The Man Behind the Music

By Rachel Carlson

The first time I saw him, he was standing in front of a sea of red robes, his black tuxedo sharply contrasting against the brilliant blur of color. His back was to me, to the entire audience, and his arms were dancing up and down to the beat of the music. The beautiful sounds that floated out of the choir seemed to stem right from his fingertips, as if they were somehow magical in creating the warm wash of music that filled the entire auditorium. As the music began to climax, he directed faster and faster until his entire body was pulsating with rhythm and life. It was clear that he was oblivious to everything around him except for the choir and their music. Nothing could come between them and the music they were creating, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the beauty of it all. The rest of the audience was watching the choir sing, but I was solely fixated on the man directing the music.

As the lively blend of voices swirled around the auditorium, the director turned his body slightly to cue the alto section on their upcoming entrance. I caught a slight glimpse of his face, which shone with wonder and joy. His arms gradually moved more slowly and more gently as the climactic piece died down. The choir held out the last note in sweet harmony, one-hundred-some mouths all shaped together in a perfect “O”. The audience sat still in silence as that last note resonated in the auditorium for several seconds, until it disappeared into the walls and there was no trace of the rich, beautiful music that had been there just moments ago. Finally, the audience erupted in wild applause.

Just by listening, one might guess that this scene took place in some world-famous concert hall, the choir being a renowned group of talented vocalists. In fact, this is far from the
truth. Not a fancy concert hall, just an auditorium in a small Minnesota town. Not a group of professional musicians, just an assortment of high school students—all different ages, races, backgrounds, cliques—who have come together for the sole purpose of singing. The man behind the music is Mr. Brian Johnson, director of the Austin High School Concert Choir, one of the top choirs in the state of Minnesota. I have had the honorable privilege to know him and be part of the choir most of my high school career. That experience has made all the difference in my life, and Mr. J has been a huge source of motivation and inspiration as I begin my own journey in a career of music.

Brian Johnson has been the head of the choral program at the high school for nearly two decades, and his experience is apparent in his every day manner. He is the picture of confidence, maturity and intelligence; qualities every good teacher must possess. But his character shows much more than that—he is also personable, fun, and laid-back, and he relates to his students in a way few other teachers at Austin High School can.

Mr. Johnson was born in Vinton, Iowa in 1964 to an engineer and church choir director. He is the third of six children. At some point in their childhood, his siblings were all involved in music, but most abandoned that hobby eventually for sports and other activities.

"I was never very athletic," Mr. J said, laughing. "My childhood was filled with memories of turning pages for my mother as she accompanied the church choir, and sitting down at the piano to plunk out random melodies. Music was just always what made sense to me," he remarked.

From an early age, Mr. J formed a special bond with the piano, although he never formally took lessons until high school. High school was also where he was introduced to the beauty of choral music. He didn’t join choir until his junior year of high school, however, until
his geometry teacher, also the choir director, approached him and suggested that Brian audition. Although he didn’t have a lot of confidence in high school, his teacher seemed to see something in him that Mr. J didn’t notice. Without Mr. Minkler’s extra nudge of encouragement for the audition, perhaps Mr. J wouldn’t be where he is today.

On the day of his audition, Mr. J went to the choir room early to warm up, but instead stumbled across the choir rehearsing. “They were singing this gorgeous piece, “Ascendit Deus.” I stopped outside the door, just listening to them. It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. I knew at that moment that I wanted to make music like that for the rest of my life.” Mr. Johnson believes that’s what got the ball rolling until he knew for a fact that music was his calling. He made the high school choir, and even was the section leader of the basses his senior year. Mr. Minkler saw talent in Brian, and constantly encouraged him to look into several good music schools around the Midwest.

“I was a little reluctant about college, mainly because with six kids, my family didn’t have a whole lot of money to spend, and those schools were ridiculously expensive. However, at the same time, I knew I wouldn’t be happy doing anything else for the rest of my life, and my parents knew that, too. They told me that if this was something I really wanted, they would find a way to make it work,” Mr. J said, looking away as his eyes filled with tears over his parents’ dedication and love.

Fortunately, his family didn’t have to suffer financially over Mr. J’s college tuition. At the request of Mr. Minkler, Mr. J auditioned for the choral program at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN – a small, private Lutheran school known for its excellence in music. He was accepted into the top choir there, and also received a large music scholarship. “Doors of opportunity just kept opening one by one, and everything fell into place. I knew that this was for
me," Mr. J said, humbly.

In college, Mr. J majored in piano. As much as he loved choir, he really wanted to focus on his piano studies. It turned out to be a lot more difficult than he had planned, however. Because he had grown up playing by ear and from talent alone, he lacked the technical and theoretical elements of piano, which were highly emphasized by his piano professors. He remembers spending hours at a time in front of the piano, just to catch up to his fellow piano majors, who had been taking lessons their whole lives. "It was really frustrating at times," Mr. J said, looking down in pain. "I didn’t know if I had what it took, and that really bothered me. As a child and teenager, I never encountered any competition in music, and all of a sudden, the talent around me was overwhelming. I just made it my priority to work extra hard, because I loved what I was doing."

Working hard obviously was the trick, because listening to him play the piano between class periods in high school, I would have never guessed that he struggled with it at one point in his life. He is by far the best pianist I have ever heard. His fingers fly across the keys in a blur of motion and sound, and he captures beauty, grace and enchantment in his playing. From the moment he places his hands on the cool, ivory keys, it is apparent that piano is his passion.

How, then, did he end up as a choir teacher? "Good question," he said, laughing. "I knew that I wanted to direct choir by my junior year in college. I loved piano, but it’s so intimate: just you facing that keyboard, with nothing else to distract you. I wanted my life in music to revolve around kids, and helping them express themselves through music. I wanted to give back to other people the joy and peace that music had given me."

This statement is a strong summary of Mr. J’s personality: selfless and giving. Perhaps this is what makes him such a good teacher. Along with his good nature and dry sense of humor,
he possesses a certain charm that high schoolers can identify with. Mr. J simply knows his students, and accepts them for who they are: scholars, athletes, preps, musicians, and punks, to name a few. “High school is all about diversity and finding yourself. I know not every kid is going to come from a good background or family. I know some kids might not ever know the difference between a time signature and a meter, and some won’t even care. You’ve got kids in choir who love to sing, kids who are there because they think it’s an easy A, and kids who honestly can’t carry a tune for the life of them. It’s hard putting all those types of people in one room and expecting them to make beautiful music.”

Mr. J remarked that his first three years of teaching were the most difficult. He thought his college music education classes had prepared him for the real world, but he found himself completely lost at first because there are always certain things college just can’t teach. He mentioned that the hardest part was having to understand that he couldn’t always get the results he expected or wanted, especially after a short period of time. “Teaching’s an art, more than a science,” he said thoughtfully, “and it takes time to perfect.”

After nineteen years at Austin High School, Mr. J’s art is nearly perfect. He has gained the respect of fellow teachers, the administration, and most of all, the student body. When I asked him what his “secret” was, he threw his head back and laughed. “There is none,” he said, then sat quietly for a few moments before speaking again. “All people really want is to be accepted and cared for. Teenagers get enough flack from society as it is. I want my kids to look forward to coming to choir class. I want them to know that this is a place that they can go to feel accepted. And it’s fun, too. We have a blast in here, making music. If my kids leave this room feeling better than when they came in, then I’ve done my job.”

Another remarkable characteristic about Mr. J is that he goes above and beyond the
duties of his job. In addition to directing three separate choirs during the school day, Mr. J also coordinates several extra-curricular singing groups, such as Austinaires, Choralaires, and Vocal Jazz. "I have a lot of fun with these groups, because it’s a lot of show tunes, Broadway, pop, and jazz; plus it’s all choreographed. It’s a more laid-back atmosphere, and the groups are a small size so I get to know the students better." Students have to audition for these groups, and they meet once or twice a week for two hours at a time outside of the regular school day. I had the privilege to be a member of Choralaires and Vocal Jazz, and some of my favorite high school memories came from the late evenings or early mornings I spent at school singing in these groups. It’s a great experience to bond with some people you’d never get the chance to hang out with outside of the classroom, and Mr. J always makes it fun.

Mr. J’s love for music is always apparent in everyday rehearsals. I know there were countless bad days I had at school, but the moment I walked into that choir room and saw his happy, energetic self greet all his students, I was immediately cheered up. I can only imagine the stress he endures from his job: trying to quiet down hundreds of high schoolers a day and get them to sing, grading papers and singing tests, attending meetings, and always being on the lookout for new musical pieces to try out. On top of the stress that accompanies a regular school day, and the extra-curricular musical groups outside of school, Mr. J is also an active member and choir director at his church, and a loving husband and father to a very energetic 10-year old son, Ethan.

"I couldn’t do any of this without the support of my family. My wife is my biggest supporter and biggest critic. Although she doesn’t come from a musical background, she’s been listening to the choirs for so many years that she really knows what she is talking about. My son is really getting into music, too. He dances and sings all the time, although he won’t let me
critique him! My family keeps me going every day, no matter what happens at school.”

I looked at his weary face. I could see some lines of age, but they just seemed to accentuate his life story: there had been some tough times and hardships, but despite all that, his green eyes still had that familiar smile and sparkle that I imagined had always been there.

We sat quietly for a few minutes, and I looked around the room in which I had spent so much of my high school career. The black Steinway grand piano sat in the front of the large room, and several long rows of chairs were set up in an orderly fashion. File cabinets and cupboards in the back of the room held all the students’ folders and music. A music staff and some notes were scrawled on the blackboard, and a large, colorful mural of “Where the Wild Things Are” took up an entire side wall. On another wall, hundreds of signatures were scribbled in black marker – the names of all the choir students who had graduated from Austin High School – students who had all been touched by Mr. Johnson in one way or another.

I caught him looking at all the signatures and asked him if it was hard to see all his graduating choir students leave each year. With a sad smile, he replied, “Yes . . . that’s probably one of the hardest parts about my job, but do I love the feeling of starting out with a new group and at the end of the year you have an accomplished group of young people who have come so far. Better yet to see the growth from freshmen to seniors – not too many teachers get to see that. You get attached to these kids, after spending every day with them for four years. You see them grow up and mature and really learn to appreciate music. You teach them what you can and hope for the best.”

At this point, the interview took an unexpected sad turn as Mr. J recounts an emotional story of a former student of his, Nick Watson, who was also a close friend of mine. Nick was an energetic, intelligent young man who would have graduated with my class last June, and one
could often find him in the choir room, chatting to Mr. J about a new piece of music he had discovered, or sitting down before class on the Steinway to play a haunting Chopin nocturne.

“Nick was a talented singer and pianist, but the thing that stood out most about him was his passion. He loved music more than anything, and it showed. He had so much life in him, and he was the type of kid who always had something funny to say in a tense moment, just to lighten up the mood,” Mr. J said, smiling as he recalled his memory.

However, for reasons we do not know, Nick hid his troubles behind his trademark smile and jokes. Less than one month before he would have walked across that stage with his high school diploma in hand, ready to face his bright future, he ended it all with a single gunshot to the chest. “I was completely shocked,” Mr. J told me with a pained expression. “That was hard for me, not only because Nick was so musically involved in our school, but because I felt like maybe if I had paid closer attention to him, I could have somehow been able to see the signs. Part of me knows that no one had any idea he was so troubled, but then there’s that part of me that will always wonder if maybe I could have done something differently…” His voice trailed off, and it seemed as though he wasn’t speaking to me anymore; he was speaking more to himself. “I mean, a kid like that who loved music so much…it was obvious when he sat down to play the piano that he really identified music with his emotions. So if music couldn’t save him in the end, then what could? That’s what gets me the most.”

It’s clear that Mr. Johnson feels strongly about educating the youth of today in music. He feels that music can give children and teenagers many benefits that they would otherwise not obtain. Studies and surveys have shown throughout the years that children who participate in music have a higher brain activity and better reading and math skills than children who don’t. Improved intelligence from music can start at a very early age. A study conducted at the
University of California (Irvine) showed that preschoolers who took eight months of piano lessons improved by 46% in their spatial reasoning IQ. (Rauscher) Also, exposing children to music at a young age will better ensure that they make it a regular part of their lives when they are older.

Music does more than improving intelligence, though. It also plays a large role in helping people who are suffering from emotional or mental distress. At Auburn University, the results of a study stated that at-risk children who participated in an art’s program that included drama, art, music and dance had a significantly increased level of self-image (The National Association for Music Education). Music also helps provide humans with skills needed to advance in society, and can benefit anyone spiritually, psychologically and even physically. Dr. Frederick Tims stated, “Music makes the elderly healthier . . . . There were significant decreases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness following keyboard lessons. These are factors that are critical in coping with stress, stimulating the immune system, and in improved health.” (www.menc.org/information/advocate/facts.html).

It’s apparent that music can benefit people of all ages, from newborns to 90-year-olds. However, it all starts in the school system with a basic music education or appreciation program. “That’s why I love teaching choir to high school students. It’s not being forced on them, but they’re here out of their own will, most of the time. If I can get them to appreciate all kinds of music at this age, the chances are high that they will carry these skills with them for the rest of their lives and mature into more cultured and balanced adults,” Mr. J said.

Perhaps Gerald Ford, former President of the United States of America, said it best: “Music education opens doors that help children pass from school into the world around them—a world of work, culture, intellectual activity, and human involvement. The future of our nation.
depends on providing our children with a complete education that includes music.” Mr. Johnson agreed fervently. He told me that it breaks his heart when he hears about school systems that, because of financial issues, must cut their music program. “That’s just awful,” he remarked sadly, “…all those kids who could miss out on one of the most beautiful things the world has to offer.”

I finally asked Mr. J how he feels about his job, being a high school choir director. I wanted to know if he ever got sick of doing the same thing every day, and if he ever got frustrated enough to think about quitting. “Well, maybe for a day or so…” he said, winking at me. “Honestly, though, I value each day because it’s always different than the last. My job is never boring. I tell my kids that the day I buy a lottery ticket is the day I should retire, because I believe that playing the lottery means you’re not happy with what you’re doing.”

I asked him if he had any goals he’d like to achieve in his life still, and what he will do after retirement. He told me that he would really enjoy being able to travel more with his family, and has aspirations of writing music and literature later on in his life. But for right now, this is what he really loves doing.

I understand wholeheartedly. I can’t imagine anything I’d love doing more than creating music for a living. Mr. Johnson has been a huge role model for me in the past four years. I have come to discover that we have a lot in common. Like him, I had not discovered choral music until high school. Mr. Minkler was Mr. J’s musical inspiration, and Mr. J is mine. He was the one who suggested that I check out Valparaiso University for their music program, a school I had never even heard of, and I ended up coming here. He also helped me prepare some difficult piano pieces for my music scholarship audition. Right now my major is tentatively piano performance, although I am still unsure how exactly I want to make music a part of my life. Like
Mr. Johnson, I grew up in a musical family and background. It was always around me, part of me. Before I met Mr. J, I was strongly considering a career in music, but the three years in high school I spent with him solidified my decision. We often correspond by email and I take his words of encouragement to heart when I get frustrated in my music and piano classes. “I know what it’s like,” he wrote to me once. “You just have to stick it out. If you really love doing this, if you feel that God is calling you to music, then it will all work out in the end.”

To me, there is nothing more satisfactory than hearing beautiful music and knowing you are a part of it or you helped create it. Day after day, I sat in choir class and watched Mr. J teach a hundred different kids how to sing and make music. But in the long run, what I will remember about choir class are not all the technical elements of music. What I will always remember is the way Mr. J locked eyes with every graduating senior the last time we all sang together as a choir. I will remember the way he directed us with tears streaming down his face at Nick’s funeral, and the way his eyes lit up with joy every morning he stood in front of us, ready to teach us something new. I’ll even remember all the times he got frustrated with us when we weren’t putting our whole hearts into the music. Most of all, I’ll remember how he taught all of his students that the most important part of life is to believe in something, and stand strong for it.

“You only have one life, and this is it,” he often told us. “What you make of it is up to you. I want you to leave this life knowing that you did something worthwhile. I’m not here to convince you to sing every day, or that you have to be some sort of talented musician for me to like you. I’m just here to help you appreciate the beauty of music, because that’s something that will never die.”

Mr. J is so much more than a choral director; he is also a confidante, a friend, and a mentor. Because of his caring personality and the way he pushes his students to do their absolute
best, he is the one teacher that his students will remember long after they leave the halls of Austin High School. I know many students who have been personally influenced by Mr. J, and I mention this to him. He reddens slightly, then brushes off my compliment with a wave of his hands.

"I'm flattered, but really, I'm the one who feels honored to have them as my students. There is so much talent and dedication, it's overwhelming. Even on the worst of days, I still feel lucky to be doing this. Getting up every morning and knowing I'm helping kids create fantastic music—how can you go wrong? Seriously, I get paid to do this..." He chuckles a little bit, and then gets serious.

"Music is timeless and universal. It's the one language the whole world can speak. Music is one way for young people to connect with themselves, but it is also a bridge for connecting with others. It's given me a chance to experience the world from a whole new perspective. I love this job. I can't imagine doing anything else," he said, smiling.

As the interview concludes, Mr. J walks around the empty choir room with a youthful bounce in his step as he straightens up for a new day of class. I once again look around the room at the rows of chairs that have seated several hundreds of students over the course of decades. I imagine how many students' lives he has touched already, and think to myself that there are many more to come.

The man in the black tuxedo whom I first laid eyes on several years ago is no longer a mysterious stranger to me, although I still watch him with the same admiration as I did the first time I saw him conducting the Concert Choir. I have had the honor of being a member of the red-robed choir that he has stood in front of so many times. I have experienced life from the other side of the spectrum—not just as a member sitting in the audience, but as a direct part of the
music on stage. Mr. J has become so much more than just a teacher, and I will never forget him for all that he has taught me about life, love and music. I hope Mr. J has many successful years ahead of him that he will stand in front of his choir, waving his arms to the steady beat, and getting lost in the beauty of the music.

Works Cited

