

Chapter 2

Themes to Initiate and Sustain the Journey

Abstract Teachers may initiate and sustain the first four to five years of teaching beginner piano students by drawing upon three foundational themes: our relation with music, student independence, and personal authenticity. Firstly, our relation with music spans an entire spectrum of experiences from music performance, to critical thinking, to playing around. Knowing that it's difficult to sustain music study by doing the same thing at the same level for long periods of time, teachers incorporate diverse aspects from our relation with music to ensure meaningful ongoing musical development. Secondly, student independence emerges from children's natural inclination to do things on their own. Given that students may take ownership of desirable skills and knowledge as well as undesirable drawbacks, teachers use a process of multiple ownership to help students develop awareness of their own performance. Finally, personal authenticity refers to the notion of students' being true to oneself. By understanding, accepting, and caring for students' true self at all levels and ages, teachers may reinforce the genuine connection between who students are and what they do as musicians.

Not long ago, I attended one of my former student's B.Mus. graduation concert. It was wonderful to hear and see how much she was still the same delightful performer I'd always known and how she'd grown in her sophistication as a musician. After the concert, I couldn't help thinking about how people and events shape our lives, about how my parents, teachers, and colleagues helped set the stage for my own personal and professional explorations. Yet, when I graduated from university and decided to become a piano teacher, there were certain questions I needed to answer for myself. Questions like: How would my teaching reflect who I am? How would I view my students? What would I draw from to initiate and sustain the long journey of working with my students?

When I think about what anchors the first four to five years of working with beginner piano students, three enduring themes come into focus: our relation with music, student independence, and personal authenticity. These themes provide what pianist and pedagogue Swinkin (2015) referred to as a "pedagogical background" consisting of my core musical and non-musical beliefs and values that underlie and

unify everything I do as a teacher (p. 9). While these themes were present right from my very first attempts at teaching, my awareness of them has most certainly evolved over 40 years of teaching. First and foremost, I place our relation with music at the top of my list because I believe that teaching and learning to play the piano may be best understood through the experience of music in our lives. Knowing about the various nuances and implications associated with our musical relations seems essential to developing students' musicianship. Next, I value student independence. I appreciate how students take ownership of music and learning. My responsibility is to incorporate their independence, add to it, and fill in the gaps as appropriate. Finally, personal authenticity—the notion of being true to oneself—is essential to my teaching. I pay close attention to my students' authentic self by recognizing and accepting who they genuinely are.

2.1 Our Relation with Music

Whether we're performing or playing, listening or creating, music punctuates our lives in a myriad of ways. From the random spontaneity of tapping a rhythm or humming a tune, to the formalized occasions of singing the national anthem or playing in a concert, these are all examples of how music fills our lives. Music has unlimited potential to make life more rich, enjoyable, and meaningful. As pianist Sylvia Coats offered, "Music touches the emotions. It makes us more fully human. One's primary reason for studying music is to enrich one's soul. Music provides solace in times of grief and enrichment in our everyday lives" (2006, p. 19). So, what exactly is going on when we consider our relation with music? How do people experience music in their lives?

One thing that makes our relation with music so remarkable may be expressed as the notion of flow—the optimal yet simple state of mind when things seem to come together. As described by renowned psychologist Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow* (1991), an activity that produces flow may be so gratifying that people willingly pursue it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it. In experiences involving flow, consciousness is harmoniously ordered, life is meaningful and enjoyable despite adversity (pp. 6–7). Based on worldwide research into what makes an experience genuinely satisfying, Csikszentmihalyi observed that people consistently identify flow with a complete range of experiences. At one end, flow occurs because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback—like playing the piano. While at the other end, flow is the result of an effortless involvement that removes the person from the worries and frustrations of everyday life—like playing the piano. Persons experiencing flow have a sense of control over their actions, while paradoxically concern for his or her self often disappears. Yet, the person's sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. With flow, there's often a sense that time has been altered, wherein hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours—like playing the piano. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi noticed that no person can sustain flow

by doing the same thing at the same level for long periods of time (p. 75)—just like playing the piano.

Similar to the way flow involves a complete range of experiences, our relation with music also spans an entire spectrum. This means that on certain occasions, as music educator Jorgensen indicated, critical thinking takes priority in musical experiences. Here, our senses, intellect, and emotions are implicated in moments of deep concentration on the musical task at hand (2008, p. 23). On other occasions as extolled by Pollei, founding member of the American Piano Quartet, the benefits of noodling and fiddling come into play as the preferred route to musicianship (1991, p. 54). This is where freedom from worry in terms of playing around and taking boundless risks takes the lead. While from another viewpoint, the piano icon Schnabel proposed, “If I were a dictator, I would eliminate the term ‘practice’ from the vocabulary, for it becomes a boggy, a nightmare to children. I would ask them: ‘Have you already made and enjoyed music today? If not—go and make music’” (Schnabel 1945/1962, p. 162). Schnabel encourages each of us to dive into the joy of making music.

Because students naturally seek out and participate in diverse meaningful musical experiences, it makes sense for teachers to incorporate diversities like playing around, making music, and thinking critically about performance development—three examples from the spectrum of our relation with music that have profound influences on each other. By playing around and risk taking, students may find out what they don’t know or cannot do; so, that necessitates bringing in critical thinking, which may lead to explicit actions; which might need to be tested out in musical performance or more playing around. In this context, teachers recognize why students may get tired of critical thinking. They know why students may become disinterested in intentional music making and even the aspects of playing or fiddling around. As a consequence, teachers and students avoid falling victim to the dangers of repeatedly doing the same thing at the same level for extended periods of time.

Teachers play a pivotal role in supporting and extending students’ own spectrum of musical relations. This means piano teachers do more than merely transmitting musical knowledge and skills; they use students’ individual relation with music to stimulate and support their ongoing musical development. They take advantage of the broad spectrum that is our relation with music because as music educator Allsup has proposed, “we are more than makers of music; we are made by the music we make” (2016, p. 11).

2.2 Student Independence

Early in my teaching career, the following question from a parent had a major impact on my instructional approach.

“Just how long will it be before my child is able to practice on his own?”

I remember wondering—Was this question concerned with parental involvement? What did the parent really want to know? Then it occurred to me, this parent’s question was all about my own role as teacher. More particularly, he wanted to know how my teaching approach would address his own child’s independence and ownership.

I replied, “Well, I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised to see how many things your child can do on his own even after the very first lesson!” And with that simple statement, an adventurous exploration involving student independence and ownership was underway.

Philosophers, educators, and child experts have long identified independence as a natural dynamic in the child’s growth from infancy to adulthood. From Rousseau (1712–78), to Pestalozzi (1746–1827), to Montessori (1870–1952) and such current parenting professionals as Barbara Coloroso, child independence is acknowledged as an unavoidable and necessary element of every child’s natural growth. We all recognize the two-year-old’s penchant for the word “No”, the child’s ongoing and irrepressible drive to do things “My way”, the rebellious teenager’s need to separate his or her self from family and eventually from peers as the inevitable signs of child independence. In our Western cultural context, independence takes on a particular relevance because, as social analyst Nisbett (2004) explained, there is an expectation that each person is a “unitary free agent” personally charged with making the most out of his or her life.

From the very earliest ages, children make amazing demonstrations of their independence as musicians. Just think about how many children sing songs on their own, move their bodies to the beat, and differentiate one musical selection from another or one instrument from another. While children may acquire such fundamentals through direct instruction from adults, children’s ownership of their musicianship results mostly from their ordinary everyday encounters with music. Music is something they internalize because of their preference for listening repeatedly to certain musical selections. Their independent ownership of music grows because children’s daily lives are full of repetitious musical moments like commercial jingles, church music, Christmas carols, Happy Birthday, music on the radio, video games, movies, and more. In this way, children’s musicianship isn’t something that develops randomly or just by chance. Nor is it something that only develops in formal educational settings. Children take ownership of their own musicianship as the result of listening to music and trying things out for themselves.

Teachers may build on their students’ independence by recognizing, validating, and following up on what students actually do—whether it’s a matter of listening, practicing, or reading, whether it’s concerned with tone, technical fluency, or interpretation. That means that while teachers take a leadership role in the early stages as students become familiar with musical vocabulary and our way of

communicating, such processes are only fully successful when students take ownership of what's going on. Teachers play an important role in promoting students' "active participation in learning" (Niemi et al. 2012, p. 277) and allowing students to take responsibility for their own "personal decision-making" (Kemp and Mills 2002, p. 13). Even at the first lesson, teachers may prioritize students' ownership of sitting too high and just right, light and harsh tone, stiff and flexible fingers. As students progress as independent musicians, teachers make sure students take ownership of increasingly sophisticated musical concepts.

One of the challenges teachers face in supporting student independence is that students frequently take ownership of drawbacks like wrong notes, inflexible techniques, spontaneous fingerings, or radical interpretations. This challenge brings attention to a very pertinent issue: How can teachers minimize performance drawbacks while supporting student ownership? Teachers may address this issue by incorporating what I call *multiple ownership*. The goal in using multiple ownership is to heighten students' awareness of what they're doing, so they know how it differs from what might be preferable as demonstrated in the following examples.

When Jessica started reading her pieces, she frequently played left hand chords in the wrong octave or E-G-C instead of C-E-G. Practicing with a multiple ownership approach meant exploring both correct and incorrect versions, comparing the sounds, and affirming placement on the keyboard.

During her second piano lesson, Victoria achieved a legato sound by dropping her wrist and pushing her fingers into the keys. Rather than asking Victoria to discard her legato accomplishment, a multiple ownership approach allowed Victoria to compare how various wrist positions—low, high, stiff, light—impact her tone quality and physical fluency at the piano.

Jeffrey often ran out of fingers in pieces that contained scale passages, spontaneously adding 4-5-4-5 in ascending, and 2-1-2-1 in descending right hand passages. Using a multiple ownership approach, he was able to explore formal alternatives and his own spontaneous versions, comparing their facility, and highlighting the necessary transitional fingers.

Scott preferred to end all his pieces with a brusque *sforzando* on the last note. Using a multiple ownership approach meant trying out various ways to have fun with the ends of his pieces: getting softer, slowing down, speeding up, and of course suddenly loud.

Multiple ownership allows students to develop broader understanding of how their practice impacts their accomplishments. Rather than thinking of performance drawbacks as something to avoid, I consider drawbacks as an opportunity to expand students' awareness beyond their current ownership. As pianist and educator William Westney described in *The Perfect Wrong Note* (2003), "Sometimes we

have to experience fully what's wrong in order to understand and integrate what's right, and honest mistakes are the only way to do that. They give texture to the act of learning" (pp. 63–64). Also in support of multiple ownership, author of *How We Learn* (2015) Benedict Carey proposed that varied practice has immense benefits over repetition of singular drills. Carey explains that *interleaving*—a cognitive science word that refers to the mixing of items, skills or concepts during practice—"seems to help us not only see the distinctions between them but also to achieve a clearer grasp of each one individually" (p. 164). Mixed-up practice builds overall dexterity and prompts active discrimination. The hardest part may be abandoning our primal faith in isolated repetition because, of course, everyone needs a certain amount of repetition to become familiar with any new skill or material. However, Carey suggests that repetition creates a powerful illusion because skills improve and then plateau. By contrast, varied practice produces a slower rate of improvement in each practice session but a greater accumulation of skill and learning over time.

While multiple ownership has its obvious merits, some teachers may fear that validating drawbacks will derail the learning process. Yet, in my own experience, I've observed that students' musicianship may survive and even flourish despite the arrival of wrong notes, inflexible techniques, and radical interpretations. Knowing that students frequently take ownership of things that may impede their learning, some teachers solve this problem by administering absolute control over students' musical development. Other teachers seem to regard independence as something only they can grant or bestow, and put off student ownership as a distant destination. These kinds of teaching seem to be embedded in a fear that students' independence or ownership will result in teachers' loss of control. Or, teachers may feel compelled to streamline student development in ways that avoid moving outside teachers' comfort zone. However, under such circumstances, it's questionable how the weight of teacher authority will avoid fostering students' blind complacency or outright dislike.

Finally, students' processes of taking ownership have both independent and dependent implications. From the independent perspective, taking ownership is something that emerges from the child's own natural inclination to do things on his or her own without assistance. It comes from the child's inherent yearning to separate his or her self from family, peers, and teachers. In this respect, students' independence is anchored in their sense of self. While from the dependent perspective, students also depend on teachers to recognize what they achieve on their own and to introduce what they cannot find on their own. They rely on teachers to guide their musical development without squashing their highly valued sense of independence. Under such circumstances, students' growing musicianship might be described as a process of *dependent independence*. That's why it's important for teachers not only to recognize students' knowledge and sense of ownership, it's also important to challenge and expand student independence, to keep in mind where we're going and how teachers may assist students in getting there.

2.3 Personal Authenticity

Around the time energetic Arthur was in preschool, his older sister Janine informed me he would soon be starting lessons. “My Mom really hopes that piano lessons will help to settle him down”, she told me. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking that both Janine and her Mom might be disappointed by the outcome of Arthur’s lessons. Because, my goal wouldn’t be to reduce, minimize, or eliminate Arthur’s boisterous authentic self. It would be a matter of amplifying who Arthur is as a person—his personal authenticity.

As criteria for musical performance, the term authenticity is often used regarding the composer’s performance intentions, faithfulness to historical performance, and period sound especially in terms of techniques and instruments.¹ So, let me begin by stating that’s not what I intend to explore in this segment. My purpose is to examine authenticity from a personal perspective especially as concerned with the notion of being true to oneself. Personal authenticity is all about the way in which a person’s actions genuinely align with his or her authentic self—that is the many layers that make up each person’s uniqueness much like a fabric woven from the countless threads of who we are. Being personally authentic relies on connecting the fabric of *who* we are and *what* we value about ourselves with *how* we actually get on with life. For teachers, paying attention to students’ authentic self involves understanding, recognizing, accepting, and caring for who they are, rather than controlling who we might want them to be.

Throughout history, poets and philosophers have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of personal authenticity. From the 400 BC inscription “*Know yourself*” on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, to the 4th century St. Augustine’s “*In the inward man dwells truth*”, to Shakespeare’s 16th century “*To thine own self be true*”, and contemporary educator Carl Roger’s expression “*Be yourself*”, these phrases represent the long historical trajectory of concern for knowing, listening, and being true to our own internal voice. As Canadian philosopher Taylor (1991) described,

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called up to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me* (p. 29).

Personal authenticity brings clarity and meaning to who we are and what we do in life. Without authenticity, there may be a sense of superficiality, artificiality, or disconnection from life. With authenticity, we may experience both comfort and discomfort in being true to oneself—when on certain occasions it’s easy to tap into our own personal authenticity, and elsewhere when we’re challenged to remain true

¹See Swinkin (2015, pp. 54–55) and Kivy (2002, pp. 238–250) for summaries regarding interpretation and critique of the authentic music performance movement.

to who we are. Yet, we take on both comfort and discomfort associated with being true to oneself, as philosophers and poets throughout history have indicated, because of the value and meaning we take from our own authentic self.²

Music serves as a resonant and intimate vehicle for experiencing who we are and how we actually get on with life. As music philosopher Cumming (2000) explained, the musician's individuality is "inseparable from the sounds she makes" (p. 27). Musicians express who they are because music's technical, expressive, explorative, and formal demands prompt all varieties and intensities of personal involvement. Similarly, in educational processes, the ideal of authenticity receives widespread support because educational activities take on personal meaning when connected to the person's true or core self.³ So, this brings us to consider: How might an understanding of authenticity impact musical study and performance? What happens when teachers pay attention to the student's authentic self?

Music lessons provide teachers with ample ongoing opportunities to interact one-on-one with their students for periods that may span several years of weekly involvement from preschool through high school. Teachers get to know their student's authentic self through observing and listening on professional, casual, immediate, and introspective levels. Everything comes into play. Things like the physicality of what students do—the quickness or slowness of how students move, mannerisms, the flexibility in bodily involvement and digital finesse, physical strength, the comfort of a balanced body, what their eyes do, body language, breathing and gestures, the need for movement. Students have their own emotional compass—easily frustrated, endless patience, playing from the heart, how things feel, dealing with success and failure, openness to all kinds of emotional intent. There's everything connected with thinking—brief and lengthy concentration, making sense of what's going on, the words they use, their own life experiences, short and long term goals, how much they have to say, figuring out the meaning of progress and setbacks. Students possess their own intuitive insight—being in the moment, spontaneous creativity and imagination, letting go and trusting your gut. Things like spirituality—soulful grounding, *anima mundi*, faith, what students believe in, morals, what they care about, relation to nature, cultural and community values. In the context of studio music lessons, teachers put together a picture of their students' true self as a result of immediate and evolving perceptions. They assemble information from students' interactions with their teachers, other students, and their parents. They witness how the fabric of students' core self is indelibly

²Personal authenticity is not without its critics. Aloni (2002) warned that authenticity tied solely to the subjective self may create a "nihilistic position according to which everything is equally good and beautiful and just as long as the individual's choice was authentic" (p. 104). Theoretical researchers (Barry et al. 2011; Hotchkiss 2002) and social commentators (Lasch 1979; Wolfe 1976) have argued against the narcissistic qualities of individualism associated with a liberal, affluent, secular, and consumer-oriented North American culture.

³On the topic of authenticity in educational settings see: Brookfield (2006), Cranton (2001), Kreber (2013), Palmer (1998), Rogers (1969).

woven into their relation with music, the sounds they make, the interpretations they prefer, the way they learn, the tools they use to study and perform, the spontaneous expression of their own internal voice. Here are a few snapshots of my beginner and elementary students taken through an authentic lens:

Jennifer is soft-spoken with a keen desire to express her sense of humor. Her subtle jokes often provide openings for exploration of both familiar and unfamiliar musical avenues.

Alex only talks about music in terms of how it makes him feel. His ability as a composer, perfect pitch, and playing by ear stand in direct contrast to his discomfort with learning to read music.

Everything about Erica sparkles: her eyes, her speech patterns, her clothes, her gestures. She has a penchant for jumping into her performances, often charging headstrong through entire sections without a single breath.

The combination of Brandon's confidence in his own intuition and urge for self-mastery often results in elevated frustration. He rarely gives up.

Recognizing each of my student's authentic self has important implications related to his or her musical growth especially in terms of two vital areas: triggering interest and developing expertise. Interest may be described as the feeling of curiosity or desire for exploration that compels a person to experiment or willingly take risks. Often the delight associated with interest involves breaking through boundaries, challenging established rules, or stepping beyond a person's comfort zone. Expertise may be defined as know-how that exceeds the demands of a given task. It's the competency, skills, and knowledge that equip a person to successfully complete activities within a certain area. Confidence associated with expertise typically results from a person working within the broad base of his or her own comfort zone.

While interest and expertise both help to define who we genuinely are, they draw from the fabric of our own true self in significantly different ways. Quite remarkably, the curiosity associated with interest involves stepping outside our own comfort zone, while expertise builds from within our own comfort zone. Although interest and expertise may occupy opposite ends of the spectrum, personal interest often generates the commitments of time and energy necessary to produce expertise. Expertise relies on a person's interest in doing something well, and personal interest stimulates adjustments to a person's expertise.

In order to tap into students' interest and expertise, teachers may need not only to understand and recognize their students, but also accept and care for who their students are. Accepting a student's true self is an unconditional and nonjudgmental practice that speaks of openness and humility. Acceptance isn't about changing a student's authentic self into something else. It's about caring for the genuine fabric

of a student's true self. Teachers who genuinely accept their students' personal authenticity open themselves to personally care about their students by involving students in their own learning journey, by protecting them, and by shielding students from excessive demands. They know when and how to guard students' vulnerability. Yet, accepting and caring for students also means teachers know when to take risks and when not, when it's appropriate to push students out of their comfort zone and urge students to look beyond their immediate vision. In this latter example, teachers help keep students from being held hostage by their own defensive sense of self. They recognize that knowing students' authentic self isn't about ego building or doing only what students want. It's about teachers becoming skilled advocates on their students' behalf, supporting and challenging students' true self.

Teaching with personal authenticity means teachers value who their students are. They guide their students by exploring musicianship as something unequivocally and enduringly grounded in students' own true self. This is not to underrate the influence of teachers' own authentic self, their own interests, expertise, wisdom, or practical experience. Obviously, teachers' input is vitally important. However, in acknowledging students' true self, teachers may provide leadership without taking over their students' journeys. In this process, teachers promote a flourishing of their students' inner voices—not as something previously unknown, mere teacher imitation, or something students eventually achieve. Rather, teachers inspire and validate the inner voices that were already there and that continue to drive students' own evolving and highly personal relation to music.

2.4 Final Thoughts

This chapter began with several thought provoking questions. How would my teaching reflect who I am? How would I view my students? What would I draw from to initiate and sustain the long journey of working with my students? From these questions, themes of our relation with music, student independence, and personal authenticity have emerged to initiate and sustain my teaching for over thirty years. What's interesting about this trio of themes is how they represent a particular aspect of teaching that might be referred to as—*what is*. While, at the same time, they also signify a contrasting aspect of teaching that might be described as—*what might be*.⁴

⁴In a similar vein Swinkin (2015) proposed that teachers may take on a transformative stance wherein their prime imperative is to open up new and numerous possibilities for the student (pp. 222–23). Allsup (2016) addressed possibilities from another angle, suggesting teachers are directed to “something just outside the possible” (p. 141).

I use the expression *what is* to describe our massive accumulation of knowledge and experience. It's things we already know, what we do right now, where we are, and where we've come from. From a musical perspective, *what is* encompasses the musical traditions that surround us, the instruments we play, what students bring to their musicianship, teachers' backgrounds and expertise, educational attitudes and trends, our societal and individual values. *What is* embodies where we are right now—musically, personally, and in life. In contrast, the expression *what might be* taps into the vastness of things we have yet to imagine. *What might be* directs us toward expanding the space of what's possible, uncovering what no one has ever thought of before. What I find remarkable is that teaching *what is* and *what might be* are not unrelated instructional strategies. Teaching isn't just about getting acquainted with or mastering *what is*. Nor is teaching just about uncovering *what might be*. Teaching may be understood as the deliberate and repeatedly cyclical process of opening up spaces of personal possibility by exploring where we are right now. Teaching *what is* serves as the excellent foundation and active inspiration for uncovering *what might be*. For what piano teacher and author Barbara Skalinder described as “drawing out the possibility in every student” (2016, p. 137).

What stands out for me in this exploration is how our relation with music, student independence, and personal authenticity may stimulate infinite possibilities. As a teacher, I am greatly influenced by the musical traditions I carry forward. That means I pass on the breadth of musicianship with immense dedication and purpose. Yet, my teaching isn't so much about perpetuating entrenched ways of thinking about music as it is about teaching *what is* and *what might be* in order to broaden what students come to know, feel, and do as musicians. On this view, music teachers emphasize two things. Firstly and perhaps most obviously, that music teaching is devoted to fostering and upholding the value we have for music and artistic meaning making. While secondly and perhaps with less apparent intentions, music teaching embodies a grand adventure that pulls each of us to consider not only who we are and where we come from, but also what we have yet to imagine about ourselves, about each other, about music, and about life.

2.5 Before We Move on

1. What comes to mind when you examine your own relation with music? How does the idea of flow as a range of personal experiences come into play in your musical experiences? How might the combination of critical thinking and playing around contribute to your teaching and learning to play a musical instrument?
2. What is your own experience of independence? How might you apply what you've learned about independence and ownership in this chapter to your own teaching? What changes will you make?

3. By understanding, accepting, and caring for their students' authentic self at all levels and ages, teachers reinforce the meaningful connection between who students are and what they do as musicians. How do you feel about this statement? What stands out for you?
4. This chapter concluded by suggesting that teaching *what is* serves as the excellent foundation and active inspiration for uncovering *what might be*. Which is more comfortable for you as a teacher—*What is?* Or *what might be?* Why?
5. Your own musical autobiography consists of the many musical events, moments, and experiences that occurred over your lifetime. Taking into consideration your relation with music, independence, and personal authenticity, identify how each of these themes may have impacted your own musical autobiography and sense of musicianship.

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Fundamentals of Piano Pedagogy
Fuelling Authentic Student Musicians from the
Beginning
Thompson, M.
2018, VIII, 99 p., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-65532-1