

ETM: The Podcast
Episode 9: Jessica Peresta
TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and today I'm joined by Jessica Peresta, who is the founder of the Domestic Musician and the host of the Elementary Music Teacher Podcast. Today we'll be discussing summer vacation and what new music teachers can do with that time immediately preceding their first year in the music classroom to prepare. Thanks so much for being here, Jessica.

Jessica Peresta: Yeah, I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Noah: How did you find yourself teaching music and then eventually supporting music teachers?

Jessica Peresta: Yeah, I started, actually I think I've shared the story but in college I started as a piano performance major and it wasn't until middle of my sophomore year, I decided to switch to music education for a lot of different reasons, but one of those was the fact that I loved working with children. I've done that in a variety of different ways. And then another reason was I just could see myself in the classroom and so I switched and thought which I've heard the story so many times I thought I would be a band director and then I ended up student teaching in the fall instead of the spring and graduated in December and had just thought I would student teach or not student teach sorry, substitute teach and then get a teaching position in the fall. Well, one position opened up and it was an elementary music teaching position that they needed someone to come in right away, right after winter break, and I thought am I crazy? Am I going to do this? And I did. But what I didn't know when I got in there was the fact that this school had been transitioning from art to music and there had not been a music program for seven years, and so that's kind of how my story started out and kind of a long and winding road to get there. I didn't know I would be a music teacher, but I'm so glad I followed that path and trusted my gut in getting that position, because that's what encouraged me. Actually, that story is what has propelled me into being able to help teachers all these years later from the experiences I had gone through. That's where my heart and passion for helping educators came from.

Noah: And what a great transition for the plan for this podcast episode, which is to provide teachers who are new to the profession and getting ready to go into the classroom this fall with some ideas for how they can best prepare themselves over the summer. And it is the summer; it's the middle of July when we're recording this, which is peak hiring season for the New York City Department of Education and, I'm sure, a lot of other districts across the country. So, as we speak, there are teachers who are getting offers for positions that they can start in the fall and they're thinking to themselves okay, well, what do I do now? I guess, to transition into exploring that question. I wonder if you recall your, it wouldn't have been the summer, it would have been, I guess, december when you, when you got your first position, what were you thinking about and what were you doing to prepare to enter the classroom?

Jessica Peresta: It's funny. The first thing I think about is it goes from the feelings of excited, kind of like you just highlighted, to scared and nervous, and then all this imposter syndrome sneaks in of like, well, who are you to do this? How are you going to take over this position? Whether it is from the summer or winter, wherever you're starting, you start to doubt yourself, but you forget that you got hired for a reason. This administrator saw something in you, and so, first of all, I had to like push back those feelings, knowing they were still there so I could prepare, and I had no idea what steps to take in order to prepare. But I'm going to share just a couple things that I did, whether it is the summer or the winter, whenever you get a position. So the first thing is, I say, know your teaching style. But, to be honest, you won't really kind of figure that out until you get in there and start doing it. And what I mean by that is you maybe even in college, had, even if you just learned, the surface level of Orphan, Kodaly, Dow Crows and all the different teaching methods you kind of have a feel for. Okay, I kind of resonate with this one a little bit more, or this one, or I want to pull some ideas. Just start with what you think your teaching style is and you're going to develop it as you go and then also start just jotting down ideas of how you want to present music to your students with singing instruments, technology, movement ideas and you don't have to have everything mapped out, but just some ideas of how you might want to teach music to your students and just start. I call it brain dumping. I don't know if that's a real term, but that's what I call it. We're just have a Google doc open and put those ideas down and, underneath each of those sections, just start jotting down ideas you would have for teaching various songs and activities under those categories. Another thing I really think it's important to do, to prepare, is if you know what your classroom looks like, then that's great. Sometimes you don't know until you. You know the first, the week before school starts. But if you know what your classroom looks like, then start kind of visualizing. I actually had someone post a picture the other day in one of my Facebook groups and said here's my classroom. Help. She said I'm not a decorator and I know that happens to so many. I'm that way. I'm not that cutesy, artsy, TPT, decorative person. It's just not my personality. I'm not very artsy. So I know when you get in there you see these blank walls. It's all of a sudden like, well, what do I do? Where do I put stuff? So visualize that, just kind of think about where would I want to store my instruments? What do I need to store my little bitty instruments? What am I going to do with these bookshelves? How do I want my students to sit? And think about everything that might happen in your classroom, from arranging the classroom to where your students will sit and all those things. Another idea and feel free to stop me if I'm talking too much. Another idea is to decide what resources you'll need, and when you're first starting out. You're not gonna always know. So what I suggest is, when you get into your classroom is look to see was there a music teacher before you and did they leave anything? A lot of times, especially if it's a teacher retiring, they don't want to take everything with them, so they maybe have left something. And so see what's in your classroom first and then start thinking about what you will need, and then also, on top of that, if you're going to have a budget to be able to get items and if not, my story, which we'll get into later I didn't have a budget, I didn't have any resources, so you can just start with your personal knowledge. Maybe it was a cooperating teacher from student teaching, maybe it's what you had learned in college. So, literally whatever you have available, use that and then also kind of look at your year. You're going to do some curriculum mapping and I know this is easier said than done but really kind of where would you like your students to start and where would you want them to be at the end of the year? Of course you need to get to know

your real life students before you figure that out, but start just kind of mapping out your year, a little bit of where you want your students to go and how you're going to get them there, and then I have a lot more ideas, but I'll stop there. Ask any questions about anything I've already said.

Noah: Well, yeah, a point that you touched on, knowing what your classroom looks like and potentially not knowing what your classroom looks like is such a critical point, I think, because your classroom is your best tool. It's not just the place where the learning is happening. It's especially when you are working with younger students who sort of need to be channeled into ways of using the space and you know you might have transitions between desks and then the carpet. Figuring out how to get your students into the classroom is the first thing you have to do with every single lesson. So getting to know your space and if you know that you're not going to know your space until day one, sort of arriving with whatever you can know ahead of time, it makes for such a smoother transition into using your classroom. But I'd love to hear some more ideas for preparing for that day one.

Jessica Peresta: Yeah, you just also touched on something that I think is super important, along with the classroom space, is knowing how you'll get your students into the classroom. When I work with teachers, a lot of times we talk about that is, classroom management is huge, which, by the way, that's something to think about as well. Have a procedure for everything, literally know how you're going to transition your students from one activity to another, keep your class time moving and literally have everything planned out as much as you can. But the other part of that of classroom management is just what happens in the classroom you need to kind of think about. But getting your students in the door. I think it's huge on day one to meet them in the hallway and not just meet them in the hallway to say hi and yes, get to know, know them, of course, that's important. But I think it's important to have them start making music even in the hallway, whether it's a body percussion activity, whether it's a silent some kind of activity where they're keeping a steady beat to get them especially with the younger elementary students to get their bodies kind of still and focused from day one, before they even step foot into the classroom. And then, of course, have your procedures in place for what are they going to do when they step over that classroom door? Where do you want them to go? What do you want them to do? What are their voices doing, their bodies doing? Where are they sitting? All those things are important to think through so you're not just assuming your students know. Think through so you're not just assuming your students know. And one thing I encourage new teachers to do is less talking, more doing, which at first, I'm so guilty of. This is we want to give so many instructions verbally, but when you look at your students' faces, you're kind of losing them. When you're talking so much, you're kind of losing their attention span, and so when you're showing and modeling and doing more than talking, then that's something to think through as well this summer is how could you do that? How can you non-verbally give more instructions instead of just talking? So those are some other points I wanted to give.

Noah: Yeah, and the talking is such a big thing that and it takes years, I think, to sort of develop that tendency towards conciseness and finding other ways of expressing other than long winded speech like I'm doing right now, and it's a podcast, so it's a different medium we're allowed. The thing that I always have teachers do, if they don't believe me that they're talking too much, is to

have them record themselves as they teach, which you can't do, you know, until the school year starts, but that's certainly something that that is worth giving a try and getting students playing right away or singing or doing something musical, so that it's clear that like this is not like every other class, and so it's kind of a special thing. And so maybe, maybe this is a good point to transition and ask how many of these things did you bring year one to your teaching and how did that play out?

Jessica Peresta: Yes, so the meeting my students at the door did not really happen right away. I didn't know that was the thing With classroom management. I was given advice. I had a mentor teacher, but she taught third grade, which that's all I was given, which is fine. She told me, be really harsh at first, be really strict with the students, then you can loosen up, and so I did that. But nobody told me the other parts of classroom management, like I talked about transitions and getting to know your students, so I did not do that right away. When it comes to setting up my classroom in all vulnerability, I, like I said, got hired in December and was starting whenever that was in January at the beginning, and so along with winter break, I maybe had five days to get prepared, both classroom and mentally ready to receive students. So I did not have a lot of time to get my classroom ready and I didn't even know where to go to find resources to get my classroom ready. My bulletin boards is what I mean, and things like that. I didn't have all the fancy sit spots. I started with literally the bare minimum and so my biggest piece of encouragement to a music teacher listening and you're like me, maybe you're going to get hired last minute, or maybe you didn't get hired last minute but you're still like I don't know which you know duck to put in a row first. I would just say start with what you can do. If all you have time to do is prepare the first week of lessons or maybe two weeks out of lessons, and you get your class list and you sort of kind of have an idea of where you want your students to sit, but you're looking around and you don't have a lot of instruments, or you don't have a lot of decorations up or you don't have a lot of. You haven't had a time to really prepare classroom management, but you're going to get into that and do that as you get going. Give yourself grace and know that it is like you already mentioned. It's a process and sometimes some of these things are things that we develop as we are teaching. It doesn't need to happen right away. A lot of my personality, to be honest, is I like my T's crossed and my I's dotted and if it's not all done right away, it stresses me out. But I've had to learn and especially when I got that my first teaching position, I had to learn that there was no way everything I just talked about could get done right away. It was going to take time. So make yourself a list of what you need to do and then I would suggest prioritizing what needs to get done, what's vital to get done before the first day of seeing your students, and what are some of these things I talked about that could come later on.

Noah: Time is one of these funny things when you're in the classroom where some periods of time feel like they take forever, like the last five minutes of a 45 minute period, whereas other periods of time feel like they go very quickly, like, you know, Sunday. So I'm thinking about these, some of these tasks that need to happen or that really, if at all possible, should happen before you see your students. You know that isn't a lot of time, and then once the school year starts, time sort of contracts a little bit and there's very little that you can get done in terms of big picture things once you get to the, once you get to the school year. So there are a lot of things

that, especially the big picture things, that you might not end up getting to work on again until the following summer. And uh, I think this is a great question for you, since after your second year of teaching you ended up winning a teacher of the year award and some of these other laurels. Um, what did you do after you finished your first year of teaching, when you know you spent a lot of time putting out small fires and trying to figure out how to start up this program? What did you bring to that following summer that really set you up for success, and what might we learn about things that could maybe go into that first summer prior to your first year of teaching?

Jessica Peresta: Yeah. So I talked about a little bit about curriculum mapping and this sounds way more overwhelming and I'm going to give the simplified version of what I did when I said I wanted to know where my students were and where I wanted them to be. Well, starting in the middle of the school year with a crew of students who have not had a music program, they're not gonna be at where the standards say they should be, and so I had to do a little bit of backtracking. And also, when I talked about giving myself grace, I had to give my students grace and knowing that they may not know how to count these rhythms I'm presenting right away and that's okay. The goal for me was just to get my students experiencing and loving music. Now, going into that summer, before my second year, what I did star doing is really mapping out, what do I want my students to know, by looking at, I taught in Oklahoma and then Tulsa actually provided their own district standards, which I know that that doesn't happen everywhere. So my biggest piece of advice is to look at what standards you want to follow. Is it the national ones? Is it some state standards? Does your district provide them? And just start looking at them and deciding. How will you map them out. What are you going to teach during each nine weeks, based upon what the standards say? And sometimes you don't know. I don't know which order to teach these in, and you just kind of start moving it around. There are so many examples online that you could find to go by as well, or sometimes there's curriculum that provides a scope and sequence or curriculum map. So I would suggest, do that as well if you don't want to reinvent the wheel. But what I did in the summer is I knew I needed to find some more songs and activities. I, like I said, didn't have anything except for these old textbooks, the spotlight on music textbooks, which is funny because they're really outdated. I'm laughing. But when I took the time to sit down that summer after my first year and really started combing through these books because that's all I had I was amazed at what I could pull out. There were some awesome poems. I even remember about Martin Luther King Jr. I was like, oh my gosh, I could use this poem or speech piece and add instruments to it. When we got some, I finally got some rhythm sticks or we could, there were some songs I used, but I just changed it up a little bit to make it not sound so outdated. And so I started just kind of making a songs and activities list that summer before going into year two. And then I also started to create more opportunities where I didn't want lose my students a little bit. And you've already talked about this you don't really learn what not to do until you kind of get in there and do it and I could tell I was losing my students. So I wanted to create more opportunities where I was facilitating learning and not just always standing there talking, giving them more opportunities for partner work or small group collaboration and things like that. So I started kind of mapping out how I was going to do that. And going into year two, centers is kind of going around right now. Everybody's talking about it. But I started doing centers with my students because I saw a kindergarten teacher do it and I

thought how can I be creative in here? And it was a great assessment tool as well because you can follow or go around the room and listen to what different groups are doing. And so I started implementing some centers in my classroom, very slowly and I didn't have a lot of resources, but they were still engaged in the learning process, and I did that every so often but just started adding in some different opportunities, and I also the last thing I want to mention that I did is I really knew the students I worked with. I started really understanding what music do they listen to outside of school. I started kind of getting to know their families more. I luckily worked at a small school, knowing the community I worked in what neighborhood are we from? And really started preparing learning opportunities to meet my students where they were at, instead of just assuming because this song says it's supposed to be taught to fourth grade Well, does it need to be taught to my fourth graders? And so I really started focusing on what would capture their attention and draw them in and then started adding those songs and activities into my rotation as well.

Noah: Yeah, I think that last piece is so important and I've worked with teachers who sort of want to be the cool teacher and not assign seats, and I always have to remind people that you're not assigning seats because you want to be an authoritarian, you're assigning seats in the beginning so that you can learn the kids names. So that you have a roster, a seating chart, especially if you are the one music teacher in an elementary school with 200 or more kids, you're seeing everybody, but 200 names is a lot to learn if you don't have a cheat sheet. So it's not about making someone sit somewhere, it's about facilitating the process of learning names so you can then get to know the kids better, so that you can strike up a conversation more easily if you see them in the hallway. You can get to know the kind of music they like to listen to, and then everything just gets so much easier if you have names. Speaking of names, I'm wondering who were some of the people in your first building who made your job easier or who made it so that you could be more effective as a teacher in your first year of teaching.

Jessica Peresta: One of my college professors. He actually taught my secondary music methods class. He gave this advice before I even got into the classroom that the two people you need to get to know the best in your building are the janitor and the secretary. And I remember looking at him like that's not who I thought you were going to say yes, it's important to get to know everybody in the building. But I did not understand until I got in there how much I needed those two people. So I'm going to name them first. My secretary, especially when I first started. Oh my gosh, the amount of times I would have to go to her and say, do you have a stapler? Or go to her and say can you reprint that class list? I don't have it. She was so supportive, so helpful, and I remember setting that relationship up right from the beginning. It really helped me as I kept going to not bug her, but when I needed something, she. It was the way you know you interact with people, that if you're kind, they're going to be kind back. Kind of situation. The janitor I needed help moving these heavy duty risers back and forth. A lot did not realize how many times, because we do our programs in the on the gym stage and we move these clunky risers back and forth, back and forth. It was because that's where I had my students sit at first, because I didn't have anything else, and then he would also come in and help me with fixing certain things. My classroom was really old, was so sweet and supportive and would just stop in just to say hi sometimes. So those two people I wanted to mention first, I really relied on my

mentor teacher and I shared earlier. She taught third grade but she helped me a lot with some classroom management advice and some general teaching advice and I did rely on her a lot. She was as supportive as she could be but just did not know how to help with the actual music teaching side of things. I also relied a lot on my core arts team and we did not have art, like I mentioned, but we had a PE library and then myself there was no computer teacher either. So the three of us really taught a lot and they were very helpful, especially from being whatever you call it specials teacher, core arts, whatever but they were very helpful in helping me with how to navigate getting different classes in all day long. How to do that? How do you not get burnt out? What do I do when I'm getting a class in and getting a class out? So really being able to ask them for advice around those types of situations. And we also supported each other in more ways than you know you could ever imagine. And then I slowly started to get to know other music teachers in my district during my first year of teaching. Even that, when I started in January, there were a couple workshops that happened throughout the that part of the school year and then over the summer we did some workshops. They my district would put on these workshops called Orpha Live, which was basically two days of just music teachers in my district sharing ideas. And so I really started connecting. And social media wasn't as big of a deal as it is now, but we would trade emails and I would feel like I'm bugging them, but I would not hesitate to reach out if I just needed some support and advice. And then the other two people that I really relied on a lot during my first year of teaching was my cooperating teacher from student teaching. She was great about email me anytime, Jessica, ask me questions as you get going. She had been teaching for 20 something years. So I would a couple times, hey, remember, I did this song with you. I need advice. It didn't go well with my students, what can I do differently? And she would just kind of give me some tricks of the trade. And the other one I relied on a lot was my one of my college professors. He taught my elementary music methods course, but he also was the one who came and observed me during my first year of teaching. So I remember even. I'm just going to be honest. After one of my observations it was just one of those classes that I thought was the lesson was going to go great and basically after the class left I started crying and he was in there observing me, my principals in there observing me. She kind of just backed out slowly like I don't know what to say, and he and I had a really good conversation, really helped me with advice of every lesson is not going to go great. There's going to be days like this, class periods like this. You got to just keep going and reflect on what happened and keep moving and he helped tremendously as well. So that was where all people who hugely supported me and I would highly suggest to new teachers to find your people that you can lean on and if maybe it's someone I mentioned or someone else and yeah, you need a support system.

Noah: Yeah, and the professional learning community that you mentioned, where you were doing these summer workshops and sort of second half of the year workshops, finding access to other teachers who are teaching in the same type of context as you especially if you can find people who are in the same district as you to bounce ideas off of each other is it's such a huge thing. And and that's something that I found really interesting when I was first starting out teaching was that there were some things that I figured out kind of quickly, but then some other things that I didn't figure out. And then there were other teachers in my district who sort of figured things out in the opposite way, so that they knew the stuff that I didn't know, but I knew

the stuff that they didn't know. And if you can just find another, you know a few other teachers who are in that same type of situation as you you'll just learn so much more quickly than if you keep banging your head against a wall to try and figure out that last little piece of the puzzle that you're missing.

Jessica Peresta: Oh, 100%. Yeah, I was gonna say we don't have to figure it out on our own. I feel like a lot of new teachers feel that if they ask for help, it means that they're not an expert enough or they don't know what they're doing. But you don't know what you're doing, so don't be afraid to ask for help.

Noah: I think that's so important, like you said so if we were to boil everything we've talked about down to a very brief uh, too long, didn't read version of the conversation, what would you say, are the are the really essential pieces for the summer, and then you know in preparation for your first school year, and then what are some of the things that can sort of wait, or the things that you don't have to show up with on day one so that you get a little bit of time on the beach and get your head together before you go into the classroom.

Jessica Peresta: So this summer, if you can see your classroom, get to kind of know the layout of it and start visualizing kind of, how would I want to decorate this? Where do I want to set things up? That is also something that can happen the week before school starts. If you can't get in there right away but I think the sooner you can do that the better starts. I would start kind of thinking about your classroom management plan for procedures and classroom management for both positive and negative. Like what's going to happen in there in your classroom both individual students and classes. Like what is going to happen with that plan, and then start thinking about how you're going to organize your lesson plans, your class list. How are you going to lesson plan weekly, start thinking about some templates you might want to use and then think about the songs and activities you want to teach and how you're going to teach them, along with what concepts you maybe want to teach throughout the school year. Look for some curriculum to use and just start with something. Then, once you get into teaching, you're going to figure out what songs you maybe want to use as you see what's working or not working with your students. You're going to start adjusting your lesson plans accordingly. When you see your students you'll decide I don't like the way my classroom is set up, I want to rearrange it a little bit. You, when you get in there, you don't have to have every wall decorated right away or bulletin board created. You can do that as you get going as well. A lot of these ideas will begin coming to you as you get going. And then I already mentioned, there's going to be some lessons that you have you're like, okay, at the first two weeks of school, planned out lesson plan wise and I'm ready to go. But you're going to figure out some of those lessons that are on paper don't translate well with your students, and so when you get in there, after you get going, you're going to figure out that some of these lessons you're going to just need to plan them a little bit differently and to meet the needs of your students, and that's okay a little bit differently to meet the needs of your students, and that's okay.

Noah: You have your own podcast and you also generate a lot of supporting materials for teachers and and you curate some like Facebook based communities and and you also have a

membership service. I wonder if you want to plug any of these things for teachers who have enjoyed this conversation and want to hear more from you.

Jessica Peresta: Sure, absolutely. My podcast is actually just called TheElementary Music Teacher Podcast. I thought about coming up with a clever title, but I decided let's just name it who my audience is, and so you can find that on any of your listening platforms. And then my website is thedomesticmusician.com. It was named that because of me juggling. I want to help teachers juggle their home. I don't want to use the word juggle, but balance work and home life, so that's where that name came from, and on there you'll find free resources and then also you'll see a link to my blog. And I do provide, like you said, a membership site called the Harmony Membership. I provide ongoing lesson plans and support and just launched a new course called the Curriculum Design Roadmap, where we do map out your curriculum the way we talked about today. But any of my Facebook groups or products or services you can definitely check out on my website and I would love for you to listen to the podcast as well.

Noah: Thanks so much, Jessica, for being here and for sharing your insight and your story.

Jessica Peresta: Thank you for having me. I've enjoyed this conversation.