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How (not) to teach

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Abstract
In this personal essay Susanne van Els draws on her musical career as a performer and educator to look at when, where and how essential learning takes place. Because, when answering the number one question – what is our main goal in life – the answer should not be 'to teach' but 'for our students to learn'. There is a major discrepancy between the ideal musicianship, as portrayed by great musicians and felt sincerely by youngsters who start their training at conservatoires, and the information materials and course structures offered by our study programmes. Also, the way we organise our education stands remote from professional practice and from the original and valuable master-apprentice model. Is our system of 'controlled learning' making our students passive? And would they develop better in an atmosphere of trust and when they enjoy themselves more? Promising projects were conducted based on an idea that goes beyond student-centred learning: student-led education.

Classical music

This is about classical music programmes. When discussing issues that are topical in music education there is a general notion that practices in folk, jazz and pop music are essentially different from what a classical musician does – I think this is a matter of (different) balance at most. If there is an absence of creation, improvisation, 'the here and now uniqueness' in reproduction (playing Mozart), a classical music concert is meaningless.

The classical music profession involves incredible technical, physical and mental demands: a job which requires steady health and complete madness at times, with responsibilities ranging from understanding music and serving composers to finding an audience and organising money, networks and professional support. And in the end, it is all about humanity, society, individual and universal joy and pain, human existence and searching for the divine. It's the best job in the world, it's just not easy. And it's not simple: the kind of learning that it requires might best be described as growth.

Learning = growing

As musicians we are blessed to have a profession which obliges us to keep learning, even just to maintain a level, which means we have our daily practice and a path of ongoing development.

When I quit playing to start working in education, I found myself learning poems by heart. One every two weeks, to be memorised with the objective of being able to recite it fluently for the never upcoming occasion of someone's need to hear me recite a poem.
It took a while before I realised what was going on: I missed learning. I missed playing music, I missed the physical activity, I missed my precious old Italian viola, I missed the solitude of practising, I missed the fun in the dressing room, I missed the excitement on stage, I even missed being nervous. But most of all, I missed learning.

One description of growth could be that there is a certain natural determination whilst at the same time there are only some predictable moments. When we grow crops, we know that we have to create the right circumstances for fertility, good soil, warmth and light, some protection. Then we wait, we do not sit next to the tomato yelling 'grow!' And every parent knows they are a sidekick in this process that children go through when growing up. They are an important factor, of course, teaching by example for better or for worse, but the relationship between their actions and the effects on the child is not always clear. And the most important rule of parenting is to really see your child. To extend trust, and to play, work and live together. To truly be with them.

Teaching – what, how?

My main teacher for 6 years at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague was viola player Ferdinand Erblich, a student of Hatto Beyerle, from Vienna. A most vivid memory of something he said was when I played and taught at a summer course with his string quartet, the Orlando Festival, and I was over the moon because I got to play with Norbert Brainin of the Amadeus Quartet. So, late one evening at the bar Ferdinand came up to me and asked 'what did you learn today?', and when I did not have an immediate answer because I was so happy with myself, our conversation stopped. This was an important lesson on lifelong learning and the importance of it to a musician.

He also taught me about the ancient carpets, the kelims, that he collected and how to cook ossobuco. What he taught me about playing in the Viennese way, 'wienerisch', was very helpful later on when I joined the Schönberg Ensemble, although Ferdinand was not particularly fond of 20th century music and did not have this purpose in mind for what he taught me.

I learnt everything from him when his quartet invited me to play all of Mozart's string quintets with them in several concerts and tours: our bowing arms connected through our spines, his viola sound influenced every muscle I used, I saw him disconnect in the dressing room when his first violin and cello colleagues argued fiercely, I felt how nervous he was on stage and how much he wanted to make music. And the funny thing is that Ferdinand got the idea of asking me not because of his thorough knowledge of my capabilities and my many flaws because he had been teaching me for all those years, but because I once spent a long evening going through chamber music repertoire just for fun with friends, one of whom was his wife, and he heard us play Mozart when he came to pick her up. So, not just I, but also my teacher, learned outside the actual lesson.

Nobuko Imai was my other viola teacher in the same period. I remember one lesson in which she was so frustrated at how I played Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata that she did not know what to say or do. Shortly after, I found a copy of her own Arpeggione score, with her personal choices of register and fingering, from which I have been performing since, still not knowing what it meant but feeling a suggestion anyway.

A huge lesson that came from Nobuko is in this story: we wanted to perform together but not just Brandenburg no. 6, so when I was offered a new viola concerto by the Dutch national composer Willem Jeths, I asked for a viola double concerto. The piece was magnificent, as we discovered in the first rehearsal two days before the first performance: one movement of 15', virtuosic both for the large ensemble and for the two solo violas, incredibly tense and atmospheric. When Willem called me while I was driving back home after the rehearsal, I expressed my huge appreciation and gratitude, and I mentioned that it was just a little bit surprising that the piece did not include a cadenza. In the middle of that night Willem called me again in a feverish tone of voice: how about he add the notes of his solo elegy for viola, a piece he had written for me years before, to the concerto? The magical thing about this idea was that it felt very natural to attach the solo piece to the end of the concerto and that it would be possible, even very exciting and beautiful, to create a two-instrument version of the solo piece. The next day I went to Nobuko to show her the Elegy (which was a virtuosic piece as well with high ranges that are usually not the domain of the viola), and on the day of the first performance the three of us were literally cutting the score of the solo piece so we could add its 8' to the concerto. For the sake of great art, Nobuko took a big risk, playing notes she did not really have time to prepare. She proved flexibility and bravery to be important professional qualities, teaching by example, including other aspects than viola technique.

My teachers are fantastic musicians. I did not realise this fully in their lessons, nor can I say that I learned everything from them in the lessons.

Generosity from the teacher is a primary condition, and it should not just address the wish for the students to become better than them, but also different. There is always a lot of informal learning going on, and formal teaching is not always straightforward or immediately effective. Outside the main subject lessons, in practical settings, playing side by side for instance, there are many learning opportunities in the interaction between teacher and student.

The ideal

> 'When I go hear someone perform—whether it's dance, theatre, opera or song, chamber music, whatever—I'm moved only when I feel something has been given to me in the most generous, open, vulnerable way. I am moved when I feel I have somehow shared with that performer, or through that performer, even with the rest of the audience sitting around me, something about the human condition that we need either comfort about, or we can celebrate together. And I can't be moved, really, unless the person or persons performing know themselves well, and know what it is that they can uniquely offer through the piece. If a performer's goal is to exude confidence more than anything else, and show what they can do, I'm not going to be moved.'(Dawn Upshaw in Driscoll, 2018)

> 'About prodigies: why should they spend their whole childhoods slaving? Music isn't THAT hard! Furthermore, when one reads about the lives of truly great performers, one learns that most of them were well-educated, cultured beings who had time for activities outside music; few of them practiced more than four or five hours a day. They took time off when they needed it, and formed close personal attachments. General culture and personal warmth come through in one's musical personality; and that's partly what makes the playing of – for instance - a Casals, a Kreisler, a Schnabel, so moving.' (Isserlis, 2018)

The way these two great musicians and educators speak about their ideal musician as a human being, with broad knowledge and wisdom, is convincing. And most probably, no one would disagree. But the question is do our students see this when they think of their studies, when they look at their schedule?

I have seen students who enrol on the classical piano bachelor programme all of a sudden thinking that creating cabaret, which they enjoyed doing in secondary school, is over, that the pop songs they compose are meaningless now, and that writing texts or even reading books has nothing to do with being a pianist.

We certainly have exchanged the ideal of broad, creative musicianship for technically equipped specialism: today you are either a violinist or a singer or a composer, and when you are a violinist you either play in an orchestra or you are a chamber musician, and, by the way, when you like contemporary music you will not be invited to play Mozart anymore.

I love *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, the night café in Paris in the roaring twenties, the ‘nothing-doing bar’ where artist and audience blended. The writer Cocteau created the ballet choreography (!) for Milhaud’s piece of the same name, which was based on 28 funny, sexy Brazilian songs. Rubinstein played Bach on the piano, while Stravinsky and Picasso teamed up, and everyone was engaged in all kinds of wildly artistic projects together.

This ideal musicianship, connecting with creation, an artistry that extends to the other arts and to other fields in society, emotionally honest and deeply engaged, combining artistic urgency with a larger societal, political context, which is much broader than what we call a ‘portfolio career’, still exists in many musicians, but they develop themselves in that way outside or after conservatoire studies, or maybe, a very small number, on special programmes.

For sure, students do not see this inspiring chaos when they think of their classical music studies!

The study programme

In a conversation with the student partners at CEMPE[1] it was expressed that students consider the bachelor phase of their studies to be problematic to their transition from ‘talent’ to ‘artist’.

Many of us look at fragmentation on the study programme as a problem: most subjects our students take teach skills we expect to be useful for their performance skills, but we do not take care of the transfer. And there are initiatives with a practical and holistic approach, reflective and entrepreneurial, happening in many places, but there is more to feel uncomfortable about in the fundamental design of the classical music bachelor:

- Our programmes are full: 60 ECTS credits = 1,680 hours of work, which equals 42 weeks of 40 hours which we concentrate into an academic year lasting an

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[1] CEMPE is the abbreviation for the Norwegian Academy of Music’s Centre for Excellence in Music Performance Education.

average of 36 weeks. Daily practice is included in these hours, and academies are starting to take responsibility for teaching their students how to practise, but we hardly worry about the fact that to practise seriously for a couple of hours, one needs a good balance in the layout of the day and time for reflection and to organise concentration and energy. Also, good ideas and insights usually get noticed while taking a walk or a bath.
- Almost no subjects or projects are complete professional activities, although we know that the job demands so much more than excellent playing.
- Almost no subjects or projects are complete professional activities which demand and train collaborative working, whereas we know that although a musician needs to be able to work in solitude for many hours, the job itself is always about making music together, about communication and connection.

Thinking about this last point: the architects who designed the Oslo opera house, Snøhetta, describe their organisation as purely collaborative, ‘the singular in the plural’, where designing consists of so many different ways of looking and thinking that their staff change roles all the time and carry joint responsibility. This is a very nice description of any music ensemble: musicians functioning at the same level while being all very different in skillsets and character, together forming a group which is capable of ‘everything’.

Orchestras are the places in which musicians have strictly separated functions and responsibilities. Yet there is an awareness that communication, ‘radar’ as the London Symphony Orchestra calls it, and collaborative attitude are the most important characteristics for orchestra musicians, too – in addition to excellent playing of course – in order to be successful and survive in this very demanding profession.

For our students, all this means that our curricula create a constant tension between the main subject and the rest: study hours for instrumental and vocal practice are limited, and the relationship between subsidiary subjects and both the main subject and the profession is not clear.

Also, this fragmented and artificial organisation of education must send the message that we are only preparing them for the job, which leads them, instead of doing trial and error in practical settings, to hide away in their practice rooms in constant confrontation with that of which they are not yet capable.

This separation of skills, goals of subjects and content of lessons, is meant to be able to control the process of learning. General learning outcomes for all students and assessment in a way the results can be justified lead to subject descriptions in which learning goals and learning outcomes are described as if we can guarantee that things will be done, learning is foreseen, and lessons have a direct effect. In our attempts to be transparent and accountable, we create a world which is narrowing down our perception of learning into a scheme of teaching. But can we ever actually predict that learning will happen?

Acknowledging how deep and profound and complex real learning is, especially in our field, this looks like fake control. Higher music education is not about leading students to a diploma, but about becoming musicians.

Assessment

The other huge reality our students are confronted with, next to the curriculum and daily schedule, is assessment. The effect of assessment on learning is decisive, and involving students has proven to make sense.

Students will always respond to the way we organise assessment – no changed approach or different teaching method can have an effect unless we incorporate and synchronise assessment with our attitude in or organisation of teaching. And giving students a place, a position, a say, ownership, an active role in assessment situations, is extremely helpful in maximising learning.

Here’s an example of how assessment *for* learning can also go beyond reflection on learning in the actual exam setting, how thinking from the learning side can be very helpful in designing assessment.

In chamber music on the bachelor course huge differences in level occur, which is normal: imagine a beginners' ensemble of accordion or guitar versus a piano trio of youngsters who come from a Young Talent programme and play a lovely first Beethoven. When at the end of the school year assessment comes and the piano trio play their Beethoven without having improved much during the year, it will still be 'very good' – a panel from outside will judge likewise. But that cannot be the goal of a chamber music programme! Students need to learn.

What we did in The Hague, where I was head of the classical music department (2009–2015), was to make the formal assessment a simple form for the chamber music teachers of all the ensembles with one question: 'Did the ensemble work and improve according to the goals set?' The teacher answered yes or no, which was pass or fail for the chamber music students in that academic year. Beware: the 'goals set' was what the teacher and ensemble decided they had to work on during the year, which obviously would be different for the different ensembles.

The colleagues and I were a sounding board: we had regular meetings to discuss the progress of the groups. The control side of this was that with a 'pass' the ensemble qualified to perform in the chamber music festival, and everyone would hear them play. But the real bonus was that by performing there we opened up all kinds of possibilities for formative feedback: the panel of chamber music teachers and international guests filled in full sheets which were passed on directly to the ensembles (when the content raised questions they could speak with us), and the panel and guests discussed amongst themselves topics that came up around repertoire, performance practice and overall level, which was instructive for the institution. And I started different experiments: audiences filled in their own feedback forms, concerts were recorded, and the videos were judged and discussed by the ensembles themselves and peer ensembles and all their feedback were published.

I really saw that the good Beethoven Trio, in a conventional situation, could restrain themselves from learning because they knew they were good, and the accordion trio would do likewise because they knew they would barely pass.

Of course, the absolute measure of level, our constant obsession, was taken out of formal assessment, but it got a lot of attention in the feedback. And students know who is the best anyway, this does not really contribute to learning.

Trust and joy

So far, concentrating on learning and on the effect our attitudes and methods in teaching, curriculum design and assessment have on students and learning, I have been sketching a reality from our students' perspective that is not a very positive one. They don't recognise the ideal of music-making which brought them to our academies nor the ideal musicianship which goes beyond practising instrumental skills on their programmes. They are fighting a daily battle for studying and playing their instrument without feeling a connection with all the other bits and pieces we make them do, they feel like they are in preparation for something which only comes in the shape of the verdict of assessment…

A bit black and white, but I must say that I worry about them. Classical music students are so much more shy and passive than their peers in theatre for instance. Of course, our job has a larger technical aspect to be taken care of, but in this, the artistic drive and active learning energy are helpful as well. It is not a completely separate thing, neither is it that hard, as Isserlis says.

Actually, both in conservatoires and on classical music stages, I miss joy.

And at this point Nigella comes in.

> '… that cooking should not be considered the domain of the expert, that food is more than just fuel but says something unarguably authentic about the way we live and feel, and that perfectionism is the enemy of any kind of pleasure in the kitchen. (Lawson, 1998, p. 8)

She changed the perspective from How to Cook into How to Eat. She does not want to be stopped from having fun in the kitchen because of a lack of expertise or perfectionism. She writes about the relish of eating good food, turning around cookbooks from instruction to pleasure. And with all this, she exposes something which is so important, in life and so helpful and vital in learning: joy.

In *The ABCs of How We Learn* (Schwartz, Tsang & Blair, 2016) the J is for just-in-time telling, which is connecting explanation to an experience, but I would plead for a capital Joy. Students often act passive and dependent, and I wonder: our students are so talented, and they choose a life of uncertainty and relative poverty because of their love for music, why do they not have 'fun in the kitchen'?

The opposite of joy not being seriousness but fear, is that it?

I have heard students talk about fear. There is the general and even daily fear of not being capable of whatever it is you have to do. And it is true, to be able to go on stage requires a lot of daring trust, and when you have to do something really difficult you need to be prepared like an athlete or a bank robber, and when you do something, like singing your heart out, that you love so deeply that it makes you be what you do, it is not strange that fear is something you need to face. But theatre students know this as well.

Then there is the fear that students express about their future, the material side of it. This is also known to theatre students. There is something else that I see when looking at our students: they look unmotivated, passive, as if they have lost contact with their ‘learning muscles’. As we know that learning, fundamental and lifelong learning, like growth, is so vital for musicians, should we maybe teach them how to learn, how to use their ‘learning muscles’? Or will our students follow their instincts when we let go? Like theatre students who are so much in contact with their artistic vibes. Like, when babies learn to walk, all by themselves, inevitably, which every parent finds scary, and I remember especially from my oldest that he also immediately walked away! So, would it make sense to try just to facilitate learning more? To make room for our students’ natural drive to learn? Shall we trust them in their urge to grow?

The main subject

The pivot in classical music training is the main subject. In publications of research that has been done on the relationship between teacher and student in one-to-one teaching, there is a general notion of the need for a different role for the teacher which even goes beyond ‘follow-me’ to ‘partners in inquiry’, or from ‘master-dominant’ to ‘student-centred‘, which leads to learning in lessons moving away from copying to independent thinking and individual artistry: a teacher who is more of a coach than an instructor.

Of course, we have to completely get rid of ridiculous and rigid ownership on the part of the teacher, but the wish of the teacher for his student to be successful is a basis for committed teaching. Besides, our main subject teachers are experts in music-making, not in teaching, and as long as they are truly generous, this in itself is not a huge problem. Students need to develop all kinds of learning strategies anyway, and there is learning which is not all that conscious but is more physical or tacit, and some copying can be very instructive. Personally, I feel that there is a limit in moving from guide to neutral attendant and that there is a danger in not wanting to be authoritarian, which is: leaving out authority. Educational support is a necessity.

With curricula having become overloaded over the last years, constantly adding new topics such as entrepreneurship in separate subjects, the main subject is under pressure. At most conservatoires the weekly main subject lesson lasts one hour, and it usually takes place between 24 and 34 weeks a year. Students will always consider their main subject teacher the master and themselves the apprentice, no matter how young, open and nice their teacher is. They just want the teacher to really see them and to help them. You learn from whom you love. Why fight this? But we must understand that it is impossible for teachers to give what their students need in so few contact hours.

Besides, in the original master-apprentice construction there were workplaces, ateliers of high quality, with collaborative working, all levels present, learning and teaching at the same table, everyone being part of the same manufacturing process. In these master-apprentice settings, theory and practice were taught while working side by side. We still find this in architect and design practices, in theatre groups, in professional restaurant kitchens and in education for craftsmanship: teaching by example, the master opens up his own practice and business to involve students at different levels and with different prospects, at every stage of their development, seeing them grow until the best amongst them would leave his house to start their own practice.

The main subject is the raft on which everything else floats. Teachers have limited time to work with their students in the one-to-one lessons. More varied settings in which teachers can work and play with their students would provide opportunities for intense learning experiences. The teachers’ role being extended provides another playing field for them to share their expertise.

Some years ago, there was a Mendelssohn octet project, and when I asked the teacher, a fantastic violinist, to not instruct from behind the score but to play with them, after some hesitation he came up with the idea of not playing first violin but fourth. It was so good to not only see the students at their best, but also to have the teacher enjoy himself thoroughly! And it did turn the emphasis from teaching to learning, which liberated great energy. The teacher showed his students trust by taking the risk of being on stage together, which inspired astonishing, fearless motivation to excel in the performances.

I like to think of a conservatoire, according to the 'look and feel' of the master-apprentice place, as a house for working and learning, for developing and sharing knowledge, where hierarchy is only functional for the process of creating and making, where teachers work alongside students.

Ordinarily making music together, in a collegial, professional way – this is not yet another teaching method, it is plain thinking from a learning perspective. And it changes the fragmented, fixed and full programmes into something which is more playful, joyful and lively instead.

Innovation

In 2016–2017 I worked on an innovation study. It was part of 'ZUYD Innoveert', a special investment programme at the University of Applied Sciences, ZUYD, that Conservatorium Maastricht belongs to. The study was called 'Year plan – from classical problem to working together', and it had as a central problem the competition between weekly scheduled lessons and project-based working in a professional way, including all the educational and pedagogical questions involved. As ZUYD has an educational profile in which practical learning settings play an important role, there was a basis for looking in that direction.

I wanted to tackle the issue of the full programme with weekly lessons and the fact that we find it difficult to validate students' activities outside our academies in a fundamental way, and organisation was a factor in thinking about student motivation.

At an ICON meeting in Finland I remember Bernard Lanskey from Yong Siew Toh (YST) Conservatory in Singapore saying:

'The next group of bachelor year 1 students I will welcome with doing nothing, no classes, no instruction, nothing, because all they seem to want to do is main subject lessons and practice - well they can have that, but just that. I will wait in my room until they come knocking on the door, and then I will ask them what they want!'

– everyone had been laughing then: we recognized the frustration of finding students only focusing on practicing their instruments and being unwilling to visit free concerts or to get involved in anything which seemed to be just a bit outside their box… and at the same time I could still feel the incredible drive I myself had to become a musician, which I find in students, but most of the time hidden behind insecurity and passivity…

Another motivation for the study was that I increasingly felt that our education needed to be able to host natural learning in an atmosphere of attention and personal awareness that we know from parenting; that when we would dare to trust our students and what drives them there would be a better balance in the house. More time for guidance and togetherness, instead of chasing students producing bad results.

The innovation study consisted of an investigation of the successful model and learning environment of the Institute of Performative Arts, our ZUYD sister theatre school, a visit to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) in Glasgow to find out about their curriculum changes, discussions amongst the staff and student participants from Conservatorium Maastricht itself, and a visit to CEMPE to receive feedback on the ideas. This was all documented. The study resulted in a layout for a possible new organisation of the bachelor curriculum for classical music students.

The pivots for the model are all the things that are normal in professional music-making such as creativity, collaboration and inclusiveness. It applies a holistic approach, incorporating music-theory, entrepreneurship, reflection and research, while reaching out to an audience.

Practically the year would be divided into 5 periods (4 x 7 or 8 weeks and an exam period of 6 weeks). In the learning and teaching periods, subjects were grouped and projects would be flanked with lessons and masterclasses. There would be topics that would be basic part of what would be organised and available yearly, or once every two years, and there would be guidelines for what a student in a specific major would have to take part in. There would be room for a student to incorporate projects and professional activities outside school in his schedule.

One of the positive consequences of the model was that it required good planning by the students and good guidance from the teachers, so the balance moved from a student having to follow a pre-fixed program and us checking on the results to the student choosing his programme. Also, this allowed students, staff and teachers to work together to influence the programme design, add special subjects in meaningful arrangement with other activities and invite masterclass teachers relevant to the general topic in that period. Naturally, there would be more collaboration between (students from different) disciplines and between students of mixed ability. And the way to literally organise all this (practising in the mornings, projects and lessons well scheduled in the afternoons and evenings) would make much more space for the main subject. That we would not be able to 'cover everything' would be balanced with a professional level and 'depth'.

Two major shifts came with this approach:

- from learning in separate subjects organised into longer lasting weekly lessons, thus preparing for professional work, to learning in concentrated practical settings of real-life work with all elements of professional practice involved, including ongoing feedback and a smooth passage to assessment.
- from a fixed programme for everyone, only to vary the level/grade a student would reach with just a limited number of ECTS[2] to be chosen in electives, to more student choice and more variety in what they would learn.

We created a model of meaningful projects and activities, which was not that difficult. Music theory teachers were also immediately inspired and started to design a 1-year bachelor with two weekly two-and-a-half hour classes, co-ordinating all separate music theory subjects within Basic Skills and Creative Skills, after which they would join in the project structure.

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[2] ECTS is an abbreviation for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. One full academic year amounts to 60 ECTS credits.

The challenge was to keep thinking from the learning side of it and to let go of control. Understanding that students learn in different ways and accepting the consequences of assessment for learning (instead of assessment of learning) was a relief.

Pilot projects

The innovation study had run so smoothly and all stakeholders were so enthusiastic that it seemed possible to start thinking of implementing the model. Of course, it was vital to test whether this approach would indeed activate the ‘learning muscle’ in students, whether it would bring them back in contact with their natural, strong drive to learn, connecting them with their deep motivation to become a musician, so we performed two pilot projects in the academic year of 2017–2018.

Both projects were based on:

- student choice, both within the project and in the project design
- teachers, experts on the specific topic, as co-workers in the project
- and the absence of the usual drivers (uniform learning outcomes for all, assessment, ECTS credits)

Both projects faced initial hesitation and cold feet amongst both students and teachers as well as a bit of initial unease amongst both students and teachers in their new roles and relationships. In both projects there was the radical decision to not describe learning outcomes or define criteria for what would make a performance ‘good’, or, God forbid, ‘sufficient’. Both projects resulted in optimum motivation and maximum learning. (Find a description of the Lied Project and the Student Initiative on https://latimpe.eu)

Some of the comments the students gave afterwards:

‘It is actually such a surprise to find all of us have become better singers in the months in which we spent all this time on production work….’

‘The singing is a reward! I did all this effort and now I sing! I really wanted it!!!!’

‘I had such a different attitude towards the audience – we did all this work to get them in, and we were convinced that they had to come.’

‘We did not think of being assessed. You are constantly judged anyway, and it was nice to show our teachers what we are capable of.’

‘Having teachers ‘work for us’, on demand, and they were great! – it was so different, and how to put this, it meant such a lot to me.’

‘I don’t know why students usually look not so motivated, in lessons and in projects…. It is the kind of uncertainty that you have, about how good you are, about whether you will have a future in music. In this project, there was no room for that kind of doubt, and, now that I think of it, we sort of organised our own future!’

‘It was like a huge strong flame burning inside of all of us, we wanted it so much. Now, how do I keep that flame alive?’

It was wonderful to see how the students made positive choices to take part in the projects, based on the wish to develop themselves. There was no hiding and no trying to escape from learning or from confronting weak points. Without us organising it, they took responsibility together and worked in a collaborative manner. They learned different things in different ways, there was no fear of experimenting while working or of presenting what they created to an audience. They strived for the maximum, and both their basic main subject skills and their musicianship developed strongly.

It was very important to find that what we might fear when letting go, procrastination, laziness, low standards, was simply not present. On the contrary. And it was not just very clear that a love for music, a wish to be on stage, wanting to have fun with a group of young people, were excellent drivers for exhausting work to get done, but also that this motivation led to open, vulnerable, deeply engaged learning. The strong connection between what they made and produced and the feeling they owned the stage resulted in a wonderfully joyful attitude towards the audience.

It is touching to read about how this student reached personal growth in the Student Initiative project, as she wrote in the master research thesis which she dedicated to their Zauberflöte:

‘*I have finally given myself permission to be proud of my work and achievements*’.

The teachers were enjoying their part in it too. Once they found out that being a co-worker did not mean they had to let go of their expertise but that it actually was an invitation to use and share whatever they thought might be helpful, they also found that it was nice to rely on other methods than ‘teaching’, like playing or listening together, bringing in material, just being there or deliberately not help at moments.

The fact that the teachers in these projects were being invited or requested by the students (‘hired’ from the ambulant hours the students had to make the project possible) created a natural setting of being an expert, without hierarchical structures. They felt trust from me in letting them ‘just work’, but they also noticed that they had to be much more active than usual: teaching from a score versus playing along, or assessing from behind a table versus being constantly aware of what is happening and giving appropriate and useful feedback at the right moment, quite a different intensity! And the teachers in these projects were so relieved to find that they were not the ones to look after attendance and that the group process functioned well without their interference. The teachers said they did not play a role in creating a standard, or in motivating students to look further or do more, so the absence of assessment, or actually the fact that it was present and available and shared constantly while working, turned it into a driving factor instead of something that was scary and would stop a student from experimenting and learning. In both projects, students stepped forward as incredibly motivated, active learners. Fearlessly and joyfully.

Student-led education

There is some passivity in ‘student-centred’: we place the student at the centre, we care for them, but it is still us thinking about them and for them. And there is a danger of being too comforting, constantly nurturing, not challenging enough.

The student as an active explorer in constant curiosity finding their way in the world of classical music is a wonderful starting point. Then again, it is so important to get rid of hierarchical notions in designing education, in performing it and in assessing it, and student motivation appears to spur on self-steering. Radically taking the normal position of looking at education from the learning side is helpful in this, and it also allows our students to design a future which we cannot imagine.

Having seen the ‘learning muscle’ of the students and how they take on the challenge of quality learning once trust has replaced control, I am positive about student-led education. It is a setting in which authority is a natural element in the process in which teachers join students in working, learning and exploring. It provides a daily-life experience with collaboration on different levels and in varying situations. And it creates abundant space for learning.

‘But students don’t know what’s good for them’. Sure, and this way they can find out. Student-led education as I see it is not about us withdrawing, it is about stepping in, being there, actively providing guidance, taking the risk of doing instead of telling, taking responsibility together, on the spot, when and where learning happens, with the students designing their learning pathway and their future in art.

Let’s not position ourselves at the end, at the outcome side, but let’s take a stand together with our students from the beginning and see where they go. Let’s create the circumstances for learning, let’s be with them, play with them, work with them. When we do this well, sharing our expertise, reflecting on what we do, questioning and enjoying what happens, our education will have true quality. And it might be more fun.

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