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Adult Seekers and Learners – Reflecting on the experiences and challenges met by adult students as expressed by them

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Mary McIntyre is an IRMT Fellow and Council member, and an Otago Branch Committee member. She teaches in Port Chalmers, Dunedin.

Mary decided that the best way to find out about how adults learn was to ask them to speak for themselves. She drew up a survey which was distributed to 79 adult learners who lived in several different towns. Their responses were then compiled and formed the basis for her lecture.

Statistics from the survey showed that 52 were female, 21 male, the average age was 53, and 21 were aged 60 or over. The oldest woman was 77, and the oldest man was 81. Other than piano, their instruments included most orchestral instruments, organ, saxophone, guitar, and there were also some singing students.

The survey began with some brief questions about their previous musical experience, if any, and the instrument they had learned. This was followed by a section called 'Starting Out'.

Some people had taken several years to decide to start lessons; others had done so almost impulsively. Their reasons varied from, "It was on my bucket list", to "Life is valuable and is to be lived now", as well as some who had finished lessons at an early age and wanted to learn again.

The results about being nervous at measuring up to the teacher's expectation were evenly divided, as were those about finding adequate time to practise; the most negative response was the fear of playing or singing in front of other pupils. The word 'fear' conjured up many reactions in the responses, including playing a wrong note, reaching a limit, hearing only criticism and not praise for work well done, shaking hands and legs, "I couldn't think straight", and "I was scared of losing my place".

Fear

Mary questioned whether fear, pushed by self-criticism, is the greatest obstacle to adults learning and playing effectively. Does this fear come from early patterns, now seemingly hardwired to provide responses to any situation seen as a threat? A threat to what? To our self-protective system? William Westney writes: The lesson is not a weekly examination. Students do not have to prove their basic worth at each lesson". When Westney makes this clear, he sees relief in his students' eyes.

The Relationship with the Teacher

Mary asked: "How do we feel about teaching adults?" Much patience is required, and an intuitive understanding as well as knowledge of our pupils if we are to meet in a place of mutual trust. Flexibility is the key as lessons are an experience for both teacher and student.

The experience can be invigorating but also challenging. Words such as patience, knowledge, encouragement, and honesty occurred many times, as well as insight, passion, and empathy. Students felt that there was much suitable repertoire offered to choose from. One cause of concern was that a proportion of lesson time was sometimes lost in chatting.

Words of advice from students to the teachers included: "Keep on extending me and acknowledging achievement"; Carry on adapting your teaching to each student's

need”; Allow the student to state their own goals and discuss these with you”; Push me a little harder on basic drills”; and “Stay in control as adults have learned many ways of avoidance (especially if not enough practice has been done)”.

Learning and Practising

There were varied responses here. Typical difficulties included co-ordinating left and right hands, playing at speed, weak fingers, arthritic problems, and reading two lines of music (three for an organ pupil). As for self-discipline in practice, 31 percent admitted to always intending to do better next time, or said they were too busy for regular practice. Fifty-eight percent felt that their inner voice of self-critical chatter affected their playing and distracted them from what the teacher was saying. Some principles of learning are helpful: we learn to do by doing; without readiness to learn, learning is inefficient; without motivation – nothing!; responses need immediate reinforcement; and meaningful, relevant content is better learned and retained.

Factors to be recognised in adult teaching include: past experiences and the associated emotions that affect learning: learning may be slower but may often be in greater depth: adult students like to feel some control over what they do; they need to be goal-orientated: adults have habitual patterns of living and learning, which means less flexibility with resistance sometimes to changing a way of doing things; and respect in the teaching/learning environment.



Satisfaction and Responses to Simplicity in Learning

The section on Satisfaction gave the respondents an opportunity to express how they felt about learning. Some comments were: “discovering new composers”; “a great sense of pride in beginning to unravel a great

mystery”; “joy, enjoyment, and gaining an overall fuller understanding of music”.

The most worthwhile achievements ranged from: “playing a C major scale on the piano”; “making my hands do different things”; “a huge improvement in ability to read music”; “passing exams”; and “getting to play more complicated pieces than when I began”.

Responses to simplicity in learning varied from “needing to practise”; “breaking down chords or sequences into building blocks and putting them together”; to “understanding the benefits of hearing the music in my head before playing it”.

Performance and Goals

When answering the section on Performance, the majority felt doubtful and overwhelmed at performing in front of an audience while more were positive about working towards an exam.

As to Goals, most felt that they were achieving what they set out to do when they started. They would like to be more confident at playing/ singing for others and suggested that the only way to gain this confidence was just to “practise doing it”. The majority set themselves goals – to keep building their piano skills as a lifelong learner, to achieve a high musical standard, a special relaxation activity, and to just keep improving.

Finally, Mary read a relevant extract from William Westney’s *The Perfect Wrong Note*, in which he discusses perfectionism. “Perfectionist expectations lead to detachment from one’s body and a tendency to apologise pre-emptively for one’s efforts, knowing from experience that there’s sure to be something wrong with them.”

Mary referred to this statement because of a recurring exchange she had had with several students. The following conversation is illogical, she said. It’s like a dialogue from Alice in Wonderland, which is why she had committed it to memory:

Teacher: (after student plays awkward passage): “How did that feel to you?” Student: (glumly): “I know that’s not how it is supposed to sound.” Teacher: “Well, I wasn’t talking about sound at all, or how it was “supposed to sound”! I was just asking how it felt physically. (And how did the phrase “supposed to” get into this discussion anyway?)”

Perfectionism really can get in the way of communication and perception, to say nothing of enjoyment and ultimate mastery.

Bibliography:

William Westney: The Perfect Wrong Note
(ISBN I – 57467 - 145 6)

Matthew Harre: Musical Fossils
www.musicalfossils.com

Beverley Fleetwood teaches piano in Howick, Auckland. She was elected to the IRMT Auckland Branch Committee in 2008, was Vice Chairperson and Convenor of Seminars in 2009, and is currently serving as Chairperson.