

Supporting Music Education: The Art of Teaching

The following examples, offered by one of America's foremost music educators, provide guidance and affirmation of the roles and responsibilities we as music educators all must possess, model and promote. *Reflections on the Cutting Edge of Teaching: Where Teacher Meets the Pupil* captures the heart of teaching.

Miss DeLay, as she is invariably known (though long married), has been teaching at the Julliard School for more than half a century, and her former pupils include Itzhak Perlman, Sarah Chang, Midori and Kennedy, Gil Shaham, Robert McDuffie, ChoLiang Lin and Shlomo Mintz. Success like this will, of course, breed success. Students will use their best endeavors to take lessons from the star teacher. Parents will push their gifted offspring her way. Managers will look to her to be training the next prodigy.

But there must be a lot more to it than that. Exceptional young musicians are often delicate seeds; they need teachers with special talents to make them grow. What those talents are, in Miss DeLay's case, have until now been a mystery. Now 83, she has never sought publicity, nor has she published memoirs or a description of her methods. For more than a decade, though, she was closely observed by Barbara Lourie Sand, whose resulting book, *Teaching Genius: Dorothy DeLay and the Making of a Musician* (Amadeus Press), at last opens the door to Miss DeLay's studio. Miss DeLay, it turns out, has no secrets. What she does have is a sound grasp of some basic rules that can be applied to any kind of training.

- **Teach the student, not the subject.** The approach has to be tuned not just to the students' accomplishments but also to their personalities. In some cases, Miss DeLay—mystifying most of her pupils—has seen a trait worth developing in someone even though that person is not going to become a professional musician. The person is paramount.
- **Expect a lot.** What you teach—information and principles but also, and more important, habits and disciplines of thought and practice—will have to last a lifetime. Miss DeLay explains how, at the start of her teaching career, she imagined a circle of exacting listeners sitting in on her classes: Toscanini, Heifetz and others. What would they want to hear? How would they respond? From this exercise came the rigorous program she gives her pupils to take them through their five hours of daily practice.
- **Be positive.** Fear is a strong incentive, but only for as long as the teacher is part of the pupil's life. Encouragement lasts forever. (Isaac Stern suggests that Miss DeLay's characteristic endearments—"Sugarplum," "Sweetie"—covered the problem of not being able to remember so many names when she was seeing dozens of students each week. But the cuddliness—partly a front, of course—helps pupils feel that their teacher is on their side.)

- **Ask questions.** This is where negativity comes in, but subtly. By questioning students, the teacher invites them to think about what they are doing and why. In time, they may start to discover their own faults and find other ways of doing things. They may come to teach themselves.
- **Learn.** Making the lesson a dialogue has another advantage—that the student may start to teach the teacher—at least in how to teach. Teaching is about giving but also gaining.
- **Be yourself; or if not that, at least be someone.** Having a distinctive teacher makes the lesson special. A lot of Miss DeLay’s success may be owed to the scarf she always wears around her shoulders.
- **Break down problems.** Students learn little from being told—in however positive a way—that they have done something wrong. And they learn nothing from being told or shown the “right” way. The teacher has to analyze, has to detect just what is going amiss and why.
- **Let progress show.** Miss DeLay, like all other music teachers, marks her students’ copies of their pieces to indicate details that need attention. She then thoroughly erases those markings as the problems get solved. Perfection is the clean copy.
- **Do not shun trickery.** Ms. Sand reports the nice story of a boy who said he could not possibly manage the speed Miss DeLay asked for at a certain point in a piece. So she put the metronome away and just asked him to play the passage over and over, a little bit faster each time; lo and behold, he was attaining the impossible.
- **Remember what cannot be taught—but not so as to relax your efforts.** However much they are given good examples, encouraged and taught to question, some students will go farther than others. Innate talent is an issue here but so is innate determination. There are parts of students’ minds that cannot be reached, though they may be released.
- **Be a team player.** Miss DeLay works with colleagues who take care of part of the instruction process, and she recognizes the importance of parents, especially where young children are concerned. Nothing will be achieved unless at least one parent is backing the teacher and promoting good attitudes toward work at home.
- **Attend to everything.** Nothing is beneath the teacher. Nothing is beyond the teacher’s competence to care. Miss DeLay’s pupils have the benefit of her advice in everything from concert dress to relationships with managers.
- **It never ends.** Not only does Miss DeLay make a point of hearing her ex-pupils perform whenever she can, but they clearly know, to judge from the evidence assembled in Ms. Sand’s book, that they have been marked by her for life.

Paul Griffith’s interview appeared in *The New York Times* on September 3, 2000. Reprinted with permission.

Editor’s Note: Dorothy DeLay was one of the world’s great teachers and mentor to several generations of violinists. Having had the personal privilege to meet Miss DeLay and observe her teaching, I can only say I was humbled. Miss DeLay passed away in March 2002.



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