

**ETM: The Podcast**  
**Episode 16: with Gina Costanza**  
**TRANSCRIPT**

**Noah:** You're listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined for this episode by Gina Costanza. Gina has spent the last 18 years teaching general music and chorus. She's written curricula, facilitates professional development and mentors teachers for New York City public schools. She's currently the president of MEANYC, which stands for the Music Educators Association of New York City. She's a member of the NYSSMA, technology and BEDR committees and has served as a site supervisor for MS Arts Audition Boot Camp and on a task force for NAFME. So, without any further ado, Gina, thanks so much for taking the time to join me today.

**Gina:** You're welcome. Thanks for the invitation.

**Noah:** How did you first get involved in the field of music education?

**Gina:** So I decided when I was 13 that I was going to be a music teacher. Like that, was it. The other career options I had weighed prior to that were opera singer and, being a child of the late 80s and the early 90s, marine biologist, of course, thanks to Free Willy. So this would be a great place for you to play a 30 second snippet of Michael Jackson's song from that movie, but only in the legal 30 seconds. But I really decided I wanted to be an elementary music teacher. When I was at what we used to call a MANC but is now NAFME, a NAFME conference, I went to this amazing workshop where it was like Carnival of the Animals the movement about tortoises, I think is the title and we were pretending to be turtles, like laying our eggs in the sand. I don't really remember the whole premise behind it, but it just. I was just drawn in by the story, by the music, by the experience, and I was like, well, if I could do that every day for the rest of my life, I would. I'm good, like that's it.

**Noah:** You made the decision to become a music teacher at age 13. And then you made the decision to become an elementary teacher after you were already at a conference. I assume you weren't going to conferences in your teenage years. What were the intermediate years like? Were you thinking about preparations?

**Gina:** Well, okay. So I was in college when I was at that conference and at that point like it was kind of like, all right, that's what I'm gonna do, y'all gonna be a music teacher. But now I know I'm gonna be an elementary music teacher. And it's funny. You asked, you said, oh, you probably haven't been going to conferences like you weren't in your teenage years. And I kind of did like I sang the 2000 Allstate Mix Chorus, which was a really exciting time in my life. It was such a great honor. I worked so hard to be there. I had done two festivals and the first festival I didn't get the score that I wanted and knew I wasn't going to get into Allstate with that score. So I went back and worked my behind off making sure I had that soul to Ray jump and sight reading. I still can sing soul to Ray perfectly. Thanks NYSMA for that. So Allstate Choir was like a very formative experience for me because it was singing this great music with the top

musicians across the state. But then we also like developed friendships and like people that I sang in that choir with I still see all the time at conferences. So I was kind of like, oh, this is a cool world at that young age. Like all county choir loved the community. I sang in this year-long honors choir called Gemini Youth Chorale and we sang at Carnegie Hall. We sang at the Cathedral of the Incarnation like we sang at the Till Center and we sang really hard music and most rehearsals we stood mixed meant. So that meant I was always singing against someone from a different part. So it really like always singing against someone from a different part. So it really like made me a better sight reader, a better musician, strengthened my ear. But it was, you know, choose, choosing to do that with my life in college, going to these conferences. What was the question? I'm sorry, I've lost my train

**Noah:** I was yeah, I was just asking about what the years were like in between making that choice and getting into the actual like profession of teaching. But it sounds like your music education is one of these like perfect examples of an education that is not preparation for something but is the thing itself like you were singing in choirs you were making these connections with people who would end up in the same profession or adjacent to your profession, so that you would continue to have these connections later on. It's just exactly what I would think is the sort of like Platonian ideal of a of an education in music.

**Gina:** Yeah, I mean it was that. But then it was also like my teachers, like the person who I really think inspired me to really do this, cause I could have just gone the Free Willy way and gotten over being a music teacher real quick. My, the person who inspired me really was my high school choral conductor, Joseph Barone and Joe was the best. I still have a hard time calling him Joe because he was always Mr. B to us, um, but he, he was that person that saw great things in me before I mean like I, before I knew I could do them, I was like I could do them, but he was the one that really pushed me and inspired me to do better. And then, of course, like I had this amazing teacher who taught me theory and piano in high school. Barbara Kelly was just the best and it was just like, yeah, it was this incubator with great people and just being in the right time and place, and I went to summer music camp. I studied jazz, I studied classical, I studied musical theater and I just had so many opportunities because these people that I loved shared this great music with me and you know, being a theater kid in the late 90s or, as they would say, in Rent at the end of a millennium, it was a special, special time. Mega musicals were everything to me and you know we would take the train in from Long Island and go see shows. From the age of 16, I was hopping on the Long Island Railroad by myself and going with friends, so it was a great time to fall in love with music.

**Noah:** You have this great music education. You find yourself at a conference and deciding that you'll be an elementary school music teacher. So what were those first couple of years like in the classroom? What were the challenges of teaching music in your first couple of years?

**Gina:** The challenge of teaching has always been that it's really hard work and not everybody is made to do this. The intellectual preparation to be a music teacher is tough and then your first couple of years you're also in grad school and you don't know all the student engagement strategies and sometimes kids say things to you and you're like I don't know what I'm supposed

to say or do now. So it's a lot of things learning right away and I think that in some people's experiences their first schools, they don't have the support they need to be successful. I will say in terms of the things that I've noticed over my career, like I said, there's it's always been hard work, but there's a lot more tech now and so much more email. I remember checking my email like once a week or twice a week and getting one or two emails, but it's very different now and when I popped onto this, I was like I had to check one of the email inboxes because I wasn't sure where the Zoom link was. So I think that that's like a real thing and also people can access you at any time of day on multiple devices and in multiple forms of communication, and in 2006, I had an iPod and a speaker on my cart. And now, like I have state of the art sound systems, I have iPads in my classroom, I have these amazing Akai keyboard controllers, I have a Promethean board, and these things are just all things I had to learn on the job. Like, even though you can take an amazing technology class, like, we are not using the same technology I did in college or even in the beginning of my career, or even five years ago. I will say that kids are still the same in the sense that they like to have fun. It's always been the same. Put puppets, props, good music and good books and stories in front of kids and you will connect with them.

**Noah:** You already touched on my follow-up, which is how do the challenges change over the years? I guess the technology is one of these circumstances that impacts all of us, regardless of the grade level we're teaching, regardless of what sort of school we're in, what classroom we're in. I'm wondering, though, how the challenges have differed between the different grade levels that you've taught and between the different musical disciplines that you've taught.

**Gina:** Yeah, so I've actually taught pre-K through 12. So the challenges of teaching young kids really relate to your inability to communicate with them sometimes, and sometimes it's like the kids can't say what they need, but then you also don't know how to ask them what they need, because you teach so many kids right, um, like, I teach 550 kids and even though I can really try to know every single one of them, it's it's tricky, um. So that's definitely a challenge with the, the littles. Middle school, they're just too, the limbs are too long and there's too many like chemicals flowing through their brain. And when you get to teach them for a few years, you get to see how things change and it can really be rewarding, like, especially if you teach someone in eighth grade and then you have them in ninth grade. They're very well, in some cases very different people, sometimes exactly the same, but as they get older they're different. And the challenge of, I think, of teaching high school students for me is, even though I was in my late 20s, when I taught high school students, I felt like we were the same age, which was not true. So I still think I'm the same age as high school students, unfortunately not anymore, and I wasn't then either. But I think that the thing that's most rewarding in any of those ages is the connection that you make with people and getting to teach them. You know, in my school if I have you in 3K I can have you for eight years. That's really special. You get to watch them grow up, you get to see them grow into people and they come back and visit you sometimes and you find out that even though you're a general music choral teacher who also teaches modern band, all of your best students are now band kids and it breaks your little choral teacher heart. But it also makes you so happy at the same time, because you know some of the band teachers call me an honorary band teacher and I'm like, well, I don't know if that's a compliment or not, because, guess what? Choral people are pretty organized too. So I don't know why y'all thought all the band teachers

were organized. We have our stuff together. But all that to say it's. You know it's. Kids are kids and they and families are families and they are why we do this work and that's why I get up every morning. Some mornings are easier than others. But um knowing that you are going to get the opportunity to spend time with someone...I'll never forget this. I read this in this book the War on Kindness. That is actually the title of the book, but it's actually about raising kids with empathy, and something that will stay with me forever is every child is the light of someone's life. Before you say that thing that you shouldn't say, or you do that thing you shouldn't do, remember that.

**Noah:** Yeah, what an important thing to keep in mind, especially when you're talking numbers like 550 students, that's 550 individuals who are the light of someone's life. So, even though you're working in bulk..

**Gina:** That's exactly it. It's the Costco of teaching.

**Noah:** You mentioned earlier that you were taking Long Island Railroad to see shows from age 16, which is one of those experiences. I grew up in southeastern North Carolina. I was not taking the Long Island Railroad to see shows. That's..it's a very New York type experience to have and I think it's cool. In teaching in New York you're working with students who are having uniquely New York experiences, but you also get to do some teaching that is uniquely of New York and since we're going to be talking about MEANYC shortly, I was wondering if we could sort of preamble that with any uniquely New York teaching stories you might have, and I've said it three times now, so I think I'm warmed up.

**Gina:** You might be, though I've never done that warm up. So I have taught the children and family members of many artists. Some are puppeteers for a well-known puppet company that's based in New York City. Some are in-demand choreographers, noise musicians and composers. Tony, award-winning directors that's true. Stars in cult classic halloween movies, which I won't say names, but you can figure it out from there. Oscar-winning directors, lead singers of the vocal jazz group I grew up studying to like get that real vocal jazz sound, you know. Former soap stars. And some just create music in their home. They listen to music at home, they play it at parties or they just always have it on. So you have to treat those kids and families the same way as you treat the family who invites you to the one night only event for VIPs to see the original cast of their hit musical perform on the fifth year anniversary of the opening, which, if you Googled it at this point, friends, you've already figured out who I was a special guest of. Sometimes you teach the nephew of the president of an Eastern European country and get to make them a penguin in your production of Seussical Junior. I've had a lot of personally and professionally enriching experiences with these people who I've had the opportunity to serve over the years, and I don't know if you get that in other places, so it's been a really cool, interesting journey.

**Noah:** Yeah, I don't think you do get that other places.

**Gina:** Yeah, also, oh my gosh, I performed with John Legend and Common for a gala for a school that I worked at. I feel like I can say their names only because I didn't teach their children or family members. So those are the only names I'll drop, because it's not. There's no kids to protect there, you know.

**Noah:** Right, right, and you were on the bill so it's...

**Gina:** Well, singing backup is not on the bill, but I'll take that.

**Noah:** So, now that, now that we have established your New York teaching credential, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about about MEANYC. What, what is it? What does it offer to music teachers facing..you know these uniquely New York teaching experiences, but also some of the really widely varying challenges of teaching within the city of New York?

**Gina:**

MEANYC is the Music Educators Association of New York City. We are the local Music Educators Association. We produce festivals for students, we provide networking opportunities for teachers and workshops as well. We're also engaged in advocacy for music education in New York City. I'm the president now about to finish up my term. How did I get involved in MEANYC? Well, I was a member when I first started my teaching career and then taught in different places and didn't re-up my membership and had done some stuff uptown when I worked in charter schools and had put a festival together and people had noticed that we're starting to do some things uptown. I think that's what happened and I was asked to join the board as the recording secretary, which is a great gig. It's just take some notes, send out the notes. Really, you get to learn everything about the organization and you get to know about everything that's going on. So then I started working on social media because we didn't have a social media person, and after that work I was nominated to be president elect, did that for two years and now this is the third year of my term. So I always say to people when they're like well, you know, is the recording secretary a good job and it's always like, yes, it's where I started. And even with the collegiate members of NYSMA, I was our province six representative in college. You know, you never know where the next president of this organization is going to come from. And just because I look this certain way and I went to these schools and this was my background, this is my education, the next president of the organization doesn't have to look like me, doesn't have to have had the same experiences. We all have something important to bring to this profession and we all have important ideas and values that should be centered and should be leading the charge for making sure that more and more kids have access to amazing music education here in New York City.

**Noah:** Yeah, I think that's a great endorsement for the recording secretary position.

**Gina:** Thanks.

**Noah:** If I am, hypothetically, a brand new music teacher, I've just met with the principal at a school in the Bronx and I'm going to be starting in September. Why would I want to get involved with MEANYC? What does MEANYC have to offer me as a new teacher?

**Gina:** Well, first of all, I started my career in the Bronx. So welcome, fam, so glad that you have decided on this profession. Of all the professions you could have chosen in the world, you chose the thing that I love to do the most. I think first you have to be really excited about what you're going to do, and then it's all about getting to know the community, getting to know the kids, getting to know their families, getting to know your colleagues, and then it's just asking for help. So I was always that person that was like I don't know how to do this thing. Do you think you would help me and you can help me figure out how to do this? And I have to say I'm about to finish up my superintendent's license. I've got one more paper and I'll be done with this program.

**Noah:** Wow, congrats.

**Gina:** I'm very excited. So, yeah, working on my SDL the school district leadership certification and I just read that there's research that supports that if you're the person asking people for help, people see you as more effective in what you're doing and also they're more willing to help you. And I promise I did not know this research. I was.. this is not a strategy, y'all, I just found out the research to support it. Um, but I was that person who you know my payroll secretary would say something to me and I'd be like, hmm, I need you to pretend like I'm five years old. Can you explain that again to me? And the truth is, I've been very lucky that I've asked some of the right people questions, because I've asked some of the wrong people questions too. Every once in a while you find that person that answers the question and helps change your story and your narrative. If you look at my resume, you can see I've worked a bunch of different places and there's been lots of reasons why I've been in different places, but why I know that the school that I'm at now is a really special place is...I ended up asking the right person the questions and she helped me, and so did her mom, who served the school community for 30 years and now comes back and subs as a retired teacher. And I've just been very lucky because this person has not only been like my kind of my mentor at school, but they've also become my friend over the years and it's because of them that I feel like I don't know, like I feel like I'm the best teacher in the world right now, but that's because someone actually took the time to help me. So if you're someone who's in the middle of your career or maybe you're getting closer to retirement, if someone asks you for help, just give them five minutes. You never know what that's going to mean in some person's life, because we're all going through things and we don't always see what everyone's going through. And, yeah, I'm just very lucky to have known the right person to ask this time.

**Noah:** We talked earlier about the place of technology in the classroom now and both the advantages that that gives a teacher teaching today over the teachers teaching previously, but also the disadvantages and the sort of new approach that one might have to take to setting boundaries around communication and that sort of thing. But where do you see music education

in the city of New York headed in the near and distant futures and what are you most excited about in the field and what that technology will bring?

**Gina:** Well, we should definitely talk about setting boundaries, but I'm not going to be the expert on that. I need to listen to that podcast, so let me know when you do that one, because I will be the first person to listen to that. I love what I do, everyone. So I think something that's really important in the field is, you know, I went to classical music school. I shared with you like I studied jazz, I studied musical theater, but I think that I really didn't have the opportunity to make connections between those different genres of music and I also learned about just those three there. And jazz was like after college I learned more of it, like I studied it a little bit but like only dip my toes in in high school and college. I think the future is multi-genre artistry and making the connections between different styles of music. So jazz is something that I studied a lot. And now that I am learning about more styles of music to enrich my curriculum and students and also to like provide a positive representation of role models from their own communities, cultural identities I have started to learn about like Colombian music and like Calypso, and I didn't realize that there was so much improvisation in Calypso, and now I'm doing this unit on bluegrass for the Carnegie Hall Musical Explorers curriculum this year and I didn't realize how much. I mean, like I knew that there was improvisation, like I went to the Grand Ole Opry I saw a show in Nashville right, I should know inherently that there's improvisation in it, but it like it wasn't so explicit. So now I'm having like a more explicit understanding of connections between all of these different styles of music and of course there was improvisation in, you know, the Baroque period and classical music. But I don't know, I think there's there's something that I still need to figure out how to get into that and bring into my classical music pedagogy. So, yeah, so there's a lot to do with like the study of different genres. I think that there's more opportunities for student leadership now. I've seen a lot of teachers collaborating with their students on composition, on arrangement, especially in modern bands. I've personally done a lot more student leadership in my own choral ensemble. If a student says, hey, I think we should learn this song, I'll say great, teach it to the ensemble. So they end up teaching the repertoire. Sometimes they help develop the arrangements. Well, now I've really started to do this a lot. I have student conductors so they conduct it. And what's really cool is our last performance..we do a school assembly once a month and the choir performs like a couple times a year. I didn't conduct anything. I accompanied one piece and the other piece, I was just listening watching one of my fifth graders conduct, watching her dad video her conducting the ensemble video. How powerful is that going to be for her when she goes on and says, hey, I've conducted a choir before, I know how to do this. She did great dynamics too. She is on her way and I've really been thinking about I don't even really need to be here, I just need to be a facilitator. So I've been thinking a lot about stepping down from the podium and handing the baton to my students, and I see a lot of my colleagues doing the same and they're even farther along in the process and I need to learn from them. But I think it's a really cool way of empowering our students, instead of us like talking about oh, they're so far behind, they don't know how to do this, they don't know how to do that. I think about these are all the things they already know, and my choir sings better for them than when I'm in front of the music stand, to be honest. So it's been a really awesome empowering experience. To just step away and let them do it.

**Noah:** I love that story. That reminds me of a previous episode of the series. I got to speak with Michael Rapper, the conductor, and that that is his sort of origin myth of how he got involved in conducting as he had a teacher who allowed him to conduct a piece at a concert, and then he said that is what I will be doing for my, for the rest of my life, for my career. It sounds as though you might have already gotten the wheels in motion for that very same type of thing happening for your students. You've sort of alluded to this, but I'll ask the question anyway so that we can get it clearly delineated for the listener, because I think it's an important question. What is it that keeps you involved in music education and music ed advocacy?

**Gina:** Well, here's the thing about music: you can never know everything about music, which is super frustrating and also super motivating at exactly the same time. And my ideas about music constantly change. Somebody will like play a track for you and you're like, oh no, I just think totally differently about this genre, about this artist, and I love that. And I have to say that, like music changed my life. I had adverse childhood experiences, and singing in choir was a place where I felt like there was nothing, letting everybody know that I was any different than anyone else. We were all there together and it didn't really matter what my story was, because we were there in service of music. As I teacher, I feel like I need to say it's really important to know who your kids are, but at the time, for me, just being in the crowd and being valued for what I contributed to the crowd and the community was a way for me to heal, and I think that, I say this to my students, music has the power to change your life if you let it. So, when you go to middle school, choose a middle school that has a music program. If you love music, you should be at a school that has the program you want. You never know who you're going to sing next to or play next to or meet. I saw Black Violin perform last week at City Winery. Amazing. If you've never seen Black Violin y'all this is a plug. I do not work for them. I should say that. They met in second period orchestra in high school and now they travel around the world changing people's lives, one concert at a time. That's incredible. You never know who's gonna meet at your rehearsal or in this festival that you create. I have to say that even my friends who are not musicians or music teachers, they all love music. We talk about music. So obviously the conversation that you have about Florence and the Machine is going to be different than the conversation that you have with your music teacher friends, but everyone loves music and it's a way to connect with other people.

**Noah:** Thank you, Gina, so much for taking the time to introduce MEANYC and to and to share your experience and your insight with the listeners and me today.

**Gina:** You're welcome. I'm so glad that we got to talk about all of this. I mean, anyone who knows me has already heard all this stuff before, so if you're listening to this podcast, thank you.