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The Perfect Balance

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The Perfect Balance

Parents who've fought to get their children to practice an instrument might find William West's homage to his own parents a bit unexpected in contrast.

"My parents were very supportive. I would get up early in the morning and I'd practice before I went to school, and that was okay," he says. "If I wanted to practice and the news was on, then they'd watch the news without sound on. They just made it very easy for me to develop that interest."

Today a flute and saxophone teacher at Illinois Wesleyan and principal flutist with Peoria-based Opera Illinois, West doesn't recall making a conscious decision to pursue a career in music.

"It's almost like nothing else ever occurred to me. It was pretty much the only thing I ever did." Unlike today's children who must decide between a plethora of extracurricular options, he says, "there weren't that many choices when I was growing up. Music really was about the only thing I was involved in. It gradually funneled down to (deciding) where I was going to focus and how that was going to happen, but it's almost like it was a predetermined path, and I just got on it and started walking."

That path eventually led him to obtain degrees in woodwind performance from West Virginia University and the University of Michigan. He credits many teachers who influenced him along the way, beginning with a junior high teacher who kept handing him new instruments to learn until he'd eventually played all the woodwinds. A high school piano teacher encouraged him to develop skills on the harpsichord and organ. In undergraduate school, he found a "terrific" oboe teacher.

"So much of what I've done has been — not necessarily directed by teachers, but sort of determined by teachers (whom) I made particular connections with."

West's multi-instrumentalist abilities intrigued the late IWU President Minor Myers jr., who was well-known on campus for his interest in the multitalented, and who urged West to record a CD on which he played all the different instruments.



West (above) compares performing to research by a biology professor — all part of the expectation of continued professional development.. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)

"I fondly called it the dog and pony show," West says — explaining that some musicians are dubious of multi-instrumentalists. Yet he found what he considered a workable concept: a collection of "incredibly beautiful" Charles Koechlin compositions that he performs on flute, piano, and saxophone. The project is due for release next year.

Myers and West made another connection in their shared passion for Baroque instruments. West's acquisition of museum-quality flutes began as a sabbatical research project, and he now has reproductions dating from about 1695. Because most of the replicas are made from relatively fragile types of wood, he keeps them conditioned by playing each regularly.

In August, West put a piece of his collection to worthy use when, joined by colleagues, he performed on traverso at a campus commemoration of Myers' life. The music, from Frederick the Great's Sonata in E Minor, was a selection he had performed with accompaniment by Myers at the 1997 Chicago Humanities Festival.

While West enjoys such outlets for performing, his focus remains on teaching.

He knows of music professors who maintain their teaching jobs "so that they have a regular check. ... At a school like Illinois Wesleyan, those are not the people we're looking for. We're really looking for people who are going to be

here on campus and for whom teaching is a priority.”

He compares performing by music faculty to research by a biology professor — all part of the expectation of continued professional development.

“Different people balance those things in different ways.”

When it comes to remaining “engaged in the trenches” of performing, West says he decided early on that playing with a professional symphony would require too much time away from his family. While his performance experience includes playing saxophone with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra — plus solo and chamber recitals in several states — West has settled on Opera Illinois as a manageable schedule of rehearsing and performing. Maximizing time at home remains a priority, even with his two children now in their teens and likely to cocoon themselves in their rooms with a video game.

“I think now they’re at an age where it’s important that they see their parents at home, that being part of the family means being in the house together. We eat dinner together virtually every day.” He doesn’t mind passing up performance opportunities if the alternative would be missing his son or daughter’s school events.

“Those are the priorities that I set for myself. It might be different for somebody else. Different people get tied up in the image idea, and they define themselves by what they do. It’s just a personality trait that I don’t happen to have. I’m not what I do, I’m who I am.”