

How Can You Teach Your Students to Play with Authority?

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I've been a music student on and off for the past thirty years. In that time, I've encountered several different styles of teaching. Some have helped me grow in confidence and belief in my playing, while others have left me feeling inadequate, needing to be told how to play. As a novice piano teacher, I've had to ask myself, "What's the difference in these teaching styles? How can I instill confidence in my students so that they will play with conviction?"

For me, the difference in teaching styles and how I have responded to them has to do with the amount of personal involvement I've been allowed in my interpretation and performance of music. I believe that *authority* in performance has to do with a performer's sense of ownership of their interpretation as well as the musical validity of that interpretation. Along the same lines, I also believe that authority stems from a performer's concept of *authenticity*. In the studio, both teacher and student need to understand their individual roles in making authenticity a part of daily music-making for true authority to develop.

Webster's Dictionary offers three meanings for the term 'authentic':

1. not false or copied; genuine; real
2. having an origin supported by unquestionable evidence
3. entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience; reliable; trustworthy

Authenticity demands that something can be traced back to an authoritative source – the author who created it. If it is unreliable or untrustworthy, then it is normally considered a forgery or fraud. Think of all the tests that a newly discovered painting by one of the great masters is put through, to establish its authenticity. Similarly, a musical rendition or interpretation can be considered authentic if it can be traced back to a legitimate source if it is genuine and believable.

An important difference between an artifact or painting and a musical performance is that performance is the result of a partnership between two parties: the composer, who wrote the music, and the performer, who interprets it and brings it to life. From my perspective, it follows that there are two components to authenticity that should be taught, both of which lend musical validity and conviction to a student's playing:

1. Faithfulness to the composer's intentions, and
2. Direct communication of the student's own personal response to the music.

The first component is difficult enough to teach; the second is even more difficult.

First, let's consider how music teachers can help students be sensitive to a composer's intentions. Many scholars considering authenticity have fixated on historical accuracy, aiming to reproduce exactly a performance from centuries gone by. The merits of this approach were hotly debated in the 1970s and 80s, and it seems to have faded in importance since then. The view that a performance geared to today's audiences is of more value than a trip back in time,

has prevailed. Still, interpretation of a composition will always benefit from knowledge of its original context of creation.

To understand the composer's intentions, it is most important to go right to the source – the music itself. Consider the reliability of the edition: how closely does it capture the original manuscript? Choosing a good edition with few editorial embellishments is a good place to start. As well, some editors have had direct access to the composers (such as Mikuli, a student of Chopin), and can therefore be an excellent resource for authenticity. Also valuable is research into the date, place, and purpose of the composition. For example, was it meant to be played at home as an exercise? In a king's parlour? Before a large audience of intellectuals? Was the original instrument a piano or harpsichord? A cello or viola da gamba? Was the composer inspired by a joyous or tragic experience? These kinds of questions help the student gain a glimpse into the composer's world and some understanding of how the composer might have thought about the work. To engage the student, see if they can guess the answers or find them in the library or on the web. Their findings will sit nicely in the back of their mind as they learn the piece.

To incorporate explicit details of the composition in their playing, a student needs only to read the score carefully. Still, as we all know, details are often overlooked. Teachers can ask questions about markings or directions in the music that the student may have missed. This can be more effective than telling the student what to do, as it points to the authority of the score, rather than the preferences of the teacher. Other details are more implicit. For example, are stylistic elements of the period used correctly (e.g. two-note slurs in Mozart or ornaments in Bach)? It takes an experienced teacher who is knowledgeable of historical and contemporary styles, to understand and impart a sound interpretation of implicit details. However, it is important to emphasize the preference of the composer's era, rather than letting the student presume they are following *your* preference.

Now, historical accuracy can only do so much to make a student's playing authentic and convincing. Personal ownership also requires the student to have a genuine understanding of form, harmony, technical challenges, and every other factor that goes into writing or performing a composition. What really makes audiences exclaim, "You play with such authority!" is the conviction a performer has in executing their own ideas and feelings about the piece, and their ability to reach their audience with it. This is difficult to teach, and has its limits because it is really up to the student to take personal ownership of the music. Also, there is a fine balance between a performer emoting and telling their own story and telling the composer's story. Here's what I think can help:

Encourage students to explore and experiment. The sooner this takes place, the better – particularly at home during practice. One idea I've used with beginner piano students is to spend some time during the week making sounds on the piano to express different feelings (scared, joyful, etc.) The following week, we play a game in which I have to guess the feeling they're expressing. For more advanced students who have learned a work reasonably well, you might ask them to choose three different moods and try them on as an actor would a costume, to see what colours they can eke out of a piece.

Have your student create a story behind a piece. This personalizes the music for the student, and lets them communicate music as a storyteller or tour guide. I had a grade two piano student whose playing tended to be hesitant and shallow in touch. Whenever I asked her to think of a story or image behind a piece of music, her playing would immediately come to life and would have so much more tone colour and expressivity.

Find opportunities to give students options. Explain the principles behind musical choices a student can make, and let them customize the piece to fit their concept of it. For example, in fingering or attack, would they prefer a stable sound or a light, ringing tone? Show them how they can achieve each and leave it to them to choose (where appropriate).

Encourage students to offer their own ideas. Never put a student's ideas down; the teacher's job is to guide the student's own natural musicality. Make it clear that pleasing you, the teacher, is not what you're after. It is much better to suggest that the student think of pleasing the composer. Perhaps the most painfully backhanded compliment I've received was from an adjudicator who remarked, "I can tell from your playing that you're well-taught." This sounded to me like, "Boy, do you know how to follow instructions." Praise for my deep feeling for the music or even my thoughtful preparation would have been so much more welcome!

Have your students record themselves. This way, they can learn to listen to themselves and evaluate their own playing perhaps more objectively. Eventually, they should become less reliant on your feedback and will begin the task of teaching themselves.

Encourage your students to listen to recordings. This suggestion is for more advanced students, who can find such recordings at a library or online. Recordings should be consulted only after spending some time making sense of the piece. Listening to several recordings is better than one favourite, as it allows the student to take what they like from each rendition and synthesize their listening experiences. The point is not to copy other musicians, but to see that many different interpretations are valid. This can be eye-opening and freeing for inexperienced musicians.

Help students find a healthy humility. Sometimes a student's ideas can get in the way of the composer's characteristic style or intentions. I've found it helpful when my current teacher has said, "Let's hear a little more Mozart and a little less Galston." This is a gentle way of letting me know that the balance of importance between my own ideas and the composer's intentions has tipped too far in my direction.

In my view, teaching someone to play with authority comes down to this: due regard needs to be given to the wishes of the author (composer) of the work; due regard needs to be given to the performer's (your student's) response to the music, as they learn to become authors of their own interpretations. Playing with authority may not seem important for young children or beginners. However, it quickly becomes very important as the student advances. I believe it is crucial for teachers, as nurturers of talent, to foster their students' ability to play with authority right from the start. After all, don't we all want our students to grow to the point where they can teach themselves, and enjoy being creative in their own right?