

## The benefits of the master class

### The masters' perspective

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#### **ABSTRACT**

##### ***The benefit of the master class. The masters' perspective***

*The master class is well-known in Western classical music tradition. However, very little systematic research has been carried out to support the effectiveness of this particular way of teaching. Results from an interview study with musicians who have extensive experience in giving master classes indicate that such classes hold various types of benefits both for the students performing and for the audience. However, it is argued that this teaching format is a very demanding one in which many factors come into play and influence how beneficial a given master class actually will be.*

*Keywords: instrumental/vocal teaching, master class*

## Background

The core of the study programme for students studying music performance with the aim of becoming performing musicians is weekly one-to-one lessons with a regular instrumental<sup>1</sup> teacher. The importance of these “private” lessons behind closed doors has been well documented (Gaunt 2006, Nerland 2003, Nielsen 1998, Plasket 1992). In addition to these individual lessons there is another form of teaching which is also a very common component of the education of performing musicians within the Western classical music tradition, namely the master class. This is a more “public” teaching and learning setting, as teaching and learning take place in full view of an audience comprising other students, and/or a more general public. The term “master class” appears to be used rather broadly, and means both public events at which a renowned musician coaches advanced-level students in front of a (paying) audience as well as regular classes at a conservatoire where invited musicians and/or members of staff teach students in front of other students. The term is also used to describe performance classes where a principal instrument teacher’s students play and are taught in turn in front of the other students. Despite the fact that master classes are a common feature of higher music education, this particular method



of organizing teaching and learning has been the object of systematic research to a very limited degree (see Hanken 2008). Thus, there is an obvious need to obtain an evidence base for claims such as the one stated in *Wikipedia*:

Aspiring classical musicians, and their teachers, typically consider master classes to be one of the most effective means of musical development, along with competitions, examinations, and practice. (Wikipedia online/Master class 2009)

A research initiative has been taken within the ICON<sup>2</sup> international network to investigate the master class. An ongoing research study is underway at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in which the master class is being examined from the students' perspective (Creech et al. 2009, Robertson et al. 2009). The masters' perspective on the master class is the subject of a study currently in progress under this author. This article will focus on one particular aspect of this study, i.e. the potential benefits of the master class as seen by the masters themselves. In this context "benefit" refers to how the master class can serve to improve or promote something or someone; i.e. improve learning or promote a career. In the discussion these findings will be compared with those reported by Creech et al. (2009) concerning the students' views on the benefits of the master class.



## Methods



This article is based on an exploratory study in which the information was primarily compiled through interviews with seven professional musicians. Three of the participants were female and four were male, and together they represent different orchestral instruments as well as voice and piano. These musicians were chosen from a wider grouping recommended by colleagues in higher music education on the basis of their vast experience in giving master classes and their reputation as good teachers of such classes. In this respect they can be considered representatives of "best practice." The interviews were semi-structured around certain research questions, and the analysis of the transcribed interviews was also conducted on the basis of these questions. In this article the focus is on a research question concerning the masters' perception of potential benefits for the students performing in master classes as well as for the audience. Several master classes were also observed, some with the masters who were later interviewed and some with other masters. The observation activities were carried out prior to the interviews, largely as a means of obtaining focused research questions and ideas for the interview guide. All of the masters interviewed are from Scandinavia, but have studied and/or worked internationally. Nevertheless, according to themselves, they may well represent a certain Scandinavian student-centred teaching tradition, which they perceive to be somewhat different from other teaching and master class traditions they have encountered. All of



them are also working as professors in conservatoires and music academies, giving regular one-to-one tuition. In this capacity, three of them are responsible for organizing weekly master classes with invited masters for students at their institutions, which means they have a great deal of experience in assessing master classes as well.

## Findings

This article focuses on the potential benefits of the master class as perceived by the masters themselves. They are, however, the first to acknowledge and emphasize that there is no guarantee of success; many factors come into play and influence how constructive the master class will actually be for the students. These factors are related to how well equipped the master is to handle this type of teaching situation, for example his or her ability to involve the audience, or adjust the coaching and feedback to the student who is performing. Other important factors include the ability of the student performing to cope with the rather stressful situation of having to play and receive feedback and corrections in public, as well as with the expectation that they will be able to improve their performance on the spot in accordance with the instructions.

### Beneficial for whom?

Before discussing the potential benefits it is necessary to consider what kind of student is likely to find the master class beneficial: those who are performing or those who are in the audience. Masters can have different goals for their teaching; some will focus primarily on the students performing, helping them to improve their performance. Others may focus primarily on conveying knowledge and ideas to the listeners, using the students' performances more as triggers or illustrations of different issues to be discussed. It could be argued that, ideally, both parties should benefit from taking part in a master class. From the interviews it was apparent that all of the masters who were interviewed actively tried to achieve such a balance in their focus in order to accommodate both the performing students and the listeners. This is illustrated in the answer one of the masters gave when asked how he would define a master class: "[It is a] master class when the teaching benefits the audience about as much as it does the student performing."

In order to achieve that goal the masters stressed that they teach master classes rather differently from one-to-one tuition. Among other things, this includes deliberately choosing the issues to address in the student's performance based on what would be of more general interest. They also described different strategies they consciously apply to involve and activate the audience. The goal that both parties should benefit equally from a master class is ambitious, however, and not necessarily easily achieved. This is illustrated by one of the masters, who admitted that his efforts to make the master class beneficial



for the audience were sometimes met by criticism from the students performing. They felt that they had not received the individual attention and coaching they had expected.

In the following I will discuss potential benefits for the students performing as well as for the audience.

## **Potential benefits of the master class**

### **New perspectives**

The master class implies that the students performing are being taught by a different teacher/master from their regular instrumental teacher. The exception is master classes arranged by a teacher for his/her own students. Several of the masters interviewed emphasized that being taught by a different teacher can be a benefit in itself.

Firstly, the master can assess the student's potential with a fresh and unbiased eye and ear, and several of the informants stated that they prefer not to know very much about the student in advance. The following statement by one of them illustrates this:

If I am prejudiced and have assumptions about someone I am working with, I will be restricted already from the start. I can actually feel inspired by not knowing that person at all, but I treat the person as if he or she is standing on stage in Carnegie Hall, and I treat everyone the same way.

Some of them compare their role in giving master classes to their role when teaching their regular students in one-to-one lessons, commenting on how refreshing and motivating it can be for both master and student to be able to focus on the performance and the situation then and there, and not be influenced by a shared history.

Secondly, a different teacher/master can provide new perspectives and ideas on interpretation or technical solutions. Several of the informants commented on how important it is for students to be confronted with a wide range of perspectives in the course of their studies in order to stimulate their curiosity and enable them to become reflective practitioners, making independent, deliberate, and well-informed choices. They see the master class as a very useful arena in this respect; by attending different master classes both the students performing and the listeners will be confronted with ideas that may challenge, complement or confirm what is learned through the regular one-to-one tuition.

Thirdly, a different teacher/master may be able to "get through" to a student where the regular teacher has difficulty in providing help. One of the masters exemplified this when she said:

[...] during a long life I have gathered information and experience, and I can often trigger something which the regular teacher has tried to explain many times, and with my "accent" or my approach I somehow manage to get through to this student.

A master may be able to explain things in a new way, or approach problems from a different angle in his or her capacity as a skilled and experienced teacher/master who has, over time,



encountered many different students, each of whom has their own individual problems. But just the fact that the student in the master class can observe, listen to and be coached by *someone other* than the regular teacher may in itself bring about new understanding.

These three factors will clearly have benefit for the students performing in the master class. There is, however, reason to believe that the latter two factors will also be beneficial for the listeners, who learn by listening and observing the performance and the resulting feedback and coaching, as well as by listening to the master address more general issues. The fact that the audience, too, can learn from a master class is illustrated by this quote from one of the masters:

Sitting a bit detached on the sidelines, maybe with the music in front of you – you can learn a lot from that. But obviously, you have to be mature and understand that you have something to learn even if you don't play that piece yourself, but that you can catch nuances and get ideas.

She describes how sitting with a cool head on the sidelines and listening and watching both the student performing and the master can add to the listeners' learning. They do not have the adrenaline rush of the student on stage, and can therefore concentrate and make full use of the opportunity to learn. But she also points to certain prerequisites: The listeners must be at a certain level themselves to fully understand what transpires, and they need to understand how much they actually can learn from listening attentively.

#### **A concert-like situation**

A master class implies playing for an audience, and the masters point out that the concert-like nature of the master class is constructive in that it provides a realistic framework which mimics an authentic work situation for a musician: The beginning of the master class for each student performing is usually staged as a “concert” where the student plays his/her piece in front of a live audience that responds like an audience should – with applause. Several of the masters underlined that this concert-like situation gives the students' practice and preparation a better focus and direction than a regular one-to-one lesson. It also generates more intensity and energy in the performance itself. The student will therefore reveal more of his or her actual potential in this situation.

Secondly, the “concert” training and the resulting feedback on how the “concert” situation is handled provide a learning opportunity that the one-to-one teaching cannot achieve. This includes learning how to deal with performance anxiety, how to communicate with the audience, and how to project in a big concert hall. One of the masters interviewed states it like this:

What is also very valuable is how [the master class] can train the student to become tough, but also to think about projection: ‘Do you think the audience in the very back could hear that detail? Maybe we should...’



The feedback and input the students who perform will receive when playing for an audience is obviously advantageous to these students, but the audience, too, can learn from observing and reflecting on issues concerning public music performance.

### **A constructive learning environment**

Several of the masters spoke of master classes as playing an important role in creating a positive and constructive learning environment in a conservatoire or academy: One of the masters who is responsible for arranging weekly master classes for all the string players in his institution underlined how important these master classes are in this respect:

...I see them [the master classes] as an arena for creating a learning environment, for developing a spirit of cooperation, for learning what kind of feedback you don't give, absolutely! [...] The fundamental realization that you learn from each other, that you are all in the same boat, that *everyone* is struggling with something.

There are several aspects of this quote that also emerge in the discussion of the other masters: One has to do with how much the students can learn from each other. We have already seen that the masters claimed that the audience can learn from the performing students. But the students performing also have much to learn from input and feedback from their fellow students in addition to the masters:

Master: [...] it has an impact what the fellow students say

Interviewer: It does?

Master: Yes, it does, because it is often good advice, and the teacher [master] cannot cover it all. And if you do cover it all, it can become a bit overwhelming, but if five things are said by five different people sitting there, one by one, it can be worth taking in.

Several of the informants also commented that the master class enables members of the audience to develop their skills in giving constructive feedback to fellow musicians. These are skills which are obviously important when working in ensembles etc. Implicit in this is another potential benefit which is mentioned in the interviews: The students learn to assess music performance. As one of the masters points out:

[...] the learning effect when they have to gather their thoughts about what they hear, and think 'what if I were the teacher; what would I focus on, where would I begin?'

The master class provides an opportunity to develop an understanding of relevant criteria which the students in the audience can apply when assessing their own performances as well as when working with fellow musicians.

Listening to fellow students playing and being coached in a master class makes it possible for students to use each other as reference points to assess their own levels. We saw earlier that one of the masters pointed out that the master classes make it evident that



“everyone is struggling with something.” This can be a comfort for students as they seek to improve as performers. But the master classes can also serve as an inspiration to work harder in order to become as good as the best students. One of the masters talked about developing a positive spirit of competition among the students at the institution where he is a professor, and he described how the master class can be a useful arena for this:

I wish to maintain the aspect of competition among the students, but I differentiate between what I consider competition as a positive challenge: ‘Oh, I want to be able to do that too’, and the negative aspects which involve envy [...] So I definitely try to maintain the positive aspect, and the master class is brilliant in this respect.

### **Demonstrating the standards of the profession**

Participation in a master class gives the students an understanding of what the standards of the music profession are. One of the masters said that

... you have to be all right as a human being, but you also have the right to be demanding in your role as a guardian of the standards that are there.

Aspiring musicians need to understand what it takes to be acknowledged as a professional musician. The masters demonstrate these standards through the demands and expectations they communicate when assessing and coaching the students. Since masters are generally highly respected members of the profession, their judgements will obviously count. It can also be inspiring to experience an “icon” within the profession at such close range in a master class, as one of the masters points out:

There are things to be learned from meeting someone you really look up to, who actually comments on your performance – it can be very important.

But it is not only what the “icon” says to the student that may be important; the demonstrations provided by a world class musician also contribute to the learning experience:

... it is nice to be able listen up close to how he actually does it, because there is a difference between listening to someone playing from a stage or on a cd, compared to standing next to him and being able to learn some tricks.

### **Gaining status and access to the profession**

Several of the masters indicated that master classes can also be used by the students as a means of advertising themselves and advancing their careers: If a student is perceived as very talented, the master might ask him or her to come and study. The master class then serves as a way to gain access to a high-ranking teacher who consequently might open many doors to the profession for the student. Likewise, for a student to be able to display



on his or her CV that he or she has played in master classes with international stars gives status and can send out the right “signals.” One of the younger masters summed this up well when he said:

It is only about status, it has nothing to do with knowledge. I also write on my CV that I have had master classes with [world famous musician], but I have actually learned more from a lot of other people [...], but he is such a big name that I signal that I wish to be associated with him.

Several of the masters expressed that they are very well aware of the fact that, for some students, the master class is mainly used as a strategic arena for gaining status and access to the profession, and that this is one of the benefits of the master class – for the ones who succeed.

## Discussion

The findings indicate that there are several potential benefits of the master class as seen by the masters, benefits that the regular one-to-one lessons cannot provide. For the students performing, the concert-like nature of the master class provides a unique possibility to try out, and obtain feedback and coaching on their performance in what is the authentic work situation for a musician: playing for an audience. It also provides an opportunity to get immediate responses and suggestions from musicians other than the regular teacher; both from fellow students/musicians and from the master. The masters further underlined the advantages that being taught and coached by a new and different teacher can bring in itself. The working relationship between principal instrumental teacher and student typically extends across several years. No matter how skilled that teacher is, there will be a limit to the methodological, musical and technical perspectives and suggestions that he or she can put forward. Gaunt’s study (2006) is an illustration of this point. Meeting a new teacher, with an unbiased mind, who has other ideas and solutions to technical or musical problems the student is facing, can therefore promote both inspiration and understanding. It appears, however, that the masters interviewed are playing down their own contribution to the learning experience of the students performing. In the many cases where master classes are taught by invited, highly respected musicians/teachers, there is a very good reason to believe that the *quality* of the demonstrations, coaching, feedback and instruction, and not merely the novelty of the perspectives, will play a role in the student’s learning. This is supported by the findings from the study among students at Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) by Creech et al. (2009): Receiving relevant advice from an expert on their own instrument was the reason most frequently cited by the students (31 out of





37 student respondents) as to why the master class was beneficial. There was, however, also support for the notion that meeting a new teacher might be beneficial in itself: When asked what they hoped to learn from master classes 21 out of the 37 student respondents in the GSMD study responded that they hoped to get new ideas and ways of thinking about the piece.

It is no surprise that the masters identified the master class as providing fruitful learning opportunities for the students performing. What is perhaps more surprising is their strong focus on the learning opportunities for the listeners. Their claims, moreover, are supported by learning theory. Albert Bandura (1977, 1986) has studied learning by observation, and he argues that individuals can learn very well by merely observing others being taught, and he claims that much of what we learn in life is learned by just watching others and observing the consequences of their behaviour. In a master class the audience members have full access to both the performance and the consequences of the performance – the resulting feedback, demonstrations and corrections from the master. Bandura (1977:12) claims that the observer/audience member will receive what he calls “vicarious reinforcement”: They observe the reinforcement that the students performing receive, and from this they learn what constitutes a good performance and what does not. By observing the student and master in action, they can also learn concepts, rules, standards of assessment, and strategies for problem-solving which they might transfer beyond the concrete examples being worked on. How much the audience members are able to observe and therefore learn, will, of course, depend on their own maturity, as one of the masters stressed. It will also depend on their own level of proficiency. The higher the level, the more they will be able to perceive and hence learn from subtle nuances in the demonstrations, instructions and performances. Based on these arguments, there is reason to support the masters’ claim that the master class also holds great learning potential for the audience members who “only” observe. The GSMD study (Creech et al. 2009) indicates, however, that the students themselves might not be fully aware of the potential benefits for the audience members. Based on the anecdotal evidence that many students wish to perform in master classes, but do not turn up as audience if not selected, the students in the GSMD study were asked to give reasons for non-participation as audience members in master classes. Seventeen of the 37 respondents said it was because the students do not understand that they can learn from other people’s performances, and 12 said that non-performers may judge that they have more constructive things to do. Clearly, it is essential to ensure that the audience members feel included and understand that the issues discussed in a master class have relevance for them as well. The regular studio teachers play a key role in encouraging their students to view master classes as important learning arenas where they have much to gain by listening and observing attentively.

Several of the possible benefits that the masters described can be seen as deriving from the opportunities the master class gives for taking part in a “community of practice.” The concept of community of practice stems from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), and is based on their studies of learning outside formal educational institutions,



and especially in authentic work situations. They point out how learning is more a result of *participation* in these activities rather than of the actual *teaching*. You learn to become a musician by taking part, as an active participant or as an observer, in the practice of the profession. This particular practice is centred around music performance, where playing/singing, listening, assessing, demonstrating, and giving feedback to fellow musicians during rehearsals are integrated activities in the preparation for a performance. The master class mimics such activities in some ways, and will, in the best case, provide a fruitful *learning environment*. There, the students not only learn from the master, but also from each other, and they learn not only from the actual teaching, but also through taking part in the activities. Arenas such as the master class give students opportunity to participate in the community of practice with differing degrees of responsibility. Lave and Wenger (ibid.) demonstrate how apprentices first participate in the periphery; in this case students can sit and listen in the back of the room, but gradually they can take on more demanding tasks, such as asking questions, volunteering comments, and they can start performing in master classes of increasing status and importance. The peripheral position is nevertheless a legitimate position in the community, it is accepted that some students just sit quietly at the back of the hall. At the same time even a peripheral position gives vital access to the learning resources that are present. Students can watch and listen at the back, and they can pick up ideas and suggestions that they can try out themselves when they get back to the practice room or remember for later use. All the masters I have interviewed seem to be keenly aware of these learning opportunities, and therefore employ different strategies in order to address and involve the listeners so that they, too, can benefit in various ways from the master class.

However, participation in a community of practice is not only about sharing, a feeling of togetherness and helping each other. It is also about hierarchies, competition, promotion, status and selection. The apprentice musician must learn the standards, and must learn to live up to them. These standards are personalized through the masters, who per definition are acknowledged members of the profession, with high legitimacy. Through what they say and do in the master class the masters communicate their expectations and convey the message of what it takes to become a full member of this community of musicians.

Successful students who are given the opportunity to play in prestigious master classes will build up their “cultural capital” to use Bourdieu’s term, by listing “Master class with so and so famous musician” on their CV. It signals quality to other members of the community who can interpret the message. The master class is therefore not only an arena for gradual initiation and inclusion into the community of practice; it is also an arena for selection, promotion, and for acquiring status within the community. In that respect it can be very beneficial for the ones who succeed.

Based on his experiences of master classes, Lalli (2003:24) states that “For better or for worse, master classes can be life-changing events.” This study has focused only on how master classes may contribute *positively* to the development of young musicians, although not necessarily in a life-changing sense. In his article Lalli reminds us, however,



that master classes gone wrong can be outright detrimental and destructive. I would argue that teaching master classes is a highly complex and demanding task, much more so than one-to-one tuition. My informants also stated that it had taken them a long time to learn the skills they needed to become adept in the master class format, and that they had learned these the hard way. Therefore, there appears to be a need for different professional development initiatives to support musicians who teach master classes. This would, no doubt, benefit both the masters doing the teaching and the students taking part.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Voice qualifies as an instrument in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The network *The Innovative Conservatoire (ICON)*: International Collaboration in Higher Music Education.

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