

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues:
A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher
Cristina Luongo
York Catholic District School Board: Ontario, Canada

Author Bio

Cristina Maria Luongo is a Music and English teacher for the York Catholic District School Board. She holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree from York University, a Bachelor of Education degree from Lakehead University, and a Master of Education degree in Education from Nipissing University. Cristina's passion is teaching vocal music and working with her school choir as they prepare for various performance opportunities including National Competitions.

Abstract

This article outlines a song in the performance of an artist/researcher/teacher. It seeks to show how the A/R/Tographic experience has helped me through my first few years of teaching high school music. The first few years as a teacher are extremely challenging, and feeling supported and appreciated is a perhaps impossible expectation. Yet, I found ways to overcome my struggles through the A/R/Tographic lens, which allowed me the opportunity to combine my experiences as an artist, a researcher, and a teacher. This study is autobiographical in nature (and includes theoretical frameworks of Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and Reflective Practice, Schon (1982). Specifically, the ability to narrate my experiences through the character of Emma has provided many of the answers I was seeking when I began my graduate studies. Essentially, Emma's narrative is a chronological account of the events that have transpired during my first few years as a high school music teacher. My professional practice has been influenced by the stress, demands, and lofty expectations of my job, but I have discovered that much of my strength stems from my experiences as an artist, a researcher, and a teacher.

Key Words:

A/R/Tography, narrative, self-study, teacher stress

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

Preface and Contextualization

My love for the Arts, complemented by my love for the English language, have afforded me the opportunity to create a fictitious account of my personal feelings regarding first-year music teachers. The ease of placing my thoughts on paper in a creative way has been very cathartic for me. This has not only allowed me to have a much-needed discussion with myself, but also with other teachers who may be struggling with similar issues. Also, this is yet another element of myself in the framework of A/R/Tography (Irwin and de Cosson (2004), since my self as the artist and creative writer is able to research my own work and dilemmas in order to aid my teaching (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001). Essentially, feelings of stress and burnout leave me feeling oppressed, thus oppressing my artistic capabilities and sometimes also my abilities to be an effective and engaging teacher. My attitudes regarding my own artistic being have been suppressed by the cumbersome demands of my job. The newness of Emma's career and the newness of the school mirror the events that have taken place in my life 4 years ago. The painting on the wall of *Unnamed School* serves as a constant reminder of someone who left 4 years ago but will never be forgotten. Their enormous shoes are there to fill; their spirit is impossible to break.

Embedded in Emma's story are some of my own personal chronicles of experience (expressed in italics). These personal stories are there in order to serve as a guideline and allow me to make meaning of the events that have occurred over the course of my life. The relationships that I have formed with my parents, siblings, colleagues, students, and best of all, myself, have become what I refer to in musical terms as my "canon." My parents, acting as the leaders of the canon, have shown me how to be a follower and how to include

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

important people in my life so that I can now become the leader of my own canon, in no way altering the main melody. These people have been instrumental in my success as an instructor.

Emma's sense of pride on the first day of school, complemented by her unbearable nerves, finally allow me to express what I felt on my first day of teaching 4 years ago. My once simple life as a singer and piano and flute player was forced to be placed on hold by the long, tedious days and excessive workload. My attempt at juggling a full-time career, graduate studies, and family and love life have since become a little more manageable but were extremely difficult to maintain during my first few years of teaching. The feeling that I will always be watched and compared to my predecessor by school administrators promotes a very Orwellian world where the pressures of perfection and surveillance create a dystopian work environment.

The following narrative, entitled *Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues*, is a fictitious account of a vocal music teacher whose presence remains solely painted on the walls of *Unnamed School*. She is an omniscient figure whose trials and tribulations live strong and are constantly remembered by past and present students and staff.

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues

August 31, 2041 – At 7:30 a.m., the school is dark, fresh, and quiet. The hallways remain clean and in order. This is only the second time that Emma has stepped foot into the building; the first time was when she was interviewed by the vice principal who offered her this position. What was she thinking? I, on the other hand, have been here for 30 years. I

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

began my teaching career here when I was 23 years old and the day that I stepped foot into this building, I knew I had sold my soul to the Devil. Many long days and long nights have been given to this school's music program.

As she timidly walked through the hallways to find her brand new classroom, a sense of pride washed over her. Finally, after being in school for so long, whether it was to complete her undergraduate degree at York University or her Bachelor of Education at Lakehead University or while currently working on her Master's degree at Nipissing University, she had now been given a chance to put her schooling to good use. After all, her father always asked her jokingly when she would find a job so he could stop working. Born into a family of professionals and raised with a brother and a sister who have the highest expectations, Emma knew that her new job would make her parents extremely proud of her. In fact, in the process of completing an assignment for her Master's, she came across a letter that her parents wrote to her many years ago expressing their innermost thoughts, hopes, and dreams for her future. This letter serves as a driving force for Emma because she wants them to know that she understands all they have sacrificed for her and that their efforts, whether emotional or financial, have not gone unnoticed:

Dear Emma,

We are writing this letter to you as part of your school project, but these thoughts and feelings are always with us, even though we may have trouble expressing them to you at times.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

The birth of a child is a very emotional time for the parents and grandparents. The anxiety and happiness associated with the birth of a little infant leaves a feeling that we find truly unexplainable in words. Your birth and those of your sister and brother were a result of the deep love, affection, and respect that we have for each other. We looked forward to the challenge of raising children as it allowed us the opportunity to grow as people along with them.

Children are born so free, innocent, and pure. As parents we wish them to grow up to be healthy mature adults who are able to achieve their goals and aspirations, enjoy life, and be happy.

When you were born, we were extremely delighted to have a second child as part of our family. We went through the normal fears and concerns, but the birth of such a lovely, healthy daughter made all of our concerns seem so irrelevant. Your birth in particular, made us realize the beauty of life and how fortunate we were to have two beautiful daughters. You became a focal point of our lives. We enjoyed the moments together such as your first words, your first embrace and kiss. You gave us reason to try to improve ourselves as adults and parents.

When I first held you in my arms, I could sense a special bond between us. I realized that I had another beautiful lady in my life. Your birth gave me aspiration and desire to achieve some of my goals and further motivation to provide a healthy loving home life for my family. As parents, we feared for your safety, education, and well-being. We hoped that you would grow up to be a beautiful loving daughter, full of life, laughter, happiness, and respect for yourself and others.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

Over the last 13 years, we have watched you grow physically, mentally, and spiritually. Today we have different fears and concerns. We fear the social jungle that we live in, we fear drugs, disease, and peer pressure. Our hopes always remain the same. We hope that you achieve your goals and aspirations, obtain a good education, respect and love your family and friends, but most of all, we want you to be happy at all times. Remember to always look at life from the positive side. Internal strength and happiness will assist you in your life for many years to come.

Life is beautiful and extremely rewarding if you can blend, mix, and balance the many elements such as hard work, good health, pleasure, and most of all, a strong commitment to a good family life and happiness.

One day, you too will become an adult and we hope that you remember all the good times that we have spent together. We hope that you remember the stable home environment and the love that we all shared. Remember to love and respect your family and friends, as they will always be there for you in good times and bad times. Emma, life is beautiful if you are able to cherish what is important. Your mother and I want you to be happy with your decisions and with your life. We will always be there for you.

We love you very much.

Mom and Dad

As Emma read the letter, she could not help but think about how time was on her side—if she did not find this letter, she would not have felt inspired by the words her parents had written her before her first day at school. The letter from Emma’s parents is very

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

personal and real. It specifically states the wishes parents have for one of their children, allowing Emma to feel inexplicably loved and supported. She realized that instead of attempting the first day of school with fear and confusion, she would be confident in her abilities and take comfort in her parents' words.

Emma was nervous, as any new teacher would be. She was qualified to teach both English and Social Science but always had a love for the Arts. She could sing like Celine Dion and even tried her luck at playing the piano and flute. When the posting appeared on the school board's website for a job in Vocal Music and English, Emma thought she would apply, never in her wildest dreams thinking she would actually be offered the job! How would she be able to serve each subject justly? Do people actually do this and like it?

Standing outside room 126, Emma placed her oversized bag on the floor, took out her very own set of keys from the pocket of her linen pants, and unlocked the door. The room was dark and as she moved her bag into the front foyer, she could hear the echoes of emptiness and the door slam shut behind her. What a terrifying experience. Struggling to find a balance of light using all six switches, Emma finally took a deep breath in her new classroom. As she looked around, she noticed the pleasant nature of the room—six windows from ceiling to floor, three tiers, a blackboard from one end of the room to the other, and closets that lined the north and south walls. She also noticed that past students had used what limited art skills they had to try and enhance the dismal nature of the room by drawing musical paraphernalia on any white wall and crevice they could find. Interestingly enough, there was one drawing in particular that caught her eye. On the very top of the drawing read the years 2008–2041. Below the inscription was a life-size cartoon image of what seemed to

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

be the former music teacher—myself. Apparently she had very large shoes to fill, which overwhelmed her.

The first day of school came even quicker than Emma could have imagined. She was prepared; her lesson plans for the first week were completed just as she had learned to create them in teachers college. She was pumped, every discussion from teachers college and her Master of Education classes began infiltrating her thoughts—greet the students at the door, be stern, be receptive, be open-minded and flexible. Emma could not help but relive her past 5 years of postsecondary education. She remembered one conversation in particular—during her first year as a Master’s student, she took a course entitled, *Narrative Inquiry*. This course focused on the ability to share stories because it is these stories that shape who we are and who we become. At this point, Emma realized that each student about to enter her classroom would come with a series of stories that would inevitably determine his or her behavior. She remembers her professor, a wonderfully chic lady, who always told the class that it is important to understand how experiences shape our lives and we live through them able and willing to tell our stories. Emma knew that she wanted her students to experience great things in her class and be able to add these particular experiences to their collection of stories.

Promptly, at 8:15 a.m. the first bell rang and the most popular song of the summer began to fill the airwaves of *Unnamed School*. Essentially, the first day as a teacher is just as intimidating as the first performance opportunity:

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

In the summer of 1993, my mother overheard me singing in the bathroom. It became a sort of ritual—whenever I took a bath or had to actually use the bathroom, I would sing the first song that popped into my head. I sang loud without realizing that I was being heard or that I was actually quite good at mimicking the artist’s repertoire. A few weeks later, I joined Arcadia Academy of Music and began my first singing lesson at a little industrial unit with really smelly carpets and tiny little rooms stuffed with a piano, a mirror, my singing teacher, myself and, of course, my proudly grinning mother. A few months after beginning my lessons, my mother had a brilliant idea—I should sing a song at my cousin Franca’s wedding so that she and her husband could enjoy a dance together as husband and wife and my family would be privileged enough to hear me for the first time. Wanting so badly to make my mother happy, I agreed and the never-ending series of nerves that I have become accustomed to began...

Before I knew it, the day of Franca and Benny’s wedding had arrived. I put on the outfit my mother made for me. It was a little pale green suit consisting of a mini-skirt and a short sleeve jacket with two little pockets in the front. The collar had a white, lace trim that matched the trim at the bottom of the skirt. The outfit was completed with white pantyhose, black flat shoes, a little black purse and a white headband that destroyed the back of my ears. Of course, I wore my very best gold jewelry—a bracelet, a snake ring with a ruby in place of the eye which wrapped around my little finger that my grandmother brought me back from Italy and my gold chain around my neck with a charm of the letter “C” hanging from it representing my name.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

The banquet hall was exquisitely decorated with white linens, tall centerpieces that exploded with beautiful, fragrant flowers and candles lit expressing a very chic, almost dreamlike atmosphere. The bride and groom entered the hall for the first time as man and wife and as their guests clapped, I began to feel sicker and sicker. I knew that I would have to perform soon and all I could think about was how much I wanted to throw up or hide underneath a table in hopes that no one would find me and I would be free!

In terms of the food, first came the antipasto—a beautiful arrangement of pickled vegetables, cured ham, and cheese in a thoughtfully constructed dish. The food did not stop there; two types of pasta, two types of meat, potatoes, vegetables, bread, salad, and dessert overtook the table at various times throughout the night. According to my family, the food was marvelous, tasty, and exquisite even. I would not know—all I was concentrated on was trying to get my heartrate to slow down because it sounded like a drum being overtaken by a family of angry gorillas in a zoo. My hands were sweaty; I kept rubbing the sweat off on my white pantyhose. Finally, the master of ceremonies approached our table and asked me if I was ready. I quickly answered yes, gave him the tape with the music that would accompany me and tried really hard to swallow the ball of nerves that had formed in my throat.

As I made my way to the stage, I could feel nothing but eyes staring at me and saw people smiling and waving at me that I did not even know. Both of my parents accompanied me to the stage with proud grins on their faces. When we arrived, the master of ceremonies provided a quick introduction and the banquet hall fell silent, to the point where all I could hear was the sound of my own shallow breathing. The music began, I gripped the microphone, a river of tears began to cloud my eyes. I could not do it and ran off of the

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

stage into my father's arms. After a few minutes of my father telling me that I could do it and the bride and groom assuring me that they would love to hear my song, I decided to give it one more try. I went back on to the stage but this time, hid behind a massive black speaker about three times the size of my body. No one could see me and I felt more comfortable that way. Once again, the music began; I clenched onto the microphone and began to sing A Whole New World from the Disney movie Aladdin. The first minute of the song was excruciatingly uncomfortable but I just persisted on. While I was singing, I felt as if I was playing hide-and-go-seek with the videographer who insisted on videotaping my performance while I insisted on remaining invisible. As the last note of the song approached, my family began to cheer for me as if I was Celine Dion. Again, I ran to my father and mother who hugged and kissed me, ensuring me that I did a great job. The bride and groom were very pleased with my performance and the groom picked me up, hugged me and twirled me around in his arms thanking me for having the courage to sing in front of five hundred people. Hearing the clapping and cheers and feeling my breathing going back to normal—ah, freedom!

As soon as Emma felt organized, she unlocked the door to her new classroom and patiently awaited the arrival of her students. Her nerves were unbearable and just as she was about to leave the room in search of fresh air, a student entered the room looking perfectly manicured for the first day of school. Emma knew she had to somehow get at least one student on her side considering that her first-period class was a grade 12 vocal class. She introduced herself and the student did as well; her name was Adriana. There was something

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

about Adriana that Emma just could not figure out but she assured herself that with time, the students would learn to like her. It seemed like the natural progression, right?

Within the next 5 minutes, various other students began to walk into the classroom. Some were really tall, shamefully taller than my 5-foot build. As they made their way to their seats, Emma tried to make herself look busy and pretended she was not listening to their conversation regarding the new music teacher. She fiddled around with the iPod dock, shuffled some paper, and even washed her hands. The word on the street was that the previous music teacher was an incredible asset to the school community and it would be really difficult to fill her shoes. The mere thought of this made Emma want to hide in some deep, dark opening; however, the time had come for her to showcase her many talents and she was not planning on letting anyone down. After what seemed like a 3-hour contemplation/pep-talk session, the bell finally rang signaling that all students should be in class ready to stand for the National Anthem. The students slowly made their way to their feet, huffing and puffing the entire time while continuing their conversations. After the morning festivities came to a halt, it was Emma's time to shine. She introduced herself to the class, took the on-line attendance, gave out the required course outline, and without further ado asked the students to gather around the piano. Emma needed to get these kids up and moving because after all of the preliminary "boring stuff," she could feel that she was losing them. She decided that now would be as good a time as any to structure the students according to the main vocal ranges: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. According to the guidance counsellors, the vocal class was basically a dumping ground, made up of students who were musically inclined and those with less talent. Emma would just need to figure out who was

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

who and how she would encourage each student to try their best. From the very first exercise, she could tell that Adriana had amazing talent; she could play the guitar, piano, trumpet, and could even sing beautifully. If only every student were this talented, there would be no use for Emma at all. She introduced the students to the Kodaly method, something she had learned in all of her years of studying that she thought would be very useful to her students. She taught them the Solfege with the proper hand motions and told them that in a week's time, they would be expected to perform these for the class and would be evaluated. After all, this was a performance-based course and at the senior level, students would be expected to perform at a high level of artistry. Emma could not help but wonder how those students who were just thrown into this class would fare? How could they be expected to learn the required theory and performance expectations if they have never taken an arts course before? Emma would come to understand that the system is seriously flawed and the arts is a constant dumping ground that lacks respect from the entirety of the school system.

Emma's first day went relatively well. She was able to make it through all of her classes and even enjoyed herself. At the end of the first day, she was exhausted. She had not realized that being a teacher meant being in constant performance. As Emma was on her way out the door, the head of chaplaincy, Maria, stopped her. She introduced herself—she was an extremely bubbly personality whose love for the spiritual unknown emanated through the gold cross around her neck, the bracelet of saints around her right wrist, and the Catholic missal in her left hand. She explained to Emma that usually, the vocal music teacher is responsible for choosing and expediting the music for all school masses. Of course, Maria

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

had offered to help her, seeing as this was just the first day of school and her first real job. Emma just stood there trying her hardest to keep the smile on her face and the tears from falling down her cheek. What had she gotten herself in to? What other performance opportunities were the students expected to attend and Emma expected to create? Emma had a feeling that she had no choice in the matter and at this point, completely realized the shoes of the previous teacher she was being asked to fill—damn her! It was 5:30, the school day had ended almost 3 hours ago and as Emma rushed to her car, she cried. She was not sure if the tears were because she was exhausted or because she had begun to realize that this job would take everything she had. She would release her stress and anxiety by playing the piano and singing some of her favourite Celine Dion songs. That would surely make her feel alive and well—ready to take on an evening of work, work, work.

On her way home, Emma began to create a list in her head of all of the expectations she would have to succumb to by the end of the week. Her third class of her Master's program was beginning on Friday evening and even though it was the beginning of the week, Emma could not help but think about the excessive workload she would face in a few weeks. How would she find the time to juggle a full-time job, a Master's program, family life, and her love life? It was clear to her that something would suffer but she was determined that it would not be her new job, even if it meant killing herself. She was now in a world of reflective practice—reflecting on the event of the day in order to determine what she could improve on for the upcoming days at *Unnamed School*. According to her professor, being able to reflect, whether during or after a lesson, reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action, is a trait that many teacher's lack, thus allowing their professional practice to fall short. Emma

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

was determined to always reflect on her professional practice—little did she know that on most days, this would become impossible with the constant hustle and bustle of running a music program.

Bright and early, dressed to impress, Emma began preparing for the day's lessons. She decided that today, she would introduce "Karaoke Fridays" to her vocal classes. This consisted of each student preparing a song of his or her choice to perform weekly. She would evaluate three karaokes per semester and each week would be themed. All in all, the students seemed to really enjoy this idea and already started planning amongst themselves what they would sing for the first Friday. At the end of period one, Emma pulled Adriana aside and asked if she would meet her after school to discuss a few things. Adriana, being the fantastic, outgoing individual that she is, quickly agreed. At 2:21, as soon as the bell rang and the students were dismissed, Adriana opened the music room door, coffee in hand and a guitar in the other. She really was a lifesaver! She confessed that she was already practicing for Karaoke Friday and assured Emma that she would be impressed. Emma sat Adriana down and asked her to explain what school events and other performance opportunities the choir was awarded and responsible for last year. Adriana began to laugh hysterically because she knew that Emma was feeling somewhat overwhelmed and assured her that everything would be fine and she would help her through it. Adriana explained that the choir had accomplished a lot last year and under the direction of the previous music teacher were responsible for Awards Night, all School Masses, Music Nights, Battle of the Bands, Feeder School Tours, Catholic Education Week, Parent Council evenings, Competitions, and Graduation. Adriana explained that Emma would have to take charge and organize such

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

events since there really was no other person who could do it. Essentially, students from the choir formed the Music Council that took an active role in producing performance opportunities for the entire music program. This did not seem at all fair but again, Emma did not want to let anyone down so she agreed that she would hold a Music Council meeting and they would figure out where to begin. As a teacher of the arts, every performance opportunity is not only a representation of the students' talents, but also a representation of the teacher's capabilities. Essentially, it is very much like being evaluated for the first time as a teacher; however, it is an evaluation all the time complete with severe performance anxiety:

Teacher evaluations are a good way for educators to reflect on their practice and teaching methods. One September, I was notified that I would be evaluated by my vice principal because I was on a one-year LTO contract. Immediately, I was terrified at the thought of having a superior look through my binders and daily lesson plans. As soon as I received the letter, I headed straight for my workroom, opened the door in a hurry, took out my notepad and began asking what seemed like a million questions. I'm pretty sure that my colleagues perceived me to be some sort of a psychopath but I needed feedback and advice and I needed it in a hurry. However, without sounding too confident, since my last LTO, I had come to realize that I have much to offer each and every one of my classes and I would like to have the opportunity to showcase that to the vice principal. Inevitably, if I were successful, my chances for receiving a permanent position would be greater than they once were.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

I decided I wanted him to come and evaluate my teaching in my vocal music class. Since I was teaching two religion classes and one vocal class, I thought that I would have him evaluate one religion class and one vocal class. I thought that it was important for him to see my teaching methods in two very different disciplines. This would allow him to gain perspective on my different talents and willingness to teach in two distinct subject areas.

I was required to provide three formal lesson plans for each class; one for the actual lesson he would be experiencing as well as for the day before and the day after. I must say, on a good day, my anxiety level reaches unreasonable proportions but on this specific day, it was through the roof! Since graduating from teachers college, I had not completed formal lesson plans but I had a very organized template that I would fill in by hand that describes the daily lesson, what teaching strategies I would use, and how I would accommodate or modify for various students in my class. I find that this method works best because I do not spend so much time with the “formal” lesson planning but I do it my way and keep myself organized. Completing a formal lesson plan requires an extensive amount of work and in teaching full time and dealing with all of the other elements of teaching, it is not always practical to formally plan. Simply put, I had learned to adapt.

I was also told that I would be evaluated on my classroom management capabilities. Since I started teaching, I feel that I have implemented a very collaborative approach to managing my classroom. The students and I create the rules and their respective punishments together so that they are aware of the consequences. I do not believe that classroom management can effectively be evaluated because every day is different in the classroom and if the students see the vice principal in our classroom, they are more inclined

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

to behave. Essentially, this is a great thing for me on the day of my evaluation but on other days when the vice principal is not present and I actually have to manage my classroom, this may become an issue.

Before I knew it, the day had arrived. I left my house at 7:20 in the morning calculating that by the time I arrived at school, I would have two hours to calm down and prepare myself mentally and physically for my evaluation since I had period-one prep. However, on this particular morning, the drive seemed to take forever and my morning had many disruptions. I caught every red light on the way to school, my travel mug blew up in my hand, the buckle on my black pointy-toe boots broke and my hair didn't seem to want to cooperate. Perfect! When I arrived at school, I climbed the three flights of stairs with two bags filled with two binders each, my purse that on this day felt like it was a luggage waiting to be taken on a three-week vacation, and my leaking travel mug. As soon as I walked into the workroom, everyone laughed at me because I looked like I had been in an eight-round boxing match. My hair was disheveled, I was huffing and puffing like a smoker who just ran a marathon, the skin on my hands was a mixture of purple and red due to the heaviness of the bags, and my mouth was extremely dry.

From the moment I arrived to the moment that I would see my vice principal walk into my classroom, I did nothing but watch the clock and waste time. It's a good thing that I'm super organized and had everything prepared ahead of time. At about 9:40 a.m., I began the trek to my classroom on the first floor with my big brown bag on one shoulder, a binder in my left hand, and my mug in my right hand. If all else failed, I knew I looked good...I was wearing a pair of black dress pants, a black long sleeve cotton-T with a short sleeve cute

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

little blazer on top that had a red, black and grey plaid pattern. Oh and of course, my broken boots that I temporarily fixed with a hair tie. I approached my classroom, which by the way is part of a dimly lit auditorium, unlocked the door, and set out to work.

I set up a desk in the front of the classroom with my vocal music course binder, my daily binder, and my attendance and markbook binder. After taking attendance in class, I took a moment to breathe—obviously; my students thought I was crazy. I began teaching my theory lesson on the various types of endings that different pieces of music can accommodate. And then it happened...he walked in and I almost choked on my own saliva. As a class, we promptly said good morning to Mr. Vice Principal and I continued teaching my lesson. I gave the students some time to work on a series of questions in class and I walked around to each student to ensure that they understood each concept. Afterwards, we gathered around the piano and began our daily voice warm-up exercises. Each student in the class had a chance to perform the warm-up and I had a chance to instruct the students on proper breathing techniques as well as vowel placement and tone quality. Of course, I snuck a glance Mr. Vice Principal's way and could tell that he was reasonably impressed by my efforts. After the warm-up exercises, we moved on to our repertoire. We sang Michael Jackson's "Will You Be There" and the students performed remarkably well. As I was playing on the piano, HE was standing to my left watching my every move...I'm pretty sure that was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences of my life. Throughout the song, I was directing the students, trying not to pay any attention to the man to my left. I must say it was extremely difficult. Finally, the song came to an end and Mr. Vice Principal said his goodbyes as he exited the classroom. I knew eventually I would have to sit down with him to

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

discuss my evaluation but before I could even think about that, I just sat at the piano, put my head down on the keys and took the deep breaths that I should've been taking all along. My students could do nothing but laugh, pat me on the back and ensure me that the evaluation went well and I had nothing to worry about—and they were right. Ah, freedom!

Awards Night and the first School Mass came and went. Somehow, with God's good graces and of course, Adriana, Emma was able to pull them off without a glitch. Emma had come to realize that these performance opportunities were not only for the students, but were a testament to her qualifications as well. The pressure and anxiety of setting up equipment, performing, and producing a decent sound were not only the pressures felt by the students themselves, but also by the organizer. Emma had come into her own; she was beginning to feel like a real music teacher. Emma had come to discover that her practice as an artist, researcher, and teacher allowed her to deal with the expectations of her job in a fashionable manner. These various roles developed through her first year of teaching into a harmonious relationship that promises to benefit her future performances whether they are as an artist, researcher, or teacher. Just as Adriana had promised, students and colleagues began to approach Emma regarding various performance opportunities. Emma assured them that just like last year, there would be equal and ample opportunity to perform and it seemed as if she impressed people. She took charge in a positive way and made things happen for the student body. Ah, freedom!

Themes and Final Thoughts

Upon completion of my creative narrative and the research built within it, I have noticed the emergence of three main themes: (a) teacher stress and burnout, (b) relationships,
C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

and (c) teacher engagement in the classroom and extracurricular activities. The themes of teacher stress and burnout, forging meaningful relationships, and teacher engagement are obvious through Emma's words, thoughts, and actions. In fact, the themes are very serious issues within education, particularly for first-year music teachers. By incorporating the A/R/Tographic lens into both my research as well as my everyday teaching experiences, I have been able to better understand my current predicament. The teaching profession, due to the lofty demands and expectations I am constantly striving to achieve, has stifled my abilities as an artist. However, my role as a researcher has allowed me to read and interpret the writings of others in order to further my knowledge as an educator and an artist.

My life as an artist and teacher encourages reflection and contemplation as natural components to my work. I believe that any form of reflection is necessary and essential in developing a clear concept of one's personality. For me, reflection comes in the form of singing alone in my room, playing the piano, or listening to my favorite song or artist. Within this musical space, anything is possible and I am truly content and feel a sense of clarity when looking at my life. This musical space is defined by Irwin and de Cosson (2004) as "new territory, a borderland of reformation and transformation, a geographical, spiritual, social, pedagogical and physical site intersubjectively and intrasubjectively situated in and through dialogue" (p. 9). Therefore, discovering who I am within this space by means of enjoying and taking part in my art is conducive to the discovery of my self. The opportunity for self-reflection and the ability to evolve as a person is inherently due to the integration of the roles of the artist-researcher-teacher. Since these particular roles work

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

together to inform the conceptual framework of A/R/Tography, it is here where I can truly create a path for my own learning and the development of my self.

The narrative of Emma's first-year teaching experience is a fictional description of my first experiences as an educator. Every feeling Emma dictates takes her one step closer to reaching the freedom she desires. Freedom from stress, anxiety, and burnout can only be achieved by implementing strategic relationships, reflecting on practice, and realizing that the artist, researcher, and teacher must work together to inform practice. Emma's story allows me to feel free. When I wrote the story, I could not visualize why this would be crucial to the completion of my thesis. Now, when I go back and read it, I finally realize that without this story, my true feelings, thoughts, and opinions would not become a reality.

I suppose that education sometimes turns a blind eye when it comes to the trials and tribulations of the first-year teacher. Teachers need to be realistic—they cannot and will not change the world. Teachers need to be better prepared for what they will face in their careers. Placing new teachers in a classroom without adequate preparation only leads them to feel oppressed and trapped. Teachers need to be taught how to reflect on their practice in order to make it work for them. Reflection allows the teacher to take a step back and realize what works and what does not in terms of curriculum implementation, how to deal with overwhelming feelings, and most importantly how to recognize the symptoms of stress and burnout before it is too late.

Music education is worth fighting for; however, music programs are only as successful as the teachers who are in the department. Teaching in general is time consuming

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

and sometimes a very difficult task, but teaching music only adds to the arduous task and overwhelming feelings. The expectations of extracurricular performances and opportunities add to teacher stress and burnout, and indefinitely affect teacher engagement. Being able to revisit and reorganize my past experiences as a first-year music teacher has allowed me the opportunity to rearrange my views, values, and ideas regarding music education.

Basically, the major issue that I have tried to address in this thesis is how my professional practice has been influenced by stress, demands, and lofty expectations. I have discovered that much of my strength is derived from my experiences as an artist, researcher, and teacher. These roles work dialectically to provide a support system or coping mechanism. This thesis is autobiographical in nature since I have been able to use reflective practice and narrative inquiry as a lens used to sift through my personal belongings and make sense of my past experiences. Past experiences inform present experiences, thus allowing me to better myself as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

Lastly, the concept of maintaining oneself as an artist in the classroom is difficult for many first-year music teachers. I believe that only a true artist can inform other artists and this is exactly what I would like to do for my students. However, the daunting responsibility associated with delivering curriculum, marking assignments, and dealing personally with students, staff, and parents while maintaining a balanced personal life is extremely complicated and takes away from my artistic self. Extracurricular expectations are time consuming and exhausting. Ultimately, recognizing the need to maintain the artistic self in the classroom can only be accomplished by means of reflective practice (Schon, 1982;

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

Brookfield, 1995), in order to overcome the stress, demands, and lofty expectations of the first-year music teacher.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581

References

- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bullough, R., & Pinnegar, S. (2001). Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 13-21. doi:10.3102/0013189X030003013
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Irwin, R., & de Cosson, A. (2004). *A/R/Tography: Rendering self through arts based living inquiry*. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Education Press.

C. Luongo

Rhythm and Bittersweet Blues: A Song in the Performance of an Artist, Researcher, and Teacher

MUSICA EST DONUM ©2016 ISSN 2369-1581