

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

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Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

Oak Brook, Illinois

TEACHING DEMONSTRATION BY NELITA TRUE

Report by Karin Redekopp Edwards, D.M.

The Saturday afternoon sessions centered around the Collegiate Piano Major Lesson taught by Nelita True. Dr. True, internationally known artist and teacher, is past chair of the piano faculty at the Eastman School of Music. Sophomore Julie Lee, a student of Dr. True's at Eastman, had prepared the Schumann Novelette in F Major for this occasion with no prior coaching. The strong rapport and understanding between the two were evident. Julie was comfortable with Dr. True and eagerly engaged.

Dr. True began by affirming what Julie had accomplished on her own and by defining sound and rhythm as the two areas she most wanted to address to heighten the character of the music. She had a very strong concept of the piece and challenged Julie persistently to strive for the realization of that concept. She herself knew the piece intimately and had it memorized, referring to structural and harmonic aspects of the music and demonstrating parts of it with full artistic interpretation. She also knew the style and the biography of the composer beyond this piece, pointing out how this work is typical of Schumann and drawing upon the Robert and Clara story to inspire Julie emotionally and imaginatively. Dr. True was superbly prepared for this lesson as a musician and pianist.

Through words, demonstration, singing, moving to the music and conducting, Dr. True continued to challenge Julie to listen intently to her tone and to various aspects of the music: the rhythmic inflection, the significance of the harmonies and bass line, the harmonic rhythm, the length and focal point of the phrase, the length of the melodic line, and the changes in the music. Julie had some opportunity to experiment with her own ideas and to answer questions.

Key questions that Dr. True asked were, "Is this the most beautiful sound I can

possibly achieve?” and at the end of the lesson, “You are the teacher now. What is your assignment?”

The moderator of the post-lesson discussion with Nelita True was Dr. Robert Mayerovitch, faculty member of Baldwin-Wallace College and member of the Elysian Trio. In this session Dr. True commented that one of our chief goals should be to help our students become independent. Students tend not to ask questions when they practice; gifted students often rely on their gifts and do not investigate the music. To become independent learners, students need to be encouraged to study the structure of the music away from the piano and to ask, “What is the character of this piece? What is the meaning of the phrase? What do I do with sound and time to get that?” Students need to have an honest ear, asking, “Am I projecting? Is it being heard?” A musician needs to find everything in the music that has meaning for him or her. An observation was made that Dr. True knew this work thoroughly, to the point of being able to demonstrate it artistically from memory. In response, she suggested limiting one’s teaching repertoire in order to be fully prepared to teach each piece.

The break-out discussion groups were led by William DeVan, Karin R. Edwards, Katherine Faricy, Jody Graves, Susan Kindall, Jeffery Kleinsorge, Helen Marlais, Tony Padilla, Reginald Rodgers, Susanne Skyrn, Dennis Sweigart, Helen Smith Tarchalski, Carolyn True, and Robert Wyatt.

In answering the question, “How did the student’s playing change during the lesson?” participants noted that the student emerged with a stronger concept of the character of the piece and communicated it more vividly by playing with greater rhythmic accuracy and articulation and with more tonal color and contrast. They observed that what Dr. True did to facilitate those changes included establishing an atmosphere of trust, respect, and joy. She had fun with Julie, teasing her at times and laughing with her. She also displayed an eagerness to work persistently with Julie to achieve the artistic vision she had for this piece and that she believed Julie was capable of achieving. The participants noted that with that vision clearly in mind, Dr. True incorporated a variety of ways to help the student find that same vision and play in a musically convincing way. Those approaches included providing

a clear aural image through demonstration; drawing attention to compositional aspects, such as phrase structure, that would inform the student's interpretation; directing the student to LISTEN to harmonies, harmonic rhythm, and the movement of the bass line; directing her to listen to her tone and pedaling, and to listen for differences and contrasts.

Several pointed out that Dr. True's use of imagery - Robert pouring out his love for Clara - and her choice of words had a great effect on Julie's playing. Dr. True improvised lyrics to the music that came out of the Robert-Clara story. Understanding the emotional underlay and the changes in character within the music helped the student's communication of the piece generally and her articulation and sound in particular.

With her questions and directions, Dr. True set up Julie to succeed. When one explanation was not working, Dr. True shifted gears to get at a solution in a different way. Participants saw how skillfully Dr. True analyzed what most needed attention and how she persevered tenaciously with a small unit until Julie was able to do it or at least to understand how to practice it. While focusing on rhythmic clarity and tone quality to heighten the character of the piece, she drew in a host of other issues.

Specific points that were made included explaining that the dynamic level of a passage is often controlled by the secondary material, not the primary, and that the pedal opens up the sound of the piano.

Some felt the mix of a few questions plus direct suggestions was appropriate; others would have liked to have had more questions asked, to stimulate the thinking process of the student and to promote the independence of the student. In the post-lesson discussion with Dr. Mayerovitch, Dr. True herself commented that perhaps she "overdirected" the lesson. Some appreciated Dr. True's physical movements, e.g. conducting, walking, gesturing; others thought Julie might have internalized the concepts better if she had also participated in the various physical movements.

In response to the question, "How can this teaching demonstration impact my own teaching," the great majority of participants said they were inspired to spend more time studying and practicing the works their students play. They observed how vital the understanding of the structure of the piece is to the interpretation. They were also inspired

to be more enthusiastic in lessons and to have more fun with the students while challenging them. They saw how motivating honest praise and encouragement was and how important it is for the student to feel successful at each lesson. After this lesson teachers resolved to be more creative in finding a variety of ways to effect change and in finding words that could help students listen differently. They wanted to keep the focus on the student without ignoring the demands of the music, guiding the student through discovery to the artistic realization of the piece in sound. That included leading the student to listen intently to the sound and to discern how the rhythm is critical to the character of the piece. Teachers left determined to take on Robert Duke's challenge to have a clear vision of their own students as accomplished learners.

One comment voiced by many was that they intended to ask their students Nelita True's questions at the end of the lesson: "What is your assignment? How are you going to practice?"

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