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VOX HUMANA: Lessons

We take them. We give them.

The concept is probably as old as humans themselves: imparting knowledge and skills for money. Nearly everyone reading this likely sat in a studio with a teacher at some point – if not an organ teacher then certainly a piano teacher, voice teacher, or band instrument teacher – struggling to coordinate fingers, feet, breath, and brain in conformity to an abstract archetype of sound as drawn in graphic dots and lines on a piece of paper. Through all this did we muddle, all the while negotiating the impregnable opinions and egos of our gurus.

So we have earned the right to our insights into the administration of musical learning. All of us have tales to tell, the narratives of yet another class of survivors. When it comes to music, the concept of “mentor and tormentor” surely thrives. But these thoughts are less about the people, the styles, the techniques (all ideas that should live to see another editorial column), than the outcomes.

Why do individuals study music? What do they expect? Where does it lead them? Has anyone counted the ratio of success to failure? Are we doomed to the eternal damnation with faint praise that has us hearing again and again the lament of those who, later in life, sigh, “if only I had continued taking” [fill in your instrument] “when I was young.” Sure, and if only I had bought those 5000 shares of Xerox in 1959 too!

A random sampling of teachers would unquestionably shake loose a significant number of anecdotes about the students who ostensibly study for no reason. There are, we know, large numbers of students of anything who seem to take up space, suck up the air, waste precious time and money, and all for little gain. Educators of all stripes know that 20% of the population can take up 80% of the available time. “At risk” is a category demanding much of that commodity, “time.”

What triggers the dogged determination of some to persevere rather than succeed? Maybe it is a reworking of the survival apparatus that leads us to shelter, food, or security? Maybe narcissism? Perhaps righteous hope? Fantasy? Powerlessness in the face of the lack of progress?

Why study if we don't practice? A colleague, a respected and resourceful cello teacher, has organized the “Spinoza Practice Club” at our university. She assembles applied music students (and not only her cellists, but anyone taking lessons) and sets up a two-hour window a couple of times a week where they all meet, and work in their respective practice rooms until an official break time, then resume. Once finished, they eat pizza and compare notes on progress. They log their time and compete for small practice-related honors, like best feedback from teachers this week, or fewest mistakes, or most new pieces learned. Motivation makes a difference in playing the violin as surely as in fitness workouts or organizational management.

But if there is dysfunctional disengagement in some music teaching studios, so there is also defiance. Some students just see lessons as an occasion to dig in heels and

resist change. The process of change, after all, is the process of music. Performing better is change. Technique is change. Interpretation is change. A student once announced that he would only play certain repertoire, and if assigned anything he felt was outside his realm of interest, ability, or acceptability, he would simply refuse to practice or play it. What is a teacher to do when this behavior comes with a check for the hours' time? Is learning a consumer activity? Are we cheapened to the domain of consumer choice akin to questions of McDonalds rather Wendy's, Honda over Toyota, Tide before Wisk?

And what of the moral and professional responsibilities of teachers? Do teachers encourage students based solely on talent, potential, growth, and change? Do they succumb to the economic pressures, or worse, shape, control, or live vicariously through students, all the while acquiring thanks and acclaim? If it seems a sordid allegation, it is also credible in some studios, especially in some voice studios where students report hearing messages from teachers like, "your instrument is not there yet, dear, but stay with me and the world will discover your comeliness in time." How tragic the failed star who has never once seen the stage nor tasted of the deep contentment that comes from artistic work well done, but having subsisted in false hope fueled by the domineering maestro, and who only remembers a what/if future of the remote past.

The outcomes of teaching are sometimes not very pretty. But it was only about ten years ago that the literature on teaching shifted its emphasis to learning, and that's the rub. If we – all of us, teachers and students, interested parties, professionals, amateurs – begin to think of musical learning rather than music instruction, studios, pedagogy, then many of the deficits of becoming musicians should fade. A student aware of what it means to learn has the tools to confront any lack of progress and celebrate advancement. A teacher attentive to learning over teaching can cultivate the self-effacing humility to impart and encourage rather than to overwhelm and abuse. Ultimately, we might just learn that all teaching is, in the end, self teaching.

- Haig Mardirosian