

Teaching Philosophy

By Dr. Isaac Lausell

Trough this brief statement I would like to share my thoughts on education and what is directly pertinent to my professional experience as a music educator.

Pedagogy is the science of instruction and mentoring while accurately evaluating the progress of the pupil in order to ensure the success of the educational activity.

As a premise it is required an area of vast expertise in order to become a good teacher. A music teacher should be first and foremost a strong and well-rounded musician. His/hers expertise should by far surpass that of the average musician and should be in accordance or above the level of a professional musician. Possessing such knowledge is a crucial factor however it does not guarantee success in the pedagogical field. When entering an educational activity the teacher needs a plan. Such plan should be the product of careful thought, research and most importantly professional experience.

There are three kinds of teachers:

1. Pedagogues who passionately advocate educational methods, theories and programs.
2. Natural teachers who rely almost exclusively on intuition and observation
3. Those who incorporate research and personal experience.

At times those who fit the first category idealize theories and established systems to teach. Some even are so passionate about the pedagogical side of their professional output that they neglect to pursue activities that will enrich their primal area of expertise. Education is a field that continues to grow every day as well as music does. The groundwork set by those who preceded us should be held as a departing point for new developments. Each educator/musician is responsible for contributing to the field. It is not acceptable to permanently coast off the work done by others. The works done by Orff, Kodály and other should inspire us to:

- a) Learn from established research
- b) Conduct our own experiments
- c) Arrive at our conclusions
- d) Develop and implement new and more effective ways to teach

The second category is an interesting one. Natural teachers are those who possess an innate sense in how to mentor a pupil. They provide solutions based on observation, experience and practicality. Many performer/teachers fall under this category. For many still being engaged in a constant professional activity provides them with a well-trying perception on what works and what does not. Unfortunately many who see themselves as natural teachers are not even teachers at all. In a music department you will often hear students say, "He's a wonderful player, but an awful teacher". A responsible pedagogue should be aware of his strengths and flaws and should address them properly. It is not necessary to re-invent the wheel to be a good teacher. Working in hand with well-trying

evaluation systems can help the teacher monitor his student's progress and his effectiveness. Reading about education philosophy and methods is the most obvious way to start working on this.

The third category is what I feel describes my way of teaching. I have learned from the work of those who preceded me but I have my own ideas as well. Since I was a teenager I thought private music lessons. While in College I explored the music field from the perspective of a performer, student, educator, and composer/arranger. With each activity and area of study I gained insight pertinent on how different factions inside and outside the music world view the field. As a teacher working in public schools, universities and churches have amplified my perception even further.

I believe *100% in real life applicability of knowledge*. The knowledge I have been able to retain in my long-term memory has real life application. I have found this to be truth for my students as well. This is why everything I teach has a real life application. If it is a musical or theoretical device I show my students ways they can relate and use the information I am teaching them on a daily basis. This is why "cramming" does not work and is a waste of time. If a student learns a device as a means to jump through a hoop for an exam he will only be training his short-term memory. In order to ignite progress *100% real life applicability of knowledge* is a must. Sometimes the applicability of knowledge is not literal. Finding a way the student can relate to the information that would be pertinent to his daily life can be just as effective. In a way Zoltán Kodály's ideas to use folk music for teaching is compatible with this concept. Teaching the foundations of music to children using folk songs was a way to convey the material discussed in a context they could relate to. Such context comes from real life, from folklore. This is why this knowledge can go beyond merely teaching children. It is applicable to anyone.

I believe in teaching through discovery in a similar fashion to Jerome Bruner's *Discovery Learning* concept. I do not merely transmit the information in a conductive way as it is often done in a theory class. I rather create controlled scenarios through which the student will discover the required information and relate to it in a personal way. This is similar to when jazz students transcribe improvised solos from records. Of course one could go to a music store and buy transcription books of Charlie Parker's Solos, yet having the student go through the process of discovery allows him to relate to the information in a unique way which imbeds it in deeper levels of consciousness.

When it comes to evaluation I believe in *quantifiable approximation*. When we are evaluating performance-based tests such as a chamber music group or a solo performance there is a great deal of subjectivity. Unfortunately many regard this as a green card to evaluate art on a "feel good basis". The class should prepare the student to develop a specific set of skills that are going to be evaluated in a specific manner. In a performance based class the evaluator can set a fixed form of parameters: phrasing, rhythm, dynamics and interpretation. The next step should be assigning a value to each parameter. I am aware that music performance test is not as quantifiable as an algebra exam. Evaluating specific aspects of the performance provides the teacher with a tool to monitor the student's progress in a detached and non-emotional way. This is what we achieve through

quantifiable approximation; we bridge the gap between what is subjective and what is tangible. For the student this highly beneficial because he/she can pin point specific areas to improve instead of receiving unspecific criticism such as “ it didn’t feel right”, “you didn’t have it tonight”.

I have saved the last and most important for the end. *Integrity* should be departing point for anything period. I believe in disclosing at first hand what I expect from the student, how and when he will be evaluated. I expect from the student to be vocal about his/her needs and interests, to be responsible and to be ethical. It is in human nature to test the boundaries of an activity, students are not the exception. This is why I disclose everything up-front so there are no surprises and we can all work toward the common goal, the quest for knowledge and wisdom.

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