

## **THOUGHTS ON TEACHING MUSIC THEORY AND COMPOSITION**

Much of what I have learned about teaching music over the past twenty years has happened slowly, away from my students, during long periods of quiet reflection. Following so many lectures and exams, discussions with peers or graduation recitals – all peppered with the usual failures from time to time – I have gradually discovered what works in the classroom. With experience and the test of time finally on my side, I am now more confident in voicing my thoughts on teaching and mentoring. Still, there is much learning waiting ahead.

Most attempts to develop and articulate a single teaching philosophy in application to a wide range of academic environments are bound to be unsuccessful at some point. The goals of a liberal arts education are fundamentally different from the competitive milieu of a music conservatory or the typical life on a state university campus, where the focus on affordable education can sometimes overshadow initiative and talent. Yet, a number of general concepts and strategies have provided me the strength to succeed in most situations and educational environments. I shall focus on these.

### **In search of a role model**

I learned so much more from musicians who could set an example before preaching about it. Starting with my best teachers and going back to Bach, Schoenberg or Messiaen, all of them equally inspiring as composers and mentors, the lessons I learned are simple: never stop searching, composing, sharing and inspiring. Such role models can have a lasting effect upon students trying to find their voice and develop an artistic identity, as their pursuits can easily resonate across the mentor-apprentice line.

Young or experienced, composers will eventually head in different aesthetic directions. Yet, we are all looking for a more personal and unique way to create music, working with similar ideas and concepts, and trying to draw from the contemporary world. It just happens that we, the mentors, are a little more experienced. By showing before preaching about it, striving to become a role model one day shall remain my primary goal as an educator.

### **The gift of communication**

Like most students, I too have experienced a few endless lectures with little impact on my growth. Often, it was not that my teachers had nothing to say; it was that they didn't know how to say it. While the resolution of a dominant-seventh chord or the basic structure of the sonata-allegro form have not changed much over the past few centuries, the way we communicate has gone through numerous transformations.

Every new generation of students is bound to read less than before, or better said, is probably going to read differently. Despite that more content is being produced every day, there are fewer bookstores and music stores where relevant information can be sorted out and curated. Libraries are rarely crowded. Ultimately, it is not a lack of information that prevents a student from succeeding, but a lack of pertinent information or even the abundance of irrelevant data.

This is where our mentoring work becomes essential. Unless we have a clear understanding of how every new generation is going to develop skills and acquire knowledge, especially with technology evolving so fast, we are bound to resonate less and less with our students.

A great teacher is an effective communicator, willing to adapt, change and learn continuously. He or she is in tune with the present-day student, and ready to constantly reform the means of communication by seeking feedback and providing it at the same time.

### **Mastering the canon and revolting against it**

Most masterpieces I know were created by composers with a deep understanding of their past. In the western musical world, a successful teacher should encourage all students to master the traditional skills and techniques pertaining to musicianship, tonal harmony, musical forms, counterpoint, and orchestration. Having been educated in a music conservatory from the age of seven, I have learned to appreciate the values of a solid foundation in music theory. Whether I had to wrestle with the strict rules of part writing, take careful steps in 16<sup>th</sup> century species counterpoint, or move in-between the fixed and movable do solfège systems, mastering the canon took time and a considerable amount of steady work. It was a phase that I fully accepted and eventually completed. It was great.

Each new generation will flourish and grow by bringing us new ideas and ideals. Some will even revolt against the canon. As with any field, in music change happens through gradual processes of evolution interrupted occasionally by drastic revolutions. Ultimately, we have the duty to encourage our students to think beyond the canon, and if needed, revolt against it and us.

### **Music doesn't come from music**

I have learned so much in the classroom, but so much more outside, away from musical instruments and staff paper. Having had time to reflect upon my growth as a composer and teacher, I cannot underestimate how much I have discovered on my own, after being taught how and where to search for knowledge and inspiration. I shall continue this search, while teaching students the same great lessons I was fortunate enough to learn from real life experiences.

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