

# Developing a Thinking Musician

The two principal aspects to playing a musical instrument are (a) technical mastery and (b) musical understanding. Without a thorough grounding in the former, it becomes difficult or impossible to put the latter into practice. Technique (or lack of it) frequently obstructs, rather than enhances, musical performance. It is essential, therefore, to integrate technique and musicality into one's approach to teaching.

A sound technique is of the utmost importance, though this may be an unfashionable thing to say in some quarters. At a County Music Service training day, I was once told by a senior music advisor, 'don't worry too much about technique – the important thing is that they can play a tune they recognise. Technique can come later'. I subsequently had the frustration of trying to rebuild the flawed technique of a musically able pupil, previously taught by the very same person. In my experience of teaching the trumpet, pupils often have very little idea of what they are actually doing when they play, even if they can do it very well. At best, they might have an assortment of jumbled ideas without having an understanding of how the elements are co-ordinated into a whole. They have even less idea about how technique and musicality are married into a homogenous unit. A car has a large number of components which work in harmony for it to run efficiently. If one part does not work well, the car may not run smoothly, or may completely break down. In order to develop an integrated approach, the brass student must understand the importance of the air stream which generates the sound, and how this is supported by the diaphragm and the position of tongue, jaw and the embouchure. Often one problem (for example not being able to tongue fluently) is rooted in another (perhaps not providing a consistent flow of air). Once this understanding is gained, the student can work on the ability to control these parameters. The teacher should encourage self-diagnosis of problems, explaining how greater control over the instrument can aid fluent musical performance. But simple language is essential. I often see good advice written in pupils' notebooks, but when I ask them what 'diaphragm' or 'embouchure' actually mean, they usually have no idea. The use of analogies is particularly effective (thinking of the flow of water and how it is moderated by, for example, the nozzle at the end of a hosepipe is an analogy used by many teachers); I also often turn the tables and ask the pupil to give me a lesson – if they can explain a concept to someone else, this proves that they understand it.

Technique should be subservient to musicality: it is not an end in itself (something that many musicians would do well to bear in mind!). The best way to assimilate different musical styles is to play with as many other musicians as possible and listen to all styles of music with a sympathetic ear. Without a pupil having a feel for the style of a particular piece of music, a convincing performance is impossible. Style is something which transcends mere dynamics, phrasing or articulation: it is something which is intuitive. This makes it very difficult to teach. Even if a pupil can reproduce the notes exactly as you suggest, it will sound stilted without a deeper musical understanding. Therefore listening becomes essential, not only to copy, but to constructively criticise. Students should listen beyond the technical wizardry of famous performers, to think how they may have played it differently if they possessed such a formidable technique. Until a performer has in their mind an idea of exactly how they want the piece to sound, they can only ever merely play the notes.

Analysis is essential, not in a dry 'academic' manner, but in a practical way – to be able to identify the hierarchy of each note within a phrase; how the notes link together; where a phrase starts, finishes or overlaps; how smaller phrases fit within larger ones. This approach should apply regardless of whether the player is a beginner or a professional. I use the analogy of words in a sentence: breathing and phrasing are musical punctuation. I tell the pupil who takes random breaths, rather than breathing according to the natural phrasing, that it would be like removing all the punctuation from a paragraph and dumping commas and full stops back in at random. It won't make sense any more, just as the playing will have lost any musical continuity. (I am sometimes shocked at editorial breath marks in publications which might be expedient for the performer, but make no musical sense.) Paradoxically, once these elements have been absorbed or assimilated, they need to be put at the back of your mind, so that the feeling of an overall performance can take over: the pieces of the jigsaw, once in place, allow you to see the bigger picture. Continuing to focus on the smaller elements can lead to a disjointed performance, just as an actor, once he has learnt his lines, will let the character he is portraying take over.

A good teaching style is one of presentation of ideas (sometimes contradictory), allowing a pupil to form an informed opinion. I would never wish to impose something upon a reluctant student, though with a well-argued case I feel that I can always push him in the right direction. (Brian Clough's approach to someone who disagreed with him springs to mind: 'we talk about it for twenty minutes and then we decide I was right.') Talking and discussing therefore make up an important part of the lesson – indeed mindless playing can sometimes waste valuable lesson time – a pupil can just as well note-bash at home. A lesson needs to be much more than supervised practice – it should be about teaching strategies, concepts and reinforcing a rational and methodical approach. Above all, it should encourage pupils to think for themselves. They should have an understanding of how the instrument and the music work. Ask questions which prompt them to solve their own problems; encourage them to disagree with you, to develop their own freedom of thinking; give them possible solutions and let them decide. Learning is essentially a journey of self-discovery. The teacher only accompanies pupils on relatively small parts of this journey. We can give them signposts, directions and encouragement but it is up to them to find their way: a teacher should ultimately teach students to teach themselves.

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