INTRODUCTION

One of the most meaningful and unforgettable compliments I ever received came near the end of my thirty-year career as a middle school band director. Ms. Smith, one of the school's guidance counselors and a person with a fine musical background, approached me at the conclusion of a concert and, in a voice choked with emotion said, "I have attended countless middle school band concerts over the years, and I know what to expect from them, but your bands *really move me.*" Wow! What a wonderful thing to hear! So much more important to me than if she had told me that she was impressed with the students' technical proficiency or their excellent posture and the like, but she said they touched her emotionally.

She concluded her comments with a probing question. "How do you get 7th and 8th graders to play with such a mature sense of musical expression?" I responded with something like, "We work especially hard on that aspect of our playing, Judy." What I was actually thinking, but didn't share with her because it most likely would have sounded arrogant, was quite different. I believed then, as I do now, that all successful teachers have a couple of things they do really well, many that they do adequately, and a couple of things that they don't do very well at all. I was certainly aware of some things that I didn't do very well at all, but one of the things that I genuinely felt that I did really well was getting students to play expressively. I honestly believed that this ability was a *gift* that had been bestowed upon me. I didn't really know how I did it. It was just something that I was somehow usually able to accomplish. It wasn't until a few years later that I came to realize that there was actually no mysterious gift involved in the process. It was really something quite simple and logical, the realization of which ultimately led to the writing of this book.

During the first part of my career, having my bands sight-read a piece was almost always a musical disaster. Students would get so lost that the resulting cacophony of sounds became hysterically funny to them and they would actually break out laughing. Although I didn't let them know it, this "making fun" of music really irritated me. In retrospect I realize that I was basically irritated by my own inability to teach them to sight-read. Specifically, what I had not been able to do very well at all was teach them to read rhythms. It certainly wasn't fingerings or incorrect dynamics that were causing the total breakdowns during sight-reading. It was the fact that students were so lost that they were on different counts, sometimes even in different measures all at the same time and, little wonder, it sounded horrible. Leav-

ing the sight-reading rehearsal, I would mull over what I should do with the piece the next rehearsal. "I think I'll try to work out the Introduction first. No, wait. The Introduction is too hard. I know. The middle section is easier. I'll start in the middle and then work backwards to the Introduction, and finally work out the ending." And that's the way the rehearsals of the piece would proceed day after day until the concert -- helping small groups of students to figure out their parts, one small section of the piece at a time, before moving on to tackle the next problem.

Thankfully, during the latter part of my career, sight-reading produced drastically different results. Over the years the students had developed the ability to literally sight-read anything that I put in front of them, because they had become wonderfully proficient at independently reading rhythms. On the unusual occasion when a major rhythm error did occur, I would simply use what I came to call my *four magic words*. "Clarinets, measure 23; *'Look at the rhythm'!"* The clarinets would look at the rhythm, give me a knowing nod acknowledging that they realized their error, and the full band would continue on to the end of the piece. The clarinets had "magically" fixed the rhythm themselves. Leaving the rehearsal, I would think to myself, "The first thing we should do with this piece is explore its form so that the students understand why the middle section has to be played in such a different style." I didn't have to plan for any class time to teach the students their parts. They had sight-read them.

During that first part of my career, my concerts were basically demonstrations of students simply regurgitating the notes on the page. For those early bands, the pieces of music were like giant jigsaw puzzles, and it took so long to get all of the little pieces of the puzzle in place that there was very little time left to try to make meaning out of the resulting picture. Later, with rhythm virtually eliminated as a problem, the students were able to see the whole picture from the very beginning. Every minute spent on the music from sight-reading to the concert was spent turning the notes on the page into MUSIC. If I had known then what I know now and if I had not been concerned about sounding boastful, I might have responded to the guidance counselor's kind comments with something like the following: "Judy, I have discovered the most unusual way to teach rhythm, and that single discovery has afforded me the luxury of being able to spend all of my rehearsal time on those aspects of the music that "moved" you -- the expressiveness, the intonation, balance, blend, dynamic contrasts, style, and so forth. The concert you just heard was simply a reflection of what we do every day in the classroom." My gift to my students, it turns out, was not some mysterious ability to somehow get them to play expressively. It was discovering an amazingly

successful, but simple way to teach rhythm, so that even the very youngest of them could understand and perform it at a level far beyond what I would have ever believed possible.

For those of you about to investigate and perhaps implement the method for teaching rhythm that is advocated in this book, there is one, absolute requirement --- a completely open mind, a blank rhythmic slate. To my knowledge, this is the most unique look at rhythm in several centuries of music teaching and learning. Many of the basic concepts that we all hold dear about rhythm will be severely challenged. Teachers who adopt this method will not only have their students occasionally playing and singing seven-count whole notes, three-count half notes, and the like, but they will also discover that it takes only about thirty seconds to teach students to fully understand, accept, and enjoy cut time! A simple method for teaching students to read and perform compound meter such as 6/8 in 2 beats to the measure will be introduced. The book will assert that teaching compound 6/8 is actually easier than teaching 4/4. Rather than waiting around for their teachers to tell them "how it goes," students will become rhythmically independent problem solvers. The rewards of these daring new approaches will be well worth it. So, fasten your seat belts, hang on, and enjoy the ride.

My First Year in the Classroom

I might very well have had a one-year teaching career, even though I actually loved almost everything about my first year in the schools. It was great to finally be getting a paycheck after all of those tuition checks. It was wonderful to stop being a student after seventeen years of formal education. The people I worked with were dedicated and sincere and friendly and encouraging, and we were all employed by a wonderful school system. But the thing that almost drove me from the profession that first year was RHYTHM. I simply could not get my students to understand it, and it really frustrated me. I optimistically entered the profession thinking that I might eventually become a pretty good teacher, but I soon discovered that I couldn't even get my students to play dotted quarters and eighths! I tried everything I knew and nothing seemed to work. I spent hours creating worksheets that I was certain would do the trick. I had my elementary students put *down/up* foot-tapping arrows under every note on full pages in their lesson books. Every whole note in 4/4 time had eight arrows written under it. There were so many arrows on the page, it's a wonder the students could see the notes. And I thought that would help! It embarrasses me to even think about it today. If

I knew where those students were now, I would apologize to them. Fortunately for them, it didn't take me too long to discover the real problem: I didn't really know much about rhythm and certainly had no clue about how to teach it. I had thought that because I could read, write, and perform rhythms myself, all I had to do was *tell my students what I knew*. Open your heads, kids, and I'll pour it in. I was teaching rhythm the way I was taught it by my teachers, who were teaching it the way they were taught it by their teachers, and so on. But it just wasn't working.

The thing that kept me in the profession for another twenty-nine years was a philosophy that I picked up somewhere and that I heartily advocate and endorse to this day. From those early days in my career, I genuinely believed that if there was something that my students did not understand, it was not their fault. It was mine. They were not understanding what I was trying to teach them because I simply did not know how to present it. They did not need to concentrate harder and study more. I needed to concentrate harder and study more.

I began to do some serious reading and, to my personal amazement, discovered that there has actually been a significant amount of research done over many, many years on how students learn music. I guess I never really knew that. I read Edwin Gordon's work and actually understood some of it. I delved into the work of Shinichi Suzuki and genuinely related to his concepts and principles. I then reread Gordon and understood more of it. I attended workshops and observed band rehearsals and classes taught by recognized experts, and I kept reading and learning and growing and becoming more hopeful that there was a solution to this problem. I took summer classes, attended more workshops, and read countless journal articles dealing with rhythm. Over time, I began to develop some rather unusual ideas of my own. I basically cleared my mind of everything I thought I knew about rhythm and started to look at things from the students' perspective. And I had the luxury of having a personal laboratory in which to test my new ideas -- my wonderful students. The end result of all this is the body of work being presented in this book.

I do not consider my experiences with the teaching of rhythm to be at all unique. The various methods that music teachers employ in an effort to rhythmically educate their students seem to largely ignore the research that exists. The knowledge is out there, but it's not getting into the classroom where it needs to be. As a department chair in the public schools and later as a college supervisor of student teachers, I was privileged to observe many fine teachers over the years. To this day, I regularly visit music teacher bulletin boards on the internet to read the rhythm questions and answers that are tendered. I

just do not see strong evidence of rhythm teaching methods being employed that are based on the existing research. I lament that in so many cases, the people who are doing the teaching are not getting hooked up with the available knowledge. I also think that I may know one of the reasons for this critical disconnect. In my personal view, most music learning theories and their resultant teaching methods are written in language that is unnecessarily obtuse and confusing. Music teachers are some of the busiest, most overworked people in any profession. They simply do not have the time to sit down and wade through complex sentences with an open, unabridged dictionary beside them. Even if they did, many of the words they would be forced to look up would not be in the dictionary, because they are author-invented. I have purposely chosen to share what I have discovered about rhythm in what I hope is straightforward, plain language. In the process of writing this book, I have envisioned you and I just sitting down together and having a chat. I have imagined myself overhearing you and a friend discussing something about rhythm teaching, and when your friend has left the room, I have pulled up a chair next to yours and said, "Ya' know, I might be onto something with this rhythm teaching stuff. Would you like to hear it?" Of course, I'm hoping your answer is, "Yes."

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that this plain, shoptalk approach to the art of teaching rhythm will draw criticism in some circles. I will most likely be accused of making rhythm teaching seem just too simple. When that criticism comes to me, I intend to smile politely and say, "Thank you."

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All of this reminds me of one of my favorite education stories. It seems that someone once wrote a *How To Do It* article that described the step-by-step process of building a hammock. The piece was then given to various groups of professionals, who were asked to critique it for correctness, clarity, and ease of understanding.

The group of clergy who examined the article reported back that they thought it was very well written and clear in every way. In fact, they all felt that they could follow the instructions and successfully build a hammock. Their only suggestion for improvement was that the writer might consider adding a "moral to the story," so to speak. They suggested that the piece conclude with a paragraph stating that the purpose of building a hammock was to ultimately lie down on it, look up at the beautiful blue sky, and contemplate the wonders and mysteries of the universe.

The engineers who looked at the piece also felt that it was very well written and very precise, with instructions that were logically sequenced and easy to follow. They felt that the drawings were especially helpful. Their only suggestion was that there needed to be a disclaimer that stated that if the hammock was expected to hold more than 300 pounds, the dimensions of the lumber that provided the main support needed to be proportionally larger.

The group of education professionals who critiqued it had no suggestions, just a question:

"Couldn't we make it harder to understand?"