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*Joseph Conyers with Project 440 students*

# Life Lessons through Music

Bassist Joseph Conyers is helping build the next generation of change makers

By David Templeton

For some young musicians, the possibility of making “great art” is a goal that carries them through life. To others, the ultimate goal is “success” of a more general sort—success as an artist, success as an entrepreneur, success as a community member or simply as a productive human being—and music is merely the playground in which they learn how to achieve that success.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an innovative music program known as Project 440 is providing just such a playground, and it’s changing the way many teachers view the scope, the purpose, and the future of arts education. “Project 440 uses music as a lens, as a tool, to provide young musicians—usually players in high school—with the life skills and competencies needed to thrive in the world,” says Joseph Conyers, co-founder with Blake Espy and

Catharine Gerheiser of the nonprofit that began in his home town of Savannah, Georgia, in 2007 and eventually transferred to Philadelphia. “In our organization, we do not teach lessons. We do not teach music. Music is the vehicle with which we teach everything from leadership skills and community building to program management and program development.”

The organization gets its name from 440 Hertz, equal to the pitch A, which is used to tune an orchestra. “Just like that note is the first pitch heard at every symphonic concert,” states a note on the nonprofit’s website, Project440.org, “so we want the young musicians we work with to be leaders in their communities through music.”

According to Conyers—a professional double bassist for 31 years who was named the principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra this past May—Project 440 is unlike other music programs in that it does not focus on teaching students to become better musicians so much as to become better members of their communities. “Some people place what we do in the entrepreneurial realm,” Conyers says. “We teach life skills. It’s about understanding that, number one, they can have agency and control in creating the life they want to live, and two, as they go through life and seek and find that success, they can then look at their community and find ways to provide opportunities for others. That’s what Project 440 is.”

Conyers has exactly the kind of lifelong musical practice and community experience necessary to create an organization like Project 440. “I started piano when I was five,” he says. “I was a pretty good pianist when I was young. I would accompany my brother and my twin sister when they played. My sister played cello, and my older brother played violin. My mom was an amateur singer. We were Savannah’s version of the von Trapp family. We were the von Conyers.”

His family played at churches throughout Savannah, so he was already a decent musician, but he grew restless with the relatively stationary piano. “I wanted to play an instrument where I could play with other people,” he says. “I was jealous that other young musicians were going off to junior strings concerts or teen strings concerts and civic orchestra concerts and those things.”

Ultimately, his brother’s teacher, a string instructor, got the word that Conyers was looking for another instrument to play. She just happened to need bass players. “And the rest is history,” he says. “I was introduced to the bass, and it was a good fit. I was always partial to the string family. When I went to orchestra concerts, the string sound was something I was always enamored by.”

Asked if many of the students he’s worked with also play the double bass, Conyers laughs. “Not a lot! It’s so big! Who wants to deal with that?” he says. “That being said, I

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do think there is a generation of bassists out there right now that has the perspective that the bass is kind of cool, which was not the case when I was young. It’s a little more woven into the culture of string education now. Though that doesn’t make it any smaller or less annoying to carry from one place to the other.”

With that above-average instrument came above-average dreams, for Conyer’s own future and that of those he grew up playing music with. In 2007, when Savannah shut down many of its music programs, Conyers, Espy, and Gerheiser created the Savannah Chamber

Players as an alternative, immediately recognizing that the program had implications beyond just giving young musicians a place to play.

After moving to Philadelphia in 2015, Conyers was appointed music director of the Philadelphia school district’s All City music program. Taking the ideas started in Savannah, he renamed the organization Project 440 and began expanding it. Currently, the nonprofit is being led by executive director Rebecca Bolden, whose experience includes serving as senior director of development at the National Constitution Center, director of development at Fleisher Art Memorial (the oldest community art school in the United States), and executive director of the Philadelphia Singers. Today, the organization offers programs in college and career preparedness, leadership and entrepreneurship, and community engagement and interactive performance. It holds an annual college fair for musicians, hosts a youth advocacy council, and sponsors the Philadelphia Music Alliance for Youth.

“If I had been a football player, then this would probably be a football program, which would make it easier to explain what we do,” Conyers allows. “For a lot of people, they look around and say, ‘Oh yeah, sports. If you let kids play football or basketball or tennis or whatever, they’re not all going to go on to become professional athletes, but through athletics they will learn sportsmanship, they will learn how to communicate, how to fail, how to practice, how to pour a lot of energy into one thing in order to achieve a certain outcome.’”

That’s what Project 440 is designed to do for young musicians.

“In music, one of our shortcomings as an industry, I think, is in our music education,” Conyers says, “in that we spend so much time saying, ‘If kids practice, they’ll get better,’ or saying, ‘If these kids work hard, they’ll go to Carnegie Hall,’ or saying, ‘If we do our jobs right, they will know the joy of playing Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms,’ instead of saying, ‘If these young people play music together now, they will learn to work as a team to create something bigger than themselves tomorrow.’”

Through its programs, students who happen to have a connection to music learn life skills that will help them to become

successful citizens. “It’s a unique model, I’ll give you that,” Conyers says. “But in the world of creative youth development—which is an umbrella term given to organizations that use creativity and the arts to help develop life skills in young people—what we are doing is special because we don’t teach the art itself. That’s what’s neat about our work at the core. Because we *don’t* teach the art, we can develop our music-playing youth through *other* kinds of programs that teach them about the possibilities of life they can find *through* their art.”

Project 440’s flagship offering, called Doing Good, is an entrepreneurship program designed help students identify needs in their community and look for ways to address those needs. “That could be speaking to the community itself, going to meetings and asking what they need, or it could be coming up with their own plan to do that work,” he says. “So, they end up learning project management. We then give them

seed money to do those projects in their community. As part of that process, students go through what we call ‘Guppy Tank’—because *Shark Tank* was taken. This is where they get to present their ideas before industry professionals to get feedback on their projects.”

Because the students in Project 440 are musicians, of course, a lot of the projects they propose do involve music. “A lot of them are about teaching music to younger kids,” Conyers says, “because they have found there needs to be more access to music for the kids in the community. Or they form organizations of youth musicians and give concerts with their friends. All kinds of things. It takes a lot of skill to organize all of that. And that’s what we teach them, because those are skills that will serve them their whole lives.”

Conyers says that while a number of the program’s participants do end up with careers focusing on music, he believes that even if they go another way, music will

always be an integral part of their lives. What’s important is that through their love of music, Project 440 helped them acquire the knowledge required to succeed. “When our kids go off to college, they often end up being the ones taking leadership positions in the music programs they enter because they are the only ones who’ve done this kind of work in organizing, in managing a project, contacting venues, and all of that stuff,” he says. “Whether they go into music as a profession or not, they will still be able to use these skills to be successful in whatever they ultimately choose to do.”

There are, of course, many definitions of success. Project 440 assists its music-loving students in defining that for themselves. “What we’ve realized is that a lot of young people basically need a lifeline in help, in resources, in encouragement,” he says, “and what better way is there to do that than with music, which is already their passion and which will fuel their ultimate purpose?”

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