

The Many Hats of the Piano Teacher

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I often reflect on the needs of my piano students who, like inquisitive gophers popping up out of their snug, cozy homes, bravely show up at my studio week in and week out for their lesson. They encompass a vast range of ages, talents, motivations, and characters, from youngsters just beginning to get their feet wet to those grizzled teenage veterans who through perseverance, determination and the helping hand of talent and parental support, find themselves exploring the high country of Beethoven and Bach with excitement and awe. Fortunately, there are only two genders, or the complexity would be overwhelming! I am constantly astonished by the sheer number and variety of roles that I am forced to play if I wish to teach well. Here are a few of the many hats that I believe we, as teachers, must wear if we are to truly make a difference in the lives of our students.

For beginning students, and unfortunately for many older ones who should know better, we are accountants, cautious, painstaking, demanding, but leavened with warmth and humour so as not to scare them off. We constantly draw their attention to the importance of clearly reading the score for accurate notes, rhythms, articulations, dynamics and so on. Without attention to and mastering of these sometimes mundane but always easily solved details, it is impossible to be artistically expressive. The score is a map, a list of instructions, and this list needs to be checked at least twice to see if the student has been naughty or nice. No presents for those who are naughty! However, this is only the beginning, the foundation on which the rest of their piano playing will rest.

We are research scientists, employing the scientific method to help students improve. The scientist must take a problem, reduce it to its component parts, solve each one, and then put the entire puzzle back together again into a working whole. The teacher must always be asking “why is this not working?” and “how can I help the student overcome the problem?”, using the teaching studio as a laboratory for experiments. If one solution doesn't yield results, then we must try another. Quite often, the root of a large problem can be found in a single and very simple cause, such as faulty fingering, inefficient hand position, a misunderstanding of the phrasing, and so on. In order to properly teach technique, a teacher has to combine the diagnostic skills of a fine doctor with the keen eye of an Olympic coach. We need to be aware of fine subtleties of movement in conjunction with the necessary geometry of good hand position. We compare the way the student moves to the sound they are producing, and come up with creative and effective ways to solve uneven scale passages, poorly voiced chords, awkward arpeggios, and so on. This is another facet of the foundation.

We are a combination of psychologist and counsellor. It is necessary to be able to peer into the minds of our students and piece together why they have trouble mastering this or that. What is it in their thought processes that throw up such obstinate barriers

sometimes? And at the same time, we have to be able to look dispassionately into the workings of our own minds, overcome our own fears and insecurities, and find a way to help our students through tough times, whether it is as serious as a failed audition or as trivial as simply overcoming a bad mood in order to do some good work. We need to constantly look into ourselves and be sure that the path on which we lead the students is the best one for them.

On occasion and with great reluctance, we are law enforcement officers, ensuring that students put in enough quality practice time. Sometimes, despite all our best efforts, we are unable to overcome negative influences in a student's life. When a student succumbs to insufficient practice time, lack of parental support, loss of interest, an overwhelming urge to retreat to the anesthetizing security of the television screen when the going gets rough, we are forced to tell parents the uncomfortable fact that given the present state of their progress, their child is not likely to get any further in piano. Sometimes, that is all it takes to stimulate improvement. Sometimes not. And sometimes, as the messenger who is punished for bad news, we must suffer the consequences of bad feelings that follow the announcement, whether or not it is our fault.

As we help them solve the essentially mechanical problems of reading and technique, we are also language teachers, showing them the language and grammar of music. Phrasing, breathing, direction, shape, diction all become new tools for students to use, broadening their possibilities for expression. As we gradually help them penetrate those mysteries, we become poets who can guide our students into deeper meanings of the music. We can show them how subtleties of rhythm and colour can move us to laugh, to cry, to sometimes shatter the walls that we all build around ourselves. We can show them how the doom-laden "fate knocking on the door" of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony also permeates his piano music, how the sensuous, mercurial whims of Debussy conjure exotic, nebulous images, how the insistent, driving rhythms of Prokofiev and Bartok imbue us with an irresistible urge to move.

We are lawyers or judges, pronouncing our considered opinions in matters of interpretation and style, poring over weighty and often ambiguous precedents in CPE Bach or Turk. "Your honour, does this Baroque trill need to start on the upper note?" "Well, young man, let us consider the evidence..." We must always debate fine points of interpretation because in the case of musical expression, everything matters. We combine this with yet another hat, that of the enthusiastic historian who brings to life the distinctions between styles, how they fit in with the philosophies of the time, and how those philosophies are manifest in the music. We show students how the irrepressible excitement and boundless energy of world discovery is restlessly pent up in the music of the Baroque, how the reasoning, enlightened fascination with structure drives the music of the Classical period, how the desperate volcanic urge towards self expression of the Romantics caused their music to gush over the formal boundaries of classical structure. We show students that there were countless different ways of thinking about music, and therefore about life, and encourage them to think beyond their own world.

Finally and most importantly, we are artists. This encompasses everything we do, from the meticulous accounting of every note to the creative scientific way in which we solve problems to the imaginative poetic way we use and teach the language of music. For those lucky students who have the determination, the courage, the talent and the support to follow us into the high country where the great musical geniuses lived and worked, we can help show them a very special world. By showing them the way to that wonderful limitless world of music, we help them find themselves. And in seeking creative and artistic ways to guide students over the tricky and sometimes dangerous path, we find ourselves.

Oh, did I happen to mention anything about patience and saints?

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