

# The Master Class: How to Take One, and Give One

## **What is a master class?**

A master class should be a three-way interaction. It is not a private lesson or coaching with an audience watching. It is a lesson on performance that is much for the observers as for the students. Its fundamental basis is the same as any good music lesson: a collaboration between teacher and student to improve the student's playing.

It is a public event where the teacher shares as much knowledge and experience as possible, from which both audience and students can take away valuable knowledge and insights that they can continue to use.

## **Who's in the audience, and what are their roles?**

The audience may be comprised of: other students who play the same instrument or other instruments; music lovers; parents; faculty; professional and/or amateur musicians; colleagues; school administrators. The audience may also include the teachers of the students playing.

The audience should be able to hear differences and improvement. The audience participation may be used in a positive way for validation of improvement at teacher's discretion. Ask the audience if something sounds better and they will always respond positively.

That said, the audience should never interfere or distract.

## **The Role and Responsibilities of the Student**

The student is present to learn but also to provide a vehicle for the teacher's knowledge to reveal itself to other students and the public. The following can help make that happen:

- Be ready to be nervous and on the spot. Congratulate yourself for having the courage to put your neck on the chopping block in front of your friends and colleagues. And then go have the best time you can. It's like sky-diving: dangerous, but fun. You will be stronger for the experience.
- Be prepared. Know score. Do the markings. Don't waste the teacher's time on that.
- Be engaged with teacher and work at their speed. Your goal is to make them successful in their quest to improve your playing. You should make them comfortable so they can give their best, not the other way around.

- Look at teacher while you while playing. Their signals, facial expressions will communicate what they are looking for. You will take away twice as much.
- Don't argue; just try what teachers want, even if you don't agree. If something doesn't sound good, they will look stupid, not you.
- Don't do stupid things. Don't wear distracting clothes. Don't burden the room with extraneous problems. Don't force yourself on the room or the teacher. Be the receiver of information and the responder.
- Assess your teacher quickly. Are they doing this for you to learn or is there another agenda? If so, still make them look good. You won't look like a sissy in front of those in the room who really count and know what's going on.
- Finally: you can't learn how to do this better than by participating in many master classes as both student and observe. Rate them according the ideas we've discussed, and your own expectations. You'll be well on your way to giving spectacularly successful master classes, and helping so many deserving and courageous musicians.

### **The Role and Responsibilities of the Teacher**

- One must always recognize that a master class is not a private lesson: information and ideas presented must be audible and accessible to the entire room, and hopefully, even to non-musicians. It's best when talking to stand next to or even behind the players and face them and the audience while speaking. NEVER speak to the musicians with your back to the audience.
- A good master class teacher is prepared, knows the repertoire and the composers, and has had at least some experience with the music. Don't teach repertoire you don't know, even in private. Learn it first.
- It does no one good for master class teachers to become impatient, except in the possible case of students who seem disinterested or who are resistant. It is not a place for humiliation.
- The class is a great opportunity for teachers to share their own stories of great musicians and what they may have learned from them that will be useful.
- The class is the perfect place to present provocative questions which get everyone thinking.
- There are positive ways to engage the audience without having them interfere: face them when you talk, sit amongst them to listen, and ask occasionally if they hear the

difference when someone tries something new.

- Don't be imperious and don't distance yourself from the students. Intimidation will accomplish nothing.
- Remember that good teaching is really a collaboration between you and the student. If you don't have their trust and cooperation, you won't get very far.
- Demonstrate if you want, but use their instruments, not your own. You never know what might be deficient unless you try them.
- If a student is playing a piece way too difficult, concentrate on a small area, and let the room, the student and the teacher figure out for themselves that this might not be the best repertoire at that stage.
- Know about the music, the composer, the history, the context of the work. This is important information to share with everyone.
- Provide overviews and analysis of a work.
- Leave enough time for questions at the end and forewarn your listeners so they may be thinking about them. It is not a discussion forum unless opened up to question and answer by teacher.
- Vary your topics between multiple students, if you have them. Don't say the same thing to everyone. Concentrate on the few things that each student needs the most.
- Remember that most master classes present you only one opportunity to help someone. You don't have the option of repetition to make progress, so your ideas, your principles, anything they can take with them, is really all you can give them.
- Don't say "This is how I do it". It may be useful up to a point, but in the end, they must find their ways and do it themselves. The information needs to be understood on a deeper level. You should, however, identify what is holding them back or getting in their way.
- Check their editions up front. Make sure they are using reliable ones and are therefore well-informed of the composers' intentions.
- Above all, be encouraging and positive. Remember it's very difficult to get up in front of people and play for a critic. Thank them, and the audience, for their contributions to your class. You can't go wrong.

- Be ready for awkward or difficult questions from both students and audience. Anticipate them. If they are not substantive or relevant, change your answer to provide useful information.
- A good teacher should be able to explain why they are asking for this or that, as much for the listeners as for the student's sake.

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