

Foreword

Creating a virtuoso, as we understand it, usually conveys an image of a teacher honing the skills of a gifted apprentice moving towards a brilliant career. Paul Harris boldly extends this notion, embarking on a ground-breaking trek to identify the path towards ‘virtuosic’ teaching. In fact, the criteria for virtuosity turns out to be broadly similar for the pedagogue as for the ‘wunderkind’; namely brilliant communication, technical flair and artistic leverage.

Paul’s indefatigable mission to raise the stakes for teachers and teaching is articulated here in his most complete and turbo-charged study to date. He builds on clarity and trust as core values (such is his enthusiasm you sense a quiet bafflement that teaching is not regarded by everyone as *the* most thrilling of pursuits), supported by an irrepressible imagination. Paul believes that practical, intuitive and reflective processes, in tandem, can bring renewed currency to the art of teaching at its most virtuosic.

Fascinatingly, Paul Harris’s sense of ‘virtuosity’ eschews all the ostentation we often associate with the word. This is a deliberate ploy and allows the reader to craft for himself what is needed to become a thoughtful, effective and multi-dimensional teacher. Whilst a strong philosophical thread runs through this cornucopia of teaching practice, expert navigation constructively supports practical methods that are both realisable and realistic for any teacher willing to open their minds. There are some experimental suggestions that might not work for everyone, but Paul Harris never espouses ‘one-size-fits-all’ since he recognises that teaching is an intangible journey of independent discovery.

Yet there are non-negotiable elements, the sound principles which inhabit all good teaching – knowing your pupils, always questioning the motivation for learning and teaching, using the power of personal example and imitation and understanding that both parties simultaneously bring new interest and perspective to proceedings – each fuelled by the need to instil hope and confidence at every turn.

Paul Harris never pretends that this is an easy journey. What virtuosity ever landed on a plate? The magic conveyed here is about delighting in the endless potential of Paul’s techniques and approaches, leading to a mutual gain enjoyed by ‘master’ and ‘apprentice’ and the durable resonances of inspired teaching. This book is a virtuoso performance in its own right.

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7 The core of the matter

A significant part of most teachers' lessons is the issuing of instructions (in one form or another) and the asking of questions.

How many instructions/questions do you think you present to a pupil in an average lesson? Include *all* the times you ask for a response, whether it be physical or verbal. Of course the answer depends on a number of factors: the length of the lesson; whether the lesson is based on teaching pieces from notation (and the length of those pieces) or evolves through a more aural-based exploration of musical concepts; whether we're in an individual or group situation, and there may be other issues to take into account too. But in an average thirty-minute lesson I've seen teachers present anything from about twenty to sixty instructions. And that means there are between twenty and sixty reactions to our pupils' responses to those instructions!

The manner in which we present our instructions and the manner in which we react to our pupils after they've carried them out are two of the most significant things we do as teachers – *because we do them so often*. If our instructions are clear and our reactions are positive, encouraging, imaginative and helpful, then pupils will move forward with their confidence and self-esteem growing and their abilities developing. On the other hand, if teachers react negatively, it's like injecting pupils with a slow releasing toxin! These negative reactions accumulate, and you can well understand why a pupil subjected to this kind of teaching will eventually decide enough is enough.

I'm going to call this fundamental and highly significant part of our teaching the *Core Activity*. It could well make or break a pupil. In this chapter we'll deal generally with things practical, and then look at the way teachers and pupils deal with verbal questions and answers in the next.

The Core Activity is formed of three components:

- Instruction (teacher)
- Response (pupil)
- Feedback, which will usually incorporate the next instruction (teacher).

There are instructions and instructions ...

The instruction sets the Core Activity in motion. If you are teaching in the Simultaneous Learning manner then the instructions will form part of a naturally evolving sequential series of activities, each seamlessly connected to the previous and leading on to the next. If you don't already teach in this way, I can sense you thinking *but that would take hours of preparation*. Not at all – with a little imagination and practice, teachers do this quite spontaneously. It's a skill which develops very quickly.

An effective instruction should be *achievable*, and here you have a choice. It

15 Moving on

Looking outwards

The world is moving faster than ever before. Values and beliefs are changing, and no one simply accepts things without question any longer. We, as Virtuoso Teachers, need to move with it. We can't afford not to.

Moving with it means keeping ourselves up-to-date and we can do that through occasional 'research' – reading pertinent blogs or articles on the internet or relevant magazines, for example. We can only know a fraction of what's actually going on, but the important thing is to know that it *is* going on.

There are four main areas of which we need to be aware. The first is **Applied Psychology**, which is making use of psychological principles to help understand and deal with some of the issues and problems we might encounter in our teaching. It's an area that has grown enormously over the past twenty years or so and there are now regular conferences, articles (on the internet and in journals) and books devoted to the subject as well as university departments researching into the psychology of music education. Topics such as how the brain processes pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony; how specific skills are acquired, developed and objectively measured; how we memorise music, and how we develop improvisational expertise are among the many areas under the microscope. Virtuoso Teachers share these kinds of particular interests and they can now be explored further with relative ease.

The second area is **Applied Physiology** which will help broaden our knowledge in treating and using the body to its optimum. One particular area of research is very practical in nature: for example, knowing the best ways physiologically to warm up or how to avoid tendon inflammation when practising. Another is exploring relatively new territories such as how we might access different brain states to deepen creativity and observation on eye movement when thinking.

The third area is **Technological Advance**: how might the internet come to play a part in instrumental or singing teaching? Will we be giving lessons 'online' sooner or later? I've seen a masterclass being delivered where the 'master' was over a thousand miles away from the action, watching and listening to the performers via an internet link. I've seen many lessons where teachers use a laptop or a 'smartphone' as an important tool. One creative teacher had composed some 'sound pictures' in different keys to act as backgrounds to scale playing. It transported each scale into something quite magical – the pupil was entranced and played her scales with a rare focus and enjoyment. Another teacher used a tuner on his phone for a quick 'competition' between two pupils playing long notes. Apps and other online resources are growing by the day.

The fourth area is the **Global Forum** – the ability and desire to share opinions,