

Contents

Foreword	5
1 Being a virtuoso	7
2 What we do	10
3 The Virtuoso Teacher as master communicator	16
4 Getting the best out of pupils	23
5 Dealing with challenging pupils	29
6 The lesson	37
7 The core of the matter	43
8 Asking the right questions	53
9 Creating the masterplan	59
10 The trouble with practice	65
11 Do teachers need to practise?	72
12 Progress	75
13 Group teaching	80
14 The journey continues	87
15 Moving on	91

Foreword

Creating a virtuoso, as we understand it, usually conveys an image of a teacher honing the skills of a gifted apprentice moving towards a brilliant career. Paul Harris boldly extends this notion, embarking on a ground-breaking trek to identify the path towards ‘virtuosic’ teaching. In fact, the criteria for virtuosity turns out to be broadly similar for the pedagogue as for the ‘wunderkind’; namely brilliant communication, technical flair and artistic leverage.

Paul’s indefatigable mission to raise the stakes for teachers and teaching is articulated here in his most complete and turbo-charged study to date. He builds on clarity and trust as core values (such is his enthusiasm you sense a quiet bafflement that teaching is not regarded by everyone as *the* most thrilling of pursuits), supported by an irrepressible imagination. Paul believes that practical, intuitive and reflective processes, in tandem, can bring renewed currency to the art of teaching at its most virtuosic.

Fascinatingly, Paul Harris’s sense of ‘virtuosity’ eschews all the ostentation we often associate with the word. This is a deliberate ploy and allows the reader to craft for himself what is needed to become a thoughtful, effective and multi-dimensional teacher. Whilst a strong philosophical thread runs through this cornucopia of teaching practice, expert navigation constructively supports practical methods that are both realisable and realistic for any teacher willing to open their minds. There are some experimental suggestions that might not work for everyone, but Paul Harris never espouses ‘one-size-fits-all’ since he recognises that teaching is an intangible journey of independent discovery.

Yet there are non-negotiable elements, the sound principles which inhabit all good teaching – knowing your pupils, always questioning the motivation for learning and teaching, using the power of personal example and imitation and understanding that both parties simultaneously bring new interest and perspective to proceedings – each fuelled by the need to instil hope and confidence at every turn.

Paul Harris never pretends that this is an easy journey. What virtuosity ever landed on a plate? The magic conveyed here is about delighting in the endless potential of Paul’s techniques and approaches, leading to a mutual gain enjoyed by ‘master’ and ‘apprentice’ and the durable resonances of inspired teaching. This book is a virtuoso performance in its own right.

Professor Jonathan Freeman-Attwood
Principal, Royal Academy of Music

1 Being a virtuoso

It was George Bernard Shaw in his play *Man and Superman* who coined the fateful expression we all know as: ‘Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach’. The phrase has never been forgotten. Shaw should be ashamed of himself! Well, it’s time to put that well and truly behind us.

Here’s a version for the twenty-first century: *those who can, do; those who can do better than those who just do, teach.*

There is a belief that teaching is indeed a bit of a second-class act. It isn’t. It may become so if approached with a second-class attitude, but if we desire to do the job really well then that status soon changes – teaching is an *enormously* important profession which should always enjoy seriously high standing in society. Teaching is, indisputably, a wonderful, fulfilling, endlessly stimulating and hugely responsible occupation. And, just as we can aspire to be a virtuoso player, we can also aspire to be a Virtuoso Teacher.

Virtuoso Teachers are not virtuoso players who teach, though the virtuoso player may aspire to become a Virtuoso Teacher! Neither are they teachers who may teach the occasional virtuoso.

Virtuoso Teachers teach as the virtuoso player plays: with a heightened sense of awareness, with passion and energy, with profound involvement and genuine commitment. Virtuoso Teachers teach everyone who wants to learn (from beginners upwards) in such a way that their pupils really *do learn* and really *do benefit* from the teaching and, as a result, *don’t give up prematurely*. Anyone can become a Virtuoso Teacher. It doesn’t take long to make the transition. We just have to be determined, dedicated, and prepared to spend quality time thinking and reflecting on our work.

All young people should have the opportunity to receive teaching that ultimately gives them the confidence and ability to access the marvellous world of music entirely independently and at any level. That is what the Virtuoso Teacher does.

The spirit of Paganini

Paganini was perhaps the most famous of all virtuosos. So what were the qualities that caused people to endure many miles of travel (in the days when travel really was quite an undertaking) and to be in their seats hours before his performances? We can put this success down to three qualities: great communication skills, an exceptional technique, and a mesmerising artistry and imagination.

The Virtuoso Teacher aspires to exactly these same qualities:

- *Communication skills* help us connect with our pupils and spur them on to fulfil their musical dreams.

- *Technique* – born from the knowledge and strategies we use to help our pupils develop their playing and singing, and which we can practise just as the virtuoso player does. This ‘technique’ reaches far beyond our knowledge of repertoire or how to operate the instrument and forms much of what this book considers.
- *Artistry and imagination* which will help our pupils to develop their own musicality.

There is, however, one major difference between the virtuoso performer and the Virtuoso Teacher – it’s to do with the nature of the interaction between the two parties. Whilst there is indeed a flow of energy between virtuoso players and their audience, the two-way energy flow between Virtuoso Teachers and their pupils is enduring, special and potentially much more revolutionary. The Virtuoso Teacher does indeed have the power to change a pupil’s destiny. Virtuoso Teachers are truly transformational – they really care about, enthuse, and create the aspiration in each of their pupils to discover and explore his or her own unlimited musical potential.

The word *virtuoso* actually derives from the word *virtuous* – which means upright, worthy, honourable and honest. The term *virtuoso* in fact dates back to the 16th century (well before Paganini and all the other luminaries that followed him) and personified those who showed exceptional skill, dexterity and precision in whatever they did (musical or otherwise), those whose work was considered highly successful, those who had great reserves of energy, and those who cared for and made a real impact on others around them. The twenty-first century Virtuoso Teacher embodies all these qualities.

There are further factors that help to define the Virtuoso Teacher. These include taking risks, challenging received conventions, the heightening of attention and the deepening of awareness. Of particular importance is the need to develop a greater understanding of how people work – which means a keen self-awareness as well as really knowing and understanding our pupils. The book considers all these factors and indeed the whole fascinating process of *how* teachers do what they do, how these skills can be acquired and how they can be *practised*, to a virtuosic level.

The Virtuoso Teacher also needs to develop a broad range of teaching strategies. Often, those who simply teach by reacting to their pupils’ (often poor) work end up becoming frustrated and bored. We *must* develop other approaches.

The book also considers the bigger picture: why we teach, why our pupils want to learn and what they want to learn. And it considers a kind of teaching that is more personalised – individually tailored to the needs of each pupil, rather than teaching to some external set of one-size-fits-all criteria.

This is also a book about personal security. If our pupils are confident, involved and satisfied, they are less likely to give up, which means we can always be sure

2 What we do

Surprisingly, trying to describe what we do is not so simple. But as aspiring Virtuoso Teachers, it's important that we give it serious thought.

First of all, and though it may be stating the obvious – *we teach music*. But what is this ‘music’ that we teach? Some say they teach ‘the piano’ or ‘the trumpet’: technique and teaching the instrument seem to be at the heart of the matter. But that’s only part of it. Some teach pieces or songs. But that’s only part of it too, especially if their pupils can only play the particular pieces the teacher can teach. Teaching music is to develop a deeper understanding: it’s teaching each pupil, in his or her own individual way, to *know* music and to engage with all of its component parts with real awareness and insight. We do this in such a way as to allow all our pupils to play or sing and, above all, to make and enjoy their music independently. We show them the possibilities and open their minds ...

... Because ultimately, people can only learn *if they teach themselves*; the ‘teacher’ is simply the means to that end.

There are other (often expressed) reasons for teaching and learning music: the intellectual, social, therapeutic, emotional and healing benefits. Whilst these are clearly of considerable interest and importance we must never forget that fundamentally we are teaching music *for its own sake*. And because music is something that matters, something that we love and is life-enhancing, we don’t want to end up spoiling it and causing our pupils to turn against it. I’m afraid some teachers do just that.

The component parts

‘Music’ is a generic word that encompasses many styles – but most have one thing in common. They speak directly to, and vibrantly from, the soul. And all the various component parts that we teach (in whatever musical style we favour) are simply means to this same end – allowing others to develop their musical aspirations and share in something we love. That may be playing a Bach Partita exquisitely and with a deep knowledge of stylistic conventions, performing a Beatles number, or improvising an abstract soundscape. We must never forget *why* we teach these various component parts:

- **Technique** (in all its many guises) is the means of performing whatever music we want to play as effectively as we want to play it. And do remember – there are many different ways to approach technique.
- **Notation and sight-reading** are the means to help us explore other peoples’ music and write our own should we wish.
- **Aural and theory** are the means to help us to understand more deeply the

4 Getting the best out of pupils

Do bad pupils really exist?

I was presenting a seminar for teachers a while ago and discussing this rather hot topic when a member of the audience suddenly exploded with considerable rage: 'But I only ever get given *bad* pupils ... *all* my pupils are bad!' He was so full of anger and an absolute belief that what he had just said *was true*. Well it may have been true in his mind but it wasn't, in any way, an absolute truth. Obviously his pupils didn't match up to whatever *his* beliefs were on what makes a good pupil. His pupils clearly fell significantly short and this was causing him deep distress.

He wasn't prepared to accept any other view that morning and he didn't reappear for the afternoon session. With some serious thinking and recalibration of his deep beliefs and values he could have turned these severely negative and unhappy thoughts right around. Perhaps he wouldn't have wanted to. In whichever case, he probably should not have been teaching.

If we believe any of our pupils to be bad pupils then we can be sure that's what they will be. But nothing should occasion such thoughts. Our job is to help all our pupils: to implant positive thoughts. So we must simply accept (without condition) that all our pupils are good pupils. There *are* no bad pupils. Pupils certainly move at (very) different rates. But 'slow moving' pupils will still *achieve* just as much and can enjoy their success just as much as 'fast moving' pupils. They may reach lower (national, or even international) levels but that *really doesn't matter*. Virtuoso Teachers do need to keep both achievement and attainment in view but as long as they recognise that *all* their pupils are (in some way) able, imaginative and creative but *different*, this will allow every one of them to achieve these positive, self-fulfilling prophecies.

Let's be certain, however, that a pupil's attainment is not held back by low energy teaching or low expectations. One pupil's Grade 1 may indeed be another's Grade 8 but we must ensure that all pupils are being given the best chance for development and progress and that means the best support (from teacher and parent or guardian) for encouraging healthy and productive practice and for galvanizing pupils with those all-important expectations.

Living up to expectations

In general, people live up to expectations. Certainly our pupils do. In 1968 there was a famous educational experiment carried out at The Oak School in the USA. A number of pupils were randomly selected and their teachers were told these particular pupils were likely to make much greater progress than their fellow classmates. At the end of a term, those pupils for whom the teachers had higher expectations did show significantly greater intellectual improvement than their classmates. The

13 Group teaching

¹ I have written about group teaching in *Group Music Teaching in Practice* and also in *Improve Your Teaching!* (chapter 8). Within these books you'll find thoughts on using Simultaneous Learning in group teaching, planning lessons (for both small and large groups) and assessment, as well as discussion of broader issues and the role of group teaching in the educational development of young players and singers.

Rather than repeating matters already considered in other books¹, this chapter will focus on ensuring that all pupils within a group are given the opportunity to use their individual abilities to the full. That really is the central challenge for the Virtuoso Group Teacher.

Whilst the Virtuoso Group Teacher needs all the qualities discussed in Chapter 3, there are two particular ones that will be of great assistance:

- An extensive fund of inventive strategies to call upon to accommodate pupils of varying ability and to deal with any eventuality in an imaginative and productive way.
- Good management skills.

The first point is often served up via the rather daunting concept of *Differentiation*. If we think about Differentiation in practical terms – having a variety of different ideas available and being able to adapt spontaneously and instinctively, it makes it all much more approachable.

Let's look at three basic principles that lie behind effective group teaching:

- **Pupils should be constantly engaged** A successful group lesson will be one where all pupils are continually involved in activity. That activity may be playing, listening, responding, thinking or possibly helping another member of the group.
- **Pupils' differences should be used gainfully** All pupils are different, to some extent, in:
 - Specific abilities
 - Interests
 - Learning styles
 - Rate of learning
 - Thinking speeds
 - What they know
 - Motivation – different sources and levels.

But rather than allowing these differences to divide pupils and cause the teacher a headache, let's embrace and use them to bring lots of different types of learning into the lesson. Pupils can for example:

- 'model' their particular strengths;
- take part in group improvisations;
- lead an improvisation session based on a phrase (or phrases) or a rhythmic pattern from a piece they are learning;
- lead an improvisation session based on a particular interest;
- explain a technical or musical point they really understand to other members of the group;

- be allowed to lead a short section of the lesson, with the teacher becoming a ‘fly on the wall’, either supporting quietly or leaving the pupil to offer suggestions to peers;
- help other members of the group with something they are particularly good at;
- give answers to a question in their own time, not necessarily immediately – perhaps even in the next lesson (‘what does that phrase/piece conjure up for you? What would be the best speed for this piece?’);
- suggest a ‘mood word’ for the piece;
- develop their own ideas about a piece by thinking about what might be happening in a film or a TV programme while the music was playing.

There is another important difference between pupils – the amount they *practise*. In the group teaching situation this can become quite an important factor. If we have three out of four who do – and one who doesn’t, it becomes a bit of an issue. We can’t allow the one to hold back the rest, and whilst our resourceful imaginations may have an almost limitless supply of differentiated activities there does come a point where we will probably reach a full stop. What can we do?

- Finding a private moment (which may be difficult, but it’s important not to discuss these problems in front of other pupils), we can ask what the problem is and do our best to offer solutions: poor time management perhaps, or maybe the pupils are uncertain as to what is required. Perhaps pupils simply don’t understand sufficiently and this is preventing them from practising. After each week’s practice, ask them to write down two thoughts:

One thing I enjoyed:

One thing I found difficult:

The answers may well help to formulate a strategy.

- Perhaps one of the other pupils can be a kind of ‘mentor’ who helps and encourages with practice. Encourage pupils to practise or play together in the week to keep momentum going between lessons.
- Reward systems may particularly encourage young pupils who need a goal to work towards (such as a special sticker for five days worth of playing).
- Practice books with space for parent and teacher feedback can be vital for parental involvement and interest.

If the lack of practice persists and the situation becomes seriously problematic for the other members of the group, then perhaps there is another group more suitable for that pupil’s needs or, if all else fails, the pupil should be advised to try another instrument, or (last resort) give up.