

Do You Lie to Your Students? **Honesty and Deception in Music Teaching** By Dimitar Terziev

Let me start with a memory that has remained vivid in my mind for more than 30 years:

I was attending a Piano Pedagogy class in my native Bulgaria in the '80s. One day our professor, a well known piano teacher in Sofia talked about a piano teacher's conduct during a lesson. "A teacher should be very supportive and praise a student for doing a job well" she said, "but should also not be afraid to show disappointment when a student comes unprepared for a lesson." Then she added with a half-smile: "But, of course your reaction should be completely unrelated to how a student REALLY played. A good teacher would say only things that would benefit the student. A student's playing may be unsatisfactory, but if you think criticism would be counterproductive, then you should be full of praise. On the other hand, if you think a positive comment would make a student slacken, then you should be as 'merciless' as you can!"

I remember feeling quite disturbed by this comment. Perhaps the main reason was that I have had strict and critical teachers whose opinion I valued. The thought that either their positive or negative reaction might have been quite unrelated to how I actually played at a lesson was upsetting. Now, after years of teaching, my position on the subject has somewhat softened; yet, I still believe that truthfulness will benefit the student more than well-(or not so well-) intended manipulation.

The issue of teachers deceiving students (and parents) is much more complex than we often realize:

Firstly, we are constantly put in a position of a conflict of financial interest. It is critical for our income that students do like us, and we feel often pressured to please students and parents at all costs in order to keep them as "clients". One of my earliest memories as a teacher in Canada includes me and other faculty members of a private music school being asked to write yearly evaluations of our students' progress and being told bluntly by the management that the ONLY purpose of this evaluation is to convince the parents that their kids are doing great, and they should sign them up again in the next fall! Needless to say, all our "evaluations" were like a chorus of praise and awe¹.

Secondly, we live in a culture where negativism is a cultural taboo, and a criticism becomes progressively unacceptable. This issue is especially evident in the fields of elementary and secondary education, as well as extracurricular activities. Mutual encouragement and positive thinking are considered crucial factors in developing someone's full potential, and they somehow have come to be viewed (at least in popular culture) as more important values than critical thinking, self-knowledge, and depth.

I am absolutely NOT against the constant encouragement and instilling positive thinking in music students. What I am against is the promotion of an environment of wishful thinking and (self-) delusion.

Even though the line between them is sometimes quite blurred, we usually feel it if we are honest with ourselves. The table below shows a few examples of how I see the difference between positive-based and delusion-based teaching:

1. I heard from a group piano teacher that she went as far as to write about a student who was constantly unfocused, interrupting the teacher, and distracting the other students as "having great leadership potential".

Teaching Based on Positive Thinking

Focusing and acknowledgement of the progress a student has made since last lesson and in general.

Acknowledging the elements of the performed piece, which show (certain degree of) beauty, precision, expressivity, and personality.

Instilling in student the wisdom to accept the imperfection of his/her own performance, as well as the impossibility of perfection.

Helping the student to discover the joy of creativity and self-expression.

Teaching the student to be inspired and learn from great performers.

Teaching Based on Delusional Thinking

Creating an environment where everything a student does is a “Great Job!” and just showing up at a lesson is already an achievement.

Promoting the idea that EVERYONE can achieve everything in life/music if one puts “his/her mind into it and works hard”.

Teaching the student NOT to learn anything from great performances and other students because one should not compare him/herself with other people

It goes without saying that we love and cherish our students. That's why we should INDEED do what will benefit them the most. Aside from doing our best to open their minds to a world of beauty, our goal should also be to increase their level of awareness, critical thinking, and judgement about their own and other people's music-making. In a confusing world which sends them so many contradictory messages, it is crucially important to provide them with an honest, if sometimes too-carefully-worded comment on their playing. This is one of the best gifts for life we can provide for them.

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