

Episode 5 - Invent. Reinvent. Rinse. Repeat.

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Welcome to another episode of Create. Inspire. Lead. I'm Stephen Biegner. So, when we first started talking about creating an IML podcast what feels like 100 years ago back in the fall of 2019, the idea was to have students interview guests they wanted to talk to about topics they wanted to know more about. And of course, COVID-19 hit and that plan changed which is why you've been stuck with me as your host for the past 4 episodes. But today, it feels like we're getting back on track.

For this episode, one of our own fabulous student workers - Frances Inzenhofer - conducted an interview with her teacher James VanDemark, and she asked him questions she wanted to know the answers to. We'll hear that conversation in just a minute, but first, if you don't know James VanDemark, you're missing out on one of life's great humans. He's fascinating, virtuosic, well-spoken, curious, and above all, exceedingly kind. And that's what I got after only meeting him for 20 minutes!

We'll include his full bio in the show notes, and you should absolutely read it. I mean, ok, he only started studying double bass at age 14, and just a little over a year later had his first solo debut with the Minnesota orchestra; he dropped out of high school to go play in his first orchestra job in Canada; a few years later completed a BFA; and then he was hired as a faculty member at the Eastman School of Music as a 23-year-old. He writes, he boxes, he works with Native American performers in *Circle of Faith*, he narrated an adult version Peter and the Wolf. And if that weren't enough, he's an avid reader.

JBV: So I read a lot. I try to get through a book, if not per week, every 10 days.

Stephen: Yeah. Just in case you weren't feeling like a slacker before...We'll put some of his book recommendations in the show notes, but now, let's turn to our conversation. So, James was supposed to give an in-person presentation for the IML back in March, so...you know how that went. But before the world went pear shaped, James had sent me the proposed title for his presentation:

Stephen: The original title that you sent to me that you wanted to advertise for your talk was invent, reinvent, rinse, repeat. And I loved that. So what, what sort of what's the meaning behind that title? And why did you, why did you choose it for your presentation?

JBV: Certainly. Well, I thought that that title probably has defined both my career and frankly, me personally for lo these many decades that I've been on this planet. And it's true. I started off with one way in which I perceived myself as a younger student, a teenager, my early 20s, what I wanted to do. And it kept evolving after that and frankly, continues to. So I'm a firm believer in reinvention. Yet also someone who is a very firm believer that you have to retain the fundamentals of what made you a - in my case, a performer or an artist - a person, a human being.

I think the complexity of each one of us is something that is defined. But how we broaden what the complexity and the richness is of our own identities is up to us along the way. It becomes our choice usually about what we can do with it. And I felt at a certain point, as though I did not want to become only defined by being X, although at one time I would have been very happy to be thought - be defined by being only X. But things can change. And I think that for me, I hope that it made me a better artist, a better performer, maybe a better person. That may be dubious. But there's lots of things I feel that having kind of a natural curiosity and a willingness to work hard, to learn goes way past the years that people spend in college conservatory.

Stephen: Ok, so now I promise I'm done interrupting. Here's Frances.

Frances: Yeah, so along those lines of having such a diverse career, you've been teaching for more than 40 years and performing for even longer. So how do you know which path to go down, when to do it, and which is the right one? And how do you keep the joy you do every day along the way?

JBV: So to some extent, I think - first of all, I'm a firm believer in that we usually can create our own luck. And I think that ending up here at Eastman - and that goes back a long, long ways - was both a lucky move, but also one that was kind of intended as a possibility. When I was studying - well, first of all, I'd been playing in an orchestra professionally as principal bass in Canada for several years. And this after having dropped out of high school to do it. And then having had a rather checkered and brief career in university at the same time. I decided, well, I really have to do something else. And I ended up in school again at SUNY Buffalo when the Cleveland Quartet was in residence. And that was a move both to broaden my horizons as an instrumentalist, as a performer. I knew the reputation of Buffalo at that time because it was also an absolute epicenter of new music with Morton Feldman, Julius Eastman, many others being there. I had an interest in that. I mean, I barely knew what to do with it. And believe me, this is long before there was any sort of formal career advice. And luckily, I spoke with a few people who I figured knew more than I did at age 20. And they suggested, well, you know, you might have an interest in that. See where it leads.

And I think the luck was also finding a terrific teacher who was a wonderful person who believed in me and my potential, which I think is often different than teachers who simply believe in only what you can do then. I am not that. I mean, I sure like to see people who can play well, but I'm the first one to say, well, I think I can see your potential and let's see where it heads. The students should be able to make decisions at a point - they'll change anyway. But I was there in Buffalo and I witnessed some really great teaching and I kind of expanded beyond watching just teaching in Buffalo to see great teaching at the Aspen Music Festival from Dorothy DeLay from Itzhak Perlman and others. And it excited me about teaching, even though I'd done some previously in Canada just on a private basis. But the thrill of that and the joy of being around young people who are passionate, gifted. I mean, you can't beat that.

So that was a lucky break in a sense and when the opening came up, the Eastman School, I was asked to come over and do a class. I'd previously been asked to do some classes at North Carolina School of the Arts and some other schools while I was finishing my senior year at SUNY Buffalo. And luckily, it went pretty well. And, you know, I didn't embarrass myself too badly. And here I am.

Frances: Wow, that's amazing. What a, what a journey. So what aspects of your education, obviously besides practicing and rehearsing and like nonmusical pieces of advice from your teachers that you've contributed to your success?

JBV: So here is something actually that I'll go back before my teachers, although I was encouraged, particularly by Paul Katz who was the cellist with the Cleveland Quartet, to do things like that. I listened to everything and everybody imaginable, and I went to see them perform or teach all the time. I went to every violin, viola, cello class you could imagine. All sorts of piano master classes, both when I was a college student and, and subsequently I wanted to see what made great artists tick, both instrumentally, artistically and frankly, personally. What would be the influences on them? What were they reading? What were they listening to?

And so I think going to hear, during summers, for example, I'd pack off to Indiana University and go hear chamber music master classes with the BosArt Trio and Menahem Pressler, as well as hearing, of course, the legendary classes of Gingold and Starker. So that was a big influence. But it was also fascinating to be able to have, you know, a sit down with creative people of every stripe and say, well, you know what, what did you do here? I was someone who was asking questions. I try not to be a nudge, but maybe I was sometimes. And, you know, there were conversations that would come up, whether it was going to be about music or current events.

One of the things that was often intriguing was to see that most of the people that I really liked, really admired in the musical world were also very informed about current events. They loved literature. They loved visual arts dance. So I think having a curiosity and letting that curiosity lead you where it may while you're still practicing is probably not a bad idea, because that will, I think, inform anybody about some other direction that they may go in or may be open for that they don't necessarily realize as a sophomore or a junior in college. You know? It can expand. We just don't know all of this. Right?

I mean, one of the things I always thought - and here is my absolute idiocy of a senior in college, speaking of myself coming through - was that after I wrote my last paper and again, my - I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, it's not a bachelor of music. But after I wrote my last paper for a Renaissance history course, I said to myself, I'll never have to write anything of that length again. Ha! Yeah. Famous last words. And it turned out that I love writing. And it's something that has helped me immeasurably, both to develop connections and all sorts of things, to fulfill myself in other ways as a teacher, to reach out to other people and to pursue other things as well. So, you know, it's hard to predict, but I think I'm a halfway decent writer. That made for some benefit for me.

Frances: Yeah, writing is important. I've come to notice - quite a bit.

JBV: Right! Yeah. I mean, this is something that Eastman I know does emphasize, and I'm very glad that they do. It's such a boon to a young performer today. It's not just that you can play 10 excerpts. You need to be able to do some other things. And every day that goes by in our contemporary musical world proves that.

Frances: You can't just be one faceted. You have to be a multiple - you have to have multiple disciplines.

JBV: And, and yet, have you have that skill as your underpinning that will help you expand from it.

Frances: Well, you also mentioned the importance of what comes around, goes around, professionally and personally. So what do you mean exactly by that?

JBV: Right. Well, I think in other conversations that I've had about this, I stress the importance of being polite, of asking questions of other people and even asking follow up questions of other people rather than some generic: "How are you? Now, let's talk about me." I have encountered that endlessly among all sorts of people, but frankly, particularly musicians.

And it's really disheartening. Frankly, at the end of the day, I feel sorry for them. You know, whatever. I just prefer not to judge anybody based on their - you can see my air quotes here on this audio thing? - on their professional success. There is a whole lot more to any of this than that.

If I think about some musicians who were great professional successes, they were also great humanitarians, they had lots of friends, they had a social life. Those things are incredibly important because I'm also - we may have - just a real believer in the role of the artist in society. So it's not just about collecting your paycheck when you perform, be it as a soloist or as an orchestral performer. The arts have a big role for us, for the world. And I think we have to see that in many, many ways.

And so being an ambassador for the arts, which I think everyone has to envision themselves in some way has become - is a really important thing. That means yes. You write well, you speak well, but also you're not, you're not a classical music jerk - or a jazz jerk! I mean, there are a bunch of those people. I mean, the ego just interferes right off the bat. It's me, me, me. And yes, I understand that performing can be this weird mix of id, ego, insecurity, overconfidence. But, I also believe that there is a way in which one can be passionate and confident and yet also receptive, inquisitive and believe, actually, that ultimately it's not about me.

Frances: Yeah, I found that being kind to people is not only good for the other person, but also just for - yeah - for me too.

JBV: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Frances: Yeah. So what are your fundamental truths as a musician?

JBV: Woah! OK.

Frances: Big question.

JBV: Well. I guess I better ask you a question. What's a truth for a musician? I mean, I see that art, music is continually evolving and I certainly believe in, you know, performing music of the past. I believe in performing contemporary music. I think also one of the things that's so fascinating is to see that the lens through which I see music is both the same as it was actually even when I was a kid, because I grew up in a musical family. But when I first started. And yet it's different. It's very different. And I'm happy that it is.

Doesn't mean it's less - it's probably more OK - but it's just something that I'm someone who has some - maybe it, maybe this will actually answer your question. Sorry, Frances. That I have some very firmly held beliefs, but there are less - I know this sounds strange - they're less about music than they are about being a person. And I guess that's what, currently, I'd say. I mean, this has changed too. We just - I don't know. At my, my age and my experience or lack thereof, I just feel as though it's been important that the fundamentals of music remain for me very similar to what they were, but kind of the direction, the tentacles, as it were, they've grown out from that, particularly in contemporary music and the role of music in society - that's changed. That's changed. And I think it's become probably more integral to who I am as a player, as a teacher.

Frances: Well, what I found is honestly a truth for me is that I just have to be honest with myself first.

JBV: Right. Okay.

Frances: Yeah, I have to. I can't just fake something and just lie to myself a little bit musically. But also, like, what my interests are, I can't force myself to do something.

JBV: Right. OK. And I mean, I think those things are, are great. I mean, I think we have to be honest with ourselves about our abilities in music and our shortcomings. I think it's all still worthwhile to recognize that it may be, for some, something to address about one's shortcomings in music at at any stage. Although there are things that, you know, obviously each one of us probably can't do that well. But I think having a curiosity and a respect for people who do other things that we can't do, well, that's great. We'll learn something from it.

JBV: Sounds a bit like Piatigorsky. His, his truth as well.

JBV: OK.

Frances: Knowing your shortcomings anyways.

JBV: Yeah, you have to. I mean...but that's also why we practice every day, otherwise our shortcomings will be magnified pretty quickly.

Frances: That's true. Yeah, so what's the most valuable advice that you could give to an aspiring artist?

JBV: Find yourself, be yourself, grow yourself. Those are all sort of phases along the way, but recognizing that those things are going to happen is actually, I think, pretty critical, particularly for a younger person in school. You're not going to have - well, you'll have some variation of your envisioned career. It might not be exactly what, it what it is. And yet even those things that you imagine that you can be and you become that, they'll change. Everything is going to change. And it always has. I mean, that shouldn't come as any surprise. Changes are inevitable for everyone in virtually everything. Accepting that and not yet conceding your skill, your beliefs, your artistry to something - unless you want to - is, you know, I think part of making a long and successful journey that doesn't always have to be a straight line, and it can still be really successful. And even more importantly, really fulfilling, and really important.

Frances: Yeah, so you talked about being an advocate for the arts. And you talked about things changing all the time. Why is it so important to advocate the arts, especially now with the current, you know, economy, pandemic?

JBV: Right. So, I will go back. Look, I'm a child of the 60s. The era of Vietnam, of all sorts of things. Quite an era of upheaval in this country and also around the world. I was lucky enough - I mentioned that I'm from a musical family. I was also from a very politically active family, so that, I remember going out to a Vietnam War protest as a teenager with my mother, you know, a middle American housewife - would have been the label at the time - but she was carrying a mock coffin. My parents took a lot of political stances, probably unpopular at the time, as did my siblings. And yet it was something I think, that informed them, that confirmed their belief in a better world they would fight for. Does music make for that? Not necessarily. But the role of the artist and society can be, in fact, remarkably political and can also have something that just does other things.

Look, people hear a lot of music in very different ways, but for many - and this, this can be all sorts of music - it can be something that drives them, that inspires them, that consoles them, that provide some spirituality or comfort for them. There are lots of things. In a sense we don't know as a performer. But the best thing is that we should know that we can have some impact. Clearly, there are some pieces that are very directly connected to that. I mean, one thing that can be interpreted in different ways.

But one piece that I've loved for ages has been the Stravinsky *A Soldier's Tale*, *L'Histoire du soldat*. And I've been in that in every conceivable iteration many times from playing it a lot, from narrating it quite a few times. One of the big things that I hoped to do that never happened was a collaboration that was on the docket with the Oscar winning designer and writer, Eiko Ishioka. And we were working on a setting of *A Soldier's Tale* in Japan after the

atomic bomb dropped. So that would have been, you know, early, late 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And so we were developing that and unfortunately, then Eiko passed away. But that was something that I thought, ah, there is going to be a fascinating story that can have an impact for a lot of people.

And, you know, we can look at those sorts of things that are quasi-political. Certainly if, you know, the pianist, the composer, Frederic Rzewski. He wrote this fabulous piece called *The People United Will Never Be Divided* [sic] (editor's note: the title of the piece is actually *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*) as a variation on this Latin American kind of revolutionary song. He wrote it in the 70s during the era of Pinochet's takeover of Chile. And so there are those things that are kind of overtly political and things that need not be. But it's, it's there.

And I think we hear that now. We hear - I mean, I think of the music of the 60s and there was a lot of stuff going on that is to some extent similar to what's happening now musically. Lots of people taking lots of chances in music, trying to make something important. Will it all succeed? No! None of this ever does. But some of it does and some of it then becomes hugely important. And we have to try for that.

{Outro Music}

Stephen: Special thanks to James VanDemark for talking with us and sharing his incredible insights. I don't know about you, but I want to make T-shirts, throw pillows, decorative shawls - whatever - that say "Find yourself, be yourself, grow yourself." Please read James' bio in our show notes, and go and explore all his creations and various outlets.

Thank you to Frances Inzenhofer for being our first student interviewer on the podcast! I can tell you that part of the reason previous episodes are cut up and spliced together like they are is so that I can take out my bumbling interview questions. It can be a nerve-racking endeavor, and I thought Frances was a pro right out of the gate. Hopefully we hear from her again.

Frances is also taking over the mixing and sound design for our show, and we're so grateful. Previously, Alexa Silverman had been helping us out, but she just got an amazing internship with this company Eventide Audio. It was a very selective process and is an incredible opportunity. We couldn't be happier for her, and we wish her the best of luck.

And finally, as always, if you have questions, comments, ideas for new episodes, please let us know. My email is in the show notes, or you can comment on our SoundCloud page. Go out, make art, do good work. For the Institute for Music Leadership, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.