

Investigating the Secret World of the Studio: A Performer Discovers research

By Mathias Wexler

Completing a mid-life doctorate is a massive undertaking that might be considered unusual, even if one had practical reasons such as receiving tenure or obtaining a more secure position. But if one was already a tenured member of a college performance faculty, colleagues and friends (and family!) might be forgiven if they considered one somewhat eccentric, if not downright masochistic. As my doctoral journey comes to a happy conclusion, ending five-and-a-half years of late night study and writing sessions, steamy summers in New York dorms and sublets away from family, it also brings to completion a major research project. It is immediately clear that the effort was worth it, if only for the gain of a vastly broadened perspective on music teaching and learning, and on my new engagement with and appreciation for the research process. It seems appropriate to reflect briefly at this juncture on my motivation for undertaking this project and, as I emerge a mid-life music researcher/performer/artist-teacher, the implications for my understanding of music learning and teaching.

I had already been teaching cello performance for 20 years when I began to be curious about the nature of the beast. It had always been clear to me that the college music studio was a unique place in the music school environment. After all, students and their teachers work together intensely, one on one, over a period of years on issues encompassing everything from phrasing and

fingering to what clothes to wear at the next recital. Through this process they develop a certain kind of intimacy that classroom teachers could never hope to attain. To “be in the studio of” so-and-so means something special. Every single student at every school of music, whether majoring in performance, music education, theory, or music business, takes music lessons as a core part of their curriculum. Where I teach, performance teachers form the largest single block of faculty positions, representing the largest department within the school. We had been hired because we could play our instruments well and had demonstrated a certain amount of professional success, which meant we had recorded, toured, been reviewed, and promoted ourselves effectively in the competitive world of classical music. But something had begun to nag at the perimeters of my consciousness, so gradually that for a number of years I didn’t recognize what it was.

As the years went by, I gradually put more energy into my teaching, even though like most applied teachers, I had been hired primarily on the basis of my playing and professional accomplishments. By the time I was awarded tenure in 1999, teaching had become my major focus, and the same forces that had driven me to excel as a player now began to drive me to excel as a teacher. I needed to know that I was as good a teacher as I was a player, that I was giving my students the most I could. I came to realize that because I had had little or no actual teacher preparation, and therefore knew nothing about what might be thought of as “good” studio teaching beyond instinct and experience, I still had a lot to learn. Nor, I realized, did I (or likely my colleagues, for that matter) have any opportunity to reflect on

teaching issues since becoming a full-time applied teacher.

This situation was not likely to change since college studio teachers like myself generally have no program-sanctioned opportunities to address a lack of teacher education. Department meetings are used to communicate new directives from the Dean or to discuss committee business and department policies. Concert receptions are viewed as primarily social. Beyond this, the studio community has no traditional and recurring venue to encourage communication among colleagues. In addition, the extreme privacy of the studio teaching process has created a culture that reminds me of an ad I once saw in a magazine pumping the virtues of Las Vegas: 'what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas'. The studio has traditionally been a private, hidden locale, almost akin to a religious sanctuary. Urban (2005) has called it "a sort of shrine, where technique, musical expression and artistic vision is passed on, one-to-one, in a secret rite not made up so much of facts or rules but rather the teacher's personal repertoire of opinions, experiences... and shots in the dark (p. 1)." Perhaps that is why until recently there has been so little research done on studio teaching: subjecting the personal and sensitive culture of studio teaching to empirical research might, irrationally, be seen as a kind of betrayal.

As I wondered how I could improve my teaching, I began to ask what might be considered "good" performance teaching, whether there were or ought to be general standards by which applied teaching could be judged, whether existing educational theory could inform our practice, and what might be the relationship of that question to the preparation of music teachers. I became particularly concerned about the teaching curriculum—or lack thereof-- for music

performance majors, a group that will become the next generation of college studio teachers. I was also concerned about the experiences of music education majors, for whom there seemed to be no clear curricular connections drawn between studying classroom teaching methodologies and learning to play their primary and secondary instruments well. Content was everything—and performance pedagogy was seemingly ignored.

From a Friereian perspective, my undergraduate studio teacher was an apt representative of the "anti-dialogical banking educator (Friere in Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. 128)". The studio teacher was in charge, the student was the passive receiver, and everything was controlled by the teacher, down to time of the dress rehearsal before my senior recital. To say that he "suggested" the repertoire we studied, what music we programmed, and how we interpreted music is a misnomer. He was in total control. In my experience of the traditional studio paradigm, students were passive. The teacher spoke, the students listened and tried to do exactly as instructed. The teacher 'knew' much, and we knew little. If students were judged to succeed, we were complimented. If not, we were excoriated. This kind of approach makes a student extremely dependent and risks squelching creativity in a field where it is supposed to be the primary currency. It took a full 15 years as a professional musician before I had the courage to consider changing certain fingerings in Bach's *Solo Cello Suites* given to me in undergraduate conservatory. Hardly the attitude or approach of a creative artist!

Given my background and the nature of my questions, Kassner's (1998) article entitled "Would better questions enhance music learning?" was very influential as I began to form the basic questions that would

guide my research. “What kind of teacher are you?” he asks. “Are you primarily the ‘sage on the stage’ or the ‘guide on the side?’ Are your students empty vessels passively awaiting knowledge...or are they active thinkers...(p. 1)”. Kassner argues that facilitation rather than telling, nurturing curiosity rather than disseminating knowledge, is the mark of an effective teacher, and knowing how to ask questions is a key teaching strategy. Although Kassner was writing for classroom music teachers, he also raises important and transformative questions for studio teachers. Could a non-authoritarian approach work better for studio teachers? What would a non-authoritarian lesson be like? How might studio teachers develop a dialogue with students? The gap, I realized, between educational theory and studio practice might be very great indeed.

In the process of thinking about studio teaching, I remembered an experience I had had at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada, in the summer of 1981. The Centre hosted an Artist-in-Residence program in which master teachers gave masterclasses to all the participants regardless of instrument. For example, a visiting pianist might hear clarinetists, cellists, flutists, a guitarist and any other instrumentalist who wanted to interact with them. The implicit understanding of this program was that the master-teacher would be able to impart musical wisdom regardless of their limited understanding of the technical basics of the student’s instrument. Clearly, different instrumentalists shared musical issues. Other questions occurred as I thought about the process that allowed different instrumentalists to learn from each other. Did different instrumentalists ever learn differently, or could there be overarching pedagogical principles that inform the studio learning

process? Could studio teaching be viewed as a process in which the pedagogy of various instruments were different shades of the same color?

As I took more education courses as part of my mid-life doctoral work, I kept coming back to the application of educational principles to the studio process. A music performance teacher needs to have the musical skills and instrumental knowledge to help solve student problems, and this is where most conservatories and music performance programs have traditionally directed their energy. But what about music pedagogy? How would Kassner (1998) teach if he were a studio teacher? The essential question for music teachers has always been how to bring students to a knowledgeable state—without discouraging creativity. For me, the question has become, how can the applied music teacher remove him or herself from the center of a dependent relationship where the student is forced to be a passive receiver?

I believe that performance teaching is on the verge of a conceptual revolution, and it is the studio teacher/researchers that need to step forward and draw upon their experiences for the benefit of all. Serious questions need to be investigated and the results may lead us to a completely new conception of what music teachers do.

Where should we situate the music studio conceptually? Is there a therapeutic element that needs to be more openly addressed? How might musical skills, teaching attitudes and practices be best developed? Might there be such a thing as a music studio curriculum? What would be its principles? Are the pedagogical or philosophical principles of studio teaching commonly found across teachers of different instruments? If there is a studio community of common practice and attitude, what might

this imply for teacher preparation curricula? What do studio teachers do? What are their values, strategies and goals? What are their psychological issues? What problems need to be addressed? How can we prepare musicians to teach studio better?

These kinds of questions motivated me to undertake an education doctorate. I hope to further the exploration of this crucial educational process, and allow research to inform and enrich my life and my students' lives as an applied music teacher. I hope that this rumination may serve as a call to action for studio teachers, both with and without doctorates, to bridge the traditional separation between the applied music and research communities, and to contribute their experiences and observations to broaden and deepen our understanding of the studio teaching process. In a rapidly evolving musical world, we can do no less.

References

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