

2012 GMTA TEACHER OF THE YEAR Dr. Martha Thomas



Martha Thomas, NCTM, is the 2012 MTNA Teacher of the Year. Her exceptionalism is evident in her commitment to teaching, performing, service and professional activities. A native Texan, she came to the University of Georgia School of Music in 1986 and holds degrees in piano performance through the doctoral level. Studies included her work at the Universities of Texas and Wisconsin. Teachers and mentors included William Race, Danielle Martin and Howard Karp. Thomas appeared in master classes with Leon Fleisher, John Perry, and Ronald Turini.

Solo and chamber performances by Thomas have been successfully received across the country and featured performances as a guest soloist with the Athens Symphony, Danville Symphony and the DeKalb Symphony Orchestra have been scheduled. She is currently working on collaborative recordings. Thomas models performance technique by being an acclaimed performer. Dr.

Tom Pearsall, Georgia Southern Professor of Piano, says that Thomas is a

"first rate pianist...whose recording of piano works by George Rochberg...is nothing less than stunning."

Her leadership as a Past President of Georgia Music Teachers and as MTNA Southern Division Chair demonstrates her stalwart presence in meeting goals of the organization. Having joined MTNA while first teaching in Wisconsin, she helped found the Stevens Point Area MTA.

Her teaching philosophy elucidates her approach to the piano studio.

I try to show respect for each student in my studio... One of my most important jobs is to help students recognize their own potential. Sometimes students see themselves as they were several years earlier, rather than realizing how far they've come in the recent past. Other students see only their weaknesses and can't yet see where their talents lie. Still others have big dreams that don't match their abilities. I need to see each student's potential so that, not only can I choose appropriate repertoire for them for next year, but also give them some career guidance upon graduation. My research area at the University of Georgia comprises that of performing as a recitalist, chamber musician, and orchestra soloist. Being an active performer enables me to be a much stronger and more informed teacher. Talking about music is one thing. But, demonstrating at the piano in order to get a point across is something entirely different. As the phrase goes: 'A picture is worth a thousand words.'

Student Jan Ritchie affirms Thomas' dedication to teaching in describing her piano lessons with Thomas. Dr. Thomas "hooked me as soon as I had a lesson" with her ability to "masterfully construct imagery in" using "story telling, colors, and a vast array of adjectives to communicate that intangible spark that music entails."

Dr. Richard Zimdars, University of Georgia Professor of Piano, says that Thomas "has successfully filled roles as teacher, administrator, performer, recording artist, and as advocate extraordinaire for MTNA at all levels of

MTNA's organizational structure. Martha's conference presentations demonstrate her understanding of critical pedagogy trends and topics."

GMTA is very pleased to acknowledge Martha Thomas as the 2012 GMTA Teacher of the Year.

TEACHING TIPS

By Dr. Martha Thomas, NCTM

I have dedicated my life to furthering the cause of music. As a performer and teacher, I believe that music is essential for everyone's life and wish to pass on this love of music to the next generation. Below are some of my thoughts on teaching.

From the first lesson with a new freshman to coaching with doctoral students, I emphasize independent thinking. The musicians' art is nothing if not creative, and to be a great artist, one must be an independent thinker. From asking simple questions such as the order of pieces to be played in the lesson, to discussing the meaning of music with advanced students, I spend much time cultivating my students' thought processes. My goal is that my students learn to think for themselves, not that they become good imitators.

Respect for students is crucial. I still remember meeting my graduate piano professor, Howard Karp, for the first time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He mentioned that he had been looking forward to our meeting ever since hearing my audition recording. His attitude set the tone for our teacher/student relationship that has endured to this day. I've never forgotten his genuine enthusiasm at that first meeting, and I try to let my students know how much I enjoy working with them.

Students need to be aware of their individual learning styles in order to practice and learn more effectively. A student with a short attention span might need several short practice sessions throughout the day. One student might prefer to work on several pieces at once, while another might function more effectively by tackling one piece at a time. Helping students discover their learning style in regards to piano study can positively impact their practicing and music making in general.

I challenge my students by constantly pushing them to strive for a higher level of expertise and achievement. I help students set short-term and long-term goals and encourage them to set very high standards for themselves. As teachers, we must have a vision for our students—a vision takes them to a new level of achievement.

"Laughter is the best medicine." I do incorporate some laughter into most lessons—This should come as no surprise to those of you who know me! I firmly believe that a sense of humor is an indispensable teaching tool. Lessons can become very intense, and humor is sometimes the best way to relieve tension that may have built up in the lesson. Laughter helps the student relax, diverts their mind from the difficult task at hand, gives them a physical break in the lesson, and can keep them from becoming discouraged.

I want my students to love music. I hope that their music studies become a part of their lives and something they will never lose. My students always laugh at me because I'm constantly saying "Oh, THAT'S my favorite piece"—and I might make that statement several times in any given day. But, it's the truth! I have many favorite compositions, and I endeavor to transmit this love of music to my students.

One of my primary areas of research at the University of Georgia comprises performance as a recitalist and collaborative musician. Being a performer has enabled me to be a much stronger and more informed teacher. Talking about music is one thing. But, demonstrating at the piano to get a point across is something entirely different. A musician's paraphrase of a familiar saying might read as follows: "A *performance* is worth a thousand words."

I still recall teaching my first piano lesson. I was 18 and a freshman at the University of Texas at Austin. How exciting those days were—full of exploration, mystery, and amazement—as I discovered the joys of teaching. I was fully convinced that I would have all the answers in another twenty-five years! As experienced teachers, you are all very aware that we will never have all the answers—but that's okay. What's important is that we keep asking questions and continue seeking the answers. Best wishes with your teaching adventures!

Martha Thomas, NCTM

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