

CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND REWARDS FOR THE INDEPENDENT MUSIC TEACHER  
(compiled in 2021 from presentations to music teachers' organizations between 1984 and 2017)  
Dr. George Fee and Dr. Susan Dersnah Fee [www.dersnah-fee.com](http://www.dersnah-fee.com)

### Challenges

The independent music teacher is the true missionary of music. When teaching young people, he/she wages an uphill battle. Music study is frequently not a high priority in the homes of highly overscheduled students. Social media, video games, and athletic practices usurp hours of time which in the past would have been spent at the piano. Focus and discipline, the essential prerequisites for music study, are not as prevalent in music students today. We teach an art and not a science, and we must constantly live with the challenging subjectivity of our field. The teacher is underpaid for his/ her efforts, which include many hours of time every week when the students are not even present.

An adult student once said to me: "How challenging it must be, to be in a profession where you would be tempted to base your self-esteem on how well other human beings are producing." Independent music teachers do often suffer from low self-esteem. However, we should not allow ourselves to base our self-esteem on our students' progress. Galileo said: "you cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him to find it himself." We don't have to blame ourselves for our students not putting forth the requisite time and effort, and we cannot assume the attitude that everything a student fails to do is our fault. As musical missionaries we must accept that some of our prospective converts may not respond as we would like them to. Often what brings much of our frustration is only one or two oddball parents or students, and we must not give those few misguided people the power to upset us.

We must remember the famous serenity prayer: "to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Acceptance is part of the answer to many things in life and our challenge is to maintain a positive attitude despite having to accept some things. But what are some aspects which we might be able to change?

The overwhelming majority of independent music teachers are women, who already have an extraordinary number of demands on them from the needs and desires of family members. This is made even more challenging because it is my belief that women frequently feel that it is their responsibility to make everything around them go just right. I urge women to realize that this is an unrealistic and impossible goal.

We music teachers are sensitive, serious, detail-loving people who are highly motivated, have high standards, and tend to be perfectionists. We must attempt to keep our perfectionistic tendencies under control and accept the humanness of not being perfect. Why is it we are patient with everyone else, and yet we constantly berate ourselves? We need to accept our unique selves – and remember to see our abundant good qualities. We must not let our own high standards erode our confidence.

We can try to see that fear is really our number one enemy. I personally regret the unnecessary worry that I have expended during my life. What I often had thought mattered so much, very frequently really

didn't. The worst usually does not happen in life, and things usually work out in some way--perhaps not perfectly, but better than we often have feared.

I wish that in the past I had had more faith, and more often thought positively. I wish I had lived more in the present moment – it's all any of us really has. We must value every single day, since life goes so very fast. We must believe, and always remember, that perseverance does lead to at least some success. As long as we don't give up, we can come closer to our goals.

We need to consciously care for our own mental and emotional well-being, taking time for ourselves . Sometimes it is beneficial to re-prioritize the activities and commitments in our lives. Perhaps we need to eliminate some activities which we do not really have to do and do not find fulfilling. Perhaps we need to learn to say no, even to worthwhile causes. Perhaps we can rid ourselves of needless distractions and find the right balance of everything in our lives. Perhaps it could help us to share our concerns and frustrations with other teachers and realize that we are not alone.

We need to nourish ourselves non-musically, as well as musically nourishing ourselves. Sometimes we need to rediscover the joys that initially brought us into music, which could include spending time at the piano for our own personal fulfillment.

Possible changes need to be made in your studio. Creating or improving a written studio policy can help. Perhaps your tuition has not been raised for many years. Although the cost of most items in the world goes up every year, the tuition of many music teachers is often only rarely raised.

If you seek more students, be sure that you have a website, and are a member of a music teachers' association. Even if not lacking students, both of these are highly recommended.

Thirty-minute lessons should be universally abolished. A lesson of 30 minutes is not really a lesson at all. A 45-minute lesson does not even, in most situations, allow for the personal warmth and interest that need to be shown to a student, and for covering the variety of repertoire, music theory and music appreciation which are essential when teaching music. We have found from decades of experience that even young children are fully capable of 60-minute lessons, and that no adult student of any level should ever take a lesson shorter than 60 minutes.

Age and experience are really the best teachers. All possible classroom courses don't provide a teacher with as much as is learned through actual teaching. Even after one has earned a doctorate, there is so much still to learn from experience. And, by the way, the whole reason I am in music is because of the teacher I was privileged to have from the age of six through 18, who had no formal education after high school. (To see the impact that one independent music teacher can have on a student ,see [Willis Bennett Memorial Remarks.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com \)](#) ) \* I remember my teacher at Indiana University, Menahem Pressler, used to quote an old Hebrew proverb : "I've learned a lot from my books, I have learned a lot from my teachers, but I have learned the most from my students." There is a famous Japanese proverb: "To teach is to learn."

## Opportunities and Rewards

We teachers must always believe that we have an important role to play as the initial musical experience for many of our students. We must remember that we have much to give to all our students--through our love for the students and our love and enthusiasm for music.

I believe that some prerequisites for successfully teaching music are not actually specifically musical aspects. I see them primarily being common sense, practical psychology, and communication skills (It has been said that "piano teachers are a lot cheaper than psychiatrists!")

"You gotta know people" is what a family friend preached to me in my childhood--and he was so right. We need to individualize our teaching. We must strive to build our students' confidence in themselves as people and as players. We must love and accept them for who they are, and we must meet them where they are. We need to listen to them, and they certainly need us as listeners on many occasions. We want to encourage them to think for themselves and to put their own personal expression into the music which they are playing. We should give them as many choices as possible in everything.

Our students have in music lessons something rare in today's world – a one-to-one relationship with another human being and a role model. Very often the student is an impressionable, needy, young child or young adult who very much needs our love and nurturing, perhaps even more than young people did in the past. Even when some students seem not to be responsive to our musical instruction, we may still be having a profound effect upon their lives. A teacher never knows the many ways he/she may be impacting a student's life. We have been surprised that many of the heartwarming letters of gratitude we have received from students have been from students who had showed little aptitude or success in playing their instrument. Yet their lives were greatly enriched and sometimes altered by their music lessons. A teacher's efforts are rarely wasted. Every student is usually getting at least something from us in their lessons. We just don't always know what that something is.

Enthusiasm is the key ingredient for a teacher to radiate and it is the teachers who most exuded enthusiasm whom all of us most remember from our school years. We need to enter a zone when teaching. Teaching is performing. On those days when we do not feel like teaching, we must put ourselves into playing the role of a teacher. We are like the actor or opera singer who may not always be in the mood to go on stage, but who must become the character he/she is playing. It is interesting that when we act enthusiastic, we become enthusiastic. We lose ourselves in the process of sharing music, and in the communication with another human being. We can actually see our own day be transformed as a result.

Even if a teacher is shy, the love for and devotion to the subject can be very powerful. My ninth-grade biology teacher was a very quiet and shy woman. But her intense love for her subject was so strong that, although I was a rather poor student in that subject, her example of being so in love with her field is still an inspiration to me to this day.

Indeed, inspiration is the ultimate goal of teaching. The American writer, William Arthur Ward, wrote: “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

We teachers must always remember that we are teaching expressivity and creativity and that these CAN be taught to every student. We should show our students the varied possibilities of self-expression, and not let the goal of their playing to be merely playing the notes in the notated rhythm. Students should not be given pieces where the notes are too demanding to be played at an appropriate tempo and with expressivity. If they are struggling with the notes, they certainly cannot play with a beautiful tone, and beautiful tone quality should be a high priority from the first lessons.

We should demonstrate at the instrument the ways students can create a more expressive performance, and we can also play for them recordings of the great artists of the past and present who provide examples of consummate musicianship. ( See [Some Exemplary Pianists Performing Today.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#) and its companion essay, “Some Exemplary and Legendary Pianists from the Past” [Essays & Educational Resources \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#))

We need to encourage our students to like their own playing. We need to encourage them to share their music with others and stress to them that playing music is in part to communicate with and give a gift to others.

One of my professors at Indiana University said to me, upon hearing of the founding of our studio, “You will teach your students far more than Hanon exercises,” and doing that has been our goal over the past four-plus decades. We should all teach our students about the composers. Often many students do not even know the names of those who wrote their pieces, and they know far too little about the lives and influences upon the great composers. A useful resource are the texts of my series of eight lecture/concerts on the great piano composers, [Exploring the Great Piano Composers Lecture Concerts \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#) Much of the information appearing on those 191 pages can be shared with students, and I am happy if you copy and distribute the texts.

We may be the only source for music that our students will ever have. Therefore, lessons should be viewed as an opportunity to open the students’ eyes and ears to the entire world of classical music, and not merely utilized to play pieces. The student needs to be exposed to the great symphonic literature, piano concerti, chamber music, opera, and the great choral music, as well as the great solo piano literature.

We need to teach our students cultural history. We teachers are not only emissaries of music--we are emissaries of Western Civilization. We represent civilization and culture in the eyes of our students, and we may be the only person transmitting that to them in today’s world . The attention to and love of history has been declining in the past decades , and Western Civilization now even finds itself under attack in our public schools and universities.

One of our students remarked later in her life that she always loved how our studio to her seemed like a museum, which opened her eyes to so many aspects of history and civilization. Another student, based

on the exposure to opera and Renaissance music we had given to him in his piano lessons, later in life founded the internationally known Haymarket Opera Company in Chicago, which produces operas from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Another student entered the field of humanities grants, partially, she said, as a result of having been inspired when young by the art hanging in our home and the books of Florentine artworks we showed her in her piano lessons. Live classical music is in danger of almost becoming extinct in the United States and it is our duty and obligation as music teachers to do all we can to keep classical music, as well as Western Civilization, alive.

There is another dimension which music study may allow a music student to experience. We live in an extremely materialistic, increasingly nonreligious, self-centered, highly stressed country and world. There is little reason to believe that this will change. Franz Liszt viewed the purpose of music as being to uplift, elevate and transport human beings to a higher world. Indeed, the entire romantic movement in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was based upon the desire to transcend the material world, and music was viewed as the primary vehicle through which to accomplish this. Liszt fervently believed that music was a “bridge from heaven to earth” and he saw music as a regenerative force for all of society. He wrote: “Art is a heaven on earth, to which one never appeals in vain when faced with the oppressions of this world.”

Hopefully by imparting the transcendent greatness of classical music to young minds, we can open their souls to something higher and more spiritual than the continuous discord and drivel to which they are continuously exposed on their ubiquitous phones.

Some people might think that the most sense of accomplishment in teaching would come from having produced students who went on to establish acclaim as performers, or the student who founded an opera company, or those who went on to become music teachers themselves. But actually, we believe many of our biggest successes have been helping those to love classical music who had little natural aptitude for playing a musical instrument or little exposure to music in their home. Many of these students studied all the way through high school, and what they played, though frequently not all that difficult, was played with love and understanding.

One student with whom I thought I was getting nowhere, volunteered to play in a school variety show, because she believed that “the world needs to hear classical music.” There was the student whose lessons included much talking about her softball team and the San Diego Padres baseball team, who later listed music as her favorite hobby and on her own initiative, took her relatively early-intermediate level pieces to nursing homes to bring cheer to the residents. There was the girl who, never practiced very much at all as a child, but in recent years bought a keyboard for to play the pieces which she had learned as a child. However, what this girl received from her lessons was far more than just music. She had been severely, painfully, shy as a child and her parents later said to my wife, Susan, “You are the one who got my daughter to open up.”

It is often the little things we teachers do that students note and remember. One of Susan’s violin students, to whom I never gave any piano lessons, became extremely close to me and I wondered why, and once asked her. She said it was because when she entered our home for her lessons when she was a

child, I always smiled at her and spoke kindly to her. The bond with another student was strengthened when I gave her a few baseball cards early in her study, and the fact that she still has those in her possession a third of a century later is evidence that they meant, and still do mean, something to her.

You teachers have also had these kinds of successes. As I am sure you have found, sometimes it is some of our weakest students whom we believed we had never reached, who come back years later to express thanks for what we gave them, which often transcended purely musical knowledge. One student who had been an especially difficult student even wrote: "What I once resented, I am now thankful for."

A teacher can never know his/her influence. While our profession has its challenges, it is a privilege to spend a lifetime immersed in the transcendental greatness of music. It is more rewarding to give than to receive and sharing and passing on one's deep love of music with others is ultimately the most fulfilling way to experience music. We teachers have opportunities every day to make a difference in countless ways in the lives of our students. These permit us to reap priceless rewards.

\*Readers may derive inspiration from reading of the qualities expressed by teachers with whom I was privileged to work. In addition to my pivotal first teacher [Willis Bennett Memorial Remarks.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#), there are several others who exemplified what truly great teaching is.

[GF--Remarks at graveside of Jack Radunsky.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#)

[Howard Karp.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#)

[Kipnis letter.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#)

[December 16, 2003 \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#)

[Menahem Pressler - 2013](#)

[Joseph Rezits.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#)