

SYMPATHETIC VIBRATIONS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Esping began teaching private music lessons professionally when she was seventeen years old. Her students have received several thousand dollars in scholarships, and have gained admission to top universities and conservatories. Her current projects include working as a consultant in public and private schools, expanding her student-centered approach to private music instruction and working with teenage musicians who wish to become music teachers.

Ms. Esping received a Bachelor of Music degree in Clarinet Performance from California State University, Northridge, where she was a student of Dr. Charles Bay. While in CSUN, Ms. Esping also completed the coursework for CSUN's well-known Music Therapy program. At the time of this writing, she had just been accepted to the graduate school at Indiana University, Bloomington and was preparing to enter a Masters program in Educational Psychology.

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A Guide For Private Music Teachers

By

AMBER ESPING



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PREFACE

PPRIVATE MUSIC TEACHING is the last of the great oral traditions. It is unique in this modern era of education because the student and teacher often work together for many years in an intimate one-to-one learning partnership. The dynamics of each of these partnerships are different, so the challenges and responsibilities of the private music teacher's job change at every lesson.

Most private music students are young hobbyists, high school musicians, or music majors, but there is no such thing as a "typical" private music student. On a single afternoon, a private music teacher may teach a hopeful retiree daring to fulfill his lifelong dream of playing an instrument, an advanced high school student, a ten-year-old beginner, a thirteen-year-old boy labeled with attention deficit disorder and a twenty-two-year-old college student relearning to play her instrument after a traumatic brain injury.

Meeting the needs of such a remarkably diverse group of students demands extraordinary flexibility. *Sympathetic Vibrations: A Guide for Private Music Teachers* is a resource that has been designed to help private music teachers of all instruments develop that flexibility. Although it contains many teaching ideas, it is not a "method" book. Its most important purpose is to help music teachers and their students discover their own answers.

It is very easy to keep consistent, high musical standards and still recognize individual differences. In fact, when private music teachers take each student's unique learning style into consideration, seemingly ordinary students can achieve extraordinary success. This book will show private music teachers how to identify their students' learning styles, and demonstrate the benefits of using experimentation and intuition to supplement proven teaching strategies. Teachers will also discover empathetic teaching and learn how to use memories of their own learning experiences to plan music lessons and communicate clearly.

Music therapists will also benefit from the concepts discussed in this book. Although music therapy goals usually do not emphasize musical achievement in the traditional sense, private music lessons can be a vehicle for reaching therapeutic goals. This book was written from the perspective that all private music teachers (whether or not they have had music therapy training) will

eventually work with disabled or “difficult” students. Therefore, every chapter has relevance to music therapy situations. The “Significance” chapter highlights the ways in which private music instruction can benefit students with special needs.

Once this book has been read, it is the author’s hope that it will be referred to over and over again as part of the teacher’s toolbox. Each chapter focuses on a broad philosophical point, but the book has more utilitarian side as well. *Sympathetic Vibrations* offers a practical advice for many common teaching situations, as well as motivational activities, composition, improvisation and listening exercises, strategies for rapid advancement, marking ideas and pragmatic advice for running one’s own teaching studio. The appendices include an unusual practice sheet, record-keeping forms and a recital planning guide. Those persons who purchase this book are welcome to photocopy these items for their personal use.

A.E.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN MANY WAYS THIS BOOK is the result of a team effort. I have received gracious help from many kind people along the way.

My father, Gilbert Esping, spent countless hours designing the record keeping forms discussed in the Communication, Documentation and Practice chapters. He also read and reread each version of this manuscript with great care. His meticulous eye for detail and quest for clarity made this book much better. Dad—you are my hero. I love you.

My mother, Mary Esping, is the real writer in the family. Her insightful comments, contagious laughter, and optimism made this project a lot less stressful. Mom—you are the wind beneath my wings. I love you.

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The manuscript material for this book was kept safe from harm by my favorite computer geniuses: My wonderful brother, Michael Esping, and my dear friend, Jeffrey Knecht. I am extremely grateful for their help and patience.

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The greatest joy of my life is teaching. I owe that to the inspiration of three remarkable private music teachers: Tom Scott, Sue Bunter and Charles Bay.

I am grateful every day for your presence in my life. This book is a tribute to the three of you. Thank you.

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SYMPATHETIC VIBRATIONS

Chapter 1

THE JOURNEY

*I am not a teacher: only a fellow traveler of whom you asked
the way. I pointed ahead—ahead of myself as well as of you.*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

I BECAME A MUSIC TEACHER when I was still very much a music student. My private clarinet teacher, Sue, was very good, and so popular in our community that she could not accommodate all of the students who wished to study with her. When she thought I was ready, she asked me if I wanted to begin teaching a little boy named Eddie. He was nine years old; I was only seventeen.

When Eddie became my student, I had been taking private clarinet lessons for six years, and was principal clarinet in my high school band. I had been first clarinet in a few honor groups, and even marched in the Rose Parade. But I was hardly a musician. I was still memorizing scales, learning to count rhythms accurately and struggling with a vague concept of musicality. Although I certainly knew a lot more about music than Eddie did (and I trusted that Sue wouldn't risk his musical education to do me a favor) I recognized that any seasoned musician would rightfully question my ability to do a good job. How could I teach someone else when I still had so much to learn myself? Nevertheless, with Sue's guidance I began to teach Eddie to play the clarinet.

Eddie didn't take clarinet lessons for very long. In fact, once soccer season started, he quit both private lessons and his band class. Despite his parents' assurance that it wasn't my fault, my confidence was sorely shaken. However, Sue insisted that I try again, and over the next few months she sent me several other young students. I learned a lot about music and life from teaching them, and the money I earned provided the means to continue my own music education as a clarinet performance major at college.

The students that came after Eddie were more successful. They progressed very fast, and within a year, two of them were doing so well that I had to ask

Sue to take their musicianship to the next level. It was hard to admit that I had reached the limit of my knowledge so soon, but giving them to a more experienced teacher proved to be a good plan; after a year of Sue's guidance, one of these students had received a music scholarship to attend high school at the prestigious Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, and the other continued to flourish in local school band and state honor groups.

The students that I kept were also doing well. Many of them gradually worked their way up to the principal clarinet positions at their schools, and three of them won coveted awards in a school district composition contest. I was teaching the only fourth grade advanced band student in the district, and my best high school student earned a generous music scholarship to attend the celebrated University Of Southern California. Local band directors added me to their referral list, and soon I had a waiting list of my own.

There was an ironic reason for my students' success. I had a teaching tool that I could not have learned in any classes, or from any teacher. In fact, the more educated I became, the harder it was to hold on to it. It was more valuable than wisdom or maturity, because it was something that came naturally to me that more seasoned teachers did not necessarily have. I started cultivating it because it was a useful substitute for experience, and it helped me understand and communicate with my students.

What was this magic teaching tool? Empathy. I started teaching when I was seventeen years old. Although I was much farther along than my own students were, I was still one of them—a partner in their learning. There was such a small gap of years and experience between us that I barely had to move to reach them. It was easy to communicate authentically because I still shared their musical fears, frustrations and joys daily. I knew what I loved about music, private lessons, and my teachers. I knew what motivated me, what I didn't like, and what frustrated me enough while practicing to make me give up and watch MTV instead. There was no struggle to conceive my students' simple understandings, no thought about how to distill complex information into digestible bits. I simply taught them what I knew. And because I hadn't figured out where my own musical journey would lead me, I didn't try to force my students down the same road.

Empathy and inexperience were serendipitous gifts that helped me understand each student as a unique learner. When I was seventeen I didn't have a plan, so teaching was about experimenting—studying my students' reactions and trying new approaches until I found a way for each of them to understand. Out of necessity, I gave them control over their own learning and adjusted my approach to suit each one of them. From this I discovered that learning right along with your students is not a detriment to teaching well. It is in fact, a very effective way to teach.

Now that I have my music degree, I am older, wiser and more experienced. By traditional measures I am much more qualified to be a teacher, but I still

value the primordial teaching experiences of my first year more highly than any education I have had since. Though my outlook has matured, the naive enthusiasm that fueled my teaching technique so many years ago is still what keeps the fire burning. I don't know if Eddie even remembers his clarinet teacher, but I remember him. And no matter what my diploma says, I earned my teaching credential when I was seventeen.