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Sarah–A Grass-Roots American Musical Profile: A Case Study in Confused Values by Barbara Lister-Sink

Excerpts from the following were delivered at the l991 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music in Orlando, Florida, as part of the topic "All One System"

In our world of music, we teachers have two traits in common–a love of music and a desire to communicate and perpetuate that love in our students. Unfortunately, this may be where the commonality ends. We have never asked ourselves collectively whether we agree upon *how* to communicate this love of music. As a result, we may have produced frustrated students who see our teaching values as confusing and even contradictory, and lacking any commonality. I ask new students and adult workshop participants around the country how many different approaches to the piano they have had–technically and musically. The answer is consistent. About as many approaches as teachers. They also consistently express real frustration and confusion at this state of affairs but do not know how to change it.

Is it important to agree upon values in teaching music? Certainly our students would be less frustrated and confused. In an era when arts funding is diminishing and fewer and fewer young people are willing to enter the music world, we certainly do not want to worsen the situation by creating yet more roadblocks from within our world.

Compare for a moment a healthy ant colony and a successful corporation. Both are worlds–one a microcosmos, the other a macrocosmos–which are united by one trait. The *integrity* and even survival of both depend on certain basic values common to healthy functioning. Integrity means the state of being whole, healthy, sound. The very health and survival of our music world could depend on establishing common values in teaching music. As music teachers, do we inhabit a world which is whole, sound and undivided? Are all of the different parts of our world–private studio, public and community music school, college and conservatory–united by common values which promote consistent musical health among our students and teachers? Is our integrity intact?

The following poetic description illustrates poignantly the damage done by one set of teaching values. Sadly, it describes many of our own and our students' experiences in music.

"Solfeggietto"
Piano lessons The mother and the daughter
Their doomed exhaustion their common mystery
worked out in finger-exercises Czerny, Hanon
The yellow Schirmer albums quarter-rests double-holds
glyphs of an astronomy the mother cannot teach
the daughter because this is not the story

of a mother teaching magic to her daughter
Side by side I see us locked
My wrists your voice are tightened
Passion lives in old songs in the kitchen
where another woman cooks teaches and sings...

The daughter struggles with the strange notations
–dark chart of music's ocean flowers and flags
but would rather learn by ear and heart The mother
says she must learn to read by sight not ear and heart

Adrienne Rich

The fictitious musician "Sarah" of our grass-roots American profile is a conglomerate product of our present teaching system. Everyone's impressions may vary about those products. But I hope that this particular profile will spark recognition and, in turn, foster a desire for collective re-examination of our teaching values. Perhaps by looking at Sarah, we will begin to discover not what must be, but more what could be in our most heart-felt dreams. Or as Scrooge says to The Spirit of Christmas Future, *"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change."*

"SARAH"

Sarah is 30 years old. She is the mother of a 4-year old son. She lives in a beautiful suburb of a culturally-oriented southern city. She was raised in a very small rural town in the south. Her parents, who were farmers, discovered she had musical talent at an early age. Her school teachers in the rural south were not sure what to do with her.

She began musical studies with a European immigrant, an older organist in a nearby town. In his dark, cozy old home he taught her the scales and exercises on a real grand piano. He also introduced her to composers with unpronounceable names. Performing for her in the old organist's recitals in his church fellowship hall had been a pleasant experience of playing her short pieces for enjoyment to an audience of proud parents, grandparents and friends. Her teacher also let her play pieces she had composed. She had loved buying a new, ruffly dress and the feeling of being special as she sat on the cushions at the old polished mahogany Steinway, its white teeth gleaming.

And so time passed and the piano became her friend. When she played, it always made her feel good inside and the clock always said she'd practiced much longer than she thought she had.

Then in junior high school, her mom felt it was time for her to receive serious instruction at a larger piano studio in a town 30 miles away The studio had a reputation for producing regional and state winners. Students came for theory and sight-reading and seemed to love being there. It had a sophisticated, big city feeling that she liked.

After visiting and observing the lively, highly charged atmosphere of the studio, Sarah decided to join that fall, also her first year in junior high. At first Sarah was excited about her studies. She practiced hard,

liked her teacher and thrived on the new worlds of sound with which she was becoming acquainted.

She was suddenly required to acquire a whole new technique and to practice two hours a day, including many scales and arpeggios, an etude and several pieces from long ago. She didn't mind this. However, she liked some popular pieces she played for her friends at school but knew they were not good enough for her teacher. She also missed playing her own compositions. On the piano rack in big letters was written, "DO NOT PLAY ANY OF YOUR OWN PIECES. THE PIANO MUST BE TREATED WITH RESPECT." Sarah had always treated the piano with respect, just as she did her other friends. She had never considered her own pieces a form of disrespect.

Sarah thrived on the discipline and lively spirit. She loved being told she was very talented and loved being around other dedicated, talented pianists. The studio held monthly recitals where students received prizes.

But something was happening to Sarah. When she participated in local and state competitions, which she invariably won, she began to notice that the boisterous cameraderie of the fellow pianists from her studio was not reflected in anyone else's faces at the music gatherings.

In her senior year in high school, Sarah admitted only to herself that she was beginning to feel different at the piano. While she loved the exciting pieces by Liszt and Beethoven, her arms and shoulders had begun to ache. Her teacher told her just to relax them and take more frequent breaks. But the pain got worse, expecially during her preparation for the State Orchestra Concerto Competition. She went to a doctor and was given a shot of something called cortisone so that she could play a Mendelssohn concerto the next week in competition. She kept practicing but found herself bursting into tears occasionally. Her teacher called her each night to encourage her to keep her spirits up and to tell her she had a good chance of winning. Her arms still ached, she kept losing her concentration, and was nagged by fears that she would not get through the concerto. She did not enjoy playing anymore, but Sarah was used to discipline, and was determined to keep going.

Sarah played and won. But something happened inside Sarah. Her mother's and teacher's plans for her to go to one of the best music schools in the country became less appealing. She no longer enjoyed making music and deep down inside she knew she was not "good enough."

Sarah got into a prestigious music school. The auditioners didn't seem to know that she wasn't good enough and that she hated the way the music sounded. She felt as if she had no power.

In the even more specialized, highly competition environment of this major conservatory, Sarah was told yet again that she had to completely change her technique. As usual, she did not understand why. Her interest diminished and her fears of failure accelerated. Sarah's teacher began to have doubts about her ability to "make it" in music, as well as her apparent disinterest in music. It saddened him because he heard something very special in her playing, something that moved him and others almost to tears– no easy task is his long career of teaching.

Sarah no longer wanted to walk out on stage–she began to have too many memory slips. She liked some student teaching of children she had done to earn spending money. But since she felt she was not good enough in performance, she did not see how she dared to try to teach and perform in a college job some day. Alongside performing careers, that seemed to be the only option discussed among her peers. Her teachers continued to support her, but Sarah's dedication and dreams had eroded.

Sarah transferred to a small liberal arts college near home, got a degree in business, met Jack, married and had Evan several years later. In her 20's she kept busy with mothering, helping Jack in his business and volunteer activities. Then one day she went to a local community music school Kindermusik program she had

heard of for Evan. The teacher explained the joyous experience of music. The room rang with the laughter of children making music–not perfectly crafted, stylistically correct music, but happy music. Sarah suddenly found herself weeping silently. That night after Evan was asleep, Sarah sat down at her long-neglected piano. She began quietly to play a piece she had loved so much as a child, her own piece.

Sarah was confused. This quiet love for what she was experiencing had little connection with the experiences she had had in her teens and early 20's with music. What she valued music for seemed in many ways at odds with the values of her remembered music world. But she was determined to discover again the love for music that had made life so much richer when she was young. She went to the phone and called the teacher who had been laughing so joyously with the young musicians that afternoon.

PRESENT TEACHING VALUES

We need first to examine the values that are at the very heart of our music world, the values which have been passed on for generations. Then we can ask whether there is integrity to this value system, or whether we are producing confused students who will quit or continue to perpetuate the confusion in their students.

Sarah is a composite of my experience of teaching pianists for two decades– privately, in several liberal arts institutions, a major conservatory in American and in Europe and now a professional music school in grassroots America. It was disturbing how easily Sarah's life flowed out of my pen. I did not have to stop to think about the next step. The pattern was so familiar to me. A student I taught some years ago with a very similar profile, ended her acquaintance with music in mid-stream at age 18 by taking 52 painkillers. She lived to leave school, return home, get married and disappear quietly into the fabric of a less stressful middle American life. I often wonder what she is doing and whether she and music were ever reunited. She, like Sarah, felt she had no choice but to exit the world she had so loved. Hers was an extreme reaction to disjunct, confusing values. Its poignancy left an indelible mark on my memory.

Now let us examine the values in Sarah's musical upbringing, positive and negative.

POSITIVE VALUES - Good Intentions

- Recognition by parents and teachers of the worth of music in Sarah's life.
- Willingness of parents and teachers to develop Sarah's talent.
- Encouragement and support of Sarah to prepare for a career in music.
- Dedicated teachers doing their best at all points to help Sarah develop.

NEGATIVE VALUES - Confusing Signals

- Conflicting signals from same or different teachers regarding:
  1) Self-expression or creating vs. re-creating of music
  2) Personal musical affinities vs. the requirements of traditional, "classical" training
  3) One technical approach vs. another
  4) Competition/achievement through music vs. intrinsic satisfaction of making music (goal vs. process)
  5) Suffering vs. enjoyment as a means of growth
  6) Performing vs. teaching
  7) Teaching the young vs. teaching advanced students

All of the above conflicting values resulting in:

1) Thwarted development of creativity
2) Elimination of personal musical tastes and affinities from music studies
3) Unnecessary physical problems resulting from little understanding of the process of teaching technique
4) Lowered self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness
5) Unnecessary emotional stress
6) Apparent limited career options
7) Failure to channel talent into appropriate career area

What were the results of these values? The positive values resulted in Sarah's continuing with musical studies throughout her youth with determination and discipline. She gave it her all, and that was a great deal. The results of the negative values were serious confusion in many areas and consequent loss of physical and emotional well-being, not to mention music in her life. She had experienced the disorientation of numerous technical and musical value systems to such a degree that disconnecting was her only option.

TIMELESS VALUES

I believe there is an urgent need for a system of values–timeless values–- which permeates all areas of musical study, which unites all musicians in a quest for integrity. I believe that if all of us would apply these basic values to students of all ages, we would greatly increase the integrity and good health of our music world. We would also not have ourselves to blame for the erosion of musical excellence in our culture.

1) That the student be viewed holistically so that all teaching promote the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the student.

Most music teachers have the best intentions but limited tools, save their own experience. It is possible to gain adequate knowledge and skills in these fields without time-consuming specialization. This holistic approach has already been incorporated into several music teaching fields, such as Kindermusik and Suzuki. Training in holistic well-being sould be a necessary component of pedagogy.

2) That a universally accepted system of teaching technique be developed that incorporates rational principles of good coordination and body use, and thus prevents injury.

There is a pervasive but unnecessary ignorance throughout the private teaching world of the nature of free, well-coordinated, injury-preventive technique. The knowledge is there for us in athletics, medicine and music pedagogy. We have not made use of it. Injury or disfunction as an expected by-product of practicing is an unnecessary and tragic assumption. It has contributed significantly to the drop-out rate in the music field.

3) That teaching on all levels be equally valued.

There is an ironic inversion of values in our country. Teaching older or more advanced students is perceived to be more prestigious. In truth, teaching the young or the beginner may well be the highest calling. Here is where the foundation, sound or shaky, is laid for the student's entire life in music. All teaching thereafter is either remedial or enhancing in nature. However, because of this inversion, music students might assume that teaching the young is an inferior calling.

4) That teachers not only teach how to perform but how to teach.

These two should be inseparable. This involves understanding a cardinal rule of teaching–"Master one step at a time." Many students never understand nor experience mastery on any level because we teachers are

not clear in our own understanding of this process. Students often feel increasingly more out-of-control and ill-at-ease with their instruments and the music. If teaching included training an understanding of this step-by-step process, the student would not only know what to do, but how to do it. The result would be a student who can eventually teach herself and others effectively.

5) That the multitudinous variety and functions of music, and even musical tastes, be incorporated into teaching.

World, pop, jazz, folk, electronic, new age music, as well as improvisation and music technology, need to be viewed as exciting teaching tools rather than hindrances to music education. An open-minded awareness of and willingness to explore these facets will not only promote increased career options and better student/teacher relations, it will expand our own musical possibilites, creativity and enjoyment. It will keep us alive and growing.

6) That students learn to appreciate and articulate the intrinsic worth of music, not its competitive value.

Equating achievement and winning with self-worth is all-too-prevalent in musical training. Consequently, losing or not living up to musical expectations promotes loss of self-esteem. In addition, a clear knowledge of the the benefits of musical study can only lead to better communication, enhanced valuing of and higher retention rate in music. Another beneficial by-product will be skills in arts advocacy.

7) That the element of joy never be missing from the musical experience.

If this, the most important value of all, is present, no amount of hard work, low pay, or disappointment will ever sabotage the student's connection with music.

I believe that there is no question as to the necessity of establishing a common value system for teaching music in our country. The development of that system would be a mind-boggling challenge. But it would also be a great adventure, an immense voyage, this proposed journey into teaching values. Some of it would be uncharted, rather overwhelming territory. However, in coming out of our sometimes self-imposed isolation, we might identify and build on the most positive aspects of our training and experience, those things which consistently promote good health and long life in music. In doing so we could finally reassure ourselves that all of our students would receive training embued with integrity.

I conclude with a quote from a 38-year-old pianist who might not have had to disconnect from her musical identity for over a decade if she had known a common value system:

"Sometimes I think music is impregnated within us and that like the Australian Dreamtime, there is no beginning or end in the knowledge of it....but only the eons of melodies and sounds holding hands and connecting us to the beginning and the end of time. I should never have let go. I should never have stepped out of the circle."

Perhaps we could have done more to help you stay, Sarah.

ENDNOTES

1 Adrienne Rich, "Solfeggietto" from Time's Power (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., l989), 3-4.

2 Charles Dickens, Works, Volume 18 (New York: Peter Fenelon Collins, Publisher), 87.