

Teaching Philosophy

Whether we realize it or not, every one of us is learning all the time. Teaching is, in its broadest sense, simply that which facilitates learning. It is not a one-way flow of information from teacher to student, but is cyclical. From my students I learn about my own playing, technique and interpretation; I learn about my approach to teaching and how to do it more effectively; and ultimately, I learn about myself as a human being.

My approach to teaching, in the much more specific context of an undergraduate guitar program, has developed from nearly a decade of private teaching experience, and from a lifetime of being a student myself. The final goal in any teaching endeavor, but especially in applied lessons, is that the student ultimately become his own teacher. My job is to help facilitate and guide them on this journey.

I believe that students learn best when they are in a positive environment in which they feel that they can succeed. There are a number of ways that this environment can be created, including the careful balance of positive and negative feedback during the lesson, and the assignment of small manageable goals that the student can achieve every week. More important than anything else, however, is that the student feels his teacher is empathetic towards his situation, and excited about his progress.

Having both extensively studied and taught Guitar Pedagogy, I have spent a significant amount of time examining my approach to private lessons, and the goals that I work towards with an undergraduate guitar performance major. Upon completing their course of study, my students should be well-rounded musicians who are capable and well equipped to go out into society and communicate the art of music with the public. To that end, with my students I work towards the following objectives:

- 1) develop technical and interpretive skills
- 2) establish good practice habits and the ability to self assess
- 3) hone performance skills
- 4) cultivate a lifelong desire for learning and excellence

1) Technical accomplishment on one's instrument is a means to an end, with the ultimate goal being an effective performance in front of an audience. In reaching that end, technical development should be cultivated by the practice of scales, arpeggios and other technical exercises, along with etudes and level-appropriate repertoire specifically selected to strengthen the individual student's areas of technical weakness. I find it important that the student understand why a particular technical skill is important, and how a given exercise or etude will help improve it.

Equally essential is developing the student's ears and musical sensibility. Interpretive skills introduced in theory and musicology classes (such as phrase structure, form, ornamentation)

become realized and put into practice in applied lessons. Having extensively studied Dalcroze Eurhythmics, I also place a high emphasis on rhythmic accuracy, and develop its embodiment and physicalization with Dalcrozian exercises.

Perhaps most importantly, the student needs to feel that his/her teacher sees the “big picture,” and has a long-term plan for his/her development. Every student learns and reacts differently, and the teacher must tailor his teaching approach to reach the individual student. A balance of positive feedback versus constructive criticism needs to be found for each student, with the goal that every guitarist who leaves my studio after a lesson feels encouraged and excited to practice.

2) Among the most valuable skills that I learned from my undergraduate teacher, Jason Vieaux, was how to practice. The importance of practicing effectively and efficiently cannot be overstated, and it does not happen on its own: students must be taught how to practice. The process of breaking down a difficult passage, identifying the problem, formulating a solution, executing successful consecutive repetitions with the correction, and finally reincorporating the passage back into context, needs to be consistently reinforced until the student masters the technique. Additionally, the skill of balancing a full program of repertoire and managing practice time so that all pieces are ready for a performance should be addressed over the course of a student’s undergraduate career.

3) Technical details and “behind the scenes” practice techniques are a means to an end, with the final result being seamless and unhindered expression in front of an audience. However, even with technical and musical security in place, there are very few “natural born” performers: most students require considerable performance experience before they begin to feel comfortable on the stage. To this end I encourage my students to perform frequently in studio class, concerts open to the general public, and just about any venue in which they have an attentive audience. I also believe it is fundamentally important for a student’s development to collaborate with other musicians in ensembles and chamber music. This has the added benefit of fully integrating the guitar studio with the rest of the music department, from which it is often unfortunately rather isolated.

4) Perhaps the most important job a teacher has is instilling in the student a passion for excellence, and a lifelong desire to learn and improve. I think the best way to achieve this is to lead by example: students should see a teacher that is constantly striving for excellence in his own playing, continually trying to improve his own technique and musicianship, and working to make every performance and every lesson the best that it can be. I firmly believe that my drive for excellence today is a direct result of observing how my undergraduate teacher lived his life, and it is my hope that I will have the same impact on the students in my studio.

The more I learn as both a teacher and as a musician, the more I realize that teaching with genuine enthusiasm and empathy is every bit as important as teaching with solid pedagogy - and as I continue on my journey, I strive continually to improve both.