The Art Of Teaching

MASTER CLASSES

A Collaboration Between Teacher, Students And Audience

By Thomas Lanners, NCTM

Music majors learn the basics of teaching individual lessons in the pedagogy courses they take as undergraduate or graduate students. Typically, little time is spent honing skills associated with “public” teaching situations, though, such as master classes (which involve teaching students of others) or studio classes (instructing one's own students in a group setting), and few pages are devoted to these skills in pedagogy textbooks. Such classes are akin to private lessons, but require a distinct approach that constitutes a collaboration between teacher, performing students and listeners.

I have often heard complaints from musicians who were frustrated or dismayed by a master class they attended at a conference, university, conservatory or other venue. The clinician may have been a first-rate performer, perhaps even a well-known, experienced and respected teacher, yet the class fell flat, disappointing those who wished to garner musical insights they could employ in their own teaching studios. I will address first some of the more common pitfalls encountered in master classes, offering tips along the way for those who may be called upon to teach in this setting.

Inclusiveness

Perhaps most importantly, master class clinicians must project their voices adequately to fill the room and must annunciate clearly. In some instances, a microphone may be provided, but mumbling into a microphone merely produces louder mumbling. Some teachers have quiet voices and gentle demeanors. This is not problematic in a one-on-one lesson, when one may wish to “draw in” the student’s attention, but a sufficient level of assertiveness is imperative in a public setting because audience members may feel marginalized or estranged when teachers' comments are inaudible. Our brethren in the theatrical world can teach us a great deal about projecting the voice without sounding strained or affected.

Similarly, just as actors use larger gestures on stage than in real life, master class clinicians might do the same to ensure clear communication in a large room. For instance, in Example 1 from Liszt’s Consolation No. 2, a lateral sweep of the teacher’s arm could be utilized in a lesson to encour-
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age fluidity and dynamic growth through the tenor melodic line to its climax on the accented D-sharp on beat one of measure 41. The gesture may then logically drift backward toward the torso for the C-sharp resolution that rounds off the phrase on beat three. The “public version” of the motion might traverse more space, vividly communicating Liszt’s espressivo and marcato indications through adding a step toward the student at the climactic moment to accompany a broader sweep of both arms, then a step backward at the resolution. In any case, it is essential to ensure all body language appears inclusive. To that end, turning one’s back to the audience for extended periods should be avoided, and advice that may benefit everyone in the room should be spoken toward the entire “house.” Otherwise listeners might feel as though they are eavesdropping on a lesson they were not invited to.

Example 1: Franz Liszt, Consolation No. 2, S. 172:2, mm. 38-41

It is wise to ask questions of the performers and, on occasion, even the audience or to simply solicit opinions on musical matters that lend themselves to differing, yet valid viewpoints. This shows respect for everyone present—in many cases those who attend such classes are already fairly knowledgeable musicians—and may allow compelling insights to arise. In Example 2, the conclusion of Chopin’s Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1, the accent marked on the final chord, following indications of dim., pp and calando, certainly lends itself to varied interpretations. I would suggest that Chopin surely did not wish for a jarring dynamic spike at that point after dying away for several bars but, instead, a chord played with a slightly quicker, yet still light attack that subtly emphasizes the brightness of the major-key ending to this minor-key work. Having no direct conduit to the composer, though, my viewpoint is only one among several valid options. On the other hand, one should attempt to limit long, awkward silences that sometimes occur after questions are posed, most commonly when students’ bashfulness or language limitations make timely answers a particular challenge. This is a tricky balance to strike, not answering one’s own questions while not giving the impression of conducting a public interrogation.

Example 2: Frédéric Chopin, Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1, mm. 54-57.

When referring to specific passages, always find a way to explain what portion of the piece is being discussed, rather than simply pointing at a score only you and the student are privy to. Something as simple as “she is about to play the lyrical, second theme of this movement” can orient listeners and show them you have an underlying pedagogical plan. On that topic, always have an underlying pedagogical plan! This blueprint doesn’t have to be rigid or detailed, but quickly organizing thoughts and prioritizing topics before launching into verbal instruction is advisable.

While one teaching a master class must read and react to whatever musical and technical issues arise, in general it is best—given time constraints and the obligation to keep listeners attentive—not to dwell on minute details until they are completely “fixed,” instead moving on when the student clearly understands the concept and has well-defined future practice strategies. It is tempting to doggedly rehash a musical morsel until it rises to uncompromising artistic standards, but such dead-horse beating quickly becomes tedious and socially uncomfortable. No one wants to witness an impromptu, supervised practice session. What may engender the highest standards in lessons may come across as a stubborn battle of wills in a master class.

Time Management

From a time management perspective, one must prioritize carefully which problems to address, choosing perhaps three or four that seem most pressing—those that will make the music sound demonstrably better within the time frame—rather than attempting to cover every shortcoming in haphazard fashion. Don’t worry that those listening might judge harshly if you fail to mention every imperfection, because attempts to do so would produce a chaotic, stressful experience for all. A knowledgeable, seasoned teacher will identify myriad musical and/or technical issues that could be dealt with given unlimited time, but typically one spends just 30 minutes or less with each performer or performing group, including the performance at the outset. For most, time flies at warp speed when teaching a class, placing a premium on concision. You will squander time if you tackle too much minutiae, sacrificing the opportunity to discuss other points of greater interest or impact. I often choose to focus on universal musical and technical issues that resonate most powerfully with students and teachers alike. In this way, teachers may be inspired to apply the knowledge they acquire to other musical works with similar challenges, rather than simply “teaching to the test” with each student’s pieces as contests and other performances approach.

It is advisable, if serious technical problems come to light, not to spend all the allotted time attempting to deconstruct and rebuild a student’s technique. This creates a situation wherein the student is bound to fail—in a public setting, no less—because technique involves motor skills that must be trained over a longer time span. In such instances, undertake in detail only minor technical issues that will yield relatively quick but significant and perceptible improvements. Serious persistent difficulties will need to be addressed by a student’s regular teacher.
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Wearing a watch is an excellent idea, rather than simply having a monitor announce when each student’s time has elapsed. By then, it may be too late to leap ahead in the piece to cover your most salient points without cheating the next performer of his or her valuable time. For that matter, it is prudent not to devote an entire teaching segment to the first page of a longer work, as this robs listeners of your insights into later themes, transitions, larger formal considerations and so on. If you find yourself teaching a two-hour master class with four performers, don’t spend 75 minutes on the first one! No doubt the other performers invested just as much preparation time as the first and are just as nervous as they await their turn to play. It’s also entirely possible the strongest student was saved for last on the program. Whenever practical, finish your time with each student by having them play the end of the piece. This gives a gratifying sense of closure, allows the audience to render a final round of applause and provides the teacher an opportunity to maximize the musical impact of this last, all-important impression the performer leaves on listeners.

Regardless of time constraints, never forget to compliment students on the stronger aspects of their performances before proceeding to the “constructive criticism” portion of the session. Some skip this important step and launch directly into fix-it mode, while others offer only generic positives, such as “nice job.” Most students are painfully aware of what went most obviously awry, yet they hope to hear that their diligent work has paid off in some discernable fashion. Assume they will recognize unwarranted or disingenuous praise, and this may undermine your credibility in their minds. Focus instead on what was genuinely successful, no matter how small, as those elements can serve as a foundation for continued improvement. Honest commendations can be sprinkled throughout the teaching session as appropriate, but I find it most critical to do so immediately following the initial performance, when many students feel most vulnerable, and at the end of their allotted time, when you can affirm their progress and responsiveness.

Demonstrating, Nerves, Humor And Ego

As a pianist, I frequently demonstrate passages at the piano in both lessons and classes because this aural picture can be worth a thousand words. Some concepts simply must be taught from a sound perspective when no descriptive words suffice. In a master class setting, wherein the audience may consist of numerous other musicians and music teachers, demonstrations of this sort are a marvelous way to flash your musical credentials as well. Take care, though, that this doesn’t turn the focus of the class toward the clinician instead of the student and the composer at hand. I am a fan of the “monkey see, monkey do” manner of teaching in which the “master” plays a phrase, followed by a student’s valiant attempt at mimicry. This doesn’t encourage creative and independent thinking and doesn’t model creative pedagogical methodology either.

While you may feel added stress when teaching in public, performing students will likely feel significantly greater strain, which may manifest itself in an increased number of musical miscues. This works in the clinician’s favor because, no matter how performers acquit themselves in the initial play-through, they will likely play better after this daunting hurdle has been cleared and the teaching portion of the class begins. In other words, even poor advice may yield better playing. Still, using carefully chosen words and an empathetic tone raises the odds students will have a positive experience that makes them eager to play in future classes. Harsh words serve no positive purpose, short or long term, in this context. Clearly no student intends to play poorly, especially in front of an audience and a respected teacher.

A good sense of humor is beneficial in master classes, particularly if the mood needs to be lightened or the audience seems tired or inattentive. Once, after I presented a lecture-recital at a conference, a man approached me and said he appreciated my sense of humor, calling it “disarming.” Until that moment, I hadn’t imagined listeners taking up arms against me, yet the use of that term is fitting. While a clinician should not view teaching as entertainment per se, and overt showboating should be avoided, there is no harm in utilizing humor as a tool if one’s personal toolbox includes it. Some instructors begin classes with a joke, which can be effective if it relates to the task at hand, but I believe it is better to be spontaneous, allowing humor to manifest itself naturally. In this way, a spirit of improvisation permeates the class that is analogous to the spontaneity we treasure in performances of great artists.

Perhaps the worst impression one can make on an audience is that the proceedings constitute an ego trip. It is
understandable that this occurs now and then, as often these classes are held to expose young musicians to the wisdom of acknowledged experts. This fatal flaw can manifest itself in, at best, the teacher boasting of his career accomplishments and dropping names of famous musicians with whom he’s collaborated, or, at worst, in verbal bullying of student performers. Either way, the all-important music has not been respectfully served, nor have the students or listeners. The class will ultimately be judged on the teaching expertise displayed and not on self-promotional skills.

Chamber Music/Collaborative Classes

Coaching chamber music groups in master classes could be the topic of another extensive article. For the purposes of this discussion, I’ll offer a few suggestions regarding chamber music or any situation wherein more than one performer plays or sings simultaneously, including duos comprised of a singer or instrumentalist with a pianist. First, if possible, one should sit far enough from the performers to experience an optimal listening perspective during the initial performance. While teaching, it may be advisable to occasionally consult those in advantageous positions in the room on issues of projection and balance, because the clinician is typically on or near the stage and, therefore, not in an ideal location to judge such matters. When coaching singers, translations of foreign texts should be spoken aloud before any piece is performed. This enables the listeners to more fully appreciate the work, reminds students of the mood they strive to set (having a text is a huge interpretive advantage), and encourages the teacher to address the piece as a union of literary and musical elements. Whether working with a duo or a larger chamber group, offer some advice to every performer. Too often piano “accompanists” are paid no heed, though they provide the integral musical depictions underlying sung text, and weaker players in chamber groups are either ignored or singled out for a miniature private lesson. It is natural to spend more time with some than others for greatest musical and pedagogical effect, but take care to acknowledge in a meaningful way all who participate, if only briefly.

Studio Classes

Most aspects of studio classes parallel master classes, with a few noteworthy exceptions. In periodic studio classes with one’s own students—as opposed to master classes with others’ students, which are sometimes referred to as “drive-by teaching”—one can delve deeper into details without as much fear of losing one’s audience. Because the university piano majors in my weekly studio classes are familiar with my teaching vocabulary, I can employ verbal shortcuts while further polishing works each time I hear them. In this manner, classmates sense a musical evolution as performances become more focused, convincing and confident. Deeper technical issues can be addressed because they can be charted along a broader timeline. Further, you will likely have discussed similar difficulties with others in the class, who benefit by contemplating these problems from an objective viewpoint as classmates grapple with them.

I require all of my students to contribute constructive, articulate feedback regarding their peers’ performances, calling on individual students who might otherwise be apprehensive to offer such observations. This encourages/forces them to verbalize concepts we have explored in lessons, solidifying those concepts while recognizing their efficacy for others. It also promotes more acute listening, because anyone may be called upon to comment at any time. Feedback from peers, if channeled in positive directions, fosters a “we’re all in this together” mindset, lifting morale when end-of-semester juries or stressful degree recitals loom. I often pose open-ended questions that relate to specific musical or technical topics, which spurs the broadest range of input. In this way, I serve as moderator, shepherding discourse without stifling any beneficial input.

I consider studio classes at least as important as lessons, because they offer occasions to address critical topics common to every student, thereby limiting what can otherwise become mind-numbing repetition in individual lessons. They also provide playing opportunities that are intermediary from a performance anxiety perspective between lessons and the public recital appearances that may follow. This somewhat heightened stress level, within a supportive peer group, gradually diminishes irrational fears of public performance. Playing frequently in studio classes solidifies students’ memorization skills, since weak spots that may result in memory slips often don’t reveal themselves in the practice room. Whenever possible, I bring copies of scores for all to follow as works are performed, so students learn to recognize how the relatively abstract indications on the page translate into meaningful, communicative musical discourse.

I occasionally play my own repertoire in class, soliciting input in the same fashion as when students perform, to reinforce the point that this process is invaluable for all musicians. In this manner, I illustrate that we are all on comparable musical paths that require similar preparation techniques. This also reminds me to keep my teaching practical rather than merely theoretical, while serving as a model for students in striving to improve throughout our entire lives.

Provided the master class/studio class clinician is a qualified, articulate and engaging musician and teacher, following the basic advice offered in this article should yield classes that enable students and audience members alike to garner valuable knowledge and genuine inspiration.

Music Examples Citations
