

REFLECTIONS ON THE MUSICAL LIFE AND THE STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Individuals who partake of the musical life are those that are drawn in any way towards the mystery of music making and deep listening as understood in the broadest sense. The musical life consists of devotion to music as a medium for growth -- not only for ourselves, but for our fellow musicians, our students, our listeners, and the whole world. While this growth may manifest itself in the acquisition of musical skill, its true goal is to provide a path by which we may know ourselves.

Most of this essay concerns itself with how the values of a musical life display themselves in the context of the student/teacher relationship.

My best teachers do more than prepare me for the life of a professional musician; they prepare me for life in general. They guide me through day-to-day musical hardships not by telling me the right notes to play, but by showing that these difficulties are microcosmic examples of lifelong hardships. Furthermore they teach by providing examples from their own lives. God willing, I perform the same service for my students.

We are often preoccupied with the outer aspects of music making: what modes? what chords? what rhythm? How many bars is the form? But the reason why we listen to and make music is to interact deeply with our world from the broad perspective of living. Music making is not only a metaphor for the individual's relationship to that other than her-self, but is an embodiment and actualization of that interaction. A teacher who can cultivate the centrality of this with and within their students is doing the true work of music.

All music is folk music. To say this is to elevate it to the ranks of the healing and human. Us jazz lovers know that to swing is a deeply human and cosmic endeavor, not just some syncopated triplet rhythm. A good performer or teacher is that special someone who gets everyone swinging before the tune begins and keeps them going well after it ends.

The public and lay-music lovers know this aspect of music intuitively. Indeed musicians do to, but a lot of us have become so preoccupied with the technical aspects of the music that we all but snuff out that intuitive light. Music lovers don't put on a record or go to a live performance to hear notes and rhythm. They come to these things to celebrate humanity in its range of experience: devastatingly sad to ecstatically joyful. At the deepest level, they come to experience these things in a sacred and

collective space that nurtures contemplation and reflection.

So often on the bandstand, in the classroom, or at the jam session we forget why we make music. The fact of the matter is that if we can cultivate and maintain our awareness of why we make music, the outer aspects will follow. It is important to recognize that inevitably, whenever we make music, we will always have form; the form will never go away! These outer and technical aspects will always be part of the conversation for students and teachers of the music. The thing that can disappear from music making and the student/teacher relationship is consciousness of the reason why we play a blues with our brother or sing a ballad for our sweetie sitting in the second row.

The teacher's work should be to develop this awareness within the student, not to pile upon her a long list of modes, chords, pieces or tunes. For the beauty of this approach is that if the student holds this awareness, she will ask all the technical questions she will need in order to achieve her desired musical voice and look inside her-self. At this point, the teacher is available to answer the technical questions. In this way, all external and technical learning organically blossoms from a deep need and love within the student and is not a form placed on her from without.

This is not to say that this blossoming is effortless. One must still practice on days she can't stand the sight of her instrument, drive to the gig when she would rather stay home, and sacrifice time at the banquet of family and friends for the battlefield of an often lonely and grinding path of lifelong commitment to music.

But here we must acknowledge the different levels of effort. If some of the deeper reasons for music making are understood, the inner part of the student will always effortlessly long for the ocean of connection that engagement with tones provides. From the inner perspective, where there is love there is no effort. This inner effortlessness continually inspires and motivates the outer aspect of the student, which is the part responsible for the alienating aspects of music making. For the lifelong musician, the outer aspect learns to submit to this love bubbling from within. Sometimes I bemoan how easy the inner self has it. It gets to live in the ever-present ocean of tones while the outer self plays a never ending, always losing, game against the physical world and the physical self.

The inner self will inevitably waiver from the path of the musical life. Indeed, some students of music move on to other ways of life when the inner love fades. This is natural and I deeply respect those, friends among

them, who make this change. For those of us still on the path, though the inner love may fade at times to the point of deep confusion and sadness, it seems to unexplainably and uncontrollably return; our bodies and subconscious selves bring it forth. We do not choose to have this deep love, but the outer self must, at every stage, willingly and painstakingly submit to it.

There are times on the path when we feel like we will never create anything musical. At these times we can become so disgusted by any noise we create that we feel physically ill. The relief from this and its milder forms is found in submission, which in this context means letting go of the desire to “sound good.” Even further, it means giving to God the question “do I sound good?” It means not seeking the answer and only being conscious of the question in a weightless and floating way. Furthermore, we must give this question away even when we feel happening and high on the music we play. This will benefit the student and most likely the actual music.

There are much deeper things happening in music than if it “sounds good.” And if we are curious about these things, we must give the questions to God. Indeed, we cannot will sounding good. If we practice our instruments with the right intention, we are practicing giving the questions to God. Throughout a lifetime of practice, maybe we will have polished ourselves enough and gotten rid of all of our questions and God will smile on us. Then, only by Him will we sound Good. But this is not in our control.

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