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Music Teaching Philosophy

At my first piano lesson as an undergraduate, my professor Michael Zenge asked me, “How has your work gone this week, and how can I help you with that work?” I had never been asked those questions by any teacher in any subject. Little did I know that my professor’s short questions would profoundly affect the entire course of my education and become central to my philosophy of teaching.

Prof. Zenge’s questions forced me to consider the work I had done. What was going well, and where were my stumbling blocks? Did those stumbling blocks simply require more hours in the practice room, or did they require a new tactic or new information? Over months and years, my teacher’s questions, asked at the beginning of every lesson, brought me to a state of mindful deliberate practice. Guided by my teachers, I became expert at identifying technical, musical, stylistic, and expressive issues in the pieces I was playing, and both my practice and my lessons became problem-solving sessions. Of course, there were problems I didn’t recognize—we all have blind spots, and my teachers certainly let me know about them. Once they were in the open, they could be addressed, and I could be better on guard against future blind spots. When I finished my four years with Prof. Zenge, he told me that his aim all along had been to work himself out of a job. I credit Prof. Zenge with teaching me how to teach myself—and helping me discover my artistic voice in the process.

Students are individuals; each student comes from a unique background. Inspired by Prof. Zenge, I hope to honor this diversity of experience and encourage students to develop their unique artistic voices. I view my principal role as teaching students how to teach themselves and discover their voices. I approach this task from a number of different vantage points, all of which have applications beyond the realm of music performance:

Learning how to learn: Since my years with Prof. Zenge, there have been tremendous advances in the neuroscience of learning. That knowledge is, of course, essential for teachers as well as learners. I try to keep abreast of the latest research in learning so that I can better align my approach with the biological reality of the brain. I am part of a community of like-minded music teachers who are deeply interested in what neuroscience can tell us about best practices for learning music.

Development of healthy technical habits at the piano: While studying musicology at the University of Pennsylvania, I had the opportunity to study privately with legendary teacher Yoheved Kaplinsky, currently the head of the piano department at Juilliard. She introduced me to the technical approach of Dorothy Taubman, a detailed and specific approach to technique that is centered on healthy alignment and coordination. I still continue this work with John Bloomfield, faculty chair of the Golandsky Institute and one of the principal protégés of Taubman. I use this body of knowledge to help students solve technical problems. In some cases, students need to completely rethink their technical approach to the piano, often because of pain or injuries. The Taubman Approach is the framework I use for addressing these problems. I have been awarded grants by the University of California-Berkeley to study this work and implement it with students.

Development of body awareness: It is impossible to develop healthy playing habits without a deep awareness of the body and how it moves. For many years, I have been a student of the Alexander Technique, a technique of body awareness that is centered on the development of well-coordinated movement habits. I have worked with legendary Alexander teacher Giora Pinkas for over ten years.

While the Taubman work centers on specific aspects of playing the piano, Alexander work focuses on the coordination of the whole body. Both are necessary for complete freedom in playing.

Development of stylistic understanding: I was fortunate to have teachers with profoundly deep knowledge of style and performance practice. One of my undergraduate teachers, Phyllis Rappeport, arranged for me to study fortepiano with Malcolm Bilson one summer. It blew my mind! Michael Zenge encouraged me in the study of 19th century vocal music and poetry, leading to a deep love of vocal music. Both urged me to seriously study organ, harpsichord, and fortepiano and bring that knowledge and experience back to the modern piano. They also supported me in my scholarly endeavors in music; this led to studying musicology at the University of Pennsylvania and to a doctoral minor in musicology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I try to help students make musical decisions through the lens of stylistic understanding, and I encourage students to work with primary sources as they develop that understanding.

Development of musicality and imagination: I was fortunate to have wildly imaginative teachers. My teachers encouraged me to push the boundaries of good taste, try out crazy ideas, and think way outside the box to discover the music hiding inside the notes. I do the same with my own students. If a wild and crazy idea helps us understand and feel music more deeply, bring it on. Students come to the table with wildly diverse personal and musical backgrounds. I view this diversity as a strength, a boon to the development of an individual and unique musicality, imagination, and artistic voice.

Management of performance anxiety: Neuroscience has much to tell us about this topic as well. Advances in the understanding of the brain have led to tools and techniques that can help students better manage problems of attentional focus and the anxieties that accompany performance, lessons, or everyday life. I myself suffer from mild performance anxiety, but I have learned how to mitigate these issues in my own performances. I try to share my experience and learning with students. In order to cope with performance anxiety, students need to practice good habits of mind just as much as they practice music.

In sum, I view teaching music as an exciting opportunity for me to learn right alongside my students. Many of my students have achieved great success, including winning competitions and being awarded high-profile performances. I celebrate the success of these students. But I also celebrate the less-dramatic successes of students overcoming technical and musical challenges, developing a deeper understanding of the language of music, or taking artistic ownership of their playing for the first time. Students and teachers alike, we are all on a pathway of lifetime learning. It doesn't matter where we are on that pathway as long as we are always moving forward.