

Current Practice and Ambition in Higher Music Education

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I am interested in contributing my experience as a musician, teacher, composer and educational developer to conservatories and other institutions of higher music education.

For more than three decades, I have taught piano and carillon, developed teaching methods and courses, arranged repertoire for students, organized workshops and performances, and worked with musicians who make music for pleasure. These experiences have gradually shaped a personal educational philosophy: I want students to become independent, questioning musicians who can eventually take responsibility for their own musical development and, where relevant, for the development of others.

Concerning conservatories, I see three areas in which I could contribute:

Piano as a supporting instrument — Piano pedagogy — Composition

These areas are different, but they share the same underlying principle: education should not make students dependent on a teacher for answers. It should gradually enable them to listen, think, create, question and make informed musical decisions themselves.

Piano as a supporting instrument

I am interested in piano not only as a principal instrument, but also as a practical musical tool. For students whose principal instrument is voice, violin, trumpet or another instrument, the piano can provide an important form of musical independence. A singer who understands harmony can accompany him/herself at the piano. A future violin teacher can accompany a pupil. A performer can use the piano to explore harmony, structure and musical ideas away from the principal instrument.

I would therefore be interested in teaching piano as a supporting instrument through individual or duo lessons, depending on the structure of the programme and the needs of the students.

The objective does not necessarily have to be becoming a pianist. It might be accompanying oneself or another musician, understanding and playing chord progressions, reading lead sheets, developing practical harmonic knowledge or improvising.

I would like to develop an adult version of my three-volume piano method, *De Toffe Pianist*. The existing method combines instrumental instruction with practical harmony, improvisation and composition. For conservatory students, I imagine a more concentrated programme of approximately two years with a clear practical outcome: the student should be able to use the piano independently within their own musical practice.

¹ Information about my concerts, compositions, workshops, courses and research projects could be found at: www.mathieudanielpolak.com

The method would never be the objective. A student who already plays piano well and wants to develop classical repertoire should follow that ambition. A student who has little interest in chord-based playing should not be forced into a method designed for another purpose. I would begin by asking a simple question: What do you want to be able to do with the piano? The answer determines the direction of the lessons.

Piano pedagogy

The second area in which I would like to contribute is piano methodology and pedagogy.

My approach would be strongly connected to actual teaching practice. Rather than beginning with pedagogy as an abstract theoretical subject, I would like students to investigate what really happens when someone learns to play the piano.

A lesson might begin with a concrete situation from my own teaching practice: a student encountered a particular difficulty; what did I notice, what did I try, and why did it work or fail? Students could then bring observations from their own teaching practice. What happened in their lesson? What did the pupil understand? Where did the pupil become confused? What did the teacher do? What might have been done differently?

Alongside these practical experiences, I would like to use pedagogical literature and the ideas of influential piano teachers, both historical and contemporary.

We could also examine teaching material itself. How is a piano method constructed? Why does one method introduce a particular concept before another? Are the pieces in a collection necessarily in the most effective order? What assumptions about learning are hidden inside a method?

Students could then create material themselves: simplify a piece for a particular pupil, harmonize a familiar melody, design an exercise or find a different way of explaining a musical concept.

The aim would not be to produce teachers who simply follow a method. It would be to develop teachers who can look at a student, the music and the situation and make an informed pedagogical decision.

Composition as craft

The third area is composition.

I am particularly interested in elective or short-term composition courses, where composing can be approached through practical assignments.

There is sometimes a tendency to think that one can either compose, or one cannot. I have even heard a musician say that composing is something you simply have in you. I understand the intuition behind this. Musical talent is certainly not distributed equally. At the same time, composing involves many techniques that can be learned.

My own experience began intuitively. As a young piano student, I invented music at the piano, often forgetting what I had just played and starting again. My first formal composition lessons gave me more conscious ways of connecting an idea with music. Later, Jeff Hamburg taught me to think about compositional techniques through which an idea could be developed into music that communicates.

Before that, however, a teacher had encouraged me simply to write a great deal of music and to improvise. Looking back, I understand that improvisation was already teaching me about continuity, possibility and choice. This is why I bring composition and improvisation into instrumental teaching.

A composition course might begin with very concrete questions:

What is a motif? - Compose a piece from one.

What is a minuet? - Investigate its characteristics and compose one.

How does a particular dance work? - Study it, explain your findings to the group and use what you have discovered to create a new piece.

For this kind of elective course, I see considerable value in group teaching. Students can hear one another's ideas, discuss compositional choices and learn from different approaches. This is different from principal study composition, where individual tuition may be more appropriate.

My approach to composition teaching is practical:

make something → encounter a problem → investigate it → discover a technique → try again.

Creativity is part of instrumental education

Creativity is not, for me, an optional extra that comes after “real” instrumental training. It is one of the ways in which a musician learns to understand music.

One of my most memorable experiences as a teacher involved a three-year-old girl who sat down at the piano and played and sang continuously for about fifteen minutes. It was chaotic, but I was fascinated by her seriousness and by the continuity of the music: note after note emerging from nowhere, without hesitation and without concern about whether it was correct.

Years later I composed a piano piece called *Boys Will Be Boys*. The piece is built on an octatonic scale and consists almost entirely of sixteenth notes. There is a deliberate compositional structure behind it. Yet what I was trying to preserve was something much simpler: the freedom and innocence I had experienced in that child's playing.

I do not believe that every student needs to become a composer, nor that every student needs to improvise. But encountering the possibility of creating something oneself can change the way one understands music.

Creativity becomes another way of listening.

The music is the common goal

One of the principles that has become increasingly important to me is that the music itself should remain at the center of the lesson.

I often tell students: We have a common goal: to make this piece sound as good and as convincing as possible.

Instead of constantly asking whether the student is doing something “right” or “wrong”, we can look together at the score and ask what the music is asking for.

If something does not work, the question becomes: *What is happening here? What is written? What does the music need?*

This does not mean that technical mistakes are unimportant. They matter enormously. It means that I prefer to place correction in the context of the musical task rather than making the student's identity the subject of the correction.

I have also increasingly learned to develop students through their strengths. Instrumental education can easily become organized around weaknesses: the wrong note, the technical problem, the insufficient skill. These things require attention, but a student's strengths can provide a much more powerful route towards improvement.

A student with a strong ear may use listening to develop reading. A student with a strong rhythmic instinct may use rhythm to improve technique. A student fascinated by harmony may use that fascination as an entry point into repertoire. This is not a rejection of discipline. It is a different way of organizing it.

Hobbyist and professional

My experience with both hobbyists and aspiring professionals has made me think carefully about the distinction between the two.

A hobbyist who makes music for pleasure can be deeply committed, highly talented and extraordinarily skilled. In some circumstances, a hobbyist may even play better than a professional. He or she may spend six months working on one Beethoven sonata. A professional may have to prepare a different program every week, teach, accompany, perform and deal with a wide range of repertoire.

The level of performance is therefore not the fundamental distinction. Nor is the difference simply financial. For me, professional musicianship is primarily about musical independence and responsibility. A professional musician hears more in a piece. They can recognize a contrapuntal line, identify a rhythmic problem, understand why a passage is technically difficult and place a piece within a larger repertoire. A professional can open a new score and make an informed judgement about what it contains and whether it is suitable for a particular situation.

The student experiences the lesson. The teacher carries the world behind the lesson. Education gradually makes the invisible visible. The purpose of professional music education is therefore not simply to make students better performers. It is to give them the knowledge and independence to make informed musical decisions themselves — and eventually, if they become teachers, to make those decisions for somebody else.

From receiving answers to asking questions

This is one of the central principles of my teaching: I want students to develop an inquiring attitude. I want students to become musicians who ask questions.

Why does this work? Why is this piece difficult? Why is this exercise here? Why does this harmony sound convincing? What happens if I change the register? What happens if I simplify the texture? What can I learn from this piece if I want to compose another one? What does my pupil need? These questions create independence.

A hobbyist may quite reasonably come to a lesson expecting the expert to provide the answers. A professional student is being prepared for a different role. Eventually, they will be the person standing in front of the pupil. They therefore need to learn not only to receive knowledge, but to generate it, question it, apply it and communicate it.

The progression I have in mind is receiving → understanding → questioning → applying → teaching. That is what I mean by professional formation.

Learning through musical companionship

A form of education that particularly appeals to me is based on the idea of musical companionship: the teacher and student investigate music together.

This does not mean that the teacher gives up authority or expertise. I bring my own knowledge, experience and musical convictions into the lesson. At the same time, I do not want students to become copies of me. My experience should not determine what they must become; rather, it should provide perspectives, questions and possibilities from which they can develop their own musical identity.

What I find particularly valuable is the moment when teacher and student discover something together. A student may notice something I had not considered, ask a question that opens a different perspective, or find a solution that I would not have proposed myself.

This creates a form of intellectual and musical companionship. We look at the music together, but we do not necessarily arrive at the same conclusion. The teacher brings experience and perspective; the student brings curiosity, individuality and the possibility of seeing something differently. For me, this is particularly relevant in higher music education. A conservatory should not simply produce students who can reproduce what they have been taught. It should develop musicians who can eventually stand on their own: musicians who listen critically, formulate questions, investigate possibilities, make informed decisions and take responsibility for their own musical development.