

Notables

Episode 14: Dr. Ryan Zellner

TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Ryan Zellner: So what's your main goal? What's just like when you get back to the nonprofits. What's your mission? And stay mission to line. Why are you doing these other things if you don't need to be and they influence your mission? What's your mission as a music teacher? Is it engaging and getting as many students participating as possible in music education? Then you're going to take a step back and say am I offering the right things?

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an education through music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined in this episode by Dr Ryan Zellner. Ryan is the CEO of the International Society for Music Education, ISME. Prior to this position, he served in various capacities, including the head of music education for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, director of strategic Programs for the Grammy Music Education Coalition and the National Program Director for Little Kids Rock, recently renamed Music Will. And now, without any further ado, Ryan, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Ryan: Absolutely. It's a pleasure to be with you and with Education Through Music on the Notables podcast.

Noah: And on that note, the show's really all about how people who are prominent in music or adjacent to music or in other fields, how they have sort of leveraged their early musical experiences to become successful professionals. And so the first question I always ask is how did you first become a musician?

Ryan: Yeah, so this goes back for me to fourth grade. Uh, so the elementary school that that I was attending at that time they had a brass group come down and play brass instruments, uh, at like a lunchtime or something like that, and I was really excited by that. For some reason I don't recall why, who knows. You know I was fourth grade. So I just remember convincing my dad to take me to the instrument demo night that was put on by the local music store and they brought a brass group in and I was for sure I was like that's the instrument I want to play.

And I pointed to the tr trombone and my dad looked at me and said, look how big that instrument is and look how little you are, why don't you play the trumpet? And I was like, okay, I'll play the trumpet. And that's how it sort of started. It was really a happenstance. Maybe I would have been a better trombone player than a trumpet player, I don't know. Uh, I could look back at that time and blame my dad for that one, but that started the course then. So, just playing trumpet I played through elementary school band and through middle school and through high school. So, but that was the very beginning, was just just hearing that brass group.

Noah: That meet the instruments night is really such a huge recruiting tool for ensembles. Were there any band teachers along the way who played a really prominent role in you sticking with music through school?

Ryan: Well, that's a good question. I think that I think music teachers in general tend to be really impactful figures on people's lives, and one of the reasons is that you have a passion for music and you have an interest in this subject. But a bigger reason is that you're in constant contact with them. So, for example, if you take a band class, say in middle school, you may have that same band director for two years, three years or four years, so you tend to develop a more of a relationship with them over that period of time.

For me, looking back, I always had trumpet players as band directors, so I think that really inspired me to just continue to work harder and understand like I can get to this level if I do this. I think they were all sort of inspirational or non inspirational in their own ways. Right, you end up being a music teacher many times because you either love your teacher or you hate your teacher and want to be the opposite of them. So there's just different lessons. I think that you can learn just from being in those groups and ensembles. But another thing that particularly strikes me from you know the primary years of going through like that, fifth through 12th grade.

Noah: Especially in certain grade levels, the music teacher is the only person in the school who ends up teaching every single student in the school, or, you know, a third of the students in a school, whereas, you know, a classroom teacher ends up with a much smaller group of students. Over the course of your career, which has really run the gamut in terms of exploring music education from a variety of different angles, angles you've sort of shifted your focus from musical performance to music education and later to music education advocacy and music teacher preparation. So I'm wondering what were some of the turning points that led you to shift your focus in this way? Or is it not actually a shift in focus? Is it something else entirely?

Ryan: Yeah, I think that's such a great question and I've never thought about it. You know, I wish I could look back and say I'd pre-planned everything, you know, like I followed some sort of script, but everything for me has been very happenstance, based on the circumstances that I was sort of finding myself in. One was I first got into music education to go to college, not because I was like, oh, I want to be a music teacher or I want to do music. I was planning on being a nuclear engineer. And then the thought of like sitting behind a desk and just crunching numbers and doing that was like no, I don't, that seems really boring, I can't see myself doing that for 30 years. Yeah. And so I was like, well, I really like music, well, what can I do in music? And I, yeah. And so I was like, well, I really like music, well, what can I do in music? And I was like, oh, I guess I'll teach music. And I was playing in the band at the local university when I was in high school. So then I was like, oh, I'll just go here. And then, when I was at the university, um, at moravian university, moravian college then when I was there, there was a flyer on the board that said hey, come to the university of connecticut and get a graduate assistantship and work with marching and pep bands. And so it was just a flyer and I made a phone call no-transcript.

And then I ended up into teaching and and after I've been teaching for a while I taught for 14 years in a high school in pennsylvania I realized like I can make a bigger impact. I don't know how to do that, but I can make it a bigger impact. And then I got a message on linkedin from a

group called little kids rock, which is a national music education nonprofit that focuses on popular music, aka modern band in a sense. And it was just a message on LinkedIn and I replied to it. I did some interviews, I ended up leaving my teaching job and started working for Little Kids Rock as a national program director, and that's when we were really focused on teacher training like teacher training, the importance of bringing in other streams of music to reach broader audiences. So that was an opportunity that came to me and it's like that.

My career has sort of layered that way. It's different connections, different avenues, different things, and it's not necessarily I get tired of one thing, because I still am very active in the ed community. Like I still teach online, I teach at a local university here. I'm still involved in that aspect because I really do love teaching, interacting with students. I don't think you can ever trade that for anything in your life. I think there's a certain like mentorship and this like relationship that you can you can build long enough. I feel like students and maybe technology and other aspects have moved on without me, so I feel like sometime I'll time out. I don't think I'm there yet, but I think that that'll come about at some point.

And then I had some really interesting jobs. I was the head of music education for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was an interesting project because up until 2018, music was banned. For example, women couldn't drive cars in the kingdom. So all of a sudden, you're taking a switch and flipping it and saying, okay, music's okay now, but how do you build an infrastructure in a society that has no infrastructure? None of the schools were built with music rooms, music instruments, music teachers, music hubs, community making, music centers, music recording all these things that come into play, um, that we take for granted in in a western country because we've grown up with that, right, but they don't grow up with it. So now you have to build all this infrastructure into this uh place.

And which leads me to eventually that uh that led me to the international society for music education, which is a global membership organization that focuses on music education and research around the world, and basically how to make those connections right. Uh, it was formed in 1953 and if you flash back 70 years, right, how did you communicate with people about research? Maybe journals, maybe you'd write a letter and wait a few weeks for a response and then write another letter back and some sort of, you know, quaint communication style. So the conference was formed. We host a worldwide conference every two years. The conference was formed to bring toward all the researchers that are working in music education and practitioners and bring them together to share best practices, and that's continued on for the last 70 years or so, and within that, it's its own unique challenges. You know, when you're taking over an organization or working on an organization, we can go into that depth later if you want to know it, but what's exciting about it is really taking an organization and seeing, uh, what can become of it all.

Right, I've never. I'm always about. One of the things I realized through teaching is I'm about building. I love to build things up. I can't maintain like if you wanted me to be an accountant and run all your books and make sure everything equals out to that. I'm just not that person. I just I can. I can do it. I just really, really hate to do it. And what excites me is like where can we grow

an organization, how can we make it better, how can we make it stronger and how can we get this world of collaboration going in music education?

Noah: A couple of interesting points really stand out to me. This job in Saudi Arabia, I think, sounds like it must have been the perfect example of building something up as opposed to maintaining, because you've got this like primary succession situation where there isn't anything in place and you have to sort of create something out of really nothing, which is never the case. You know, you take over at a new school. There's always something there. You know the students are bringing in their musical experiences from their homes. You've got, you know you might have some old instruments from a previous music teacher. There might be actually like a pretty well-developed program there. But in the case of a kingdom where music is legally forbidden, then all of a sudden needing to develop music, that's such a fascinating situation and I imagine it must have been not quite to the same extent. But with Little Kids Rock developing that teacher training in modern band, that was a pretty novel model. Was it a sort of a similar thing where you felt like you were building something out of nothing?

Ryan: Well, I think when I came into Little Kids Rock, there was already a model in place and it was more or less looking at the model and saying where do we need to focus and how can we grow the organization. And with Little Kids Rock, what we did is we just really focused on what structure is already there and how do we just build ourselves into that structure. So, whether it's through organizations like NAFME, the National Association for Music Education, or just building in through teacher training models and professional development, building into college courses, there's already a system in place. So what we're doing is refining and trying to scale that system.

At that point, what you're doing with Saudi Arabia is you're starting a system, and one of the challenges for the kingdom and very common, when you, when you want it, you want to do everything at once, you get really excited by things you don't prioritize. So we are working on everything from military music programs to uh, you know, the, the national orchestra, uh for for youth and band, and and uh like modern programs, songwriting, song recording, virtual reality programs, augmented reality programs but you still have to. What, for me, it boiled down to that same fundamental principle is that you need teachers in order to convey that material. Now, whether those teachers are in place there for you or you have to do some sort of virtual system to get them there and be present with that, and that's the issue is that you know, if you're in the US and you say, I want a guitar teacher, how many guitar teachers could you find in, for example, the city of Philadelphia?

Noah: If I walked out and looked at telephone poles, I could probably on my block find you two or three.

Ryan: Yeah, right Now, imagine there's no music and now how do you find a guitar instructor? It becomes a much greater challenge, right, right? And the other challenge is that many of the teachers that are in this, the system for system, for Saudi Arabia, is that they're Egyptian or Jordanian. So even if you're looking at music, maybe of Saudi culture or some sort of folk music

or something that exists, and have some people with some baseline music skills, you're now dealing with people that aren't from that country. So how do you do this? And, to scale for a country that's basically the size of Texas, so how do you scale that to put enough music teachers in place in order to have any sort of meaningful output? And it was getting them to really focus on that. So, for example, one of the challenges is that there was many engineers on the projects and engineers love to build, which is what they do. For example, um, one of the challenges that there was many engineers on the projects and engineers love to build, which is what they do.

So they were building 40 community hubs while I was there and we launched three of them during the time I was there. So building very quickly, and the community hubs were designed to be like music creation spaces, but also like coffee houses, like little gift shops, like just a community center, but focused on music right Performance stage. Now they launched, they opened the building, they opened this community center, but they had no teachers. There's no one to teach the music right. So for me it was about how do you get the scaled in the school system and how do you get teachers that can be there in some way, shape or form.

Initially and it's part of the challenge when you look at this is that sort of worldwide view. You know what Saudi Arabia would do is look at like okay, well, the US is very well equipped to handle music education training, so let's just buy what they do and put it in place. And meanwhile there's not one system for us and that system for music education training is changing and evolving, so they're building something off of an old system that we're not even using anymore or have the potential to farm out in a few years. So it presents a huge challenge to do that. And the other concern was getting performance groups at a very high level. Was getting performance groups at a very high level?

Well, if you look at orchestras, or like Boston Symphony Orchestra or orchestras in Europe. Right, there's a long history there and there's hundreds of years of training and everything else that comes into this time. You can't just pull someone off the street and be like here's a violin, we're gonna get you six months of training and you're gonna play at this level. So it's this sort of race to get to a stage of prominence, but also one that takes time. That's not something money can buy, right, it can buy you love, but it can't buy you music teacher training, to quote the Beatles, I think, right.

Noah: Just thinking about the notion of let's buy whatever they're they're doing in the U S, like there, there's so many unquantifiable, ineffable aspects of of a musical culture and um so much of what goes into music education, writ large so not necessarily just like a curriculum in a school. But you know, the places where people learn music are all over the place and a lot of them don't have any dollar signs attached to them. A lot of it is, you know, something that people are doing in community with each other where there is no financial exchange, and you know, much to the chagrin of a lot of the people involved in those spaces. I'm sure they would like there to be some money involved, but like passing a hat around at, you know, one of the performance venues in New York is not the same thing as it would be. I think, really difficult to replicate that from you know, a bird's eye view. You kind of need to be on the ground.

Ryan: Yeah, absolutely, and I think with anything, whether you're dealing with like a nonprofit or a business or whatever, what's your mission right?

What's your goal? And you got to be very clear and quantifiable about those goals. And their goal was very simple, but they just never wanted to call it out and they're the reason that they did all these programs wasn't really out of the kindness of like, hey, I want a better society, but it was badged as that and what had happened is that there was a study that was published that basically, it basically said that Saudi Arabia, its income from oil, is going to be cut in half by whatever year it was going to be, whatever year it was going to be. So what they decided to do is invest billions and billions of dollars into what they call the quality of life program, among other programs, to bring in entertainment and to bring in things. Now you see this with, like golf tournaments, for example, that are happening in Saudi Arabia and how they bring the PGA or and they do those sorts of things to to bring that over.

It's it's done for an economic benefit and what they did is they looked at K-pop and they said that K-pop in South Korea has been a tremendous source of wealth for that country and it's only growing. So how do we get a share of that? How do we become a leader in the Middle East to get to that agenda? And if you have that goal, that's your goal, right. You can debate on whether it's right or wrong, but it would be very clear what you need to do, that you need to work on popular music programs that blend in and you could scale everything along that sort of trend. And they're not wrong. The streaming of songs has increased what? 13% in the last year. It hit 1.5 trillion through video and audio in 2023. You know that's only going to keep increasing and the revenue streams are only going to keep increasing.

And where you have these uh opportunities, you know that you want to seize upon them. But it was badged more like quality of life and we want to bring music in and we're giving you these good things and it just it just led to confusion in uh in in the project in general. But you have that with a nonprofit right. If you start doing this and you know, if you're focused on teacher training, well that's what you do. You do teacher training. You don't all of a sudden start making instruments and start doing all these other things. You just need to focus on what you do best and sort of keep that mission focused and that's what keeps you aligned to achieving your mission as an organization.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. Etm's mission is to positively impact student motivation, achievement and self-confidence by partnering with under-resourced schools to integrate music education into the core curriculum. To find out more or to support ETM in its mission, go to etmonline.org. So we spoke briefly earlier about ISME and the conference and you know the original goal and how time and the development of technology has sort of impacted the way in which you approach that goal. But I'm wondering just sort of what does your average week look like as CEO of ISME?

Ryan: Yeah, I think that I don't know if there is an average week that we're going through. You know when I started with is me back in January of 2023, and as you're coming to any project,

you just don't know what you're getting. Right, the old forrest gump life is like a box of chocolates, you know, and this, you read the label on the other side that has all the chocolates labeled. So you don't know really what you're inheriting sometimes, and so it takes you some time to figure out the systems. You know your CRM system, your websites, your. How are people like, what is going on? Right, what is going on? Why are people coming to this organization? How is it functioning? How is it flowing? And in that same period of time, we moved from being an Australian nonprofit to being a US nonprofit. We moved from being an Australian nonprofit to being a US nonprofit. So 2024 is our first official year as a US nonprofit, which then opens up a doorway of other things for us.

But for me it's really not a week-to-week thing, as much as it is cyclical depending on where we are with the conference and what other events are coming up. So, for example, right now we're prepping for Montreal 2026. And that's going to be at the end of July, from July 26th to the 31st 2026. And you're like Ryan, that is two years away. You would like to think that's really far away. And one of the things that you realize with conference planning is conferences are generally planned out six years, eight years, 10 years in advance many times. But for us right now we work on the theme of the conference. We work on the splash page, the initial webpage of what's happening. We're contracting with a professional conference organizer to help us orchestrate that. We've negotiated contracts with the Palais des Congrès in Montreal, which is the convention center there. That was negotiated two years ago. So we have a run-up to. The first thing that we launch is the submission process, which happens in March and then stays open. But during, when all that's going on and all of the submission process is happening, that's when the real meat of the conference is occurring. So there's not like a typical like I do this every week or I do that every week. It's really depending on what we're doing with our conference, what we're doing with awards that we could be giving out, what are we doing to support the regional conferences, what do we need to build internally? Because, as members or people that interface with your organization. They see the external things. They don't see the updates that you're doing in the backend of the website, the bug fixes that you're going through. They don't see any of that. They just see, oh, this is hither, this is that, and.

But my focus, you know, we had the first world conference that I was a part of as a staff member was in 2024, just this past summer in helsinki, and one of the things that struck me is it's very much still and I don't say this in a negative way it's very much still the same conference that you would have had back in 1976 or 1980 or whatever year. It would have been Right, yeah, which is good. We had about 1300 participants. We have people that come from all over the world. We had 80 countries represented. You know, hundreds of people performing, but for me there's more to it than just the academic portion of it. And how do we pull in this community side? How do we make it more cutting edge? How do we leave a legacy in the cities that we're in that live beyond that.

One of my greatest pet peeves about nonprofit organizations and maybe it happens in profit spaces I don't work there. But in nonprofits we do our work and we're work focused. But when other people try to intersect with our bubble, we get. What do they want? What are they doing? This is our work. It's it's so much many times about the ego than it is about the work. Right, and

we're all working in this music education, this music advocacy. We all want the same things, but yet we let ourselves get in the way.

So what I've been trying to do with this organization, and specifically with the conference, is who do we partner with? How do we work with the Canadian Music Educator Association? How do we work with the Music Education Council? How do we work with US organizations? And you know we're to be in the, in North America, probably for another 20 years for a world conference.

So how do we sort of, you know, seize the moment now on this collaboration? Let's get out of our own way and let's move forward as an organization. It's not about, it's not about you, it's not about me, it's not about. It's about what are we doing to better the state of music in the world? And sometimes we just can't. We can't back away enough to say, hey, I don't have any ego to play in this. And as soon as someone says that, you know they have a lot of ego to play in it, but that's usually how it rolls.

So, some of the innovative things that we're doing at this conference because I really wanted to take in the whole conference sort of experience and one of the areas that we're going to be focusing on is, instead of an exhibition space, we're doing a creator space, and a creator space is going to be everyone from that's. Hey, I've written a book or methodology from an ISME member that maybe they came up with a new instrumental method or something that they want to promote and be able to showcase all the way up through people that are working in health and wellness, in the music space, toward artificial intelligence and music generation, and then how do all those things sync together and how do we interact with one another? So really, the idea is to create this, this, this learning lab or creator lab of a space that we can all interact. And part of that is my visceral I hate to use the word hatred, but it's the only word that comes up right now but my visceral gut reaction to see an exhibition space even the word itself is I walk in.

There's a company that sets up a booth. There's some person who doesn't want to be standing there for eight to 10 hours a day or whatever it is, and they have their methods laid out in the tables and it's very sad and I'm like what is this Like? What am I? What am I doing here? Why I don't don't want to. This isn't. Is this really? This is just selling, like we're just selling.

At this point, we're not creating, we're not building, we're not advocating, we're just selling. You care about selling instruments, you care about selling methods. You want to maximize how you're, how you're selling that and what's the bottom line for that? And it kind of makes them sound like all the companies sound evil and whatever. But for me it's. It's not that at all. It's about how are we interacting, right? What is AI and music education? What are they doing together? They're going to be doing something. Do we know what that is? Do music educators even know the companies that are working in the AI space? Do AI space know music educators? So let's bring us together. Let's have those Shark Tank style presentations. Let's be able to collaborate. Let's talk about the methodology that's going into it.

Noah: Let's come up with some working sort of relationships that are going to bring all these people together and to rather than positioning people as you know, salespeople and consumers position people as creators in this sort of much more mutualistic way.

Ryan: Yeah, that was one of the ideas of just creating this space of interaction.

Noah: So, Ryan, we spoke about Saudi Arabia and your work there. We spoke about Helsinki. What insights into the state of music education in the US have you gained by traveling to these various corners of the globe and engaging with music education researchers and practitioners from over 80 countries and ISME?

Ryan: Yeah. So that's a that's a very uh large question to sort of tackle. Uh, I have visited almost every major uh school district in the United States and talked to many of the organizations, as well as uh organizations from overseas and around the world, and I think that there's often this idea of, like the grass is greener, like if we go, if I go to this country, they do it well. Or I go to that country and they do it well. And you know, one of the things that you learn is, there, there's always a couple of things that are happening. One is like what level of support is the government putting into the programs, right? So if the government sees art in general and this could be, you know, state government or, more likely, a country that says, oh, we really support art, we're going to fund it it then becomes a priority for the country. Yeah, right, and then, but there's always downsides to something like that. So if you say, yes, that's a priority, okay, well, what are you willing to pay to make that happen? Are you willing to have a 40% tax rate in order for arts to be sustained? And many times, people will go whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. No, that's too much, right. So then, what's the right balance to make this occur right? And I think the one constant that you see and whether it's advocating for programs or advocating for music in your district is if there's interest there from the students and there's relevancy, then it's going to be important. You know, what's important to the students, is important to the parents and important to the community, is important to the district, and those are the things that we really have to focus on. What programs are you offering? If no one's taking a class that you offer, then you're probably not offering the right class. And if we take a second and think about this in capitalistic market and saying like, okay, I made a great product, I think it's a great product and I advertise it everywhere, I put it on the shelves and I sold four units, guess what? It's probably not a great product, right?

And what happens in the school system is that you have students that have to take a music class, or they have to do this or they have to do that. So it's just this lack of choice that they're sort of you know, preempted to take this class. And then they sign up for the class, not sure what they're getting, and then it's not an opt-in thing. So you have this set population, but what are you doing to keep them engaged? Are you offering something that's going to keep them engaged and keep them growing through music and the countries?

One of the things that I've encouraged the US to do is look outside of our bubble and say what's out there. We have our traditions and our traditions are great, but what are we leaving out? And we need to sort of move on, and it's part of the struggle I think that we're in in music education

in general is we don't know how to get off this wheel, because people are scared of letting go and for whatever reason, right? So if you're in concert band and you grow up and you're in fifth grade, you play in band and do this and then you get out into the public. Do you listen to concert band music again, or are you listening to something else, right? So the argument there then is no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. We created a, a, a, a, somebody that's more knowledgeable about music, somebody that has a more of appreciation for music and more of it.

Nonsense, right? Maybe you did, maybe you're not. That's not true. You didn't set out with that goal, like people would say to me when I was a band director, you know, and other other teachers, and they would lead with things like well, band teaches teamwork and I was like so does basketball, and probably more effective. There's five players, you know, you're moving up and down, you're communicating all the time. It's probably a more effective means to an end, right?

So what's your main goal? What's just like when you get back to the nonprofits. What's your mission? And stay mission to line. Why are you doing these other things if you don't need to be and they influence your mission?

What's your mission as a music teacher? Is it engaging and getting as many students participating as possible in music education? Then you're going to take a step back and say am I offering the right things to be able to do that? Am I offering the right things to be able to do that? And if you had that groundswell of support, you would be able to then advocate for those things and change would happen, naturally, because you'd force yourself to change with that. But I think many times we hold onto things because we love that. You know, we'd love to be in a concert band growing up. We had good memories of it. So we want to recreate that and give that to our children and give those other experiences on. But the problem when we're sitting in this space is that we lose sight of everything else that's happening in the world around us.

Noah: Ryan, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me and share all of this insight. I really appreciate it.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah, it was a blast.