



Changing Lives, One Player at a Time

By Brian Wise
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A look at The Academy--a performance and training program for postgraduate musicians run by Carnegie Hall, The Juilliard School, and The Weill Music Institute.

Carol McGonnell came to New York nine years ago from her native Ireland to make it big as a clarinet player--and had no interest in teaching. "There is this whole stigma, especially when it comes to public school teaching," says McGonnell. "I was much more focused on developing my own career."

Since signing on last January as one of the first 16 Fellows of The Academy--a performance and training program for postgraduate musicians run by Carnegie Hall, The Juilliard School, and The Weill Music Institute in partnership with the New York City Department of Education--McGonnell appears to have had a change of heart.

"The teaching has been, without a doubt, the most exciting part."

Embracing her role as mentor to the 25 registered band members she works with in PS 46 in Upper Manhattan, McGonnell has gone above and beyond her assigned duties: with guidance and support from her partner teacher, she has helped her students win auditions for prestigious instrumental training programs, organized recitals within the school so that her young musicians can have outlets to perform, and collaborated with Claire Bryant and Elizabeth Joy Roe, both Academy colleagues from other schools, to get works commissioned from James Blachly and Nico Muhly, two of New York's hottest young composers, for a joint concert by their students.

In a school with outstanding leadership and support for the arts, but where more than 90 percent of students are eligible for subsidized lunches, McGonnell has faced challenges that she never expected; it is a sense of hope that her work provides the students that has given McGonnell the energy and enthusiasm to thrive in this public school environment. "Music makes a huge difference for these kids," says McGonnell. She recalls how one painfully introverted young boy chose the tuba only because he could hide behind it; playing eventually helped him to overcome his shyness to the point that he could open up and talk to his peers.

At a time when an estimated 2,700 music performance majors graduate each year to compete for a handful of full-time jobs, The Academy, which turns one year old this month, presents McGonnell and the other 33 Fellows with the intriguing option of becoming a new type of classical musician that can actively engage the public, one that can reach out to young people such as those at PS 46 while also being able to converse with audiences, communicate with donors, and devise interesting programming ideas. In addition to teaching a day and a half each week in New York City Public Schools, the Fellows regularly perform together as Ensemble ACJW, receive lessons and coaching from prominent musicians, and can attend seminars on marketing, fundraising, and programming.

Richard Kessler, Executive Director of the New York-based Center for Arts Education, notes that by helping Fellows to develop the real-world skills, The Academy is "positioning post-graduates to have a more effective, entrepreneurial presence in the community. Usually when you leave a conservatory, it's 'you're out, good luck, pay your student loans, and start giving us money.'"

Since joining The Academy, McGonnell hasn't given up her other performance activities: after a recent teaching session, she hopped on the subway for a rehearsal with her contemporary-music group, the Argento Chamber Ensemble, and later scrambled home for dinner and to practice. She has, however, used her time with The Academy to take stock of her life as a musician and develop a much broader view of what it means--to herself as well as to others--that she is a music professional in the world today: "No matter what happens, even if all I could do for the rest of my life was teach, that would be an amazing way to spend my time."