

GUSTO

COMMENTARY

Three Buffalo-area teachers among nominees for Grammy Music Educator Award



Christina Custode of Niagara Falls High School is a quarterfinalist for the 2020 Grammy Music Educator Award. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

They make all the difference. And too often, they get none of the credit.

But for three Western New York music teachers, a collective “Thanks for all you do” and an acknowledgement of their dedication and commitment to excellence has turned the spotlight away from the glitz and glam so often associated with the music business and placed it squarely on their humble classrooms.

Christina Custode of Niagara Falls High School, Jaime Pitnell of Buffalo Academy for Visual & Performing Arts, and Andrew Bennett of Fredonia High School have all been announced as quarterfinalists for a special 2020 Grammy Award. The three made the cut to a pool that includes 189 music teachers from 179 cities.

Dubbed the Grammy Music Educator Award, it was designed to honor teachers across the country “who have made a significant and lasting contribution to the field of music education and who demonstrate a commitment to the broader cause of maintaining music education in the schools.”

It should surprise no one that Western New York is full of teachers who have tirelessly, day in and day out, demonstrated such a commitment. Often, they’ve done so under more than challenging conditions, sometimes with the use of sub-par or outdated instruments, in the face of diminished funding, amid a culture that repeatedly seems to value sports over the arts when it comes to regional education environments.

There’s something of the hero about these educators, so motivated by the belief that music education will positively affect their students – whether they end up becoming full-time musicians, or if music simply becomes one pixel in their life’s picture – that they faithfully soldier on under sometimes dire circumstances.

The Grammys have acknowledged the depth of the music education talent pool in our region in the past – the first Grammy Music Educator Award, presented as part of the 2014 Grammy Awards ceremony, went to Westfield Academy music teacher and choir director Kent Knappenberger.



Buffalo Academy for Visual & Performing Arts music teacher Jaime Pitnell. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

Inspiration goes both ways

Like Knappenberger, Custode, Pitnell and Bennett – three teachers from diverse corners of the region – have formed deep bonds with their students through a free exchange of inspiration.

“It’s an honor to be acknowledged for something I feel passionate about doing,” Pitnell said. “My goals are to inspire my students to do great things, while also encouraging them to challenge themselves along the way. What I never imagined was they would do the same for me as an educator. They push me to be my best every day and for that I’m thankful.”

For Fredonia High School’s Bennett, the idea of “paying it forward” and connecting the educational community with the broader community has been his approach all along. This is the second time he’s advanced to the quarterfinalist stage since the award was introduced.

“It is truly an honor to be listed among this prestigious group of music educators once again,” Bennett said. “We have a vibrant music program here at Fredonia, and I am looking forward to using the next steps of this process to highlight the achievements of our student musicians and community.”



Fredonia High School music teacher Andrew Bennett. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Custode is unique in the quarterfinalist field – she was already, from 2016, a multiple Grammy Award nominee as a songwriter and performer, including her song "Fire."

I asked her how she continues to balance dual roles as musician and educator. Do they feed each other? Has her experience with students in the classroom environment changed her as a musician?



Niagara Falls High School music teacher Christina Custode. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

"In all that I do, I am first a musician," she said. "I became a music educator because I love music, and I want to share that passion with young musicians. I don't view my work as an educator and as a performer as two separate roles – they're just equal facets of what I do as a musician.

"My time spent with my students absolutely inspires my performances and songwriting, and my time performing heavily influences my teaching. I've been in the middle of glitzy performances in New York City and thought, 'Oh! I have to tell the kids about this when I get back!' I share my experiences with them – the best moments of my live performances, and especially, the worst.

"I think it's so important they see what a musician actually does. The assumption is that the industry is all glamour and good times, and I'm happy to show them that it's more about hard work, dedication to your art, composition, performance, and forming real connections through music with other people."

Reconnecting with the source

Formed as part of the Grammy in the Schools foundation, the Music Educator Award emerged at a time when it seemed the Grammys themselves were losing touch with the true sources of musical inspiration and falling in line with the "whatever sells is what's the best" approach. Though they'd long touted the party line the awards were handed out based on artistic and cultural merit, by 2014, it was becoming difficult to discern the artists with the most Grammys on their mantels from the artists routinely populating the upper echelons of the Billboard charts. Commercial success was being treated as the equivalent of artistic credibility.

By emphasizing the role music education plays in the development of individuals, their communities and the culture and country as a whole, the Grammys made headway in reconnecting with their original *modus operandi*.

"For every performer who makes it to the Grammy stage, there was a teacher who played a critical role in getting them there," reads a descriptive passage on Grammyintheschools.com. "And really, that's true for all of us who are making music today. Maybe they introduced you to your first instrument. Or they showed you how to get over your stage fright. Or maybe they just inspired you to have the confidence to go for it when you were ready to give up."

This language is echoed by Custode, who truly believes "music is everything for young people," particularly those who are struggling with the social and economic pressures often associated with life in contemporary public high schools.

"I know that's a huge sweeping statement, but I truly believe it," she said. "It's not just an isolated course with a set outcome of skills. Music informs a student's emotional, social and academic development. Music helps students discover who they are in the world, to develop opinions and to communicate them respectfully to their peers. It assists in forming a sense of self and identity. It teaches them how to be a valued individual and simultaneously part of a team. It teaches them perseverance and demonstrates how continued practice and persistence yields results.

"Music teaches students that it's OK not to be perfect all of the time. It teaches humility, patience and dedication. In a world where kids can feel so divided, isolated and alone, students participating in an ensemble have a sense of worth and belonging. Everyone is equal and welcome – it doesn't matter who you sit next to at lunch, it doesn't matter if you're a star athlete, it doesn't matter if you are a member of the chess club. In music, everyone has a place.

"Ultimately, music is an important part of development because it helps us become better human beings."

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The winner of the 2020 Grammy Music Educator Award will be announced during Grammy Week, which kicks off Jan. 20, 2020. The winner will be flown to Los Angeles to attend the Grammy Awards, receive the award at a ceremony during Grammy Week, plus pick up a \$10,000 personal honorarium