

What makes a good masterclass?

In the following article, educationalist Paul Harris considers the key ingredients for a successful masterclass.

The audience waits excitedly: some are masterclass veterans and some are new to the experience; some have copies of the music on their laps; some have the music in their heads. There are teachers, parents and other young players; there is an atmosphere of hushed reverence and expectation. The young musician (who has worked hard in preparation) sits nervously wondering what the forthcoming encounter will bring. The master enters ...

The stage is now complete. The three participants of a masterclass are finally assembled together: master, learner and audience – but the success of what is about to happen is very much in the hands of the master.

So what exactly is a masterclass? Liszt was one of the first teachers to give masterclasses. It was a platform for teaching and sharing ideas with a group of students. And so that, therefore, is our first principle of the good masterclass: *acknowledging and sharing with the audience*. Some masterclasses are little more than a public lesson, a one-to-one, with the audience as passive onlookers. As far as the master is concerned the audience may or may not be there – they are of little concern. That's okay and (in the hands of a good teacher) may be reasonably informative, but it's not really in the spirit of the game. The master who ignores the audience is letting down one of the three participants. The expert masterclass presenter engages the audience, who become more than note-taking observers. They are individually and emotionally drawn in to the occasion, which means they get so much more out of it. And the master draws on their collective energy to enhance his or her own. This doesn't mean the master need ask the audience questions or get them (physically or mentally) to take part in actual activities – though some masters do. The skilled master simply makes contact through the innate generosity of his or her own personality.

The second principle, perhaps the most important, is to have the ability instantly *to understand the needs of the student*. The ability instinctively to pick up and recognise what the student can and can't do and what would be most helpful in allowing them to travel deeper into their music making. In other words, the ability to empathise. Some masters can go no further than 'this is how I play it and I'm here to show you how to do it more like me'. Perhaps that may be sufficient? But that's not really the stuff of the really effective masterclass. Effective masterclass presenters also have the related ability to put their students at (reasonable) ease. It's often pretty nerve-racking being the student – though some have remarkable confidence. For most students, if their self-esteem is preserved then the potential for exciting discovery is very strong.

The third principle is that the master needs to *have something interesting to say*. I've sat through countless boring masterclasses where masters have felt their role is simply to make alternative performance suggestions: play this a bit louder/softer/faster/slower; phrase it like this; try this fingering; use less pedal. These kinds of hints and tips may or may not



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be useful, but we want more from such an occasion. I want a master to challenge my thinking; to take my imagination to places I may not have been to before. I don't mind if some of the ideas presented are too extreme, not physically possible, or defy commonly held or received opinions. In fact the masterclass may well be all the better for such provocative and stimulating content. Some of the very best masterclasses I've encountered have been given by musicians who have profoundly questioned the nature of music and the nature of learning. Where the masterclass itself was much more about asking questions than providing answers. I've often come away seriously enthused by such occasions.

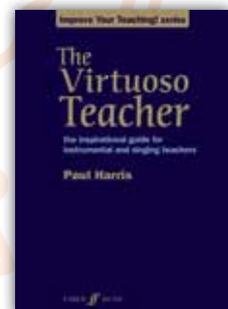
The fourth principle is the importance of *communication*. The master and student need at least to be speaking the same musical language (if not always the spoken language). Such an occasion is ripe for much misunderstanding – inevitably the master may make many assumptions and the potential for confusion and misconstruction is considerable. The student will rely heavily on words and expressions that mutually express a common meaning. If the master doesn't achieve this the student will take away little from the encounter.

The fifth and final principle is that a good masterclass needs to be *entertaining*. And I don't use the word in the sense of being 'funny' or lightweight. A masterclass can be very serious with profound teaching taking place, but at the same time it can be delivered with a winning and appealing touch. Well placed humour plays a vital role in engaging all three participants, and can very helpfully serve to 'break the ice', putting both audience and player more at ease.

For a masterclass to be successful and effective, the master's ego will be held in check. Virtually all masters will have something of an ego, which is generally okay and to be expected. But with the ego firmly under control, the truly helpful master can build confidence, open the student's mind and guide them, sensitively, down new avenues of thought and experience. The event is not used as a platform for the master to show off. Worse still is any 'master' who leaves a student upset or embarrassed or doubting their worth – to be avoided at all costs.

So what does make a good masterclass? In addition to the five principles I've identified, it will be both inspirational and aspirational, leaving the students who take part and those audience members who play or teach with a burning desire to get back to the coal face and practise, teach or perform with a greater sense of awareness and enthusiasm. It will affirm the beliefs, hard work and diligence of those involved and the experience will be, to some degree, truly life-enhancing.

For further information about Paul Harris's *Simultaneous Learning* approach read *The Virtuoso Teacher*, published by Faber Music.



Paul Harris has established an international reputation as one of the UK's leading educationalists. As composer and writer he has over six hundred publications to his name, and is in great demand as a workshop leader and adjudicator around the world. Paul's innovative teaching techniques, especially his concept of Simultaneous Learning, have found support all over the world and combine thoroughness, imagination and practicality; the defining qualities of his outstandingly successful work.

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