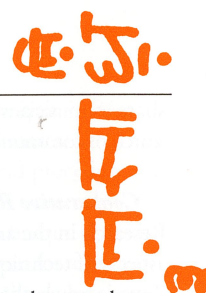


Teacher-Student Communications: Crossing Cultural Barriers

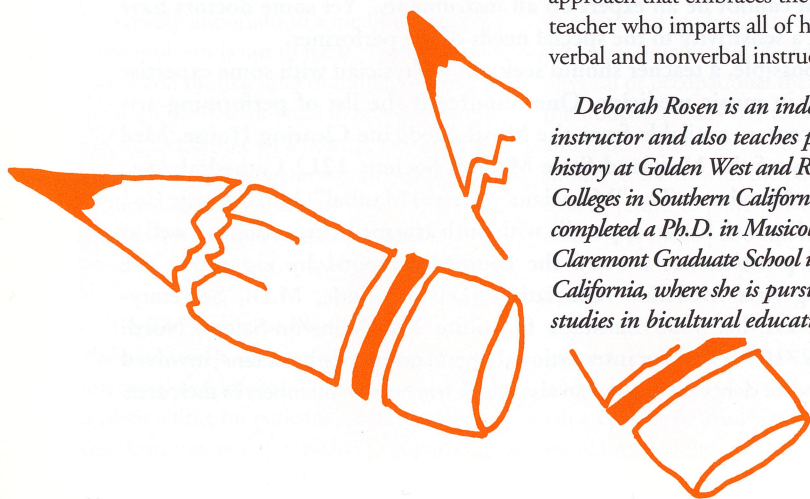
by Deborah Rosen



If we study the pedagogical methods employed within independent studios in the United States, we begin to see that our approaches to private and group instruction are based mainly on ideologies from within our own society, to the exclusion of most others. There is a tendency to lean toward principles that reflect our European heritage, often ignoring the fact that many of our students represent a broad cross section of different cultural backgrounds. This tendency also ignores that cognitive learning is affected in large part by an individual's cultural environment and past educational history. For example, a student whose prior learning experiences include the study of fixed-do solfège (as is quite common in many parts of Asia, Africa and South America) might regard notational reading via the English alphabet more problematic than the Western student who has not been indoctrinated to the former approach. In addition, a student whose societal values dictate the highest level of respect being shown to the teacher will be less inclined to take initiative and ask questions during the lesson, opting perhaps to remain silent.

In European-influenced private music instruction, there exists a conservatory style approach that embraces the idea of a teacher who imparts all of his ideas through verbal and nonverbal instructions. Teachers

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shape their students' approach toward musical performance through a process that, in essence, is passing along their own Western musical heritage by setting standards of tone production and technique. It is within the private lesson that the student first becomes musically literate and learns to understand the symbols that indicate musical expression.

If we, as instructors, work only with American-born students, there are few if any negatives to this approach. However, as statistics indicate, this demographic is not always the case. In California alone, there are currently eighty-two ethnic groups represented within the public school system, and in New York the number reaches over one hundred. On a personal note, in my own independent piano studio there are first- and second-generation students representing Ghana, Cambodia, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Argentina. In addition, I live in a suburban area sixty miles away from urban Los Angeles, where one might not expect to find such a multi-ethnic representation.

The Teacher-Student Relationship

My conclusions regarding the impact of cultural variables on music learning are based on findings of communications researcher Geert Hofstede. He establishes the teacher and student as an archetypal role pair, and establishes that problems can lie in the following areas: 1) differences in the social positions of the teacher and the student in two societies, 2) differences in the relevance of the curriculum for the two societies, 3) differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations from which teacher and student are drawn, and 4) differences in expected patterns of teacher/student and student/student interaction.¹ He recommends that teachers gain an understanding of the perplexities of cross-cultural learning situations, using as his argument that the teacher needs to learn about her culture first, and become intellec-



tually and emotionally accustomed to the fact that in other cultures people learn in different ways.

Teaching a student with cognitive tendencies that differ from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic and demands a different didactic approach. For example, when children learn to read and write in China, the nature of the script develops children's ability to recognize patterns; it also necessitates a need for rote learning.² This, in fact, parallels the background of many international students who have acquired musical skills through the process of rote instruction, an ideology quite prevalent within many non-Western countries. So teachers with no experience in rote learning might familiarize themselves with the process of modeling (see Modeling As a Teaching Philosophy, page 33).

Being in contact with individuals from other lands also makes us aware of the differences between cultures, and the societal values that program the individual to act accordingly. In the private lesson, how we communicate with our students will ultimately affect the learning process. Our teaching is affected even by paralinguistic behaviors, such as body contact, the distance between ourselves and our students, eye contact and volume of voice.³ The adage that one does not look into the eyes of another as the eyes are regarded as "the window to the soul" is much more than a cliché in many cultures.

Knowing "who the other is" requires that beliefs, attitudes and values of the "other" be fully investigated. The immigrant student is faced with learning to adjust to our culture; even some second generation students have to make adjustments either by virtue of family pressures or through a general lack of enculturation on their part. By the third generation, however, most individuals have become fully assimilated into the Western culture, making it generally unnecessary for the teacher to make special considerations.

Broad Group Cultural Tendencies

A specific approach toward understanding cultural diversity is to concentrate on the differences between customs and lan-

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guages among societies. However, there are negative aspects of being culturally specific; it is nearly impossible to study every different culture and its social value, and it invites the negative stereotyping of certain ethnic groups.

What Hofstede has concluded is that a theory of cross-cultural differences is much more informative in explaining broad group tendencies. It is also important to realize that within any culture there are individuals who do not conform to the societal directives and may not fit within the categories listed. These are broad group generalities that do not apply to each and every individual.

I have enlisted Hofstede's four dimensions of Individualism-Collectivism as a means by which to define the cultural variables of different societies. The concepts provide a standard the private music instructor can employ to become acquainted with students from different countries as well as those cultural standards that are apt to shape the students' patterns of learning.

Individualism-Collectivism. This is the most widely used dimension employed by those in the field of communications to describe the ways in which cultures differ. In very broad terms, individualism is a cultural pattern found in most northern and western regions of Europe and in North

America. Individualists are "I" oriented, seeing the self as separate and unique. They place a high value on autonomy and individual competition and expect to be rewarded for individual achievements and initiative. People within individualist countries are encouraged to make individual decisions and are rewarded individual credit or blame where it is due.

Collectivism is more prevalent within Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific. Collectivists are more inclined to belong to extended families or ingroups who protect them in exchange for loyalty; they are "we" or group oriented. The person is expected to take care of the extended family before the self, and there is emphasis on group harmony and cooperation. Group decisions are valued while credit and blame are shared, and rewards are given for contribution toward group goals. Friendships are predetermined by ingroup relationships and a high value is placed upon duty, order, tradition, age, group security, status and hierarchy.

Within the individualist culture, information is passed along verbally with less focus on nonverbal messages. There is more self-expression through a manner that demonstrates uniqueness of the individual and individual values and achievement. In collectivist societies, most information is communicated non-verbally. Very often individuals will talk around the point, allowing others to figure out the missing parts of the message. Ambiguity and silence are admired qualities while there is an avoidance of speaking or behaving in a way that might cause one person to stand out.

Within individualist societies, the student is more apt to speak up and question or even contradict the teacher, while in collectivist societies the student expects the teacher to initiate conversation and outline the specific paths to pursue. In Western private and group instruction, teachers rely heavily upon interaction with the student to help understand what direction needs to be taken within the lesson. However, when communication is unilateral, this might be regarded more as a result of cultural differences than a lack of knowledge on the part of the student.

Power distance. A low power distance culture believes that power is relegated to those who are in power legitimately or to individuals with expertise. In low power distance societies, education is student-centered and the teacher expects the students to initiate communication. Students are permitted to contradict or criticize the teacher, and in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student. Countries that scored low on the power distance dimension were Austria, Israel, Denmark, Costa Rica and the United States.

In high power distance cultures, authority-based relationships are seen as natural; these societies also accept inequality as being natural. A teacher merits the respect of his student. The student speaks up only when invited by the teacher, and the teacher is never contradicted or publicly criticized. In teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher. Countries that are high on the power distance scale are Malaysia, Panama, the Philippines and Mexico.

Uncertainty Avoidance. In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, people are active, aggressive, emotional, security-seeking and intolerant, accepting strict codes of behavior while keeping conflict and competition within their group. Countries high in uncertainty avoidance include Greece, Guatemala, Portugal, Uruguay, Belgium and Japan. Students from high uncertainty avoidance societies feel comfortable in structured learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables. Teachers are expected to have all the answers, and students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving. Intellectual disagreement is interpreted by the teacher as personal disloyalty. Teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from the lay person.

People from countries low in uncertainty avoidance seek change more often and are more tolerant of risk taking. Competition is also more acceptable among individuals within the same groups. Countries low in

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uncertainty avoidance include Singapore, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Denmark and Malaysia. In low uncertainty avoidance societies, students feel more at home with unstructured learning situations that issue broad assignments with no timetables. Students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving and teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as stimulating exercise.

Masculinity-Femininity. This dimension differentiates between sex roles in culture. Cultures that score high on the masculinity scale place a high value on those elements that are considered more masculine, such as the work ethic, material wealth and competition; whereas in feminine cultures, the quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and a lesser concern for competition and confrontation exist. Countries scoring high on the masculine scale were Japan, Austria, Venezuela, Switzerland, Mexico and Italy. Those that scored lower were the United States (slightly below the median), Sweden, Costa Rica, Yugoslavia and Chile. In feminine societies, teachers avoid openly praising students, while a student's failure is looked upon as a relatively minor accident. Students practice mutual solidarity and behave modestly. In

masculine societies, teachers openly praise good students as the system rewards the students' performance.

Teachers in Other Lands

In many countries the teacher is held in much higher regard than in our own society. In India, the "guru" is the teacher; in other societies there is a "master-teacher" who directs the students in every move made within the lesson. In the Vietnamese culture one would be addressed as "Teacher"—a person of high authority who deserves respect and not questioning or confrontation. In Asian countries where Confucian principles are followed, the teacher is considered to be the most respected profession in the society. Collectivists are slow in forming relationships with people they do not know. Yet, once they get to know the person and begin to define the other as an ingroup member, they become more interactive in their communication. If students are reassured that confrontation is not "taboo," and in fact is welcome in student/teacher relations when done in a positive tone, over time they will accept the new attitudes as they conform to our societal values.

Age as a Cultural Factor

A teacher's age is an important factor within collectivist societies; the older the teacher, the greater the respect. In individualist cultures, teachers earn the respect of students by means of their teaching ability, notwithstanding their age. Collectivists also believe that the young should learn and that adults cannot accept the role of student. This is important to consider when working with the immigrant adult student who demonstrates insecurity and self-doubt over starting at an older age.

Criticism

Emphasis upon positive reinforcement, as opposed to negative verbal criticism, is a concept widely agreed upon by most educators. Positive reinforcement is even more important to recognize when working with students from collectivist cultures, where people generally do not say "No," or criticize in an outright fashion. In general, disapproval is indicated in subtle ways. If

criticism is absolutely necessary, offer many positive remarks beforehand. In a group lesson, it is better to avoid criticism in front of others so that the individual may "save face." This element of "saving face" is very important within collectivist societies, where criticism reflects not only on the individual, but on the family and ingroup as a whole. Demonstrating to the student the proper ways in which to perform a skill or interpret a phrase—as opposed to only describing what was done incorrectly—would seem less threatening to the student. Over time, more verbal communication skills could gradually be incorporated.

Another way to approach criticism is through consultation with the parent of the child. In collectivist cultures, vertical relationships (for example parent-child, supervisor-subordinate) are much more prevalent than in individualist cultures, where there are fewer consultations of this sort.

Competition

Linked with the concept of the ingroup (family and close friends) is the collectivist's view of competition. In most individualist countries, competition is experienced by the individual who uses it as a means toward personal recognition. In collectivist societies, however, competition is recognized as another step toward raising the status of one's group as opposed to bringing attention solely to the individual. Competition within collectivist societies is not as acceptable when it occurs among members of one's ingroup as when it is between representatives of different groups. An example is in the Japanese culture where interpersonal competition is necessary for entry into the most prestigious schools, yet once an individual has joined a corporation, cooperation with coworkers is the most important attribute for success on the job. Japanese people believe that when the individual competes, in effect she represents a past and present family and group. In collectivist societies, an individual is the contributor, but it is the group that is actually competing. It is through competition that cohesiveness can be enhanced and survival of the group ensured. One might recall the young female skater at the recent winter

The Value of Music Study

The student from the collectivist background is more apt to see her musical accomplishments as a gain for the family unit rather than as a unilateral accomplishment. There is great emphasis placed upon the importance of education in collectivist cultures, and very often the student is expected to please both her family and the teacher. In countries where Western values and attitudes are more common within the society (Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and South America, for example) the study of Western classical music on instruments such as the piano is held in high regard, and might even be considered a way to elevate the societal position of the family to which the individual belongs.

This may be seen in Vietnamese culture, a society where Western influences have had a marked effect upon the culture since the occupation of the French and the United States involvement in the Vietnam War. Prior to the occupation of South Vietnam by the communists, only students whose families were of substantial means were offered admission into the conservatories where students followed a style of piano instruction that most closely resembled European teaching methods. Many Vietnamese who have since immigrated to the United States have either started or resumed musical studies, and for some this has meant having to accept differences in teaching styles and teacher expectations. For others who were not part of the upper class in Vietnam, and thus unable to afford lessons, what is demonstrated is the ability of the individual to fill a void and to achieve that which was not possible in the past. It is also through acquiring Western ways that the survival of the family unit is measured and preserved.

Olympics who apologized to Japan for not having won. She had, in her eyes and to her countrymen, "lost face."

Modeling as a Teaching Philosophy

Nonverbal instruction, also known as modeling, is a very important part of music education throughout most of the world. In educational psychology there is a theory known as modified mastery learning, whereby the student learns to perform a skill, and then repeats it until it is done correctly many times in row. Western teachers might not be used to this form of teaching, yet it would be instructive to investigate programs that incorporate the use of rote teaching and

imitation as part of their pedagogical basis, such as the Kodály and Suzuki methods.

Alan Merriam, in *The Anthropology of Music*, writes that "the simplest and undifferentiated form of music learning occurs through imitation."⁴ One need only examine how music is taught in some of the collectivist cultures, on either traditional or non-traditional instruments, to see the variety of ways in which rote instruction, imitation, and modeling have become the main forces behind the communication of information. One might conclude, then, that the underlying principles of modeling are

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Music and Fiction

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literary agent from New York who, along with his wife, has retired to California to write his memoirs. They are invited to the home of some wealthy neighbors who, in their interest to support the arts, are presenting a young and talented "new" pianist in concert. The agent's invitation is partly due to his influential circle of friends in New York and the possible help he could offer this aspiring artist. His descriptions of the local music teacher, the accompanist and the music critic are both comical and cynically appropriate. Some of the most powerful and imaginative writing describes the performance, as the reader reacts to the music through another listener's perception. Especially noteworthy, and quite hilarious, is a commentary on the "physical" effects of Schoenberg's music. The sequence about the controversial importance of a New York recital debut is also fascinating both for its accuracy and pertinence to struggling performers today. With this story, the reader is given unusual glimpses into the business side and business mind of the artistic world.

William Somerset Maugham

As many know and have experienced, the decision to become a musician is not always an easy one and, most often, is one that affects those closest to us. William Somerset Maugham addresses this reality in his story, "The Alien Corn." Told from the point of view of a distant relative, the narrator becomes more closely aligned with his nephew's family when one of their two sons decides to become a pianist. The family has its own ideas and aspirations for this son who represents the perfect English gentleman. He is to follow the family tradition by assuming a reserved place in the House of Commons. His decision to become a professional pianist triggers a stream of concerns and oppositions that most performers are forced to consider in this highly competitive environment: the validity of such a career, the financial burden, the unknown possibility of success. As you may imagine, the family's opposition only fuels his determination, whereupon an agreement is made that places the future of his questionable career in music on the advice of a well-known and respected artist. With Maugham's emotionally charged conclusion, the reader is invariably left to question the value and role of such crucial decisions.

Arno Karlen

The complex issues that surround the possibility of a career in music are, once

again, a prominent theme in Arno Karlen's "The Lesson." However, unlike Maugham's story, the focus here is the controversial role of the teacher. Is it a right or responsibility to make decisions regarding career choices for the student? After failed attempts to become a pianist or a conductor, the determined narrator of this story finally pushes towards a career on the French horn after being accepted by a renowned teacher with an illustrious past. Through the process of lessons and the honest integrity of this teacher, he learns to see that his obsession is with the idea of a career in music, not a love for the music itself. While the story is one of reflection (his teacher's death is the catalyst that leads him to tell of his experiences), it is also a testimonial to one whose honesty and insight saves a person from a life of pain and denial.

John Gardner

As with Karlen's story, the main character of John Gardner's "Redemption" becomes a student of the French horn, but for very different reasons. At the beginning of this work, the reader learns that a twelve-year-old boy, Jack Hawthorne, is responsible for the death of his younger brother in a freakish tractor accident on their farm. The effects of this tragedy transform the entire family as they try to face their grief. For Jack, an overwhelming sense of guilt propels him away from his family emotionally, and he seeks relief in music. As the distance from his family grows, the seriousness of his dedication to study French horn finally leads him on bus trips to have lessons with a famous teacher at the Eastman School of Music. The powerful images and feelings that provoke the reader are especially moving when one learns this is an autobiographical story. For Gardner, seeking redemption from the guilt of his brother's death became a crucial impetus behind a life dedicated both to fiction and love for music. As well as being a student of the French horn, he wrote two opera librettos, one for *Rumplestiltskin*, the other for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

It is my hope that curiosity will lead many to read these and the vast number of other stories written on the experience of music. As you can see, many facets of the musician's world have been insightfully portrayed, including the teacher, the student, and the perils and rewards surrounding a life in music. While some of these authors had more direct relationships through personal music study, they have all, through their eyes as artists, written vividly about the dedication and diligence behind every artist's life. After all, music, or any life in art, is not merely a choice, but a calling.

Teacher-Student Communications

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tied together with specific cultural variables such as conformity, non-questioning of ideas, and deference to authority.

In Africa, for example, music is learned by rote and preserved by memory. Improvisation is important, involving strict, unwritten organizational rules. In some African music, however, the student is not allowed to improvise or vary the established rote pattern. In India, students learn by "osmosis," living in an environment filled with music twenty-four hours a day. As many as five to ten students might live with a well-known guru, the ultimate source of all the student's musical knowledge. In China, rote instruction is usual in the instruction of traditional instruments. Nonmusical ideas are drawn from nature scenes and stories in order to create a musical outcome. All instruction is through demonstration, using metaphors to describe the way in which a phrase changes, or even how to create nuances. Modeling is employed to the point where the student's physical movements are expected to imitate, in exact fashion, the master teacher's gestures.

In each case, the master teacher first demonstrates all aspects of the performance, and the student is expected to follow the teacher's instructions. In European-influenced private instruction, teachers tend to avoid stories and narratives, and there is a greater tendency to discuss music in terms of its basic elements such as pitch, rhythm, timbre and motive. The Western teacher looks at structural elements (such as form and harmonic rhythm) when making artistic decisions. There are exceptions, of course, in that teachers may employ some form of narrative within the lesson in order to paint a picture of a phrase, or gesture with hands and arms to help the student feel the rhythmic structure and flow. Students are also encouraged to sing the melody as a way of being able to feel the flow of the musical line.

Technical Mastery

One important aspect of applied music study is technical mastery. Those students whose prior performance skills have been developed within non-Western countries might have been recipients of pedagogies that fostered the idea of modeling to the extent that all aspects of technique and musical artistry were taught through rote imitation. Often, the results of this kind of learning experience, however positive, will have led the student to think, "Why consider doing any more?" What ought to be stressed to the student is that, in the United

States, originality of one's own ideas is a concept held in high regard and greatly encouraged. Conformity, not resistance to new ideas, is the issue here, and yet teachers who have not explored cultural learning might be inclined to fault the student for lack of ability.

Because we live in a culturally pluralistic society, we must study the social backgrounds of our students and attempt to extract the best from what other cultures have to offer, incorporating these ideologies in our own styles of teaching. The most functional intercultural skill we use as teachers is taking another point of view. If we consider our way to be the only way, we run the risk of alienating many students who deserve a proper music education. Many foreign students have left oppressive countries in order to find a better life in a country that stresses the principles of unity and equality. It is the responsibility of all of us who operate independent studios to uphold these principles and become, in the truest sense of the word, multicultural.

AMT

NOTES

1. Geert Hofstede, "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10, (1986), 305.
2. Ibid, 305.
3. Dan Landis and Richard Brislin, ed. *Handbook of Intercultural Training* vol. 1-3, (New York, NY: Pergamon Press, 1983), 84.
4. Alan P. Merriam. *The Anthropology of Music*. (Evanston, IL, Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), 146.

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