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The Art and Science of Becoming a Successful Studio Teacher

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The Art and Science of Becoming a Successful Studio Teacher

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Honors Research Project

Submitted to

The Honors College

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For a music teacher, running a private studio is both an art and a science. The teacher must be skilled at his or her craft and must also be an effective entrepreneur. Whether a teacher is just beginning to build a studio, or has a thriving studio, the work is never done. Each student brings unique talents and issues, requiring critical thinking each step of the way.

One of the first problems music teachers face is how to select curriculum. There are a variety of ways to choose appropriate materials for students, but an important thing to remember is that each student is different. The needs of every student cannot be met with the same teaching plan. In the beginning stages, it is important to focus on the fundamentals of playing the instrument. This should be addressed for each of the students who are in the beginning stages, as well as those who are in need of corrective teaching in fundamentals if, for example, they have never had proper private instruction on the instrument. Making sure students have a good grasp of fundamentals provides for a much easier and more enjoyable process later in their training.

Without practice, students cannot improve their skills. It is crucial that a student has a good understanding of how to practice. When teaching a student to practice, there are several tools to use. For example, a teacher can demonstrate to the students how practice time might be set up. Perhaps they may start with warm-up exercises, followed by etudes, scales, and arpeggios, and lastly, repertoire. The students should be taught how a piece can be broken down into small sections in order to identify problem spots and use drills and exercises to work on those difficult sections. Additionally, requiring students to keep a practice journal and write in it every day is

beneficial to their learning. They can write what pieces, exercises, scales, arpeggios and etudes they practice and goals they have for each practice session. They can then use these journal entries to evaluate themselves, working toward the ultimate goal of becoming their “own best teacher” (Dr. Margaret Tung). Giving students a set amount of time to practice each day is also very helpful. For young students, involving the parents, by informing them how much time their child should be practicing each day, is a good way to ensure the student is staying motivated to practice and does not forget to practice until the day before his or her lesson. Another good motivator for young students is to keep a log of how much time they spend practicing each week. At the end of a semester or a year, awards can be given to each student who goes above and beyond the expected practice time. Such methods give students added incentive to practice.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when teaching young students is that, for them, maintaining a fun atmosphere in lessons and practice is crucial. Students will grow more diligent in their work if they first learn to enjoy music-making. Positive reinforcement is another great tool to use in motivating students. If they work efficiently, with good results and supportive feedback from the teacher, that will encourage more hard work in the future. Students enjoy being praised by their instructors. Fundamentals can be learned through any genre of music, so discovering if the students respond better to classical, pop, jazz, or any other genre is helpful in keeping their attention focused. Even with advanced students, who may need focus on a particular set of literature or genre, giving them options from a list of pieces can help keep students motivated to put the necessary work into their practice sessions. “I also

like to, in selecting repertoire, offer options; a controlled list of appropriate pieces that would be good for the student” (Dr. Todd Gaffke). If they are fond of the piece, they will enjoy the practice and be more willing to put in the time to learn it properly. Additionally, assigning students a very specific list of what to work on each week will improve practice productivity. It will also ensure that students understand clearly what the teacher expects them to have prepared for the following lesson. When these expectations are not met, it is important for the teacher to determine why the student is not prepared. For a student who is usually prepared and occasionally comes to lessons without proper preparation, the cause is often understandable, such as a big exam or a family emergency. In cases when a student perpetually comes to lessons unprepared, there is an issue which needs to be addressed. In addition to discussing the issue with the student, it is often helpful to include the parents in the discussion. If the problem persists, it may become necessary for the teacher to remove the student from the studio. This can be a very difficult decision for teachers to make, both from a personal and a financial perspective, but it will be more beneficial for both the student and the teacher in the long run.

For the teacher, determining the expectations can be a daunting task. Students have varying abilities and different overall goals. “What works for one person does not work for another person, so you just have to get to know them” (Professor Sue Yelanjian). If students are young, they may not yet know the importance music may play in his or her life. In such cases, pushing students at first and then observing how they respond to the challenge is a good way to determine how far to push them. For older students, it is important for the teacher to know what they foresee their musical

future to look like. If they have plans to pursue music as a career, the teacher should push them to constantly strive for the highest level of playing. However, for students whose goals are to be proficient on an instrument, but they do not desire to pursue a career in music, the push will be different. It is still important to expect that the students will continue to improve and grow as musicians, but the standards will not be the same as for future professional musicians. The goal then becomes to improve skills, teach discipline, and create future music supporters.

While teachers have different ways of using demonstration in lessons, it is a teaching technique that nearly all will use in some way. A very common method is to demonstrate a passage or a new technique, then ask the students to imitate. This helps students to understand exactly the sound they should be aiming to produce. With this method it is sometimes necessary for the teacher to play without a particular technique if the student is not yet advanced enough to attempt the new technique. For example, on a string instrument, an advanced bow stroke, which would be used in a passage by an advanced student or professional, may at times not be demonstrated for less advanced students. Other times the new technique can be used to begin getting a more elegant sound in students' ears. Another method that is occasionally used is first playing how the students played, incorrectly, then playing the correct way to show them the difference. When using this technique, it is important to exaggerate what the students did wrong in order to make the difference more obvious to the students' ears, which will not yet be well-trained. With this technique, the students can easily hear the difference between the incorrect and correct ways of playing a passage. It is important to remember that for some students, too much demonstration can be harmful. If, for

example, students learn very well by ear, but do not read music well, demonstrating everything can lead to the students only playing by ear and never learning to properly read the music, which is very detrimental to their musical growth.

A challenge for new teachers is simply building a large enough studio to meet their financial needs. There are several ways teachers can promote themselves and gain students. Initially it is a lot of work. Finding out which schools in the area have band or orchestra programs can be a great first step. Contacting the music directors at those schools and setting up a time to go to the school and give a speech or a clinic to the students will often get children interested in taking lessons. Making such a presentation fun and exciting will also help to gain their interest. As success is built, teachers should advertise what their students' accomplishments have been, such as winning competitions or being accepted to music conservatories or universities to study music at the college level. Another helpful tool in building a studio is to set up solid networking. Friends, colleagues, and former teachers are all beneficial to new teachers looking to acquire students. When students are looking for teachers, they may contact somebody who is unable to take on more students. In such cases, they will be redirected, often to new teachers who are still looking to continue growing their private studios.

Another important thing to keep in mind as music teachers is to think about how their students will address them. While teachers have different opinions on this question, they do agree that maintaining an understanding about the difference between teacher and student and having a good respect for the teacher is crucial. Often, teachers who are close in age to their students will choose a more formal title, such as

Mr., Ms., Dr., or Professor. This can ensure that students remember that, while they may not be much younger than their teacher, they must give them due respect. In some cases, a teacher opts to be called by his or her first name only. This can create a certain level of comfort and trust between student and teacher. Each case is different.

Depending on the area in which the teacher lives, rates of payment will be different. It is best to discover what an average cost of lessons on the particular instrument is in that area and set the rates based on that. Doing this ensures that parents will not be deterred by higher than acceptable rates and also makes sure that the teacher is paid fairly. Having a contract for students and parents to sign is a very useful tool and will protect the teacher and guarantee that money will not be lost due to missed lessons. The contract should include an outline of teaching philosophy, rate and frequency of payment, practice expectations, and attendance policy. Clearly outlining what constitutes an excused absence is crucial. This will guarantee the teacher will get paid for his or her time in the event that students do not show up for their lessons or cancel without sufficient warning. Having the parents pay prior to lessons will also help this issue. For example, if the teacher is paid on the first of the month for the entire month of lessons, he or she will get the money for each of those lessons regardless of whether or not the student shows up for the lesson.

Knowing how best to engage the parents is an important skill for all music teachers to understand. Some parents will have almost no desire to be a part of their child's music-learning experience. Others will try to be too involved, correcting the student as they practice at home and questioning the teacher's decisions and instructions during lessons. "Don't correct every mistake...They need to be able to

make mistakes sometimes and play through it” (Mrs. Darla Proseus). It is important to help parents find a healthy balance. Communicating to the parents very clearly will help them understand the nature of their role in their child’s learning process. It will also build up a trust between the teacher and the parents, which is vital to the success of a studio. For example, if a student is in need of a new instrument or other piece of equipment, the parents will be more comfortable making the financial investment necessary if they trust the teacher. It is crucial to understand that buying a new instrument is a big commitment. It is not always possible for parents to make such a financial commitment. Remembering that it is more important to have excellent equipment for students who are pursuing a career in music than for those who are not will help a teacher determine how hard to push the idea of making such a purchase. Letting parents know what specific needs a better quality or properly sized instrument will meet for the students will often help. In addition to the need for new instruments, teachers should always be aware of the condition of the student’s instrument. Proper instrument care, repairs and routine maintenance should be discussed with parents from the first lesson. Doing this will aid in keeping instruments in good playing condition.

Some teachers require students to perform, while others do not, but any successful studio teacher will, at the very least, provide opportunities for his or her students to perform. The performances could take many forms, such as playing for residents in care homes, organized Fall and Spring recitals, or competitions and contests. Gauging what a student will gain from public performance must be done on an individual basis since some students will one day be professional performers, and

others on the opposite end of the spectrum may have unnecessary anxiety associated with music if they are required to perform. Determining which category a student falls in takes good personality analysis and is very important.

When preparing students to perform, especially if it is their first performance, teachers should make sure to help the students prepare properly. Thoroughly learning the music is key to a successful performance. When choosing a piece, it must be kept in mind that students should play pieces that challenge them, but that are well within their capabilities. Then, as they learn the pieces, having bench mark goals along the way will aid in good, solid preparation. In addition to learning their pieces, students will need help mentally preparing for performance. Encouragement and positive thinking greatly help the confidence of the students as they near the performance. Teachers should remind them to trust that they have been thoroughly prepared and are ready to share their music with the audience. It is also beneficial for students to give practice performances for family or friends to let them feel how their nerves will affect their performance and learn to cope with those nerves. Additionally, teachers can have the students imagine they are in the performance space; have them imagine what the room will look like, who will be there, how they will be feeling. This helps to ensure there are as few surprises as possible for the students on the day of the performance.

For music teachers, another aspect of student performance is the organizational components; where and when the recital will take place, etc. Locations such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and sometimes churches will often allow teachers to host their student recitals in their facilities free of charge. This saves money for the teacher and his or her students and also provides an enjoyable activity for the residents

of the care facility. Contacting the Activities Directors at such facilities is a great way to set a time and place for a recital. Once a time and place is set, teachers should announce to the students and their parents when the recital will take place and create a list of which students will participate. Additionally, having a typed and printed program improves the overall event, making the recital more formal and professional. Getting everything organized as early as possible will lead to a successful event.

The job of music teachers is not an easy one because they must possess many skills. They deal with people on an individual basis, as each student is completely unique, so they must have excellent teaching and personality analysis skills. They also must have a good mastery of their musical instruments in order to be able to teach effectively. Additionally, they run their own businesses, which requires a completely different set of skills beyond their musical talents or their abilities as a teacher. Because of this, teachers must remember that continually working to improve each set of skills is crucial to building and maintaining a thriving private music studio.

Appendix A

Interview Sources

Dr. Margaret Tung, Assistant Professor of Horn, University of Akron

Dr. Todd Gaffke, Assistant Professor of Saxophone, University of Akron

Professor Sue Yelanjian, Professor of Bass, University of Akron

Mrs. Darla Proseus, Private Piano Teacher, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Pedagogy

What kind of curriculum do you use? Do you use set curriculum? Is it the same for every student?

How do you approach teaching students to practice and motivating them to do so?

How do you find the right way and degree to push students in their studies?

What do you do when students come unprepared for their lesson?

How much do you play in the lessons?

When you do play in a lesson, what techniques do you use? Do you play how the students played and then contrast that by playing how it should be played?

Do you require a certain number of solo performances each year? What about orchestra? Is that something you require?

How do you prepare students for a solo performance, especially if it is their first time performing solo?

Organization

What do you have your students call you?

How do you decide on a payment rate, and have you found a particular payment schedule to work best?

How do you engage the parents? Do they sit in on the lessons?

How do you approach the topic when a student is in need of a new instrument?

Marketing

In what ways do you promote yourself as a teacher and attract students?

What have I left out?

Appendix C

Spring Recital Program



Appendix D

Spring Recital Group Photograph

