

Podcast #2 – Philosophy of Music Teaching The Music Educator's Crucible

Hello and welcome back 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. Before I get any further, I want to say thank you to Corey Cerovsek violinist and Paavali Jumppanen pianist whose interpretation of Beethoven's Spring Sonata is made available courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. Thanks so much.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm a classically trained pianist with nearly 40 years studio teaching experience. I've worked with hundreds of students, parents, and teachers across Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Spain, and Great Britain. You can find out more about what I'm up to on my website merlinthompson.com.

For this second episode of The Music Educator's Crucible, I want to build on the topic explored in Episode One – Getting the Chemistry Right. If you remember – Getting the Chemistry Right was all about understanding, accepting, and caring for students, acceptable tensions, and authenticity - Basically – an investigation into what teachers can do to shape meaningful interpersonal relationships with their students.

This time around, I take a look at the philosophy of teaching - or to be more specific - how the way we think about teaching actually informs what we do as teachers. Because my impression is whether we're aware of it or not, as teachers we all hold onto certain ideas about what teaching should look like. And those ideas have a huge influence on *what* we do with students and *why* we teach the way we do. So I'm wondering about questions like – how do teachers put together their own philosophy of teaching? Or – what is a philosophy of music teaching all about? And okay – yes – I realize that lots of music educators have already talked about philosophies of music teaching – with lots of informative results.

What makes this exploration different from others is that I deliberately step away from the language music educators typically use – themes like aesthetic-education, student-centered, and curriculum-based teaching. In place, I focus on two guiding principles that I think bring it all together. The first: structured excellence and the second: interruptive messiness - Two guiding principles that sum up what I consider to be a comprehensive philosophy of music teaching. Now even if you've never heard of structured excellence and interruptive messiness before, I suspect your first impressions give you a sense of where this podcast is headed – I mean – the words alone will point you in a definite direction. My hope is that throughout this podcast, you'll get glimpses of how structured excellence and interruptive messiness already connect with your own teaching.

To get things started, it's probably useful for me to give you a sense of where I'm coming from with all this. That means revisiting what happened some time around 1986 or 1987, something that surfaced quite unexpectedly that would come to have an amazing impact on my teaching.

So, here's the scenario – it's the week following one of my very first student concerts some thirty plus years ago. The concert consisted of around 40 performances from beginner to advanced students. Prior to the concert, I remember working really hard with my students to ensure a high standard of performance. Polishing here and refining there. I anticipated a good result. A couple of days after the concert, I sat down to watch the video of my students' performances. Sure enough, my hard work had paid off. By all accounts, it was a successful concert. Students played well – actually they played very well technically and musically. I had every reason to be happy with the concert, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something seemed off. As I watched student after student, it dawned on me – my students looked and sounded pretty much just like me – like I do when I perform. It was a staggering realization that left me somewhat uncomfortable. Of course, I wanted to help my students achieve musical excellence – it would be absurd to indicate anything other – but I wasn't sure I was comfortable with all my students ending up looking and sounding pretty much just like me. Turning out replicas of myself definitely wasn't the direction I wanted to take.

What I couldn't see at that time is that my teaching was basically a continuation of what I'd experienced as a student. I taught much in the same manner as my teachers had taught me – a

master/apprentice approach – it was as simple as that. For better or worse, this master/apprentice approach was all that I had to work with. And I suspect I wasn't the only novice teacher who stepped almost blindly into the model of master/apprentice teaching. I think it's pretty accurate for me to say that – colleagues from my generation of novice teachers – we most likely very trustingly took on a master/apprentice approach without putting too much thought into where it came from and how did it really work. So, what exactly is a master/apprentice model of music instruction all about?

Over the past several centuries, the master/apprentice model of music instruction has dominated vocal and instrumental performance teaching in music studios, bands, orchestras, and choirs around the world. These days, the term master/apprentice is commonly used to describe the one-on-one interactions between teachers and students in learning to sing or play a musical instrument. It's a term with a long history – one that dates back to medieval guilds and a time when music was considered a craft. Starting from the 1400s – the late Middle Ages - through the Renaissance and Baroque eras – developing musical skills was treated as a matter of craftsmanship similar to the way painters or sculptors or even furniture builders would develop skills in their own particular *métier*. Instruction in a craft like music took place within tightly knit households. Masters passed on their musical traditions and apprentices copied or imitated the master's exemplary work as the necessary steppingstone to becoming musicians in their own right. In this hands-on structure, teachers worked closely with students to ensure excellent standards of musical execution. The seriousness of the whole process was formalized in contractual agreements that stipulated years of commitment, intensive study, and discipline to fulfill the practical and increasingly higher demands on musical achievement.

When the 1800s came along with the full force of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, the master/apprentice model evolved in response to several overlapping influences. For example, widespread implementation of public schooling gave music teachers good reason to rethink the whole learning process. Everything involved in learning to sing or play a musical instrument was deconstructed - so that music teachers could streamline their teaching into standardized linear processes and raise the level of students' mastery step-by-step. The influence of public schooling also meant teachers implemented grading and exams to ensure consistency in terms of delivery and student learning. During the early 1800s, mechanized printing machines

basically did away with the time-consuming and labour intensive process of hand copying musical scores. This new-found speed and efficiency freed up lots of time for teachers to focus on students' technique and interpretation – while making it easier and cheaper for composers to publish volumes of exercises and studies to stimulate students at all stages of their incremental progress. Furthermore during the same time period, music conservatories quickly replaced the previous tightly knit musical households. And the master/apprentice model shifted to emphasize virtuosic technique and standardized repertoire as the route to high levels of student artistry and musicianship.

Finally, moving to the twenty-first century music teaching context, we see the master/apprentice model continues to adapt in relation to contemporary practical, personal, and professional influences. For example, today's master/apprentice music teachers have unprecedented resources through Internet access and computer technology. And – teachers are greatly affected by the institutionalization of music instruction both at university and grade school levels. There are also enormous music publishing houses, music recording and entertainment industries that come into play. In this era of significant and constant change, the master/apprentice model remains teachers' method of choice basically because it works. It provides teachers with a framework for effectively and efficiently passing on what they know to their students at high levels of mastery, generation after generation.

What seems noteworthy in all this is how the master/apprentice model is a great example of structured excellence – that is - the way music teachers organize their teaching with *structures* or strategies they know will be effective in developing *excellent* levels of students' musicianship. From its origins in medieval guilds to today's teaching studios, the master/apprentice model provides clear demonstration of the way structured excellence operates. Like when music teachers create tightly knit households, or follow step-by-step incremental processes, or have students watch performances on youtube, teachers use such – what I call - *structures* because they're confident such *structures* will have a positive impact on the excellence in students' interpretation, knowledge, technique, and skills of performance.

When teachers teach with structured excellence, several characteristics are key - beginning with an emphasis on goal setting and planning. This means teachers know where they're headed and what they hope to pass on to students. Whether working with beginner

or advanced students, teachers have a clear picture of what they want to accomplish and the processes they'll use to guide students. Another prominent characteristic is that teachers use a variety of strategies to pass on what they know – ranging from kinaesthetic to cognitive to emotional and motivational.

This may include - a hands-on approach to demonstrate the ideal way for students to execute a particular musical aspect, - asking reflective questions to encourage students' ownership of their progress, - listening to recordings and watching video performances, and - mapping out practice strategies. Teachers organize their instructional processes to minimize error and guide students in achieving musical mastery – which brings us to another characteristic in structured excellence - high performance standards throughout students' development.

With high expectations in mind, teachers monitor students' growth and provide feedback – typically micromanaging and controlling detailed aspects of students' development. Students practice what teachers have demonstrated and are corrected by teachers until they achieve proficiency. A final characteristic of structured excellence sheds light on the implicit trust between teachers and students – how teachers trust students and students trust teachers to contribute their best efforts week after week and year after year. The characteristic of trust means there's a noticeable accountability and responsibility associated with structured excellence.

What stands out for me is that structured excellence has a multilayered practicality. It pulls together a lot of ideas. But for me, it's only one of two guiding principles that I want to examine in this podcast. It's time we take a look at interruptive messiness.

I'll start by sharing with you some scenarios from my own teaching that brought interruptive messiness to my attention. Let me introduce my student Chris – who came to my studio as a transfer student after his family moved to Calgary. At seven years of age, Chris had already completed a year of lessons with another teacher. He played a number of pieces – some better than others – and he always seemed ready to give things his best shot – no matter how they might turn out. At my first impression, I thought there was a diligence in his playing that I wasn't sure was working in his favour. You see – he played every piece from his newest to his most polished – at an extremely slow pace. Despite this diligence with playing slowly, mistakes seemed to show up completely out of the blue. So I'm thinking - what can I do with

randomly arriving mistakes? While he plays another piece, I count the number of mistakes to myself. There are eight of them. I say to Chris, "Chris, why don't you try playing at a quicker speed and we'll see what happens to the piece."

It might be overly optimistic to think that Chris played with no mistakes at his quicker speed, but that's not what happened. He did play better – actually 25% better. And as he went through the rest of his pieces, first playing slowly and then playing more quickly, the results were similar – Always 25% better.

Now you might be wondering, why didn't I ask Chris to just play a couple of bars or small sections of his pieces with no mistakes? And it's a good question – because it could have immediately set him up to play with no mistakes. My rationale? Well... I just couldn't see how motivation wise, Chris could take on that kind of practice at home. He was accustomed to playing his pieces all the way through and so I opted for another route – a route that might seem messy or even undesirable in comparison to playing small sections with no mistakes. I decided making an investment in the messiness was worthwhile.

Here's another scenario. At nine years of age, Emily had been my piano student for five years, more than half of her entire life. In that time, I'd learned that if I was going to ask her a question, I needed to make sure it was one worth answering. So one day, after a particularly poor performance of Beethoven's Theme, I choose my words carefully. "Emily. Why do you think sometimes kids play well and sometimes they don't?" I ask. She shrugs her shoulders, tilts her head, and I wait. "Well... kids who play well, want to," she begins. "And kids who don't, don't really care," she concludes with another shrug of her shoulders. I must admit I had anticipated something completely different. After five years of piano lessons, I expected her to answer with something like – "They play the right notes, or they keep a steady beat all the way through."

It's hard to believe that in all my years of being connected to the piano – of having relationships and observing people, I'd never consciously made the connection between how caring about something could have such an obvious outcome. Of course, it made sense that if people didn't care about whether they played well or not – that it would show up in their performances. Emily had caught me completely off guard – interrupting my thinking process with remarkable insight. She'd responded to my impromptu question with unexpected awareness, even though such a question can easily be dismissed with mechanical

answers that focus on anticipating what teachers want to hear, rather than something that digs deeply into what's going on. All this took place in less than 60 seconds. Thirty years later, my memories of the moment Emily interrupted my mindset are still vividly in place.

Juliet is one of my most recent beginners. After only 8 weeks of lessons, she sings amazingly on pitch in a loud voice that fills my entire studio, which partly explains why playing by ear is so easy for her. She prefers to sit cross-legged yoga-style at the piano. After her lesson while her sister continues, she seats herself at the small desk in my studio and churns out a flurry of greeting cards all designed on themes that wish me a good week. When midway through her seventh lesson, Juliet asked – “Can I show you something?” I had no idea what to expect. “Sure! Go ahead!” I replied – and Juliet performed the first two lines hands together of a piece I thought was still a minimum of 3 months beyond her playing ability. One week later, she completed the final two lines of the piece – concentrating ever so fiercely on the third line – just like all students do.

With so few weeks experience at playing the piano, there are lots of things missing from Juliet's musical skillset. Things like consistent tone production, ability to keep a steady beat, and appropriate body posture would help her to play more consistently, but currently they take a back seat to her driving enthusiasm for learning the music that's bubbling in her own ear. Of course, I could minimize the messiness of what Juliet's doing by explaining the value in developing her skillset and avoiding pieces that are beyond her current capacity, but somehow that feels more punitive than it does constructive. I can already see how the future will unfold – her unorthodox style will most assuredly continue with messiness undiminished. For myself, keeping up with Juliet's spontaneity will stretch my own creativity and ingenuity. My role for at least the next year is two-fold: unwavering practical support for Juliet's self-driven explorations and gentle almost secretive expansion of her musical skillset.

So, what's going on when teachers incorporate interruptive messiness into their teaching philosophy? For me, several important aspects come into play. First of all – what might be the biggest challenge all teachers face in teaching - fear of failure – the insistent inner voices that keep teachers from straying from what's tried and true. Everything about interruptive messiness can spark teachers' fear of failure – fear of incompetence – fear that we're not up for the job. So it's essential for teachers to have a grip on fear. When teachers recognize how fear may be blocking their vision, they've got room to

consider how, why, where and when interruptive messiness might be the more effective solution.

Secondly, teachers recognize interruptive messiness for what it is. They acknowledge that processes like teaching and learning – as well as relationships between teachers and students – come with an inherent amount of disruption and missed solutions – just think of how students' efforts may get twisted up, or teachers' instructions may not achieve what was intended, or conversations take surprising directions. Those are signs of interruptive messiness.

Thirdly, investment is key – so teachers respond to interruptive messiness by investing in it. I like the idea of investing, because it means teachers actually use what's interruptive and messy to move forward – like when students' preferred style of working is different from their own, or when it's time to move in the opposite direction, or take a risk.

Fourth on the list is empathy – teachers' capacity for walking in their students' shoes. When teachers teach with empathy, students feel supported and challenged because teachers watch carefully for the subtle and obvious clues about how their students thrive. Teachers don't assume that how their students experience the world and how they experienced the world as students are the same. They help students personally work through the highs and lows of interruptive messiness because they know of its positive impact on students' short-term and long-term development.

What I find interesting is that it's easy to put a lofty spin on interruptive messiness – to talk about it in terms of teachers pushing back instructional boundaries or opening up unexplored spaces. Nice expressions that tell us something about teaching, for sure. But, they feel a lot like sugar coating interruptive messiness into some kind of squeaky-clean recipe. The point I want to make is that interruptive messiness is exactly what it says it is – it's interruptive and messy. And its value lays right there. In the invitation for teachers to make the most of students' learning by investing in students where they are and where they thrive – no matter how interruptive or messy that might be.

My central idea in this podcast is to take a close look at two guiding principles that team up to provide a comprehensive philosophy of music teaching. When I place – structured excellence and interruptive messiness – side-by-side, what seems remarkable is that structured

excellence has a huge head start on interruptive messiness. It's as if for centuries, music teachers have focused almost exclusively on structured excellence – and they've had good reason to do so, because teachers want to pass on the best of what they know so their students will be able to perform at the highest musical levels possible. That's why I include structured excellence as one of two guiding principles. Teaching without it would be a sorry affair. My point is there's more we need to think about.

What we also need to consider is that structured excellence comes with certain strengths and weaknesses. For example on the strength side – we see high levels of student success - On the weakness side – the same successful results can seduce teachers into a false sense of security – into thinking we've got it all figured out. With centuries of refinement as back up, teachers have the advantage of proven routines at their fingertips. The disadvantage is those same routines may turn into micromanaging and control that overlook the diversity of students' experience, ability, and interests. The logic of linear step-by-step teaching is sound in that students can only handle a handful of details at a time. Not to mention how such processes satisfy a basic human desire for consistency – even predictability – in our lives. However, we might also argue that such organized processes are poor choices given that isolating ideas and creating specialized sequences aren't always necessary or desirable for learning. Frequently, we all learn in disorganized and unpredictable ways.

That's why I'm pushing for bringing together two guiding principles – structured excellence and interruptive messiness. Not one that's more important or more dependable than the other – but two principles that come together and interact with each other. Bringing together structured excellence and interruptive messiness broadens what teachers have at their fingertips. It's not like interruptive messiness fills in the gaps left by structured excellence or that interruptive messiness balances out structured excellence. That seems unrealistic. For me, these two guiding principles have an interdependent relationship much like beat and rhythm, where rhythm makes sense when you've got beat, and beat without rhythm, well that's just beat nothing more. That means teachers get the most out of structured excellence and interruptive messiness when they put both of them to use.

So – you probably get where I'm going with all this. What I'm trying to promote in this podcast is a broadening of music teaching philosophy. Music teachers have been well served by structured excellence for

centuries. There's no doubt about that. I also think interruptive messiness has been around for centuries – but teachers responded by minimizing its influence or dismissing it all together. Now I'm thinking the time has come to shake things up a bit – to see what happens when teachers incorporate structured excellence AND interruptive messiness as the anchors and fuel for their teaching.

My hope is that throughout this podcast, you've gotten glimpses of how your teaching already connects with structured excellence and interruptive messiness. What'll happen next? Well... Now that your awareness has been piqued, I imagine there'll be days that feel like – why on earth didn't I start doing this earlier - followed by - what on earth have I gotten myself into. If you want to let me know how things turn out when you take on these two guiding principles, please be sure to drop me a line.

Until the next time – this is The Music Educator's Crucible and I'm Merlin Thompson. Cheers!