

2018 GMTA TEACHER OF THE YEAR Ping Yun-Hsu



Every year, the Georgia Music Teachers Association recognizes one teacher as Teacher of the Year. Teachers are nominated by colleagues and a committee is formed to choose the Teacher of the Year. It is my pleasure to introduce you to the 2018 GMTA Teacher of the Year, Ping-yun Hsu, by sharing some of the letters of support written on her behalf.

Letters of recommendation from students, parents and colleagues describing our Teacher of the Year were inspiring to read. Students spoke about her positive impact and how she teaches the emotion of music. Some of her students shared:

“She was the first teacher that showed me what expression and emotion was when I sat down at the piano bench.”

“She actively stood by my side every minute of my lesson because she was so passionate about the notes on the pages before me. “

“She made me jump in my seat when she showed excitement through her own jumping beside me. Even to this day, I can still vividly picture our lessons in her studio. “

Parents described her ability to individualize lessons for each child as one of her top qualities telling how the student always comes first. She has a vision for each of her student’s future musical development and plans what is best for the student by guiding students, even those with top achievements, to her fellow piano teachers who she thinks will be the best for the students’ future. Her insight and generosity is recognized and respected by so many teachers, students, and parents.

One parent commented, “She is able to connect with her students and customize their piano lessons according to their strengths. She is a very positive and encouraging teacher who is able to make confident self-motivated musicians. She has a generous and special vision for each of her student’s future development.”

A colleague shared about her teaching studio that includes multiple practice rooms and a recital hall. “The studio is used for a number of special events, mostly geared towards enriching the student’s musical experiences. She often holds masterclasses inviting other teachers to work with her students giving them the opportunity to learn from other teachers. Her reason for this is because she believes a student should learn as much as they can, from as many great teachers as possible.”

With her desire to always put the student first, you can understand how so many of her students win top awards at the state and national level. Looking over past state winners, you will find that her students are among the finest in our state.

Not only is she considered an outstanding teacher, but you will also find the 2018 GMTA Teacher of the Year serving our organization. She has chaired Audition events numerous times and volunteers at the Region and State levels each year. I personally cannot think of a year that she has not volunteered in the GMTA Auditions. She has also served on the board at the local and state levels. She is always willing to help and take care of anything that needs doing. Her support of the local and state associations is an example for each of us.

A former student states:

“She is one of the most incredible mentors and human beings in general because she does all things with humility and intentionality. Her goal in teaching piano and serving her students and parents did not run off of attention or recognition but rather the small things that were far more important than her own pedestal. She is quite frankly the humblest and kind[est] person I know.”

Our 2018 Teacher of the Year was nominated by Huu Mai. She has inspired many students and teachers over her career and is a vital part to GMTA. Ping-yun Hsu, we applaud and congratulate you on this well-deserved honor!

Special thanks to the selection committee: Susan Naylor, 2015 Teacher of the Year; Jan Adams, 2016 Teacher of the Year; and Susan Andrews, 2017 Teacher of the Year.

Thanks also to those who contributed to this article: Huu Mai, Elaine Liu, and Tiebin and Ethan Liu.

**Georgia Music Teachers Association
Teacher of the Year, 2018 – Ping Yun-Hsu
Teaching Tips**

This is an honor I must share with my students and their parents, my team members for the past 50 years of teaching piano. My humble contribution to this collection of Teaching Tips begins with a saying by the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. When the student is *truly* ready, the teacher will disappear." To me, this means knowing how to set high expectations for students and parents from the beginning, but it also means knowing when to stop teaching a student who is ready for their next stage in learning about music and about life.

From my college degree in music in Taiwan, I gained strong technical skills, but I learned to enjoy music as a fine art when I studied for my graduate diploma at the Freiburg Conservatory Music in what was then West Germany. My graduate thesis was a comparison between general themes and styles in Eastern and Western music, as well as cultural differences in teaching and learning. I realized that my training in Asian education system taught me mainly to practice piano for certain skills but left little room for me to enjoy what I was playing. For my first exercise in graduate school, however, a professor asked me to close my eyes and run my hands over the entire instrument, making no sound but creating a powerful emotional response in me. I cried, because I always thought piano was a machine--I never realized that it was a living thing.

Over the years, my students have also represented both sides of my musical experience. Either they are skilled but play robotically, or they lack the necessary skill to support their natural creativity. Once I had a very gifted student who had perfect pitch and was a 4th grade spelling bee winner, but he didn't seem to enjoy practicing piano. During a lesson, I asked him to tell me if a certain musical phrasing was pleasing to him or not, and he said nothing. He didn't know how to form a personal opinion, so I told him that when playing piano, the heart must sense and the body will then move naturally, and the fingers are what integrate these feelings into a performance. It took him three hours to decide what sounded good to him, but this ability to make an aesthetic judgment is the most important thing that we teach.

When a student is ready, the teacher will appear. Starting with total beginners is my preference, and before I agree to take on a new student, I have a face-to-face interview with the student and parents. I keep no written policies, but I ask for personal accountability to a set of expectations. "The day I eat is the day I practice" should be their motto, which means practicing piano every day is necessary, though not for any specific length of time. I also ask parents to sit in on every lesson, if possible, in order to assist their child when practicing at home. If they can't commit to these actions, then the student's progress will be slow.

My first lesson is to explain the instrument and to let the student understand that the piano is not a piece of machinery but a living reflection of your mood. From then on, our focus includes basic technique and half of my practice assignments are technical for all students, regardless of their level. Their repertoire music covers four styles: classical, romantic, impressionist, and contemporary. With an emphasis on musical phrasing, I encourage students to develop their own original interpretation while staying faithful to the details, and to regard me as their guide to understanding music as a language.

If my students win awards for their playing, it is not due to my efforts as a music competition coach. Their success is due to their hard work and passion for music. Among their repertoire, my students choose two different period pieces that they most enjoy, and I let them know that if they put in 200% effort at practicing for a competition, then they've done their job, because competitions are just trainings for meeting life's challenges. I organize recitals for my students four times a year so that they can learn to feel free playing for the public. Only for our annual recital is there a formal program because usually the students just introduce themselves and talk about their pieces, as in an informal concert or coffeehouse setting.

When a student is *truly* ready, then the teacher will disappear. Once I start to enjoy my students' playing, then I believe that it's time for a change. When I can say, "That's the kind of music I want to hear," and when I can see my students' passion, especially in their romantic repertoire, then I tell them that they should start the next school year with a new piano teacher. This is because my very best students have learned all they can from me about musical feeling. Plus, if there's too much familiarity in our relationship, then my teaching is less effective. Sometimes this happens after a student has won a competition, but usually it occurs after five or so years of private lessons. Identifying who their next teacher is should take many conversations over a period of two to three months, but my main concern is to find the best match. I insist on having a personal conversation with the new teachers to whom I refer my best students so that they understand that I haven't rejected them. Rather, I have the honor of sharing with them the foundational skills for expressing their own feelings through music, and this is a lesson that takes a lifetime with many teachers to master.