

“Jump on the rhythm train!” he shouts with a note of pleading in his voice. He simulates a choo-choo chugging down the tracks while half skipping, half jumping across the front of the room. I can’t keep from laughing and giggling, but Monte Gris  eyeballs me with a look that says, “I know I’m funny, but we have work to do.” I laugh anyway, along with the rest of the class, and Mr. Gris  joins in with a great smile.

When at last we’ve all calmed down from our raucous laughter, Mr. Gris  asks us to focus on the difficult passage in *A Movement for Rosa* by Mark Camphouse. None of us see it as anything but a muddle of notes on a staff that we can’t seem to squeak out on our instruments. Someone groans as Mr. Gris  switches to his serious mode. He describes this as one of the piece’s tension points, representing the increasing violence of the civil rights movement. The rim shots on the snare signal gun shots. All of a sudden I realize this music has a greater purpose than other pieces we previously played. Usually the band room is noisy, but now not a noise can be heard.

On another day during class we continue our months-long preparation for our final spring concert. *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff can be formidable for even the most respected symphony in the country. That makes no difference to Mr. Gris . He pushes us to play with all the emotions, imagination and hot air we have that day. He’s yelling at the saxes to get in tune, while cuing the trombone entrance. With baton in hand, he never misses a beat whether it is a phrase of crisp 16th notes or harrowing whole notes. After working on *Carmina* for forty-five minutes I feel like I’ve just run five miles. Yet it comes with a similar feeling of satisfaction. Mr. Gris  chats with some students for a few minutes, then detaches from the scene and slouches

in his chair in front of his computer (most likely to look up one of his favorite jazz players on the internet). At the end of class he rarely tells us “good job today kids” or “nice playing today” because we already know that by just asking us to attempt a piece like *Carmina Burana* Mr. Grisé thinks we’re playing our instruments pretty well. Mr. Grisé isn’t one to praise his students frequently anyway.

The evening of our spring Gala Concert finally arrived. We played in the Helena Civic Center with a seating capacity of 2,000. Mr. Grisé waltzed around the waiting room as we waited to perform reminding various people to remember to come in at Letter A or to bring their mute on stage. He appeared so calm, while I could only think that everyone I knew in the audience must have been waiting skeptically. How could a 100 piece ensemble of high school students master *Carmina Burana*?

It was as if the New York Philharmonic Symphony performed in Helena, Montana that night. Mr. Grisé conducted us with such energy and passion I feared he’d pass out from exhaustion right in front of us. His coattails flapped behind him with the slightest movement, and his dark, focused eyes pored over the music and performers with intense concentration. Sometimes I think he examines each player so closely that he knows what is running through his mind.

The strings shrieked, the trumpets rose above, the flute danced across the stage and the sopranos articulated their t’s. The music soared through the auditorium right off the stage as Mr. Grisé controlled everything from his podium with a simple, yellowing score.

A thundering applause, complete with whistles and shouts, erupted from the audience. When Mr. Grisé passed out our parts for *Carmina Burana* in early October, eight months before the Gala, I jestingly told him that I would never be able to play all that jumble sitting on my

stand. He stopped in front of me and with an impassive expression, said “of course you will,” like it was nothing, and continued handing out the music. As the audience members broke into applause that night I knew that Mr. Grisé always believed in my musical ability.

For two years I dragged my body to the band room, because I dreaded going to class. Mr. Grisé’s idiosyncratic quirks annoyed me and I couldn’t wait for the 49 minutes to quickly end. I convinced myself that Mr. Grisé disliked me, and I found no interest in learning anything about music. During my junior year, however, I entered Symphonic Winds– my school’s top winds ensemble. Something occurred during the year. I learned to love playing for Mr. Grisé, and at last I took notice that he had a passion for his job. I realized that I respected and enjoyed Mr. Grisé’s teaching because he treated the students in Symphonic Winds like members of a professional symphony, and respected us as fellow musicians. I appreciated him and loved going to his class each day. On the last day of school Mr. Grisé announced that he took a position at a university. I knew that he deserved to be a college professor and that the freedom to pursue his own musical interests would suit him very well, but I could feel my heart sink as I thought about band class without Mr. Grisé my senior year– my year to truly excel with his gifted instruction.

On the third day of my senior year our new band director exclaimed that she would be much more fun than Mr. Grisé. I want to tell her she’s right. Mr. Grisé wasn’t fun! Oh, man... I miss him already.