



A conversation with Alexis Silver

with Alain Guilmette

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ALEXIS SILVER holds Bachelor degrees in Music and Education from the University of Manitoba, and is most known for her “incredible puns” (lame sense of humour). Alexis teaches Bands, Drama, and is the former Visual & Performing Arts Department Head at Sisler High School in Winnipeg. She served as a regional representative for, and is currently Vice President of the Manitoba Band Association. Alexis has guest-conducted throughout Manitoba (and beyond); has enjoyed playing, adjudicating, acting, and directing for the Manitoba Band Association, The Little Opera Company, The Winnipeg Wind Ensemble, Wahanowin Theatre, Leithelle Productions, Murder on the Menu, MTYP, and the Women of Note. Alexis believes in the healing power of music, and is an advocate for Music Education.



Give us a brief synopsis on how you became a music educator.

- Marlene Stephen was my middle school band director, and Bill Kristjanson was one of my high school band directors, so how could I not have become a music educator? Actually, I did my Bachelor of Arts as an English major before I wised up and auditioned for the School of Music.

Where and when were you born?

- I was born in the small town of Rothesay, New Brunswick (just outside of Saint John)... in the 1970s (can we leave it at that?)

Can you describe your early experiences with music?

- My Uncle David played piano beautifully, and I remember sitting on the edge of my Grandma’s sofa, listening and watching and **NEEDING** to do that. I started taking piano lessons when we moved to Winnipeg (when I was 5). My Grandma sat with me when I practiced. She never pushed, but she always sat with me. I think I felt a responsibility to practice, without really understanding what was happening. The gentle nudge. The consistency. The routine. I loved piano.

Where did you grow up and where were you schooled?

- I went to Robert Browning and Lincoln when we first moved to Winnipeg, then my family moved over to St. Vital. I went to George McDowell and Glenlawn for middle and high school.

Where did you go to University?

- I am a loud and proud University of Manitoba alumni. (I spent a while there... three undergraduate degrees and all...)

Who first got you interested in music?

- As I mentioned, my Uncle David and Grandma were my early, formative influences, but I need to credit my good friend Joanna for getting me interested in percussion in high school. I thought it was so cool, and so interesting.

Who and what inspired you to become a music teacher?

- Marlene Stephen, Bill Kristjanson, Marilyn Redekop, Fraser Linklater, Connie Turner, and David Moroz made me realize that being a music educator was where it was at. I did my Bachelor of Arts first, as an English major/Theatre minor. I was just about to graduate when I realized I did not really want that degree, nor did I want to do a masters or anything. So I went to Bill Kristjanson, and cried in his office. He said, “What do you love?” and I said, “Band”, and he said, “Well, be a band teacher dummy!”

Where did you first start teaching music?

- Other than teaching a little private piano when I was in University, I’ve been at Sisler the whole time. Connie Turner really helped guide me into Winnipeg School Division (and there were actual full-time band positions at the time I was looking for work).

Is your family also involved in music?

- They’re all drummers. My Dad (who passed away last year) played drum set and really got me into The Beatles and Stones and Pink Floyd, and my brother (who also plays set) got me into punk. My Mom is pretty tone deaf, but she was always my champion. She came to every concert and festival, and bought me my flute (when our family probably couldn’t afford it), and is a true music lover.

Who are some of the people who have made a significant impression on you over the years?

- Mostly, and I know this sounds as if I’m kissing up- but it’s unbelievably true- my MBA colleagues. I worship this association, and strive to be like the Jacquies, Simones, Annas, Janets, Grahams, Cheryls, Chads, Rosses, (and so many more) of the world.

Who are/were important musical & educational inspirations for you?

- I’d say Bill Kristjanson is and was and will continue to be. Ken Epp was my biggest professional inspiration. And, I don’t want to embarrass her, but I strive to be like Janet Yochim. Her openness and heart really inspire me.

What advice do you have for younger directors or recent graduates?

- Read books. Take care of yourself. Listen as much as you can (to people, to music). Get to know as many good people as you can (students, members, staff, community). Try REALLY hard not to sweat the petty stuff. And never trust how crappy you may feel in December and June.

You are involved with professional organizations, such as the MBA and the CBA. Please describe why this was important to you and if you would recommend others to do the same.

- Volunteering for events was a great way to get to know people, and I feel that I give a bit back to the people and “thing” that gave me so much. To be honest, I had to have my arm twisted when I was asked if I would let my name stand for nomination for the board, but I’m very glad I said yes! It is so interesting to see how the machine works. John Balsillie deserves a million dollars!

What is a memorable experience from your teaching career?

- Well, my Dad died last year right before Spring Break. When I came back to school on the Monday, the kids knew. They had written me a song. And they played and sang/rapped it for me. It was funny, and filled with heart. I was very moved that these lovely human beings spent some of Spring Break writing me a silly song so that I would feel better. I think that sums it all up. I love when we make beautiful music. I love when we really have true understanding of learning. But, it’s the small, stupid, meaningful moments that really make me know I chose the right job.

Describe a favorite concert or trip story.

- When I was a student, it was when we went to see the Count Basie Band. It was life-changing. As a teacher, I just friggin love going to Brandon. It's so fun (and there aren't a thousand hours on the dang bus). I was pregnant with Eli on a trip to Banff, and with Syd when we went to Chicago. You could not pay me to do that again (be pregnant... or be on a bus for that long). I have some funny stories from when I did my student teaching with Darryl Chrisp too, but you will have to ask me about that another time!

Why do you feel it is important for teachers to get involved in associations like the MBA & MMEA?

- The events cannot run without volunteerism and the events are what make for community and advocate for the importance of music education. I think it is so important to give back. The MBA and MMEA have done everything to support my career, professionally and socially, so it's important to give back.

How has the MBA supported your teaching career?

- The calendar maps my year. The members support and inform. Ken before, and now John, answers every question I have. PD is provided. Festivals and events enrich my students' and program's learning. Without the MBA, I don't think I would have made it as an Arts Educator.

What is the value of being able to participate in a school band program?

- For me, it gave me all the things that my Uncle and Grandma set up for me so early on, and when it became more difficult to "find my place" (middle and high school) it gave me a safe spot to "be with my people." I learned the life skills of consistency, routine, community, and success.
- For students now, it teaches life skills, provides safety, and helps enrich lives.

In 2009, you were the guest conductor of the Manitoba Junior Honour Band!

- Yes, I was. ☺ It was SUPER FUN!!!

Is there anything you would like to share with the Manitoba Band community?

- I flippin love you.

You remain a very active clinician and adjudicator. What are some trends that you have noticed over the years about band programs?

- Things are good. Solid. Musical. But, perhaps- I've noticed that there is a need for continued support of directors. We do a lot. We spend a lot of energy. We need to celebrate and care for ourselves and each other. Always. When some programs are getting smaller, and/or disjointed, and/or some educators have to wear many hats/teach several subjects, we need care.