

A Portrait of Room 218

Finding community and building a sanctuary for classical music over three decades

By: Alec Rich



On June 11, 2020, Joseph Rutkowski switched on the lights of room 218. It was a simple maneuver, one he'd made countless times before over the last 30 years. On any normal day, the sea of empty chairs and stands he'd just illuminated would soon be filled with students: talking, tuning, watching, playing.

But on this day, there would be no students coming through that music room, just as there hadn't been since Great Neck North High School went remote three months earlier amidst the pandemic. So instead, Rutkowski pulled out his phone and documented the emptiness of it all.

"This is the room that I haven't been in since March 13," Rutkowski can be heard saying, as the camera pans across the space with its large arched windows and instrument cages lining the walls. "That's three months, I have never spent three months away from this room."

For some, that statement might be an exaggeration, but coming from Rutkowski, 66, and the school's storied instrumental director, the disappointment in his voice underscores just how

serious he is. Since 1991, thousands of students have studied under the baton of Rutkowski in room 218, hammering out scales and playing repertoire that goes far beyond the limits of most high school music classes in the country. From Beethoven's nine symphonies to the authentic works of Bernstein, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak and countless others, Rutkowski demands greatness from his students in that room, and often receives it year after year. Whether they're rehearsing for a school concert or the almost yearly invitation to Carnegie Hall, many of Rutkowski's students are often locked in a cycle of failure and growth, learning from both him and each other for the betterment of the ensemble. I know because I was one of those students.

For four years, room 218 served as a site of both great hardship and achievement for me. As a nervous freshman with my alto saxophone, there were days when I'd come in anxious, unsure of my place amongst so many high-achieving performers. On others, I'd feel a rush of accomplishment as I made progress playing lines from Gustav Holst's 'Jupiter' or Ralph Vaughn Williams' 'English Folk Song Suite,' leaning on older students in the program to keep me from getting lost.

Over time, I gained my footing in room 218, as many students who are willing to put in the work so often do. There were days I'd still come in worried, not wanting to be singled out for flubbing a note or missing an entrance. But slowly, my confidence grew as I began perfecting scales and ironing out common mistakes I was making in the repertoire of the week.

Really enjoying the music we played, I soon worked to soak in every opportunity I could in 218, from joining the after-school jazz band to volunteering for the annual pit orchestra three times. For five years prior to arriving at 218, I had played the alto saxophone, learning from some great teachers along the way. But within three years in 218 I'd worked to fill positions of need in the band by switching from the alto to the tenor saxophone in my sophomore year, and then from the tenor to the baritone the next. Learning the feel of a new instrument came with its own set of adjustments and hurdles, but having the confidence to even do so only came because of the expectations Rutkowski set for me. He knew I could do it with a little push, and after a while, I began believing that too.

I gained friends within the walls of 218, rehearsed for performances at Carnegie Hall in there, and played music like ‘An American in Paris’ and the ‘New World Symphony’ that still have a deep impact on me whenever I hear them today. Ask any number of alumni who have passed through 218 before or after me, and they’ll likely tell a similar story of growth and achievement.

Take, for instance, Sofia Notar-Francesco, 21, who graduated from the program in 2017 and is now in her final semester at Syracuse University. Notar-Francesco grew up around music, playing piano beginning at age four on the insistence of her parents and soon taking up singing as well as the viola once she got to elementary school. But years of lessons with intense piano instructors placed “pressure” on her, so much so that she “pulled away from [music] a little bit” just before reaching high school. Finally arriving in 218, she said her viola skills were “nothing special,” and that she was initially worried about embarrassing herself or letting Rutkowski down. But she recounted an early turning point at a pre-concert rehearsal that changed her trajectory.

“I remember him asking people rhetorically, ‘do you want to make the orchestra better or do you want to make it worse’,” Notar-Francesco said. “And as simplistic as that is, that was something that stuck with me because I knew I didn’t want to participate in this if I’m not going to be making it better.”

Constantly improving after that through practice and feeling inspired by Rutkowski’s leadership, Notar-Francesco said she rediscovered a love for music in 218, where she eventually rose to principal violist by her senior year. Even then, she said there were challenging moments in class and practices with Rutkowski, but the pressure to both perform well and help her section benefitted her even more.

“Whenever he would tell me that something wasn’t good enough or that something you could do better, I would definitely take it very personally,” Notar-Francesco said. But I just knew that once I calmed down from feeling inadequate, I would just remind myself that he just wants the best for all of us and he wants his orchestra to sound as good as it can. And he expected a lot from me because he knew I could do it.”

It was during that time as principal violist that Notar-Francesco decided to pursue a music education degree because of the time she spent in 218. For Notar-Francesco, the experiences she had in that room altered the course of her life, and now, just a few years later, she's set to begin student teaching in a few of weeks.

Now, this is not to say that most alumni of room 218 go on to pursue music or music education. Some do, most do not. But the feelings that Notar-Francesco described are ones experienced by many students who walk through those doors, whether it's at 7 a.m. for a before-school rehearsal, during their scheduled class time, or after the final bell has sounded at 2:33 p.m. for after-school band or orchestra.

Students don't have to put in that level of dedication and effort, but time and time again they do. So why is that, and how has the music program coming out of 218 that's inspired so many students remained successful for the last 30 years? The answer first requires a look at the background and mindset of the man at the front of the room, Rutkowski, because the program didn't begin this way, nor was it successful when he first took over in 1991.

Growing up in Queens, Rutkowski was surrounded by music. The son of a drummer in a polka band who also played accordion, guitar and harmonica, Rutkowski's father, uncle and grandfather would often play gigs together. Soon taking up the accordion himself, Rutkowski would play with his brother, who was on drums, at their own gigs.

Beginning the clarinet by the time he was in junior high living out on Long Island, Rutkowski said a turning point for him finally came a few years later when he moved from Central Islip Senior High School to Smithtown Central High School in his junior year. At Smithtown, Rutkowski met music teacher Lawrence Sobol, who would go on to become Rutkowski's primary mentor after his father. It was Sobol who first introduced Rutkowski to the power of classical music, which was far different from the polka music he'd grown up with around his father.

An intimidating presence, Rutkowski said Sobol's "taskmaster" mentality pushed him hard, with exercises like individually going down the line to make sure students played correctly (a tactic Rutkowski himself uses today). His first week at Smithtown, Rutkowski said he played Rossini's 'Italian in Algiers,' followed by the works of Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich, which fostered his love for classical music. Also a professional clarinetist, Sobol would perform outside of school, which only sparked Rutkowski's interest further.

"I used to go see Larry Sobol play clarinet at Carnegie Recital Hall and with his chamber ensemble," Rutkowski said. "So I saw all this music by the great masters of western civilization, Beethoven and Brahms and Bach, and it was so much better than what I was doing when I was in junior high school."

After graduating, Rutkowski originally studied music education for a year, but deciding that he didn't "want to spend [his] day with teenagers," opted to then study clarinet performance in the hopes of playing professionally. But after completing that clarinet performance degree, he soon found himself freelancing and playing the piano in bars and restaurants. Taking one last shot at solely performing as a career, Rutkowski entered the Munich Competition for clarinets in Germany in 1982. One of the oldest in the competition at 28, he came up short and was eliminated with 100 other clarinetists out of 120 in the first round. Defeated and realizing that he couldn't make a career out of just performing in New York City, Rutkowski returned to Sobol for advice.

"I called him up in the fall of 1982 and I said, 'Mr. Sobol, what am I going to do with my life, I'm not going to be able to make a living as a clarinetist.' And he said, 'stop talking about all this toilet paper Rutkowski, just get a job...get certified before it gets too hard'."

Despite his reservations about teaching high schoolers, Rutkowski listened to his mentor, and within a year, he had a New York State certification to begin teaching. His student teaching gig thereafter brought him to the famed Stuyvesant High School in 1983, where he'd remain for eight years before coming to Great Neck.

His time at Stuyvesant was both a shock and presented a challenge for Rutkowski who, from the start, saw the intensity of the music teachers there. While visiting in June of 1983 before he was to start that fall, Rutkowski recalls watching his soon-to-be-supervisor Max Watras only doing scales for the entire period with the class. Rutkowski originally questioned why this music program was so heralded if students simply labored through scales rather than playing music.

“He was just going down the line and making them play scales and reprimanding them if they weren't paying attention. I'll never forget I saw a saxophone player, he was talking to someone else, and Watras just sat there, and he didn't say a word until the kid realized it was silent... So when I saw that, I said, ‘I don't know how I'm going to get through this semester student teaching with this guy.’ But by the second day, when I heard how good the students sounded in the band class, because of the scales, I said that's the secret.”

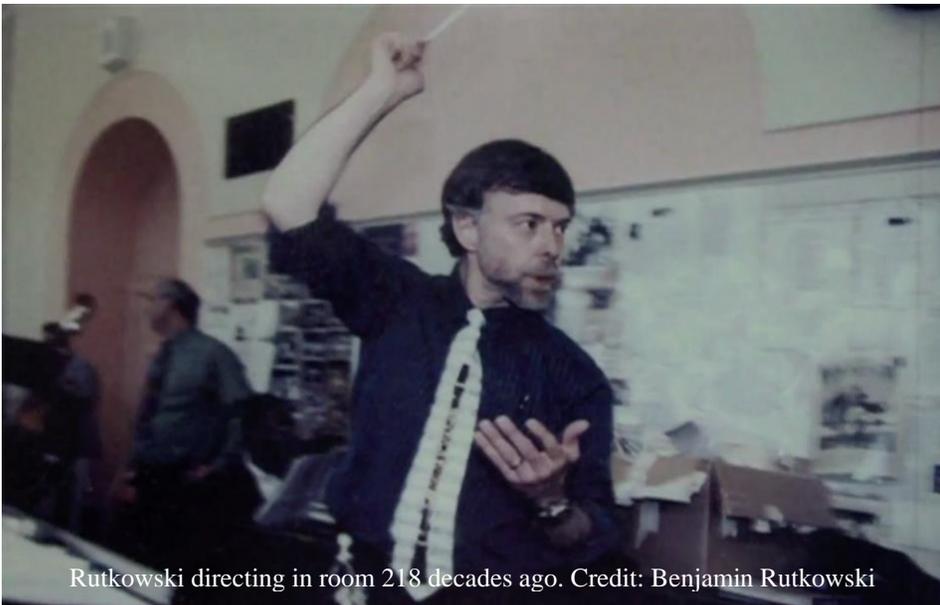
Over the next eight years at Stuyvesant alongside Watras, Rutkowski sealed his fate as a rigorous and devout music teacher, forging that signature mentality which he'd soon bring to room 218. But at that time, Rutkowski still believed he'd “stay at Stuyvesant until [he] retired,” that is, until he passed the city's assistant principal license exam for music, which would allow him to become the equivalent of a department head down the line. Heeding the advice of Watras that he'd need to take “interviews to be a chairman somewhere else” in order to gain experience for the Stuyvesant supervisor role, Rutkowski began interviewing on Long Island in the early 1990s.

After facing rejections from high schools out east, Rutkowski came across a New York Times opening for instrumental director and music chairman in Great Neck. The job, though it was one posting, actually combined two positions, instrumental director and music chairman of Great Neck North Middle School and Great Neck North High School instrumental director. Soon enough, after officials from the Great Neck search committee observed Rutkowski teaching at Stuyvesant, they offered him the job as they looked to revive a music program that had been driven “into the ground” by the previous teacher. But before taking the job, Rutkowski said he came to watch North High School's 1991 spring concert, to see what needed to be fixed.

“There were more people on the stage than there were in the audience and the orchestra didn't

even play because the best players couldn't make it," Rutkowski said. "So the instrumental director said, 'okay, we're not going to have an orchestra at the concert.' And the band played two numbers and they were really bad. But I said to myself, this is going to be so easy to make better once they learn the scales."

But upon arriving for his first day in room 218 that fall, things didn't come easy at all for Rutkowski. Having just walked over from teaching the middle schoolers down the street who had acted out and began to "eat at [him] like maggots on a piece of meat," Rutkowski was met by a similarly "pathetic" high school group. With just 15 students in the orchestra class and 50 in the band, Rutkowski said students asked to drop when told they could no longer come in just two



Rutkowski directing in room 218 decades ago. Credit: Benjamin Rutkowski

days a week like they had under the previous teacher.

"I told them no, no, no, this is band," Rutkowski said. "This is a class, we're here every day."

Leaving room 218 defeated that day, Rutkowski arrived home, unsure of what he'd

gotten himself into and questioning whether the program could even be saved at all.

"I said to my wife, 'I'm not going to make it in Great Neck.' This is a terrible place. The kids are so infantile...But I did not want to come back to Stuyvesant High School with the tail between my legs saying I couldn't make it."

So the next day, Rutkowski returned to 218 for eighth period orchestra and pressed on, despite some students not knowing how to tune their instruments and others spacing out entirely. Looking to have students play a C Major Scale in preparation for playing Mozart's Symphony 41 later that week, Rutkowski said it was again "terrible." With all that transpiring, in walked the

superintendent of schools at the time, William Shine, who stayed after class to speak with Rutkowski. Worried that Shine would fire him, instead Shine told Rutkowski that he was giving these kids “exactly what they need.” The students in 218 certainly needed a leader, but Rutkowski still wasn’t sure he was the right one for the job.

Telling Shine that six students the day before had asked to drop, Shine decided to step in, and the following period as the band class walked into 218, he made an announcement.

“I understand that some of you aren't happy to come through this class every day,” Shine, a retired Marine colonel said sternly. “If you don't want to come here every day, drop. I don't care if there are five of you left in this room tomorrow, if you don't want to be here every day, there's no hard feelings, just drop.”

21 band students did just that over the course of 1991, as parents began calling Shine to complain about not having the music class ‘experience’ their children were used to. Rutkowski, despite not taking any days off from work that year, said “every day was a struggle” to make the hour-long commute from Manhattan. Occasionally he’d return to visit Stuyvesant too, questioning why he ever left it for room 218.

In that first year as he kept working to build the program, he’d lean on other music faculty in the district, along with administrators like Shine, for guidance and assurance. Rutkowski also leaned heavily on his family, which includes a wife and two kids, who he was working to support and send to college despite the challenges of the job.

“Every morning when I was getting up in the dark to get ready to go to work, I'd come into my children's room and say to myself, this is why I'm going to work today, because I want to make a good life for them,” Rutkowski said.

But in time, Rutkowski said he began to find his footing with methods to keep classes more engaging besides just doing scales and eventually pieces. One of those methods included

listening to a piece of classical music on the classical radio station WQXR each day at the start of class, which gave Rutkowski renewed purpose in teaching music too.

“I realized that it's really important that students know about these great composers, and it's the way I'm going to spend my life, just working on music by great composers and then getting students to listen to WQXR,” Rutkowski said. “I realized that this is the best thing for the life of classical music, because if teachers don't do this, if music teachers don't keep this up, then classical music is going to die an early death.”

By the end of that first year in 218, following a successful graduation concert, Rutkowski said there were a few star students who made returning each day worth it.

“Had I been in a school where there was nobody that was dedicated, I don't I think I would have survived,” Rutkowski said. “I would have retired as soon as I could or just left.”

But in time, as more students learned and wanted to be a part of the music program, the number of students coming through 218 steadily grew, as did Rutkowski's appreciation for what was transpiring there. Each summer while doing inventory, Rutkowski said he soon looked forward to returning to that room again in the fall, eager to create more music with his students.



Rutkowski enters room 218 on an early morning in 2010. Credit: Benjamin Rutkowski

This was a mentality I noticed immediately upon entering 218 for the first time as a high school freshman. While I'd began playing the saxophone in fourth grade after winning a "lottery" for one of the few spots available, I wasn't, at that time, a very musically oriented person. My dad occasionally played piano, but I'd never learned it myself and had no idea what I was doing the first time I picked that saxophone up.

Over time as I progressed through middle school, I did well for myself, but there was still a massive learning curve when making the leap to the music we played under Rutkowski in 218. Each day, he'd both berate and uplift students with his words, always working to bring us one step closer to his vision of great art.

At one point in my freshman year, while rehearsing a sequence in Holst's 'Jupiter,' I just could not get down a portion where the saxophones were playing alone. Soon, Rutkowski went down the line, calling on each saxophonist to play one-by-one. I remember missing some notes on my turn, and feeling the embarrassment wash over me as Rutkowski continued calling students out. Flash forward to the night of the concert, when we'd occasionally warm up without the music in front of us. I remember vividly playing that same sequence from memory, recognizing that the practice I'd done in the time after that moment of shame led to an amazing improvement.

In other respects too, namely maturity, being in room 218 gave students the opportunity to become more responsible through the mentorship of other students and idea of self-accountability. This was something that stood out to Notar-Francesco, the alumni and college student now pursuing music education.

"Our high school was very competitive, and I think that some people needed a little bit of a wake-up call in many respects," Notar-Francesco said. "So if you were going to be a member of the orchestra or the band, you had to show that you were capable of it, so it's something to get used to in being in the type of classroom that Mr. Rutkowski runs. But I think that for a lot of people, he was just what they needed."

Great Neck North was an extremely competitive place, in terms of gaining both recognition and earning high marks in the classroom. But for those of us in the music community, room 218 presented a rare break from it all. It gave students an opportunity for tangible self-improvement

that often wasn't noticeable in the day-to-day grind of any other class. Sure, you could score better on a science quiz a few weeks after the previous one, but entering 218 gave many students, like myself, a chance to take a step back and track the incremental improvements I had made each day.

The room was also an equalizer. For students who didn't heed Rutkowski's constant warnings to practice, they risked falling behind their peers, bringing down the overall progress of the program itself. And while this might all sound highly pressurized, and it could be at times, the understanding that you were working with one another toward a collective goal made students even more eager to try their best.



Demonstrating that idea in our interview, Rutkowski noted an exchange he'd had with a sophomore student at the graduation performance in 2015, one year before he was planning to retire. That student, who he said didn't practice much, had still managed to convince her friends to come to after-school orchestra that year quite often. Rutkowski said partially because of her

efforts that year, along with those of other dedicated students in her class, he'd never had such high after-school attendance numbers. So graduation day in 2015 came, and she was one of the students performing with the ensemble before sending off the graduating class. As she was preparing to take her seat in the pit of Tilles Center, a concert hall where North holds its commencement each June, she noticed the golden tie with music notes that Rutkowski was wearing and came up to him.

“And she just said, ‘I love that tie, I want you to give it to me when I graduate’.” “So I said to myself, ‘poor kid, she doesn't know I'm not going to be around here when she graduates, it's too bad’,” Rutkowski said. Then, when I got home, it was such a good graduation, I said, ‘I don't think I want this to be my last year’.”

So Rutkowski decided to stay a few more years, and two years later, when that student was at her own graduation, Rutkowski took off that golden tie, which he remembered to wear that day, and gave it to her. Though she didn't remember the exchange from two years earlier, he had, and I note that story because it underscores the connection both Rutkowski and his students can form within the walls of 218 over the course of just four years.

It's now been four years since that student graduated, and Rutkowski remains instrumental director at Great Neck North. Unable to pull himself away from that classroom after so many cherished performances over the last few years, he still wakes up a little after 4 a.m. each morning, preparing for the commute from the city.

But things are starkly different in the age of the pandemic. Students have since returned to 218 in a hybrid format, with half coming in every other day. Rutkowski now wears a double-mask and employs a face shield as he switches on the lights in that familiar music room each day. It hasn't been easy to direct a band class that can't play under these conditions, and instead must hum scales or listen to music recordings that they'd normally be playing.

Rutkowski also acknowledged that he is “nervous” to enter 218 these days, as he makes sure the windows are cracked (even when it's freezing outside) and that all 22 to 24 students in a period are fully masked up. And while he's always enjoyed walking around the building in between classes, nowadays he does everything he can to avoid students in the hallways.

“Sometimes if I’m in the building in another room and classes are changing, I do get nervous when I see that many kids together,” Rutkowski said. “So I always duck into an office and wait for the passing to be, but sometimes if it’s when I have to be in the room, I have to get up through there.”

But despite the harsh realities of teaching in the coronavirus era, Rutkowski continues to walk into 218 each day, not only for himself, but to continue the push for classical music that has bonded him and his students together for the last 30 years.

“I find great comfort that so many students think of the time that they were in room 218 when they hear a piece that we worked on, especially if there's a piece that we did for a concert or a piece that we worked on for four years,” Rutkowski said. “When they hear that, if they think about being in that room with their friends and me, that means a lot.”