



Talking with people like Brandon is one of the many reasons that I get to love what I do for my job - every. single. day. From his inspiration to begin playing, to one of his incredible dissertation projects, the enthusiasm and dedication to his craft is contagious. I hope you enjoy his story as much as I did.

- Audra Lange, Director of Marketing

Growing up and riding in the car to church - that's where Brandon's story in music begins.

When did you start playing the flute?

"I love telling this story! I was in the car on Sundays with my mom and she always listened to this Gloria Estefan song that had a flute solo in it - I always wanted to learn how to play that."

Not only does Brandon proficiently play the flute (obviously - he's our principal!), but he's also an incredible piccolo player. Did you pick up the piccolo at the same time as the flute?

"No, the piccolo is really difficult. When I got to Michigan State, I was randomly put on a difficult Piccolo part and it went really well on the concert. It just happened that all the directors were there so then everyone wanted to put me on Piccolo. I actually went through the first part of my early career while I was in the Lansing Symphony assuming that I was going to have a big Piccolo job somewhere because I was making finals in Piccolo auditions at that point in my career."



You're currently working on your DMA, set to graduate this May. Tell me more about your experience.

"The University of Michigan is structured a little differently than most programs. You have three years of funding to complete the degree, two for coursework and one for your dissertation. My dissertation focus is on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion specifically geared towards queer voices and queer bodies and queer people. Instead of writing a thesis, the dissertation is comprised of three recitals over the course of the year.

The first recital was called Focus on Flint. I'm the Principal Flute of the Flint Symphony and also had been teaching at the Flint School of Performing Arts (FSPA) for a couple of years and I felt like the community needed something. I wanted to provide a model in which I wasn't just making pretty music for people - I don't think that's enough, I don't believe that making pretty music - that's not all that art can do. One way in which I did this was to hire composers who are from

where the performance would be taking place, and I performed two works by working composers from Flint, Michigan. The composers from Flint needed to either be from the community, or students at the FSPA or UM Flint, and luckily both composers I found were from both! One of them was also randomly non-binary which added a queer composer's voice, even though I wasn't necessarily looking for one specifically.

For the last piece on this recital, I invited another queer professional from Flint to join me onstage so we could celebrate queer musicians who are supporting and giving back to the community. Long term, this project is going to turn into a recording - recorded in Flint with all the resources it takes to record an album going back into the community.



The second recital was an entire lecture and performance on gun violence and the treatment of repertoire that depicts, involves, or suggests gun violence titled: "On the Treatment of Repertoire in the Age of the Gun: Preparing, Presenting and Performing Music Involving Gun Violence in 2024. I used two pieces of music by queer composer, Jennifer Higdon, "Rapid Fire" and "Legacy" and discussed what artists go through to adequately prepare pieces of music. I discussed how traumatizing and triggering this can be in an age where there are so many mass shootings happening all the time. I provided statistics and facts about why we need to care about how we're presenting this programming, keeping in mind our audiences and their autonomy to choose what they're exposing themselves to. Another facet to this recital's queer focus was the irony that while Jennifer Higdon is a queer woman, who wrote this exceptionally impactful piece, it's not been treated as something associated with gun violence but with 'interesting or cool flute

playing'. Once the lecture portion of the event concluded, I used the "Legacy" work very specifically as a meditation moment before opening the floor for questions. It allowed the audience to reflect on what they had just taken in, to allow people who many have been traumatically triggered to come back into their bodies and for those who may have been upset to calm their voices so we could engage in respectful conversations.

Now I'm getting ready for the third recital which will have nine premieres. It will feature all music by LGBTQ+ composers. In the first half of the recital, I had four composers from the University of Michigan write pieces for professional wind trio, but also intermediate middle school level wind trio. There is literally zero original chamber music for that level for winds, all we have are transcriptions.

I'll have students from the Michigan Youth Ensembles at the U of M, or local middle to high school students playing, and we'll premiere those works side by side with professionals onstage. The students won't know, but at the end they'll be granted scholarship money. This is part of my dissertation that focuses on equity. All performers, composers, etc are being paid for their work on all these projects.

The second half of the recital will be the Dynamic Duo - myself and harpist Rachel Miller performing Liebermann's *Sonata for Flute and Harp*, and we'll also be premiering a piece by a student of mine here at the U of M who is a composition major. The culminating work will be a piece that Rachel and I will be composing together, and it will be a suite of Britney Spears music. She may not be in the queer community herself, but she's an icon in our community and has been there as a role model for me when I needed something to be there for me – especially when I was younger.

One thing I'd like to point out - I am being told consistently that the scope of this project is too large and that I'm leading too much with activism and not enough with music. For me – these things are inextricably tied. Music for beauty and entertainment - I love to do that too, but my dissertation needed to be 100% me, and what I think the power of music can actually do. I'm excited to see where it goes from here.”

What's your biggest piece of advice for someone considering going back to school for a DMA or any other grad program?

If you're told no on something, try to explain it in a different way or come at it from a different angle. I've discovered that 90% of what I'm told no on, is just a misunderstanding of actual intent. The other 10%? Do it anyway.