

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

Wednesday, July 18, 2001

Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

Oak Brook, Illinois

TEACHING DEMONSTRATION BY MARVIN BLICKENSTAFF

Report by Nancy Bachus

I. The Teaching Demonstration

Marvin Blickenstaff, President of the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, has had a distinguished and varied career as a performing pianist, college and university piano professor, administrator of piano pedagogy programs and piano teacher workshops, teacher of beginning students in group settings, clinician, and author of piano teaching materials. The piano lesson (demonstration) was given to 14 year old, C.J. Hague, a student of Mr. Blickenstaff when he was on the faculty at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. Mr. Blickenstaff had not heard C.J. play for two years prior to this public lesson. C.J. played Etude Allegro by Yoshinao Nakado and the third movement from Clementi's Op. 36, No. 5 Sonatina in G Major.

Mr. Blickenstaff's opening comment to C.J. on the pleasure of "making music together again," set a warm, relaxed atmosphere between the two (with 700 teachers observing). The focus of the lesson was always on the music, its expressive qualities and on listening. Although many changes were suggested in the way C.J. played, they were preceded with positive comments, celebrating what he had done well. "You set up the B section beautifully. Your mind and ear are working so well together. That was really beautiful." In this way the student was led into playing better and better rather than feeling failure.

In the opening of the Etude Mr. Blickenstaff wanted a different rhythmic accent and more forward momentum than C.J. projected. First Mr. Blickenstaff presented it intellectually so the student understood where the pulse and accent should fall. Next they conducted it so that C.J. could feel the rhythm. Only then was C.J. asked to play it again.

It took several repetitions to bring the performance level to Mr. Blickenstaff's satisfaction, so he kept changing the explanation and approach, having C.J. snap his fingers and actually playing it (modeling) himself while C.J. listened.

C.J. was guided to first think and then do, to discover many things on his own, and was allowed to make interpretive decisions. Presented with two choices, "You may decide which you prefer." Not only was rhythmic vitality and momentum improved, C.J.'s technical facility on the passage also increased, achieved in part through physical suggestions. Musical timing and rubato were discussed and savored. When C.J. did not know the meaning of the word *cantabile*, this could have been awkward and embarrassing, but Mr. Blickenstaff quickly said, "You don't know? But you're doing it so beautifully!"

When the lesson time was almost over, rather than use the "discover" method, Blickenstaff humorously took charge in the Clementi. Before C.J. played MB said, "To save time, I'll tell you first what I don't want you to do." Finally, there was a review of the lesson as Mr. Blickenstaff asked, "If you went home this afternoon, how would you practice?" In this way, all the points made were now re-stated by the student, and a practice plan was devised, also by the student (aided by the teacher, when necessary.)

II. Discussion with Moderator, Beverly Lapp

Beverly Lapp, teaches piano and piano pedagogy at Goshen College and also directs the Piano Preparatory Department there. She is a former student of Marvin Blickenstaff.

She pointed out Mr. Blickenstaff's mastery of language and imagery and how his very detailed teaching of one point in the music also gives a "huge lesson" in overall musicianship. Mr. Blickenstaff stated his deep belief that unless the student is brought into the decision making process, no musicianship is being taught. When asked why he moved quickly through many points Mr. Blickenstaff replied that with C.J.'s intelligence, he grasps concepts quickly.

Mr. Blickenstaff had asked C.J. his "favorite moment" in the piece, and explained

this is a frequent question since the student's favorite moment is seldom what the teacher expects. Regarding the review at the end of the lesson, Mr. Blickenstaff stated had there been more time, he would have handed C.J. a pencil and asked him to write down the three most important points of his lesson. He reiterated that without review and summary of the points made in the lesson, students will forget. Mr. Blickenstaff also feels strongly it is necessary to document a student's growth, to talk about this in the lesson and have the student recognize it. Since he had not heard C.J. in two years, this was natural here. Weekly lessons cannot always show growth, and since it is easy to forget where we once were, this must be done periodically with every student.

III. Break-Out Discussion Groups

Leaders: Nancy Bachus, Roma Eicher, Deborah Dewitt, Suzanne W. Guy, LeAnn House, Virginia Houser, Rebecca Johnson, Gloria Machado, Arlene Steffen, Rebecca Shockley, Martha K. Smith, Helen Smith Tarachalski, Karen Taylor

One group participant recalled a line from the film *As Good As It Gets* describing Mr. Blickenstaff's teaching ability. A character in the film remarked, "She makes me better than I am." The teachers felt Mr. Blickenstaff had remarkable energy and a "student-centered" approach that was nurturing, yet demanding. He communicated "global musicianship" seeing music as an expression of the whole person and guided the student to become a thinking musician throughout the lesson. He pointed out musical relationships and contrasts in the score. ("How does the rhythmic organization change from the first two measures to the second two measures?") The pieces were analyzed through specific questions and comparisons between sections as theory was integrated and used as a basis for musical decision-making. He used large physical gestures to convey movement and rhythmic motion by clapping and conducting.

His use of language was amazing in so many ways:

"Your ear will tell your hand what to do."

"Lift up the dynamics."

“That was so successful.”

“The downbeat is a magnet.”

“Match my dynamics.”

“This is boring—twice the same way.”

“That was breathtaking! That’s to cry for!”

“Don’t play the C major downbeat until you can’t stand it any longer!”

“Shave off a millisecond.”

“Share with us how extra special that high note is.”

“That was so beautiful, you have to do it again.”

Teachers said this will influence their own teaching as they document the progress of students, try to use words for rhythmic clarification, (“Mississippi mud,”) and at times cut to a point quickly. Giving the student a time of silence to think about what he wants to change is also necessary. Students must actually experience things, rather than just telling them and moving on. Mr. Blickenstaff “managed the magic trick of seeing the whole forest while examining the veins on every leaf in every tree in that forest” (all in 30 minutes).

IV. Robert Duke’s Summary

Mr. Blickenstaff exhibited traits found in outstanding teachers as enumerated by Mr. Duke. Mr. Blickenstaff is obviously a highly skilled pianist, musician and teacher with infinite knowledge of his subject matter and of teaching techniques. He knew exactly what he wanted the student to achieve and systematically brought about the desired change in the student’s playing through a variety of approaches so C.J. could experience success and be praised for genuine achievement. The student learned by doing, working in small rehearsal frames toward specific goals through a structured sequence of short episodes. Marvin had a vision of C.J. as an accomplished musician and helped him achieve this. He had tenacity and systematically re-cycled repetitions within the rehearsal frame until C.J. could do what was desired. Perhaps even more important was the relationship between the two so that C.J. was inspired to think that the desired goal was worth all the required effort.

Everything taught had a musical outcome and many of Marvin's questions centered around, "What is the music doing?" Teaching the character of the music is what music-making is all about.

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