

Musical Context

By Mikki Steyn

Before taking on a new student I require that the prospective student come for an interview. In broad terms the idea of this interview is to determine whether the student and I have the same goals in mind with regard to his/her lessons, whether our personalities are compatible, and if the student has had lessons before, to gain some information about the nature of the former lessons, performance experience and so forth.

In a recent interview with a prospective student, when we came to the point where I enquired as to what pieces she had been working on, she took out a flip-file with photocopies(!)* of three grade 7-level pieces. They were the second movement from Poulenc's Flute Sonata, the second movement from Mozart's D major Flute Concerto and Telemann's Fantaisie No 2. None of the photocopies gave any indication of who the composers were or of the compositions these movements were taken from.

The student said that she had been working on these pieces for a while and so I enquired whether she knew the composers and compositions. To my shock she had no clue. Neither has she heard any recordings of any of the three pieces she had been working on, let alone recordings of other compositions by the same composers!

To my question, "does she know any flute players (well-known, or not) and has she heard them play?" her answer was: "James Galway". This situation has repeated itself time and time again in interviews with prospective students.

How on earth do you get to Grade 7 level and the only flute player you know is James Galway? How can you learn a piece if you don't know who the composer is or the particular composition, or know where the composer/composition fits in historically?

In the same interview mentioned above, I asked the student whether she has ever heard or at least seen a picture of the flute the Telemann Fantaisie was written for. Needless to say, she hasn't.

I am not advocating that teacher's should turn flute lessons into music history lessons or musicological analysis lessons. The least a teacher can do, however, is to make sure the student knows who the composers are of the pieces he/she is playing and where they fit in historically. With regard to listening to recordings of a particular piece, students usually find it exciting to do comparative listening. In other words, listening to how different players perform the same piece. Of course, with regard to Baroque pieces the teacher can really get them involved by playing a recording of a particular piece as performed on a traverso and on the modern flute. What could be really exciting is when you play them, say, at least two different recordings of performances on the traverso and two different recordings on the modern flute and then have them write down what they perceive and use this as a starting point to discuss different aspects of historical performance practice. I usually also show students pictures of the traverso and through interactive discussion make them aware of the differences between the modern flute and the traverso. Art and architecture books with pictures could also be a great source to give them insight into historical context.

* I will comment on the issue of photocopies in a different article

Of course the above method of introducing a 'new' composition to students does not apply only to Baroque music, but to any composition. By putting a composition into context by means of as many different media as possible you are broadening a student's musical insight and experience and this doesn't take a lot of extra time and/or effort. All it takes is a little bit of initiative and planning.

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