that have worked for me in the past include group preparation with different students taking turns leading, have one student teach a portion of the class/lesson and subsequently other students take turns, each student presents a small portion of the class/lesson, etc. Sometimes setting an organized format for how the group is to be taught each and every class also works well; some students feel routine is comfortable, for they know what to expect each and every class.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What are the basic factors or variables that lead you to mentor a student with exceptional talent?

Pamela Shuler: No matter the level of talent, it is important that a student has a desire to invest in and develop their talent. In speaking with a student, and parents/guardians depending on the student’s age, I place importance on exploring goals and what a student hopes to achieve. All students will reach a point that they are exposed to new and possibly challenging material and content. It is important that the student is able to schedule practice and have short and long-term goals. When challenges come, it is important that a student that can keep a regular practice schedule that focuses on steps towards improvement.

Richard Schwartz: In general I attempt to mentor all students, but for a student with exceptional talent I will let them know that I hear or see something special in their playing – because I really do – and often ask them what their musical goals are. Once investigating and compiling what musical direction the student wishes to take, I will offer the student recordings to listen to, repertoire goals, YouTube videos to peruse, and other objectives to strive for in pedagogical order. Though, I must admit I do this for all of my students.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask about the importance of early identification of musical talents and abilities?

Pamela Shuler: I think these are fantastic questions! The only other thing I would add is the importance of parents, guardians, and even teachers exploring resources for students that demonstrate musical talent. I encourage reaching out to connect with possible mentors at surrounding higher education institutions, musical organizations, and musical ensembles for possible information on private lessons, classes, ensemble experiences, performances, and other opportunities.

Richard Schwartz: I think you have covered quite a lot and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this important topic. One thing I can mention is that students can vary in their musical talents and abilities. One music student may be a marvelous player by ear, but not have the patience or maturity yet to read music. Some music students are the opposite – they can read music but are dumbfounded when learning by ear. Some prefer specific genres of music – jazz, blues, or rock vs. baroque, classical, new music, etc. Some students have difficulty displaying performance talent, but they have brilliant “ears” and can compose or arrange works, or love listening, reading and writing about music and musicians. Again, I think flexibility and understanding as a teacher is very important.

Biodata of Author and Interviewees



Prof. Dr. **Michael F. Shaughnessy** is currently Professor of Educational Studies at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico USA. He has served as Editor in Chief of Gifted Education International and can be reached electronically at Michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu. ORCID: 0000 0002 1877 1319. His current research interests include talent development and intellectual assessment as well as the role of personality in giftedness, talent and creativity.



Dr. **Pamela Shuler**, originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is currently serving as the Clarinet Instructor at Eastern New Mexico University. At ENMU Dr. Shuler teaches applied clarinet lessons, directs the clarinet choir, and has taught music theory, music appreciation, and freshman seminar courses. As a performer, Dr. Shuler has been heard throughout the United States, in Spain, and Japan. She has performed with the Southwest Symphony Orchestra, Champaign Urbana Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonia da Camera, the Concert Band of Central Illinois, and the American Wind Symphony Orchestra. Having served as a K thru 12 educator for a number of years, Dr. Shuler is passionate about working with students at all phases of clarinet mastery and enjoys serving as an active clinician and adjudicator for high school and middle school students. Dr. Shuler holds a Bachelor of Music in Education from Youngstown State University, and a Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts Degrees from the University of Illinois. Her principal teachers have included Joseph Edwards, Robert Fitzner, and J. David Harris. Shuler lives in Portales, New Mexico with her daughters Eleanor and Beatrice and husband Sidney, who is also on faculty at ENMU. Research interests of Dr. Shuler include the classical chamber commissions of Benny Goodman and performing new works for the clarinet and chamber ensembles. Composer Mike Curtis stated that Shulers recent performance of one of his chamber works was, Very well done! As a member of the Proha Clarinet Quartet, Shuler was invited to perform at the 2008 and 2009 Vandoren Clarinet Chamber Festivals. E-mail: pamela.shuler@enmu.edu (Web 1)



Grammy considered saxophonist Dr. **Richard A. Schwartz** has commissioned and or premiered nearly thirty new works for saxophone, performed for regional, national and international events in North and South America and Europe and is the grand prize winner of the 1997 International Henri Mancini Institute Concerto Competition and recipient of the 2010 Southeastern Louisiana University Presidents Award for Excellence in Artistic Activity. After performing the Boston premiere of Jan Curtis Transformations for voice, piano, and alto saxophone in Jordan Hall, The Boston Globe declared, Richard Schwartz displayed extraordinary talent on the saxophone, sympathetically mirroring the voice and contributing his own improvisatory imagination. Awarded three United States patents, Schwartz founded the music publication company SilverKeyMusic.com authoring the internationally recognized intonation tool The Tuning C.D. and many instructional guides in music education. His research interests include saxophone performance and pedagogy, jazz ensemble pedagogy, jazz history, jazz improvisation, jazz composition, musical intonation, advanced woodwind techniques including multi-phonics, circular breathing, double-tonguing, the altissimo register, and more, entrepreneurialism in music, sight-reading techniques, recruitment techniques and more. Email: richard.schwartz@enmu.edu (Web 2)

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