

Relationship Between Master Music Teachers  
and Master Students

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**Abstract**

The relationship between the music instructor and the pupil has only been superficially examined. As advanced students in music become even more talented and sophisticated, they need increasingly greater amounts of individual attention from accomplished musicians and instructors. As students hone and sharpen their skills, they need increasing amounts of attention, supervision and nurturing from their master teachers. This paper explores the quality of such a relationship and other specific concerns.

### **Relationship Between Master Music Teachers and Master Students**

This study examines the perceptions of both master teachers and master students from Finnish music conservatories. The purpose of the research was to explore the relationship between advanced music students and master teachers from a conservatory model.

#### **Method**

The sample consists of 60 students and teachers in different towns and cities in Finland. Teachers' attitudes toward nurturing and mentoring their students were explored through a five point, 36 question, Likert Scale. The social backgrounds of the students and teachers were reviewed; teachers and students were interviewed by the researchers; the relationship between the teacher and pupil was examined; and the climate and atmosphere of the conservatory was investigated.

#### **Results**

It was found that the atmosphere, or climate, in the conservatory was very competitive. Teaching was very much teacher-oriented. Usually, teachers tried to shape and mold their students repertoire in very strict, rigid ways. In general, the students did not appreciate this. The competitive climate was cited as one main reason for many students dropping out, because students who did not want to compete or perform publicly, were often ostracized. This aversion to public performance was seen as a major factor in this research. There was also a great deal of competition between teachers who utilize or exploit students for their own prestige or gain. This was often seen as a sort of "hidden competition." The "status quo" of both teachers and students was found to be mainly based on the public performances of students. Students were very often

forced to “succeed” in public performances and examinations held every year. Teachers were evaluated by their peers using a “ranking system” based on how many students a teacher could get to the “top twenty” of the conservatory. Often, students who succeeded in the competition formed their own groups and "elite culture" in the conservatories. Students with less success felt they were left out and often got bored, bitter, and alienated and would easily tend to drop out of their music studies. The process of dropping out of the conservatory was often traumatic for the students' self-esteem and they usually needed a couple of years to work through this experience of severe “failure.” This was due, in part, to their enthusiastic expectations in regard to a career as a professional performer.

Most of the teachers were judged to be “product” oriented and they wanted to see their students performing as quickly as possible. Teaching was very technical in orientation and there was little time left for the mentoring or nurturing that some students wanted. This type of teaching was considered to be stressful for teachers and students. This study identified three principal types of teachers:

**Technically oriented and highly competitive.** This type of teacher was always trying to push their students to a higher level of performance. They did not inquire as to what their students wanted, but rather forced or prompted their students to examinations and public performances. Often students felt that teachers became bored or frustrated with less capable students. Teachers' interest in their students was frequently based on their musical success and competence. It was not uncommon for this category of teacher to be located at the top of the conservatories' hidden hierarchy of teachers. Sometimes it seemed that for these teachers, the students represented flexible material to be molded and used to enhance their own self-esteem and profile as competent and successful music teachers. In this category of teachers, mentoring and nurturing were not that important. They did not even consider mentoring, and were astonished when this was mentioned in the interview.

**Nurturing.** A second category of teacher was more caring, helpful, and took time to assist in the growth and development of their students. These master teachers employed their personality and made adjustments and modifications when necessary. They would often become friends with their students and utilize the students' strengths and best abilities. These teachers were more

empathetic, social and outgoing. They did not see competition as that important. There was more emphasis on quality and the long-range development of the student. These teachers appeared more confident and competent and they were tolerant of their students lack of technical skills. Usually, these master teachers reported having had a good relationship with their own master teachers. They felt somewhat estranged from the result-seeking, competitive culture of the conservatory. The nurturing teachers wanted to give their students time to grow and discover their own motivation and talent.

**Laissez-faire.** This category of teachers did not appear to care about the growth and development of their students; their main concern was the passage of time with these less than adequate students. These teachers would neither mentor nor nurture students; did not seem to have much interest in them; and appeared alienated from the whole process and conservatory culture. Instead, they seem to see teaching simply as a way of making money. Students were very unhappy with this type of instructor, and instruction. One instructor did indicate that the one positive factor about teaching was that he, “was able to sleep late.”

### **Implications**

Prior to beginning a relationship with a master student in the conservatory model, both the student and the teacher may want to discuss their own needs and agendas. If public performance is the ultimate criteria and is seen as important, this should be indicated early on. Often, parents who were very enthusiastic to see their children in public performances, placed a great deal of pressure and stress on their children for public performance and accomplishment. A good master teacher recognizes the whole personality of the student and is willing to have a dialog with students on an on-going basis.

Students of competition-oriented teachers would often feel guilt and anxiety about not practicing, which interfered with optimal performance. These students were forced to practice repeatedly the same kind of music material. Some of the interviewed students had finished their music studies and stated that after they quit playing their compulsory repertoire for examinations and public performances, their musical taste and repertoire radically expanded. Some of these students also mentioned that they were so busy practicing their compulsory repertoire that they didn't even have time to listen to music.

It is sad that there is so much pressure placed on master students for immediate accomplishment; and that master teachers would often compete among themselves for public performance and live vicariously through the accomplishments of their students. This seemed to be unconscious; the researchers felt that the master teachers were unaware of this behavior. These master teachers may have been trained in the same model when they were students, and may be replicating their own experiences.

Often, these teachers failed in their own careers as performers, have not been able to succeed on their own, and are thus bitter and somewhat angry about their own lack of success. They may seek to substitute success by attempting to achieve vicariously through their students.

### **Mentors Should Follow the Guidelines of Paul Torrence**

Paul Torrence has indicated that mentors should help their protégés to:

1. Be unafraid of “falling in love with something” and pursue it with intensity and in depth. A person is motivated most to do the things they love and can do best.
2. Know, understand, take pride in, practice, use, exploit and enjoy their greatest strengths.
3. Learn to free themselves from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games that others try to impose upon them.
4. Free themselves to play their own game in such a way as to make the best use of their strengths and follow their dreams.
5. Find some great teachers and attach themselves to these teachers.
6. Avoid wasting a lot of expensive, unproductive energy in trying to be well rounded.
7. Learn the skills of interdependence and give freely of the infinity of their greatest strengths. (Torrence, 1984, 56-57)

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Many master teachers have not been trained to actually teach or mentor students. They know how to play their instrument, but they know virtually nothing about the psychology of personality or developmental psychology. We need to recognize the importance of a warm, supportive, caring relationship in the development of musical talent, skill, and ability. The Suzuki method is an example of employing warm, nurturing teachers. The competent teacher

knows when to encourage and prompt, and when to push and be supportive. The personality of the student is important and should be taken into consideration. The good master teacher is sensitive to the emotional nuances and feelings as well as the technical and performing aspects of music. Master teachers must realize that they are models for their students and should be aware of the impact they have in many areas of their students' lives. The teacher-student relationship could have lifelong positive and/or negative effects on the student.

In terms of music education, we must not neglect the emotional life and personality variables of students. In addition, music therapy is another field where this relationship is of great importance. Lehtonen (1989) has written on the relationship between music and psychotherapy and found very many common aspects and elements.

In particular, the mentor relationship is seen by many to be critical in the success of one's endeavors. Torrance (1984) has written on why mentor relationships are critical for success and why some succeed and some fail. Interested readers may want to consult this text for more information on the mentor and the mentoring relationship.

### References

Lehtonen, K. (1989). The relationship between music and psychotherapy. Publication Series A:113, Department of Education, Turku University, Turku, Finland.

Torrance, E. P. (1984). Mentor relationships: Why they aid creative achievement, succeed, and sometimes fail. New York: Bearly Limited.