QUALITIES AND COMPETENCIES OF PROFESSIONAL MUSIC TEACHERS

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**Introduction**

The approach in this paper is the highlights of the qualities and competencies of professional music teacher in accordance with the intricacies of the profession. It should be understood that qualities and competencies in teaching music are related to performance and productivity. For any training programme that is tailored toward music teacher education that guarantee quality, it is only when that teacher demonstrates the skills once out there in the field as a competent teacher that such programme is worthwhile. Besides, the qualities and competencies that a professional music teacher should have are those that promote and transform effective teaching and learning, with learning environments and value the learner as having potential to achieve. The teacher is therefore to help the learner achieve that full potential. This paper highlights some of the key issues in music teachers’ preparation and what skills, qualities and competencies the teacher should have. What is being mentioned here are quality issues in relation to effective teaching, learning styles, learning environment, and teaching methods as being core qualities and competencies for any professional music teacher.

Many music teachers still confront the false idea that their subject is a walk in the park to teach. The belief that music is one of those easier subjects where less effort needs to go in to supporting students than in the sciences or English literature, therefore, ignores the tremendous efforts educators put in to develop the musical abilities of their students. Effective teaching is one of the central purposes of educational practice and research in improving learning. But behind the mastery of learning stands the mastery of effective teaching. Understanding teaching has presented a persistent and formidable challenge to those who have sought to improve the quality of teaching and learning over the years. Teachers are important and make a difference. The quality of teaching is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools**.** William Cosbie (1996) says what happens in the classroom determines the quality of a school. In other words, the teacher’s role goes well beyond information giving. The idea that to learn effectively we have to work things through for ourselves does not mean that the teacher’s role becomes a minor or peripheral one, where she/he withdraws into the background, or acts only as a manager of learning resources. In a report published by University of Stratchclyde (1996) entitled "Schools Speak for Themselves: Towards a Framework of evaluation" it is said that good schools are more than an amalgamation of good teachers, but good teachers are a vital ingredient.

Effective teaching involves talking regularly with learners about their learning, and listening to them. Interaction in classroom is often dominated by the teacher. St. Augustine quoted in Robert Fisher, Teaching Children to Think" (1992) says I learned not from those who taught me but from those who talked with me. Learners can become more equal partners in the classroom if they are given more opportunities to formulate their own questions, express their own thoughts and make their own meaning. Teachers have both the right and the responsibility to develop a climate in the classroom which supports effective learning. This involves maintaining order without undermining learners’ self esteem. Aristotle quoted in Stephen Covey, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", says we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit. In the classroom, the way the teachers behave determines the way learners behave. How teachers establish their authority, the tone of their voice, the little things they continually say and do on a daily basis, determines the climate in their classroom. The significance of teacher educator learning lies primarily in its potential for establishing norms in teaching that prize learning as a central value in a teachers’ work. If teacher educators see themselves as learners, and reveal to their students a reflective - learning stance towards their practice, they will engender more broadly a positive disposition towards teacher learning in the teaching profession.

Russel and Korthagen, (1995, p.6) maintain Teacher educators need to be learners so that they can respond to the changing circumstances of their work and constantly learn to do it more effectively. Teachers need to be learners for the same reason that the students of those teachers need, in turn to be learners. Never before has the importance of learning been as vital to humanity as it is in these times of upheaval, uncertainty, and change. Growing beyond our imaginations in almost every dimension of human existence, we are called upon to solve questions today that will be outdated tomorrow and absolute the day after that. And so far we have not done as well as we must, in order to preserve the well-being of all life forms on this planet. The point to note here is that change and the uncertainties that accompany it render all of us beginners in some important ways. The area in which we may consider ourselves not beginners lies in our ability to frame important questions that can be studied in powerful ways to find significant answers that will in turn suggest the next round of important questions. Guided towards creating a more human world, it is teachers’ commitment towards this collective journey of inquiry that holds the greatest promise for making the world a better place. As teachers we have no choice but to embrace the globe as learners so that our students will do the same. Ultimately, our survival depends on it.

It is for this very reason that in modern music teaching and learning, the emphasis has now shifted from the teacher as the centre of learning and teaching, to the child. The current trends are to move away from dull instructional routine that emphasize teacher dominance and excessive content coverage to a teaching and learning style that allows engaging activities in a well orchestrated, cohesiveness and in which the teaching and learning environment is stimulating and enriching. Teaching is an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make judgements based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action. Qualitative forms of intelligence are used to select, control, and organize classroom qualities, such as tempo, tone, climate, pace of discussion, and forward movement. The teacher must ‘read’ the emerging qualities and respond with qualities appropriate to the ends sought or the direction he or she wishes the students to take. In the process, qualitative judgement is exercised in the interest of achieving a qualitative end (Eisner, 1981 p. 176). Taken further still Eisner maintains that teaching requires for its artistic expression routines with which to work; the teacher must have available repertoires to draw on. It is through repertoires or routines that the teacher can devote his/her energies and attention to what is emerging in the class.

**On Learning Music**

Learning music involves developing emotions and feelings along with the ability to think and act. Educating a whole person is, therefore, a very important goal of any education system. Music schools have to play their part in helping young musician learn how to enjoy life. We are more likely to learn when we are motivated to do so. Young people who feel good about themselves are much more likely to be highly motivated to learn music**.** Mihaly Sikszentmilhalyi, in Flow: The Psychology of Happiness (1992) writes: The reality is that the quality of life does not depend directly on what others think we own. The bottom line is, rather, how we feel about ourselves and what happens to us. To improve life, we must improve quality of experience. In other words, effective schools recognize and value young people not simply as learners. They create conditions in which young people can build their self esteem. They pursue this goal explicitly and openly, involving young people themselves in helping them to achieve it. It should, therefore, be understood that learning music involves thinking things through. It involves going beyond simply acquiring new information and adding it to our existing knowledge and modifying, updating and rethinking our ideas in the light of this new information. Learning is messy. We rarely learn anything by proceeding along a single path to predetermined outcomes. Our brains are capable of operating on many levels and process volumes and variety of information simultaneously. Planning is therefore, very important, but sticking too tightly to detailed plans can prevent or distort learning.

**A learning paradigm Shift**

It is true that a learning paradigm shift is preceded by stress whose intensity ranges across a continuum. Such learning paradigm shift will indeed cause uneasiness because of loss of confidence in the individuals involved. There is a saying that "The devil you know, is better than the angel you do not know". Taken further, this implies that we tend to be comfortable with what we know and understand. We establish routines and are comfortable with the procedures. The moment there is a shift in the relationship, the moment we are confronted with a paradigm shift, our comfort zones are being challenged, and this may lead into a uneasiness because we will be required to adjust our position. In this process, in as much as, the feeling is natural, there is tension because of the uncertainty of the situation. There is confusion because it is a new situation requiring new thinking and approach. There is anxiety because we may be breaking new grounds, there is pain and fear because starting a new can easily be understood to mean experimenting.

However, one of the most important issues to remember is that learning shifts cannot occur without need or reason for the occurrence. The shift can be attributed to a number of factors which include among others, the need to optimize the learning environment to create or offer security enough that will enable us to explore our learning environment, and encourage us to go forward with all the certainty and confidence of succeeding. Teaching should not be a lonely or isolated activity. Teachers need opportunities not only to talk to each other about their work, but to work together, and to use each other as resources. It is only when we work together as a team of professional that we can overcome in security. Successful schools have a culture which encourages and supports teachers to reflect on their purposes and principles as well as their practices, and helps them to work together to improve these practices. In the absence of such a culture, teachers fail to transform their teaching and learning approaches for fear that by so doing it might upset the learners. It should be noted that teaching is primarily concerned with developing qualities such as curiosity, originality, initiative, cooperation, perseverance, open-mindedness, self-criticism, responsibility, self confidence and independence. This is achieved by the child’s involvement, in a personally meaningful way, in an enquiry, or more aptly a congeries of related enquiries, which grow out of an issue which attracts his/her interest. There is both co-operative and individual work, and success is assessed in terms of the development of individual potential. The overriding aim is to help and encourage children to learn how to learn; to develop their own ability to think; to develop a lively, enquiring attitude (Best, 1991, p. 275).

**What Makes a Great Music Teacher?**

Greatness in teaching is just as rare as greatness in any other profession. Although it’s impossible to offer a prescription of qualities in order to cultivate great music teachers, understanding these qualities can give all would-be teachers a standard of excellence to strive for, and guide schools and parents toward what they should look for in current and prospective music teachers. Here are just a few characteristic traits that I believe all great music teachers’ must possess:

Great Music teachers must connect to their students on an emotional level:Students always remember how teachers they greatly respected made them feel, and the teachers who saw something special and identified with them. Therefore, teachers must show that they care — and there are many ways to do this.  The best way is the one that comes natural, and for many that is humour — but it can be anything from eye contact, a strong sense of empathy, or something else that indicates that the teacher truly “sees” the needs of each individual student. Because every person and student differs, so must the music lessons. A great music teacher gets to know his or her students enough to make the lessons meaningful for them. Knowing how to teach each student in a way that will get through to them will make for exceptional music lesson.

Great music teachers must always strife for greatness in their students:There are a lot of music teachers who strive to have all of their students “like” them.  They look to ensure that all of their students are happy and comfortable at all times, making sure that there is not too much effort involved with rehearsing and learning.  These teachers usually run entire pieces of music and cover a lot of material in a short period of time –they tend to not “dig in” to small sections and have a laissez-faire approach to developing young musicians.  Great teachers, however, command respect and are not afraid to stretch their students’ comfort zone in order to teach them how to strive toward achieving greatness in music.

Learn to be patient:This is a quality that every music teacher, regardless of client base, should develop. Becoming proficient in music requires repetition when learning an instrument and fine-tuning your craft, it is likely that you needed to be patient with yourself, developing and offering that patience to others, though, is what makes a great teacher. Every student will learn at a different pace and will require a different level of explanation, but no one will get it on the first try.

Effective music teachers are great communicators of knowledge:You will rarely walk into a great music teacher’s rehearsal and see those giving long speeches.  Highly effective music teachers keep the concepts at the highest level but the explanations short and incredibly clear.  A great teacher has a target they are aiming their students toward and do everything in their power to guide them toward it in the most efficient manner.  Often times, the most useful information is delivered in a few seconds between the actions, in our case, making sounds that should be occurring throughout the majority of class time.

Great music teachers love fundamentals and know how to “sell” them to their students:Wise music teachers understand that technique is essential, and that proper technique can be taught during a school day, no matter how many students are in the class.  These teachers are not afraid to go back to the beginning of a method book and honour the foundations of playing a musical instrument.  Not only will a great teacher understand that building blocks such as posture, breathing, and hand position are critical to beginners, they also understand that these fundamentals must be constantly reinforced throughout their student’s schooling.  Great teachers do not abandon fundamentals in order to “teach to a concert” — they ensure that their concert repertoire is an extension of strong musical foundations. In fact great music teachers love all aspects of music and share that passion with enthusiasm! Students won’t always practice when they should, show up to lessons willing and excited to learn, or face challenges with a can-do attitude. It is the teachers’ job to instil the desire to develop, grow and achieve musically, even when they don’t appear enthused. The only way to do so is by loving what you do and letting it show. This is especially important when teaching fundamentals, as they are not the flashiest aspect of lessons, but are the most important. Great instructors love even the basics and sell them to their students passionately. By sharing enthusiasm for music, students are more likely to be inspired and eager to overcome technical challenges.

Being “scared” of music teacher once in a while is not the worst thing in the world:Of course I do not mean that students should fear their teacher, or that teachers should ever scare their students intentionally.  But great teachers often evoke feelings that may be unfamiliar to our younger generation — students should feel true respect for a great music teacher; they will also tend to admire them very much; and yes — they will be a little scared of them from time to time. Even though it may often seem this way, students do not win when teachers seek to be their buddy, or even a parent figure.  They do need someone who they trust (and trust a lot) and someone who they will dedicate their time to being with for a long haul, but there needs to be a little distance present.  Students should be a little timid to show up unprepared to create music.  The words “that’s okay” should not come out of a great teacher’s mouth when students are not holding themselves to a high standard.  Great music teachers are honest and tell students “how it is”, even if it is sometimes a little blunt.  Hearing the truth is rough, but when true constructive feedback is delivered with clear language that is not personalized, students will be thankful, and see that they can use that information to get better.

Great music teachers understand that every single child is capable of becoming proficient at their craft.We have a long way to go to dispel the myth that talent and musical ability is inherent and inborn.  Great teachers understand that they must help build proficient young players, one day at a time.  While some students may have instant and early success, a great teacher communicates through their teaching that those who persist and practice in an intelligent and mindful way will grow, learn and reach their potential as well.

Great music teacher always render selfless service:The long-term goal of any music teacher should be to help their students learn so much that they longer need the teacher.  They do not lead by personality alone, and needing to be the centre of attention.  That is why great music programs cannot be built on a personality — it is not sustainable. Successful music teachers create a culture where students want to continue to go beyond their comfort zones in order to get better on their own.  These teachers seek to create moments of independence, so that students can slowly begin to “teach themselves” moving forward beyond the classroom.

Self reflection is a requirement of great music teaching:Most great music teachers do not think of themselves as being great.  They are constant students of their craft, and constantly look in the mirror and ask themselves, “How can I do this better?”  We all learn by experiences and mistakes, but unless teachers question themselves about what their experiences mean and think actively about them, they won’t make any changes.  Self-reflection enables music teachers to move from good to great by eating some “humble pie” once in a while and not being afraid to grow and make changes along their professional journey. Knowing the qualities of greatness can help music teachers strive for the highest standards and help students, parents, and school systems celebrate music as a core part of their curricula.  Observing a great music teacher at the top of his or her game is like watching a masterful performance; although infinitely difficult and painstakingly planned, great teaching appears effortless and seamless.To ensure that both you and your students get the most out of every piano lesson, vocal session, or double bass performance, the teacher must strive to understand and embody the qualities of a great music instructor. While many teachers continue to practice and enhance their musical knowledge, the areas that separate a great instructor from a mediocre one often are not related to music at all. Instead, as you try to become the best music teacher that you can be, consider practicing some of these techniques that can turn a good music teacher into a great one.

Know that organization is very important: Anyone running a business or offering a private service has to be organized in order to succeed. And, while this is one may not be directly related to music, it certainly applies to all music instructors. Being organized not only makes for a smooth, stress-free lesson every time, but also promotes a sense of professionalism to students and their parents. Consider automatic lesson reminders, recurring payments and detailed lesson notes to help you become more organized.

Always exude confidence: More than anything, music teachers’ always want their students to trust their methods and respect their policies. By being confident in your own abilities and the music lessons you are sharing with your clients, you will earn, gain and maintain that trust and respect. Always stand behind your techniques to assure students that you are qualified and prepared to take their skills to the next level, whatever that may be.

**Reflections and conclusion on Teaching Philosophy of Music Teachers**

Music teachers come in all assorted sizes, shapes, weight and colours. However, they share one common creed: To help each child reach the highest possible degree of personal development in music. According to Carelton (1992) in "What a teacher is" once puts it:

The teacher must have the energy of a harnessed volcano, the efficiency of an adding machine, the memory of an elephant, the understanding of a psychiatrist, the wisdom of Solomon, the tenacity of a spider, the patience of a turtle trying to cross the highway inrush-hour traffic, the decisiveness of a general, the diplomacy of an ambassador, the financial acumen of a stocks and bonds wizard, and finally to always remember that teachers teach not by words but mostly by precept

So, in addition to being all of the above, music teachers must always remember that they are the eyes and ears of society by virtues of their profession; the difference between music and others is the great appeal of music with the youths and the society in general. They have to demonstrate not only professional competencies and skills, but also social responsibilities as mirrors of society. However, just as it is dangerous to glorify, as uncritically the personal and practical knowledge of music teachers, it is also dangerous to accept, as necessarily good, everything that teacher educators reveal in their stories about their practice. As we begin to give more attention and respect to the personal and practical knowledge of both teachers and teacher educators, we need to learn how to assess the contribution of this knowledge to the common good. The stories of teacher educators must go beyond an exclusive concern with individual empowerment and personal transformation. These stories must also include a concern for social reconstruction through music, that will move us toward a society where what we want for the learners is in tandem with the approved curriculum. This is the only kind of world with which we should be satisfied. In the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, the former President of the United States of America, he once said I know of no safe depository of the ultimate Powers of society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it away from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

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