

# Preface

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta writes of a girl who was trained on the veena and sitar by her father, a master teacher.<sup>1</sup> He did not permit his charge to touch either instrument for the entire first year of study. Instead, during that period, he taught her to recognize the musical sounds found in nature—to relate, for example, animal noises to solfège tones. He then sang various ragas in order to expose her to various tonalities, and they explored connections between the ragas and particular colors, emotions, and seasons. “He was always searching for ways to make me understand the link between my music and the world,” the girl said. Indeed, in the master’s approach, music and the world were symbiotically related: the appreciation of one enhanced that of the other. When she was finally allowed to play the veena, she learned mere “skeletons of melody”; only after five years did she play an actual raga. The father delivered frequent diatribes against “what is only pleasant in music,” continually reaffirming the connection of music to emotional and spiritual realms.

Mehta’s story eloquently conveys several musical and pedagogical values and principles to which I subscribe: that music is intimately connected to the world; that the teacher can (and should) foster in his pupil this and other fundamental precepts from the earliest possible stage and in an experiential way; that much of music learning takes place apart from actual music-making; that it is essential to teach musical structure (the “skeletons of melody,” for instance); and that music should never be thought innocuous or merely sensuous. All of these assumptions motivate and underlie this study.

As all piano teachers know, in day in-day out teaching, one can easily grow weary of the nuts-and-bolts matters one continually has to reckon with—hand position, fingering, reading accuracy, and so on. Students grow equally weary of being corrected about the same types of mistakes. A stifling uniformity can easily creep in. For this reason, and wanting something more for both myself and my students, I contemplated, over the many years during which I taught studio piano, what higher-level ideas and ideals might inform the most seemingly mundane of teaching activities. How wonderful, I mused, if fingering and music reading turned out to

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<sup>1</sup> This work is a collection of short, interrelated stories; the one to which I refer comprises Chap. 13.

reflect the broadest of musical beliefs. And how wonderful if each component of playing and teaching, while having something unique about it, was also part of a larger whole—that whole being like a work of art, which, as a rule, is a model of unity-in-diversity.

Indeed, I became quite enamored with the prospect that teaching art could itself be artistic. Granted, this idea is hardly new. Joseph Kupfer, for one, outlines several traits of aesthetic teaching.<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic teacher introduces a particular skill (at least in some instances) in response to the student experiencing a pressing need to learn it. Similarly, the teacher introduces a particular concept in response to the student perceiving a gap separating his sensory experience and the conceptual models by which he frames such experience. In this way, the teacher ensures that new skills and concepts will be meaningful to the student, because they arise from her own inquiry, her own curiosity (although the teacher may certainly evoke these to some extent). Aesthetic teaching, like the aesthetic artifact, thus synthesizes the sensory and conceptual as well as the subjective and objective (in introducing general knowledge in response to a subjective inclination).

Relatedly, the aesthetic educator will teach skills and concepts by continually engaging the student—eliciting her thoughts and active participation—by exploring resonances with the student's wider range of skills and interests, and by relating the material to broader ideas so that the student can apply that material to other endeavors. In other words, the emphasis is more on the *how* than on the *what*; the goal is not merely to transmit information but to do so in a way that captivates the student as a whole person. Kupfer writes,

How many of us applied mathematical formulae or methods and then greeted the resulting answers as so much magical success? We saw *that* the technique worked but not how. Missing were the links of connection which make applying technique meaningful.... [This] isolated way of imparting technical mastery is unaesthetic in that it disjoins the technique from the individual's particular interests and questions. Because it does not grow out of the student's perception and appreciation of everyday connections, the perception and appreciation are restricted. In aesthetic education, however, the student's capacities are expanded because technique is situated in his overall intellectual labors. The technique must be situated in the student's ordinary experience if it is to be learned aesthetically and not as a fragment.... The technique or method should be introduced by the teacher to satisfy a student's felt need.... [It is] therefore meaningful from the moment of introduction.... Ibid., 23.

In short, aesthetic teaching eschews the mere utilitarian transmission of knowledge and acquisition of skills; these are only as valuable as they are grounded in and applicable to the student's larger experience.

While aesthetic teaching is a well-worn idea, my study is the first, to my knowledge, to establish a theoretical basis by which to approach studio instruction aesthetically. Indeed, despite both the patent intricacy of classical repertoire and of the skills needed to perform it, and despite the ubiquity of studio teaching within and without academia, there has, surprisingly, been relatively little theorizing of performance teaching. The *raison d'être* of my study is to bring to performance

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<sup>2</sup> The following is drawn from Joseph Kupfer, *Experience as Art: Aesthetics in Everyday Life*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1983.

pedagogy a degree of intellectual rigor adequate to the complexity and profundity of the music and musical praxis with which such pedagogy deals.

Of course, the relative uniqueness of any project derives in part from how that project situates itself among existing works, to which it thereby owes a debt. I see this book as filling a gap between the speculative studies that characterize the burgeoning field of philosophy of music education and the more empirical, hands-on studies that have long characterized traditional music-education research. Hence, my book is distinguished from, even as it depends on, books such as Estelle Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education* (Indiana UP 2008), on one pole and *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, a collection of essays mostly on practical teaching matters, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the book closest to my own is David Elliott's *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (Oxford UP 1995), which valorizes active music-making and participation, eschewing the assumption, typified by Bennett Reimer in *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Prentice Hall 1989), that the focal point of music pedagogy is or should be the aesthetic relations and effects of the abstract musical work. I, of course, also seek to situate performance at the center of musical discourse and training. In fact, in Chap. 3, I incorporate musical performance into the very definition of the musical work, and, in Chap. 7, I present ways in which attributes of the musical work can infuse pedagogical practice. Of course, the main difference between Elliott's book and mine is that his primarily addresses classroom teachers, mine performance teachers, both inside and outside academia.<sup>4</sup> Another similar study is Lucy Green's *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology, Education* (Manchester UP 1988), which, like mine, explores the relation between aesthetic ideology and music education. Yet, Green does so mainly to critique the implicit conception of popular music as inferior in value to classical music and to encourage its inclusion in curricula. While I draw upon many of Green's valuable ideas, my concern is with classical rather than popular music.

In fact, I make no bones about this book being narrow in scope, confined to classical (as in, "common-practice") piano music. Classical music: not because I devalue popular, non-Western, early, or recent musics in any way, but merely because there are musicians far more qualified than I to address their pedagogy. However, my hope is that the ideas herein will prove applicable in some form to other styles. Piano music: not because I valorize piano literature over that of other instruments, but simply because I happen to be trained as a pianist. However, my hope is that the ideas herein will prove applicable in some form to studio teachers of virtually any

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, and Elyse Mach, Editors. *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*. New York: Schirmer, 1991. Admittedly, a few of my chapters lay little claim to originality: Chaps. 2 and 3 in particular are rather research-based (thus replete with citations) since I need to supply quite a bit of music-philosophical background for the readers who may not already have it. The material that is most "my own" is found in Chaps. 4, 6, and 7, which outline methodology, curriculum, and method, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, Elliott's book (like Reimer's and many others) argues for the indispensability of music in public school curricula—a laudable aim, but one with which I am not presently concerned.

instrument, including voice, and even to classroom teachers as well.<sup>5</sup> This book addresses primarily students and professors of music education and piano pedagogy. But, more broadly, it addresses all music teachers, in whatever venue, who care about teaching and want to think about it from a different angle. Moreover, since I delve deeply into historical aesthetics in Chap. 2 and into the ontology of the musical work in Chap. 3, my hope is that humanists, especially philosophers of art, will find something of interest here as well.

Such scholars—that is, the more theoretically inclined—might stick to those initial chapters, while the more pragmatically inclined might jump ahead to the later chapters, which address concrete topics such as fingering, music reading, and teaching a lesson. Needless to say, the reader who can find the fortitude to chop through the dense theoretical brush of the initial chapters will have a richer context with which to approach the practicalities of the later chapters. Nonetheless, every chapter demonstrates the same thesis (albeit in markedly different ways), so the reader will likely be able to glean the essence of my approach from any one chapter. Every part of the book, to adopt one of Adorno’s favorite locutions, is equally close to the center.

As for this “thesis,” consider, merely as a teaser, this striking sentiment from Novalis, who, though talking about language, could just as easily have been talking about musical elements: words, he ruminates, “create a world unto themselves—they express nothing more than their wondrous nature, and for just that reason are they so expressive—for just that reason do they mirror the strange play of relations among things.”<sup>6</sup> The more self-referential language is, the more it reflects the often elusive relationships of things in the world outside language. My book revels in this paradox, exploring its foundation in Romantic music aesthetics and its relevance for pedagogy. In a nutshell, I argue that the more structurally intricate and aesthetically nuanced a pedagogical system is in its own right—that is, apart from the music and musical skills toward which it is directed—the greater its ability to illuminate music and facilitate musical skills.

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<sup>5</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 are especially oriented toward piano pedagogy, but even these, after addressing idiomatic concerns, return to more generally applicable principles.

<sup>6</sup> *Monolog* [1798]. In *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. and trans. Margaret Stoljar. Albany: SUNY Albany Press, 1997, 83.

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