TOSSAL
Revista Interdepartamental de Investigación Educativa

VOLUMEN 2-3

1993-1994

UNIVERSIDAD DE ALICANTE

ISSN 1132/8134
TOSSAL
Revista Interdepartamental
de Investigación Educativa
Teaching music through an instrument

KEITH SWANWICK

Professor of Music Education
University of London, Institute of Education

LEARNING TO LEARN

We are asked to teach a student who wants to learn to play an instrument. What does that really mean? I would suggest that it means two things. The first is that we are asked to help someone learn to play: the second is that we are to help them to learn to play musically. There are ways of teaching someone to play the trombone or the bass guitar that open up the way into musical playing and musical understanding more effectively than others. Learning to play an instrument should be part of an initiation process into musical discourse. Getting people to play any instrument without musical understanding - not really «knowing music» denies both feeling and cognition and under such conditions music itself becomes meaningless.

Some of the worst teaching I have witnessed has been in the instrumental studio, where - in a one-to-one relationship giving the teacher considerable power. For example, a student can be confronted simultaneously by a complex page of notation, a bow in one hand and a violin in the other, and be asked to play in time, in tune, with a good tone; all this without a scrap of aesthetic pleasure. On the contrary, some of the very best teaching has also been by instrumentalists who really understand their art, teaching where everything is motivated by a respect for music as a symbolic form and by respect for the student as an autonomous being.

The complexities of playing an instrument cannot be tackled by following any single method or just by working systematically through a tutor book page by page. Musical learning takes place through multi-faceted engagement; singing, playing, moving, listening to others, performing in different size groups, integrating the rehearsal and performance of set pieces with improvisation and audience listening. We also need to find space for the personal intuitive engagement of the student, the place where all knowledge begins and ends.
For the moment let us leave aside the idea of musical expressiveness and think only of the technical management of an instrument, we still confront complex skills and sensitivities. A skilled action—say playing Bach on a violin—is not the result of tying together into one bundle a number of smaller technical bits. We do not build up a technique from atoms of muscular behaviour. On the contrary: the performance of any skill requires a plan, a blueprint, a schema, an overall action pattern.

When I run towards a moving tennis ball—hoping to hit it back over the net—I am not just stringing together a number of totally separate physical movements of legs, hand and so on. I am coordinating hand, eye and body into a unique variation on a known theme, a plan in my head called, «getting the ball back». When I play a piece on the piano or trombone I am not only drawing on specific bits of knowledge but will also be executing a plan, managing the piece in accordance with a set of requirements, a strategy which unfolds and to some extent changes as we go along. Once I lose the thread of my plan—perhaps by losing concentration in my musical thinking, or perhaps too far in front from the present moment then things tend to fall apart.

Building up such a plan—or representation, or schema—seems to be facilitated by varied practice rather than by sticking to one way of playing\(^1\). Music teachers have always suspected this to be true and good instrumental teachers find ways of getting their students to play the same material—perhaps scales or pieces—slowly, quickly, detached, legato, in dotted rhythms, with accents falling in different places, using alternative fingerings or hand positions and so on.

We are also helped to form plans by the use of metaphors, mental images—mind pictures of the action. For example, if I want to take hold of a «cello bow in a way that conforms both to the shape of my hand and the stick and allows me maximum flexibility and control in action». One fairly common approach seems to be to try to sort out the position of each finger in turn, perhaps having a teacher move by hand about or place appropriate fingers at the right angles and in the right places.

But that would be the teacher’s plan, not mine and things are likely to go wrong when I am eventually left on my own. Alternatively, I could put my hand in a «pretend» bucket of water of shake off the drops—now the hand and arm are free and loose—. The—following an idea of Phyllis Young—I might imagine that I take up a fairly soft strawberry between thumb and second finger, applying this «plan» to the bow itself\(^2\). In this way, and through a series of metaphors which allow me to draw on a repertoire of movements I already have, I come to be in control of my own bow-hold. I shall have begun to generate a schema or plan of my own—a mental picture which can be refined and further developed—. In developing images of action a student is learning how to manage music, becoming autonomous, learning

---

how to learn. How different all this is from having a teacher pushing my fingers around—something that is done to me rather than anything that I am doing—. Unfortunately it seems that much instrumental teaching tends not to be informed by this realisation.

Approaching technical control from several different angles facilitates learning. It makes artistic sense. If I can play a piece in only one way—perhaps at one speed with one level of articulation—then things are likely to go adrift fairly easily and the whole thing can break down when something untoward happens. But if I have practised altering the expressive character by adjusting speed, accentuation and relative loudness levels, then not only is my technique likely to be improved but the chances of an interesting musical performance are increased.

Giving students time to experiment with music in various ways does two things. Firstly it lets in the prospect of intuitive insights, unconsciously coming to new ways of approaching the performance: secondly, it supplies alternative slices of analysis, bringing to consciousness a broader repertoire of interpretative possibilities. Often instrumental students are confronted with one technical hurdle after another with little musical gratification on the way, no sense of accomplishment and hardly any chance to make performance judgements for themselves. Playing becomes mindless and routine, and musical knowledge is neither gained nor projected to an audience.

The emphasis within instrumental teaching is usually on technical work. There may be good reasons for this. Sessions are short and teachers want to be sure that students are getting into «good habits». Without technique nothing is possible. But since technique itself appears to be enhanced by varied practice, we need to be sure that we are not just grinding away within a narrow set of skill routines. Playing passages in just one way may meet even the limited aim of acquiring a manipulative skill. In general, it would be better to have students play more pieces in different ways and at lower levels of technical difficulty, than always to press on relentlessly with the next exacting assignment, a strategy which leaves no time or room for making musical decisions about articulation, phrases, emphasis and line.

GROUP INTERACTION

One way of broadening the instrumental teaching and learning agenda is through work in groups. I am not advocating group teaching exclusively, nor am I denigrating the private teacher. I simply want to draw attention to some of the potential benefits of group teaching as just one valuable strategy in instrumental instruction. To begin with, music-making in groups has infinite possibilities for broadening the range of experience, including critical assessment of the playing of others and a sense of performance. Music is not only performed in a social context but is learned and understood in such a context. Music learning involves imitation of and comparison with other people. We are strongly motivated by observing
others and we strive to emulate our peers, often with a more direct effect than being instructed by those persons designated as «teachers».

Imitation and emulation are particularly strong between people of similar ages and social groups. The basic requirements for anyone playing an instrument are careful listening and perceptive watching. A group with a good teacher is an ideal circumstance for the development of these attitudes. We might think of «master-classes» at any age and level, where everyone present can learn something. Giving attention to someone else's sound, their posture and style of playing, their technical achievement; all this is a part of the motivation a group can provide. So is the stimulation of other people's triumphs and the consolation of recognising their difficulties. There is also scope for learning by osmosis, by indirect observation, by just being there.

Group-teaching is not at all the same as teaching separate individuals who happen to be scheduled in a group, giving attention to each of them, say, on the basis of ten minutes each over a half an hour session. Working with a group is a totally different form of educational endeavour. To start with, the teacher has to be specially alert. There can be no casual drifting into lessons without previous preparation. There can be no listening with half an ear whilst looking out the window, consulting the diary of engagements or attending to the length of one's fingernails. There are constant questions to be addressed. What is the next stage of development and where do we go from here? How do we involve all students at all times?

Resistance to instrumental group-teaching most often comes from those who have come through music schools and conservatories where the one-to-one ratio is jealously preserved and no other alternative seems feasible. Yet we recognize that people can learn a great deal by sitting next to other players in a brass band, guitar class, a rock group, or as a member of a chorus. Consider how much time in lessons is spent on common problems? Is there anything to be learned from regular participation in a small ensemble? Are there not dull lessons when both teacher and pupil feel lethargic, tired, uninspired and might not a group even out the ups and downs of personal temperament and present a constantly stimulating challenge to teachers who are really interested in teaching?

Can we plan to avoid mistakes not merely wait to correct them? It is unwise to teach individuals on a deficit model; they bring along their mistakes to the lesson and we try to sort them out. This is neither possible nor desirable in a group setting. Good group teachers know how to structure sessions to avoid mistakes and misunderstanding from the outset. A group should be large enough to be a potential music-making ensemble but small enough for any individual to play a distinctive part. A number somewhere between six and 15 tends to be seen as optimum by those who work with groups. The major requirement is that the teacher has to prepare beforehand: the major benefit is that under the cover of a group environment the pupil can be learning on the intuitive side as well as taking part in a range of analytical work that will lead towards student autonomy, freedom from the teacher.
LITERACY OR FLUENCY?

Music notation seems to have a curious effect on musical behaviour and it certainly has a strong influence on instrumental teaching and playing. The greatest virtue of written sings is their potentiality for communicating certain details of performance that would easily be lost in aural transmission, just forgotten. Imagine what would happen if the production and preservation of any large-scale classical symphonies had been entirely dependent on the collective memories of composers and performing groups. It is inconceivable that many if any of these works could have been composed at all without the visual maps and designs that constitute the making of a score.

However, imagine also what happens if these scores are converted either by machines or by mechanical playing into sound, as for example, in the distinctive regularity of fair-ground organs. Without aural performance traditions most expressive and structural shaping is missing. Worse, imagine the consequences of insisting on notating jazz, rock, a samba improvisation or almost any folk music before performance. Such a needless exercise would impede fluency and stifle creative thought. Yet in instrumental teaching within the western classical tradition, notational «literacy» is thought to be essential and thus notation is often central to instruction and is frequently the starting-point.

THE INNER EAR

Music educators agree that one goal of music education should be to help people to develop what is sometimes called the inner ear, a «dynamic library» of musical possibilities which we draw on in performance and as music listeners. Jazz musicians certainly have strong views on improvisation. I made notes at a conference I was chairing in London, where jazz players extolled the virtues and essential nature of improvisation. In brief summary, the collective wisdom of this group appeared to be as follows:

• everyone can improvise from the first day of playing;
• the basic principle is to have something fixed and something free, the fixed including scale, riff, chord, chord sequence and crucially-beat;
• it is possible to make great music at any technical level;
• use systems but beware of fixed, rigid teaching strategies;
• imitation is necessary for invention and copying by ear is a creative effort;
• improvisation is characterised by problem-solving and a high level of personal interaction;
• there is no consensus as to how people can be helped to practise improvisation – commitment leads to self-tuition and the motivation is «delight»—;
improvisation is self-transcending not self indulgent and the product matters, we make contact with something beyond our own experience, it makes demands upon our the way we listen;

the secret of playing jazz is the aural building of a «dynamic library».

There is no mention of notation here. The emphasis is on the «inner ear», forming musical images. Listening sometimes to students practising the piano from notation is often like a westerner reading Mandarin from a phonetic transcription, with no idea of what it means.

THE FOURTH FINGER ON THE A STRING

Let us consider these ideas in the reality of teaching and learning, in a specific «case-study».

Daniel is seven. He now has a half-size ‘cello which not only looks wonderful but can—in the right hands—sound well too. Why a ‘cello? Someone came to his school and played one. Thereafter he wanted to play ‘a big instrument like the «cello». When taken to the first half of a concert which included Strauss', first Horn Concerto and seated on the front row, he resolutely ignored the horn soloist in front of his nose and scrutinised the ‘celli. Why this should be is hard to know. Visual and aural images of instrumentalists playing seem to linger in the memory and perhaps there are ranges of instrumental sonority that seek out particular people as if to say; ‘Hi! you're on my wavelength, my sound spectrum coincides with your way of taking the world'. Sound materials are wonderfully compelling, even before the music starts. They are the beginning and the end of musical experience.

We have a recommended tutor book but, when getting him started at home, I am puzzled by the titles of the pages; «fourth finger on the A string», and by the captions within pages; «the vow hold», «ledger lines», «basic knowledge» (which turns out to be about the notation of the bass clef), «the minim», «the semibreve rest». This particular slice of musical analysis fails to captivate Daniel and it worries me.

I do not even play the ‘cello, beyond the most elementary level but I have worked intensively with string players and I think I know what matters. They care about the sound the make, they know that string sonorities can be powerfully evocative and that the instruments have all sorts of potential (how near the bow is to the bridge or fingerboard, which part of the bow is appropriate, oof or on the string) and they like their playing to be coherent, structured. Just wandering through a piece is no way to play it.

So we begin. ‘Pluck each string in turn four times —yes anchor right thumb lightly against the side of the finger-board’—. Now let's get the bow to work. «Try pulling it across the “C” string and the pushing it back again» (first getting the
fresh strawberry hold) and «feel the sound in your chest». «Now the next string». I am soon becoming a pianist expert in vernacular patterns based on the open strings of the ‘cello, and these figures organise our music-making. They include horn calls, dramatic tremolo, flowing divisions of the beat that lead us on to the next change of string and Latin American rhythm patterns (especially the habanera or tango) that seem to fall under the bow so effectively. We are making music and it is the first lesson. In time we shall explore other sets of sound, including the up and down patterns of left-hand fingers on the A string —especially the difference between C and C# which so strongly affects expressive character—.

This personal account serves only to press the point that instrumental teaching must be musical teaching, not merely technical instruction on the instrument. There is no point in teaching music at all unless we believe that it is a form of human discourse and that the beginning instrumental player is being initiated from «day one» into this discourse and not into «the semibreve rest». Analysis on only a narrow technical level and without intuitive response leads nowhere. Perhaps this is why so many instrumental students give up.

I would offer three general rules for instrumental teaching.

- Rule number one: no lesson is in orden without music and music means delight and control of materials, heightened awareness of expression and whenever possible the delight of good form. A session without music is time wasted and the wrong message is taken away —that it is sometimes in order to play unmusically—. It is never in order.

- Rule number two: always go for intuitive ear-based fluency before analytical literacy. In the early days at least, music should be articulated freely before sorting out notation. We do not need the limited analysis of a printed copy in front of our faces every time we play. Aural awareness precedes and is the foundation, the real «rudiments of music»; it is also the end-game of musical knowledge.

- Rule number three: by all means push but also pull. Students can be drawn into what they sense to be worthwhile. How well do we and other people play for and with the student. Is music an invitation? Students need to feel that what they do contributes to sustaining human mind, we all do.

Instruction without encounter, analysis without intuition, artistic craft without aesthetic pleasure; these are recipes for educational disaster. Meaningless action is worse than no activity at all and leads to confusion and apathy. But meaningful activity generates its own models and motivation and in so doing frees the student from the teacher. Thus we can take charge of our own learning. Ultimately, there is no other way.