

## Independent Music Teachers Forum

# Reevaluating Teaching Philosophies

*Editor's note: This column is a reprint from the August/September 1999 issue of American Music Teacher.*

A recurring topic over the past several weeks has caused me to question and reevaluate my own teaching philosophy.

When I teach piano pedagogy classes, I always stress identifying and writing your own teaching philosophy. As independent music teachers, we have no specific guidelines for establishing a philosophy, and the variety of philosophies is probably as large as the number of independent teachers. We are bound by no established guidelines so we are free to be the kind of teacher we are capable and willing to be.

The first incident involving this philosophy "lesson" was when I observed another teacher's student recitals. My concern was the quality of some of the playing. It is very difficult to hear another teacher's students without forming some opinion and often judgment of that teacher's work. It prompted me to think that some of what we hear in another studio is reflective of that teacher's philosophy, that the standards we set in the studio are often manifested in a studio recital. Many teachers do not stress performance in their teaching, choosing to focus on giving students a broader knowledge and understanding of music. Unless you screen students based on talent and potential, the studio recital is probably going to be reflective of a large variety of talent and commitment. The student one teacher would never put up with in his or her studio might deserve a teacher who could give that student an appreciation and understanding of music and who has the patience to see that student through difficult personal times and

adjustments. I am struck again by the importance of respect for all kinds of teaching philosophies and for reserving judgment based on a one-time performance.

Another incident along the philosophical lines came to me when a teacher asked for help "weeding out"—the studio had become too large, and new opportunities necessitated scaling down. This is one of the hardest things we do in private teaching. Most of us have some students who are hanging on by a thread, are overcommitted, have lost interest or reached a point in their progress they seem unable or unwilling to go beyond. Yet pulling the plug is sometimes difficult and often painful if not handled well. We discussed this issue and came up with a definition of various kinds of students based on possible end goals they might achieve. We labeled them *hobbyists*, *amateurs*, *serious amateurs*, *semi-professionals*, *professional non-performers* and *performing artists/teachers*. These goals, of course, might evolve and change as a student grows and changes directions. The point was to equate goals with approximate practice commitment based on the age of the student. This identification process helped my friend redefine his philosophy. His concern is not the students' end goals but their commitment to a minimal level of practice appropriate to the end goal. Having the long-term goals defined has helped students and parents realize the time involved in the pursuit of excellence and, of course, that time must increase with advancement, even for the hobbyist or amateur.

I have another friend who recently has changed her philosophy of teaching. She has decided that adults are really much

more rewarding to work with than children because it is their choice and not their parents. Adults do not demand the motivation and are more committed to the kind of teaching she enjoys. Another friend is willing to teach students with all kinds of learning disabilities, even physically challenged children; she enjoys the challenge and reward of teaching these special-needs students. Yet another friend really believes in passing on her love for music, not setting any real minimal standards, instead using the lessons as a means of sharing and enhancing the lives of those who might not otherwise have the access to private study. She uses a lot of improvisation and creativity in her teaching, not necessarily relying on a set assignment and practice schedule.

I am so grateful for these teachers with other philosophies. I do believe they can impact those lives others might not be willing or have the skills to reach. I recently played for the wedding of a former student I had taught ten years ago. I remember her as an extremely difficult, very slow student, and I remember being thrilled when she quit lessons in high school. Yet when I met her again as a young woman, she had become an engineer with a vocal minor in college. She loved music, had pursued it, is still singing regularly and raved about how much our lessons had meant to her—quite a different memory than mine. We never know what kind of impact we will have on students.

This kind of thinking and questioning really made me rethink my own philosophy, which is essentially the same as it has been for the past ten years. Now that I

continued on page 81