

Wild Rider

By Alison S. Barr, NCTM

In A Strange Land

Sustaining Relevance In The Independent Studio

My colleague Irene Reed recently passed away. She was a maverick in our field—a professional independent teacher, maintaining a large class in her dedicated home studio, long before it became an “industry standard.” Irene’s person-

ality was one of quiet warmth and loving gentleness. She believed in always growing, always learning, never lowering her standards. In Irene’s spirit, I often contemplate the qualities necessary to maintain relevance as a piano teacher. My greatest fear is I’ll look into one of my student’s faces and see the bland and polite stare of profound boredom as he bides his time until the end of the lesson.

Throughout my 40 years of piano teaching, I’ve seen myriad trends and technological developments come and go, watched new learning theories become popular and then fade away. When computer-assisted theory programs came on the scene, I installed an Apple IIGS in my multi-teacher studio. I bought a first generation Roland digital piano with an MT120 that played

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accompaniment disks and recorded students. I've taught group lessons with and without an electronic lab. I've evaluated and written about business practices and researched and experimented with the best strategies for teaching adult students. From 1980 in Washington, D.C., through 2015 in Las Vegas, Nevada, I've attended countless sessions at MTNA Conferences. I began teaching in the days when only one or two method series were available; now I am able to think of a title and legally print it out on the computer in the next room. I've adapted as scheduling conflicts have proliferated, and I've somehow maintained a large class while the demands of sports programs have grown exponentially. My students' schedules, their family lives, their school days, their social interactions and their hopes for the future—nothing looks at all like it did in 1976.

Being *relevant* is wider and deeper than being *current*. iPads, *Skype*, stunning websites and engaging blogs—all these can be wonderful tools. Or, they can be marvelous distractions. True relevance is about the way we relate to the world around us. It's about keeping our deepest teaching values intact against great odds, while recognizing which elements of our "learned behavior" need to be updated. We have to recognize when to tweak "the way we've always done it" while holding fast to our integrity. Relevance is about the way we listen to the student on the bench and whether we respond honestly. David, the 9-year-old who comes at 3:00 P.M., deserves my musical expertise, my ability to shape his hand position, my knowledge of methods and repertoire. He will be greeted with a bright well-ordered studio, a well-tuned piano and my pleasant and cheerful demeanor. But even more than the sum of all of these, I hope I offer a truly *relevant* lesson—an experience that acknowledges who he is and the world in which he lives.

How exactly do we maintain relevance in a tumultuous world? How can we be sure what we are teaching and how we are teaching it have value to today's students, while we still honor our deep-seated cultural and musical traditions? I believe several qualities promote our "relevance quotient." These are courage, awareness, empathy, energy, adaptability, authenticity, generosity and passion. Each of these characteristics contributes to our ability to make meaningful and significant choices, and each guides our communication toward the long-term growth and success of our students.

Courage

A former student, Sheila, now a music major, is in the

process of developing her own method including ear training, improvisation and reading. I'm inspired by Sheila's conscious, courageous choice. Courage, or the will NOT to proceed down the path of least resistance, takes many forms in the independent studio. The boldest choices I've made—buying a Steinway, attending my first MTNA Conference, hiring a guest artist for an annual high school master class—have also been the most rewarding. They have deepened my resolve and commitment. Since we ask our students to take risks in their learning, our students deserve to see their teacher doing the same.

Awareness

It's easy to perceive that we're aware of what's transpiring around us, but it's difficult to be *truly* aware. We're constrained by our expectations, experience and beliefs. We brace for errors we've heard many times before, perhaps missing what's being done well. Colin is a ninth grader who has had a difficult time reading music, breaking down his pieces for practice and performing with fluency. He's a wonderful, funny and smart young man, full of deep ideas and rich spirit, but I know it's been frustrating for him to stick with piano. And it's been frustrating for me to figure out the best teaching strategy for him. In his last lesson, I looked up from his assignment notebook to find him swaying gently as he struggled through the right hand of his new piece, Schumann's *About Strange Land and People*. Colin's obviously deep response to the music showed me we had rounded a corner. My awareness easily could have been shut down. If I'd been preoccupied correcting notes, fingering and hand position, I might have missed what the piece really meant to him.

Empathy

In *Good Teaching: The Top Ten Requirements*, Richard LeBlanc, PhD, states, "GOOD TEACHING is about caring, nurturing, and developing minds and talents." I agree completely. Our students are caught in the maelstrom of our times, expected to move furiously through a frantic world. They're afraid to drop any one of the precariously balanced balls they are juggling. They're constantly fighting the time-eating, focus-grabbing thralls of social media and rampant consumerism. In the midst of all this, music teachers hope to create a lesson environment that is not just another hoop-jumping exercise, but is instead motivational, inspiring and deep. The way we communicate and support our students, the personal experiences and humor we bring

to our teaching, all contribute to such an environment. Amelia, an accomplished high school junior, came to a very late lesson the other night. She had just left a ski team race, where she had competed in subzero temperatures. I resisted my knee-jerk reaction: “Why did you have to go to skiing before your lesson?” I said instead, “Wow, you must be freezing, so let’s try to get those fingers moving with a nice, slow scale.” In a very few minutes, Amelia had shifted her focus onto her Beethoven Sonata. Though exhausted, she went away excited and musically refreshed. Truly empathic teaching is relevant to every student at every lesson. It’s purposeful and meaningful, not just “nice” or “easy.”

Energy

As studio teachers, our physical stamina, enthusiasm and energy are on intimate display every day. Our students scrutinize our every move, our wardrobe and our figures of speech. (They tell me that many of mine are as “old as the hills!”) As teachers, old or young, we need to bring our best selves to every lesson. Keeping our energy highway clear and open is a multi-faceted task. It involves a personal formula for self-care—exercise, diet, rest, meditation, study, practice, travel, relaxing with family and friends, performing, concert-going and helping those around us. If we routinely participate in activities that stimulate us and heighten our *joie de vivre*, our students will see us at our best. They in turn will want to rise to meet us.

Adaptability

The fantastic *MTNA Self-Assessment Tool for the Independent Music Teacher*, available on the “Members Only” portion of the MTNA website² poses hard questions about our teaching, the infrastructure of our studio, our curriculum—just about everything! In the face of tumultuous societal change, it’s easy to say things like, “Kids nowadays have no time, no focus, spend too much time on social media.” I’m sometimes guilty of looking outside myself when my students don’t play as well as they might or don’t practice enough. But my better self understands that the solutions reside within me, and I strive to be adaptable. For example, I teach more popular music than I used to, deepening its value by dissecting the arrangement or concentrating on theory. When I’m perturbed because a student

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argues with me, (that wouldn’t have happened 40 years ago!) I apologize about locking horns. After all these years, I should be able to find a way of communicating that will bring that individual to a higher place of understanding. A few days ago, I quipped, “Kids nowadays!” in response to a crazy excuse, “The cleaning lady moved my music.” The student fired back, “Adults nowadays!” Not disrespectful, but a product of her times. I laughed and laughed with her, because she reminded me how funny I must sound. Flexibility of programming and scheduling, colorful and frequent communication, humor—all these along with recognizing the deep humanity that still and always will reside in every student—will enable us to keep our eye on the prize of creative and exciting instruction without sacrificing our authenticity.

Authenticity

In her excellent article, “Cultivating a Tenacious Teaching Spirit,” Sara M. Ernst states, “Being tenacious begins with an artistic vision.”³ Our teaching experience gives us the opportunity to develop such a vision and to experiment and adapt that vision for the many individuals we encounter. The *most important* components of our teaching philosophy, those we adhere to unalterably and without compromise, are at the core of that vision.

Here are three of mine:

Piano lessons must provide a complete and contextual music appreciation and education. The piano repertoire spans three

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hundred years of cultural, historical and artistic evolution. Through its study, we learn to appreciate and evaluate our cultural heritage—from Bach through jazz and on to current popular styles.

There is a direct correlation between what the student invests and what rewards she achieves. Expecting greater commitment and work from the student reaps lifelong rewards.

Every single piano lesson should be a challenging, exciting, humorous and passionate journey for both the student and the teacher.

If we periodically remind ourselves of our core values and hold firm to them, the demands of studio management will swirl around them, but we will remain our freest and best teaching selves.

Generosity

One of the most confounding statements I've ever heard was in the context of a presentation about earning a lot of money as an independent teacher. While I'd never argue with producing a healthy income, I've struggled for years with one of the speaker's caveats: "Don't do any 'free' teaching. Never give a lesson that you aren't paid for." This sentiment, so absolute and uncompromising, seems to be borne of fear and limited resources rather than of generosity and abundance. When we teach music, we share our human spirit, hoping to guide our students toward the highest heights of expression. This is best done when we are giving of ourselves as expansively as we are able. Certainly our written policy should protect our time and ensure our income, but what teacher would choose to have his make-up lesson policy celebrated in his epitaph? Ultimately, our legacy is what we offer our students, our colleagues, our professional organizations and our communities—not what we deny them. That extra lesson before a recital, the time to record an audition tape, accepting yet another office for

your local chapter, the parting gift of a beautiful Beethoven Sonata volume—these are exemplars of true professionalism. These will endure in the hearts of our students long after we retire.

Passion is our touchstone as independent teachers. Many of us share a similar story. When we were young, we heard our instrument and were captivated by its sound. The passion that began long ago drives us to enter our studio every day. It fuels us to present an alternative sound picture for halting and awkward playing. It grants us the vocabulary and enticements that will motivate each student. *Passion* delights in the eight-measure composition played over the phone or *Skype* when an 18-inch snowstorm prevents a student from being at his lesson. *Passion* is the force that lifts us out of our seat when we want to inspire beautiful melodic shaping in a Chopin Nocturne or causes us to lean into the student's space to help her fine-tune the two-note slurs in her Clementi Sonata. *Passion* keeps us relevant because it is timeless and abundant, rechargeable in countless ways.

I hope I'll know when I'm no longer offering my best as a piano teacher. My colleague Irene Reed did, retiring to accolades and warm good wishes. I give her so much credit for that. *In Merrily We Roll Along*, Stephen Sondheim says, "True greatness is knowing when to get off." In the meantime, I hope to show my students every week, in every lesson, that learning to play this instrument is one of the most exciting and important things they will ever do. ♪

Notes

1. Richard LeBlanc, PhD, "Good Teaching: The Top Ten Requirements," *The Core-Association for Experiential Education*, York University, Spring 1999, Vol. 2, # 1.
2. MTNA, *MTNA Self-Assessment Tool for the Independent Music Teacher*, <https://members.mtna.org/mtnasecure/>.
3. Sara M. Ernst, "Cultivating a Tenacious Teaching Spirit," *American Music Teacher*, February/March 2015.

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