

## Podcast #1 - A Matter of Chemistry

### The Music Educator's Crucible

Hello and welcome to the Music Educator's Crucible. My name is Merlin Thompson and I'm the creator of this podcast series devoted to exploring music and education – in particular topics related to teaching and learning to sing or play a musical instrument. So, if you're a music teacher who teaches private or group lessons - in your own home studio or an institution - you've come to the right place. And I'll also mention that this series has lots to offer schoolteachers, parents, and community leaders as well. So be sure to tune in as often as you like. And before I get any further, I want to give a huge shout out to fans of Kimiko Ishizaka and say thank you for making available her recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm a classically trained pianist with nearly 40 years experience of working with students of all ages, parents, and teachers all across Canada, the USA, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Spain. You can find out my background and what I'm up to on my website [merlinthompson.com](http://merlinthompson.com). Some of you may be curious why I chose the title The Music Educator's Crucible for this series. Well the music and education piece is probably obvious – so Why the crucible? It's because I like the chemistry that's associated with the crucible. Not just in the scientific way, but how throughout time, the crucible has been a symbol for extraordinary and often groundbreaking developments. Even just the other day, I read about a company that advertised itself as a "crucible for innovation". Not a bad tagline – I will say that. A crucible can be a place, situation, time, or space. It's not limited to physical properties. I can hold a crucible in my hands and in my imagination. While there's a scientific side to the crucible that's rational and secure, mystery and uncertainty may also be involved given that crucibles have the potential to stir up our imagination, to draw from our vulnerability, and provide space for our hopes and dreams to run wild. A crucible isn't some place where people just sit by idly and wait for things to happen. It represents a place where unpredictable and risky exploration may occur, where individuals flourish and cultures come to life.

For this inaugural edition of The Music Educator's Crucible, I take the crucible as my inspiration to explore what music teachers might do to generate the dynamic energy associated with the crucible. What's involved? Is there some kind of a magic formula every music teacher

could be using? Well, I don't know if I'd call it a magic formula, however I have the impression there's something quite powerful that teachers may already know about, but have underestimated its potential. For me, what provides constant underpinning for dynamic teaching and learning all comes down to – getting the chemistry right. Yes! You heard what I said! – Getting the chemistry right – because we all know that learning to sing or play a musical instrument goes better when teachers get the chemistry right. It means teachers are equally adept at engaging, informing, and questioning their students week after week and year after year. And students describe their teachers as supportive, creative, challenging, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. Now before you cut me off and skip to another podcast because you're not convinced getting the chemistry right has got what it takes to support dynamic teaching and learning, or because you've already given it a try and didn't get very far -- let me just say – Hang tight. There are a few things we need to examine – actually I've got a small list of things teachers can do. And it all starts with teachers genuinely understanding who students are.

Let me tell you about one of my students. At the time of this story, 11-year old Joshua had been my student for about two years. That meant I'd had ample opportunity to observe his energetic personality, his curiosity, his joy in creating the unexpected. One day shortly after walking through the door of my studio, Joshua directed a question to me. "Dr. Thompson", he said. "Do you think you'll ever get mad at me?" His question caught me off guard. I imagined what kind of day Joshua was having – filled with a long list of people getting mad at him that probably stretched from his friends to his family to his teachers. I replied, "That's a good question. Give me a week to think about it and I'll get back to you." When Joshua returned for his next lesson, I gave him my response. "So, will I ever get mad at you? I have to say the answer is in all likelihood – yes. But here's what you should know. Getting mad at someone is always my last resource. I'll most likely get mad at you when I've completely run out of options for helping you. When it feels like nothing else could possibly work, that's when I'll get mad."

What strikes me about Joshua's story is how on that day I came to understand a little more about what it's like to walk in his shoes – to be 11 years old and encounter obstacles you're not entirely sure how to take on. And unexpectedly – I also got a picture of who I am as a person and as a teacher. Music teachers develop an understanding of who their students are in numerous ways – through first impressions

or through lengthy interactions and spontaneous questioning. They get a sense of students' interests, attitudes, beliefs, insecurities, frustrations, strengths, language, the way they learn, and the tools they use to study and grow. But, when it comes to getting the chemistry right, understanding students is only one part of what's involved. It's time to look at another layer – acceptance.

Acceptance is all about teachers accepting students for whom they are rather than for whom teachers might want them to be. The most prevalent issue with acceptance is that music teachers and their students may have radically different interpretations of what learning to sing or play a musical instrument is all about. Whereas teachers may highlight technical accuracy and musical development, students aim for personal enjoyment and fulfillment. A great example is the difference in how teachers and students typically think about "practicing". For teachers, practicing requires discipline and commitment. It's a focused activity with predetermined goals and high quality standards. Practicing is a serious endeavor with no time for fooling around. For students, their approach to practicing is modeled after the characteristics of play. This means that first and foremost, practicing is an expression of freedom. *Practicing is* students doing what they want to do as opposed to what they're obligated to do. Practicing is grounded by their desire to have fun along the way. It's propelled by their ability to self-direct and self-choose. To give you an example, here's a conversation I had with my student 6-year old Ethan many years ago. He arrives for his lesson. I say – So Ethan, How did your practicing go this week? Ethan replies – Really good. I did everything you told me to do. I continue – So what did you improve? And Ethan's voice jumps an octave when he says – Improve?! You didn't say anything about improving. I just thought I was supposed to practice.

Question: What happens when teachers accept their students for whom they are? Answer: teachers reject the absolutes of idealism and perfectionism – those weighty judgments that may be well intentioned but end up being mostly about controlling what students do. Accepting who students are doesn't mean giving up good work. It's about equipping students for performing at high levels while also making sure they have ownership of how they personally got there. I like to help students achieve excellence by starting where they are, consistently acknowledging the value in them playing their own favorite way – even if its fast and loud. For me - fast and loud is just a steppingstone to other ways of performing, including my own favorite. Accepting students is an all-inclusive and unconditional part of getting

the chemistry right. It's about teachers being open and receptive to students in their entirety. So now we've examined two layers of getting the chemistry right – understanding students and accepting who they are. What's up next is another important layer – care.

Caring for students – it almost seems like a no brainer – because most teachers naturally develop caring relationships with their students. Or do they? So to start with, it might be good to identify what the opposite of caring might look like. When teachers don't care about their students, they never smile. Most of the time, they yell at students. They try to lighten things up by telling jokes or being sarcastic, but can't see that students don't understand what's going on. When teachers don't care, they ask questions but don't give students time to answer. They say they're open to students having questions, but get angry when they do. That's what the opposite of caring looks like.

What do teachers do when they care for their students? My impression is that caring spans an entire spectrum – from advocacy to agitation. Yes – that's what I said – from advocacy to agitation. At the advocacy end of the spectrum, teachers care for students by helping them to be successful. They empower students to recognize and value their own successes. Teachers who advocate for their students stand up on their students' behalf. They protect their students from excessive demands and take great care to guard students' vulnerability and integrity. They understand how students' growth isn't just like climbing up a ladder; students develop through cycles of growth and rest wherein growth requires followup with rest, and rest makes it possible for growth. At the agitation end of the spectrum, things are pretty different. Here teachers care for their students *by knowing* when it's appropriate to push students out of their comfort zone. Teachers work hard to keep students from being held hostage by their own defensive sense of self, by their own self-imposed limitations. They know when it's beneficial to introduce challenges and guide students in pushing beyond their own boundaries.

With caring from advocacy to agitation as another layer of getting the chemistry right, let me tell you about another occurrence with one of my students – 15-year old Ashton was preparing for an upper level RCM examination while balancing a heavy scholastic load and part time job. One week, somehow the topic of socializing with friends came up, and so I asked, "Ashton, what role would you say you play with your friends?" His response is something I'll never forget, because what he said was – "Well... Actually I'm an intimidator. You know, I

always get high marks on all my exams, and so I guess I pretty much intimidate my friends to do the same." I couldn't believe my ears. Ashton was an agitator! What seems almost phenomenal about his insight into friendships is that Ashton probably wasn't an agitator on a daily basis. Most likely, his friendships were based on mutual support, which when the time came, allowed him to take on an agitator status. Friendships provide good example that having a "nice" teacher may not always be in students' best interests. When it comes to caring for students – similar to caring for friends – Students need teachers who *know how* to get the most out of staying within the comfort zone and *when* it's time to reach beyond the usual limits. Teachers need to *know how* to get things done without compromising their students' emotional health and wellbeing. So now we've had a look at three layers of getting the chemistry right – understanding, accepting, and caring about who students are.

What I find interesting is how easy it is to start thinking of understanding, acceptance, and care as squeaky-clean processes that guarantee squeaky-clean outcomes. It's as if once you've got understanding, acceptance, and care on the go, nothing could possibly get in the way. Mind you, there's nothing wrong with hoping for positive outcomes. But I've got a news flash for you. Things don't always go according to the plan and that's what the next layer is all about – that's where what I refer to as acceptable tensions come into play. You know what I mean - tensions that teachers experience like impatience, frustration, and being caught off guard. I call them acceptable tensions because most tensions that show up in music teaching – are just that – they're acceptable. They're not so arduous or overwhelming that music teachers can't continue or find a way around them. They're acceptable tensions.

For example when it comes to understanding students, tensions seem inevitable given that assumptions and misinformation may show up – like assuming that Andrew slouches at the piano because he's disrespectful or thinking that Andrea not practicing daily is an act of wilfulness and deceit. Sometimes, what students say and what they do may not entirely match up – just as what teachers say and do may not be entirely in sync. On occasion, students may have unrealistic expectations. - Like my student Chris who thinks learning a new piece should be just as easy as it is for him to learn a new sport or academic challenge.

Things get interesting when we consider acceptable tensions in regards to accepting students for whom they are. On the one hand, accepting

students sounds like the generous thing to do – almost noble – until for example, my student Julia shows up for the third week in a row without her music, or Francis rips into another demonstration of his fastest and loudest playing.

When it comes to caring about students, teachers most likely have their own preferred *modus operandi*. Tensions may arise because some teachers are more comfortable with advocacy while others relish their roles as perpetual agitators. Somehow a steady diet of either advocacy or agitation doesn't really seem adequate. Yet stepping onto a playing field that encourages teachers to offer an entire spectrum of caring may be asking a lot.

Recognizing the value of acceptable tensions is important because it's often enticing for teachers to micro-manage students' every move in order to produce sanitized or trouble-free outcomes. In the process, understanding, acceptance, and care become artificial positions that have little in common with real life. We limit what we can accomplish because we've basically preprogrammed what will come out at the other end. I've discovered that acknowledging acceptable tensions means I'm able to engage openly with students and appreciate the unexpected. For sure, it doesn't mean I never feel impatient or frustrated with my students. Or that I'm never caught off guard by a topic introduced completely out the blue. Although I must say – it's fascinating when I consider how being caught off guard by Joshua, Ethan, and Ashton resulted in such significant adjustments to my teaching. What seems important is that tensions come in all sizes and shapes. And because some tensions are more of an obstacle than others, we need to figure out which tensions need an adjustment, which ones are okay the way they are, and which tensions we need to let completely go of. So - Along with understanding, acceptance, and care, acceptable tensions make a total of four layers that help teachers to get the chemistry right with their students. It's time for our final layer – teacher authenticity.

Up until now, I've focused on teachers' interactions with students. For the final layer, I want to change things up a bit by shifting our focus to look at teachers themselves – to consider what teachers do to bring authenticity to their teaching.

Over the years, I've been privileged to observe many teachers in action. And it's always fascinating to note the differences and similarities between them. For example, my colleague Angie demonstrates a noticeable comfort in her teaching that seems

completely in sync with whom she is as a person. The way she talks, the energy she brings, the knowledge she shares – it all seems to ring true. In contrast, I've observed other teachers whose teaching seems artificial and disconnected from themselves and their students. The knowledge they share is informative but it feels as if they're talking from behind a formalized teacher mask.

Every teachers' own authentic voice forms an essential layer in getting the chemistry right. When teachers aren't authentic, students may doubt teachers' credibility. When teachers are authentic, the connections they make with students have a genuineness that differs from an artificial teacher façade. There's realness to their teaching because they bring who they are into the studio. What can teachers do to make sure they bring their own persona into their teaching? My impression is that it involves varying amounts of self-awareness. I say varying amounts because for some teachers like my colleague Angie, getting her real persona to show up is a simple matter of – just do it. No extra effort required. For others, it may require intentional exploration of questions like – Who am I as a person? What's important to me? How do I show up in my teaching? What obstacles might be getting in the way?

Which reminds me of a situation early on in my own teaching when I realized something wasn't quite on track. You see - I had studied the piano with a couple of teachers who were amazing storytellers. Every lesson was filled with anecdotes that brought an engaging depth to the lessons. So when I started teaching my own students, I pretty much transplanted my teachers' stories to my studio. Until one day, it struck me that here I was – telling my teachers' stories, but they didn't really belong to me. It was time to start telling my own stories. Fortunately for all of us, bringing our real persona into teaching needn't become a lifelong quest. After all, we have lots of everyday experience at being true to ourselves even if it stretches from confidence to vulnerability. Once teachers get a feel for teaching with their own authentic voice, it shouldn't be long before they can't even imagine teaching any other way.

Just to be on top of things – though – I want make sure teachers don't confuse being authentic with being egotistical or the center of attention. Because it can be tempting for teachers to think that teaching is a gigantic arena for them to showcase how real they are - how much they know - and how no student can manage without their guidance. Authentic teachers aren't deceived into thinking they have license to do whatever they want as long as they're being true to

themselves. When it comes to *getting the chemistry right*, they know the difference between *imposing* their own personal history and *sharing* who they are with students.

So there we have it – five layers to getting the chemistry right – understanding, acceptance, care, acceptable tensions, and teacher authenticity. Five layers that I suspect for most music teachers have a familiar feel to them – five layers that have a doable quality. So – that brings us to what's next? Well... I think this is where the fun begins. And I emphasize fun because over the coming weeks and months, I'm certain that things will start to pop in your teaching. Like the look on a student's face, or the tone of your own voice, or the words students use, or the way they play, or one of your trademark actions, or the way students respond to what you say. I'm thinking of simple things that may have been there for a long time that you never noticed were so important. - Serendipitous moments that will give you an appreciation for what it means to get the chemistry right.

My hope in *The Music Educator's Crucible* is fairly simple – to provide a fresh perspective on music teaching and stir up awareness and questioning in the process. Awareness and questioning – somehow they seem like a good way to finish off this first podcast – because if I've left you with either awareness or questioning, or perhaps both, then I've done what I set out to do.

Until the next time – this is Merlin Thompson - Cheers!