

Music Teachers Make Their Mark With Personal Connections, High Standards and Infectious Passion

by Catherine Womack

Influential music teachers give their students much more than technical advice and helpful fingerings. They connect with their students on a personal level, challenging them artistically and leading by example, demonstrating their own contagious passion for the instruments they play and the music they love.



Beatrice Français

ACMP board member Beatrice Français remembers the personal connection she had with Gabriel Banat, her violin teacher at Smith College. "He took an enormous amount of interest in his students, in their progress and in their lives," she says. Banat taught her to play with energy and passion, and he introduced her to the broader world of professional classical music. "He awoke in me my own musical sensibilities," she explains. "He could also give excellent advice on how to draw a good sound from the instrument. I still remember him telling me to use the muscle that runs along my shoulder blade when I draw the bow, and I still remind myself to do that when I play."

Banat also invited Français directly into the music-making process by playing chamber music with her both at dinner parties in her New York apartment and at his home in Westchester. "He loved playing chamber music and delighted in the idea of playing with some of his students," Français recalls. The two developed a lasting friendship and remained close confidants and musical collaborators years after her college lessons concluded.

"She comes closer to being my guru than anyone else in my life."

David Pearl, another ACMP board member, shared a similar friendship with his college cello teacher. "I've never had a guru," he says, "but she comes closer to being my guru than anyone else in my life." Pearl met Margaret Rowell when he was a student at the University of California, Berkeley in the early 1970s. Like so many college students, Pearl was trying to figure out who he

was and where he fitted into the world. His lessons with Rowell were centering.

Rowell's innovative and physical teaching techniques transformed the way Pearl approached the cello. "She taught me the principles of connecting the physical with the art," Pearl says. He remembers Rowell grabbing his arms and swinging them around, and asking him to crawl around on the floor of her house. These were not mere gimmicks, he stresses. They were playful, memorable ways of helping a student connect with and control the power of his own body then to use that power to generate richer tones on his instrument.

Violist and North American Outreach Council Member, David Yang, the director of chamber music at the University of Pennsylvania, remembers vividly what it was like to discover the complexities of phrasing and musical expression as a young teenager in New York City.



David Yang coaching at Penn.

Yang's two most formative chamber music coaches were Mark Sokol of the Concord Quartet and David Ehrlich of the Audubon Quartet. "These guys could and would spend a two-hour coaching session working on just two or three measures," he says. "They would look at every note and every line in each part, making certain everything was infused with expression. They would examine the shape and color of each note, the blending of the sounds between the instruments, and the speed and width of vibrato. This kind of detailed work is utterly exhausting, but I also found it exhilarating."

Yang also worked with Mark Sokol's son, Damian, who was his high school conductor. He and Damian became good friends, and Yang still visits him at his home in Maine. "[Damian] had an infectious enthusiasm for music. This is incredibly powerful in a teacher, and I strive to be as inspiring to my own students. When you know your [teacher] loves this music, you can't help but get pulled into that passion."

continued on next page

Music Teachers Make Their Mark...

continued from page 2

For ACMP board chair Janet White, cello teacher Ann Kerr was “a rock” throughout her adolescence in Buckinghamshire, England. “My cello lessons were a stable element of growing up,” she says. White felt a close bond with her teacher, and she remembers lessons in her teacher’s home fondly.

Students are often spurred to work harder because they want to prove to a beloved teacher that they can rise to the occasion.

Most of all, White loved that Kerr encouraged her to take risks and stretch herself, to try difficult repertoire

(like Schubert’s *Arpeggione Sonata in A Minor*) and perform in front of audiences and judges at England’s Associated Board examinations.

To this day, White values the confidence those experiences gave her. She sees a direct link between her experiences performing on the cello and her ability to be poised during a public-speaking engagement or presentation, a skill she exercises regularly in her role at the Gates Foundation (where she runs training sessions in drug and vaccine development), as ACMP board chair and when she is invited to give talks on career development to women scientists.

Asking a child or young adult to try something new or difficult does indeed boost confidence. Students are often spurred to work harder because they want to prove to a beloved teacher that they can rise to the occasion.

Catherine Womack is a classically-trained pianist and freelance arts and culture writer and regular LA Weekly and LA Times contributor.

◆ ACMP Worldwide Play-In Weekend - March 4-5, 2017 - Help Chamber Music Circle the Globe ◆