

Ping-Yun Hsu's 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.