

Oregon Musician

Sharing ideas about music and the teaching of music

Professionalism and the Independent Music Teacher

A Note from the Editor



About the Editor

Rhonda Ringering, NCTM has crafted a career as a pianist, a writer and an instructor. She has released four CDs, is an active solo and collaborative performer of both classical and jazz, and her articles have appeared in *American Music Teacher*, *Piano & Keyboard*, *Flute Talk*, *Clavier*, and *Keyboard Companion*. She received her MM from Boston University.

I never wanted to be a piano teacher. Despite having excellent teachers (most notably the late Jeanne Schell and Dr. Leonard Richter), I was going to do “important” things like performing and writing, not spending hour after hour teaching little kids to play the right notes at the right time. Dr. Richter’s pedagogy class changed my mind. In that class I saw teaching as dynamic and creative—something I had a “knack” for doing. A year and a half after graduating from college, I was working a corporate sales job and experienced a blinding insight while driving through rain to get from one sales call to another: if I could sell pagers (and be at 150% of quota), I could survive as a piano teacher. I joined OMTA, started teaching on evenings and weekends, and several months later left the corporate world for a career as an independent music teacher.

Over the past twenty-three years I have loved teaching and have loathed it. At one point I got so burned out I “left music forever” (I lasted a year and a half). Since starting teaching I pursued my twin dreams of performing and writing and have seen successes in both areas. I got my Master’s degree and spent ten years working in higher education. Through all of it (with the exception of the year and a half away from music), independent music teaching has been the one constant aspect of my career. I learned to love teaching and in the past few years came to realize it is what holds the rest of my professional life together.

Teaching keeps me real. As a writer I can pontificate and as a performer I can become “precious,” but nothing brings me back to humility faster than my students. They keep me humble. They keep my writing real and my playing grounded. Their questions challenge me to ask my own and to keep growing as a professional and as a person.

In this issue of *Oregon Musician*, some of our best independent music teachers share their thoughts on what it means to be a professional independent music teacher. Dr. Gary Ruppert writes on communication, and Sandra Palmer on keeping our profession alive in a

changing society. Patti Duthie and Joy Novak remind us to act and dress professionally, and to treat students with respect. Susan Todd, this issue's feature interview, presents a life example of what it means to be a professional independent music teacher, and Dr. Jill Timmons reminds us of the advantages of private teaching in a profession that too often values college teachers over independent instructors.

So what does it mean to be a professional independent music teacher? It means being committed to the highest possible personal, artistic, and business standards. It means treating ourselves, our colleagues, and our students with dignity and respect. Most of all, it means having the curiosity, humility, and "moxie" to show up each lesson, put ourselves aside, and change the world, one note at a time.

—Rhonda Ringering, NCTM

Professionalism and the Independent Music Teacher

Table of Contents

Editor's Column by Rhonda Ringering, NCTM	page 1
Professional Communication in the Music Studio by Dr. Gary Ruppert, NCTM	page 3
The Persisting Pendulum by Sandra Palmer, NCTM	page 6
Professionalism and Piano Teaching by Patti Duthie	page 8
In the Service of Music: An Interview with Susan Todd, NCTM by Rhonda Ringering, NCTM	page 12
<i>New Voices</i> by Joy Novak	page 15
<i>Ask Artsmentor</i> by Dr. Jill Timmons	page 19
<i>Coda</i> The Neighborhood Piano Teacher	page 21

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Professional Communication in the Music Studio

by Dr. Gary Ruppert, NCTM



About the Author

Gary Ruppert retired as Dean of Instruction from Linn-Benton Community College. He also held positions as Dean of Liberal Arts and teaching faculty of music and communication. He is the author of the *OMTA Jazz Syllabus*, a past state president, and an active clinician, adjudicator, and performer of both jazz and classical piano.

When we consider “professionalism” in the music studio we often think of issues such as educational attainment, punctuality, and billing practices. There is however, another area where determining your parameters for expertise will make a substantive difference—Professional Communication.

In many workplace environments, communication effectiveness is judged by the accurate transmission of information or the ability to motivate people to do the work you are requesting. Certainly, that is true in the teaching studio, but it goes much further. Relationships in the independent music educator’s studio are far more interpersonal and require a great deal of sensitivity to what the student is feeling, anxieties they have, the communication triangle between teacher-student-parent, and the overall communication climate that develops. This communication climate, perhaps more than any other single item, may ultimately determine the broadest level of professionalism.

A communication climate is defined by the emotional tone of a relationship. It is based on the degree to which people believe themselves to be valued by others in that relationship. When we view this through the lens of the teacher-student-parent triangle it becomes quite complex. The way in which our actions demonstrate the intrinsic value we have for the student and for the parent helps determine the professionalism of the music studio. Mixed with this are the values we help them understand about the art of making music and the discipline required. In this relationship, you will inevitably have to share some negative information, and it is at this point when the real test of climate and professionalism will occur.

So how can we make sure we are developing this professional, emotional tone? When the student is doing well, what kind of reinforcement are we giving them? It is essential to let the student know when he or she is successful. The old assumption, someone should just know they are doing well because you haven’t corrected them, will not

Professional Communication in the Music Studio

build an affirming climate. We must voice our recognition of their positive progress and how pleased we are with it. But we should move beyond that and constructively praise the student in front of their parent. The student has a right to feel proud of their accomplishments. The parent should be proud as well and engage in reinforcing the positive learning. The student will feel valued by both the teacher and parent, the parent will feel valued because of their inclusion in the accomplishments of their child, and both will recognize the emotional reinforcement from you.

It is essential for you to establish this kind of positive climate before corrective communication becomes necessary. If the student and parent both feel you are on their side, when the time comes for you to deliver negative messages, they will be more willing to accept them because of the pre-established emotional tone. This can be reinforced even more if you remind them of the positive accomplishments as part of the corrective message. It is also critical to the professionalism of the situation for you to give the negative message in the context of the issue at hand and not about the student personally. Saying they are not advancing because of less practice time is an acceptable professional statement. However, saying they are not advancing because they have become lazy is not a professional statement and will completely undermine the climate for all future communications. When learning is not going well, we must be honest or we lose our credibility. But when that honesty is perceived as an attack, we lose the supportive, relational climate.

Another element, essential in building a strong, learning relationship, is participative decision making. When the teacher makes all of the decisions, students will likely feel as though they don't really matter. Obviously, the student can't be calling all of the shots, but there are many opportunities for shared decision making. Sometimes, the decision-making must involve a parent as well. A truly supportive, professional climate is one where all three can recognize the difficulties inherent in an issue and work together to find a feasible solution. This means the teacher must move beyond being the one in charge of the studio and become a mediator. When the student, parent and teacher all come to a shared conclusion, and they all reached it in a collaborative manner, the climate between them grows in an exponential manner. This will hold true even when everyone doesn't agree, if the teacher/mediator creates an opportunity for follow up within a short time period. Saying, "I know you don't feel good about this, but let's give it a try for a month and then talk about it again to see if we want to do something different," will give them a sense of collaboration, and that they are still in partial control of their own future. They will be much more willing to give it a chance than being told, "this is how it's going to be, so you better just get used to it."

The overwhelmingly difficult thing about communication is that we are always doing it. Even if we are not saying anything, we are still communicating. When a student asks about changing something, and they are met with silence, a strong message is taken. If it is met with an eye roll or loud sigh or laughter, it has even more disastrous potential. The underlying message is, "I really don't care what you want because I know

Professional Communication in the Music Studio

best." Needless to say, this is destructive to the climate and future interactions. Almost all communication is interpreted on two levels: 1) what information is being shared, and 2) what is implied about you and I and our relationship. Even the simple verbal message, "We'll talk about this later," infers a very strong secondary message. You may have truly meant "later," but often the interpretation is "never," and the implication is that you don't really care about my ideas or me. A way to enhance the climate would be to say, "We're out of time today. Let's talk about this first thing next week at your lesson. Will you help remind me?" This is the response of a professional who cares about the climate of future communication and the value of the relationship. Taking the extra step of also saying this to the parent, in front of the student, will further strengthen the secondary level message that you care about the integrity of the relationship.

As is obvious by now, the underlying element for building a professional communication climate is to let others know you value them. Another way of demonstrating this is through empathy. When a student shares something that has a strong emotional attachment for them, they want a response recognizing their feelings and respecting their right to those feelings. If our response is to tell them why they shouldn't feel that way, the implied secondary message is that you don't actually care. A professional, empathic response will acknowledge the validity of their feelings, even though you may not approve. Having empathy means you are trying to understand how and why they feel a certain way. It does not necessarily signify agreement. This same openness applies to the triangle between teacher-student-parent, and often this is where it becomes very delicate. If the student and parent have conflicting feelings about an issue, how do you empathize with both? What if the student expresses a passion for getting involved in a certain activity, which may result in less commitment to their music lessons? The student has strong feelings and the parent may have equally strong misgivings. Your initial reaction may likely be to agree with the parent. The professionalism comes into play by again acting as the mediator, validating both sets of feelings on the subject and finding a middle point of reconciliation. Your empathy gives a strong secondary message of relational importance to both student and parent, as well as enhances the strength of the triangular relationship.

In closing, here is a metaphor for this three-way relational communication. Imagine three people at a single potting wheel, and all of them have their hands on the clay. Collectively, they shape a piece of pottery from that clay. The clay represents messages we send and receive, waiting to be fully realized. The pot represents meanings we create together from our messages. Effective, professional communication only happens when all parties are involved in a common interpretation of meaning. The interactive dynamics of the professional music studio are not much different from the dynamics of an effective workplace. When people feel valued and confirmed, they do their best work, even when corrective actions need to occur. When student, parent, and teacher all feel valued and affirmed, learning, creative sparks, and music making will happen in the studio and beyond. What higher level of professionalism could one ask for?

The Persisting Pendulum

by Sandra Palmer, NCTM



About the Author

Owner and operator of Roseburg Piano Academy and a faculty member at Umpqua Community College Music Department, Sandra Palmer, NCTM has over 35 years of teaching experience. She holds Bachelor and Master's Degrees in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from Eastern Washington University and Central Washington University. She has held offices at local, district and state levels in Washington and is the current Oregon Music Teachers Association (OMTA) President of the Roseburg District.

"Time's a-ticking," yet predicting our future in the ever-present and changing world is overwhelming. The status of our relevancy becomes the main focus. Can private teaching continue to exist with the societal burdens we face day to day in a studio setting? Certainly, history speaks to the fluctuations and adaptations musicians have had to endure and conquer from century to century culminating in some of the greatest treasures for all mankind.

But, can an independent professional remain secure while addressing current demands? Adapting to economic burdens experienced by clients is a major concern. Consider the dilemma opening a studio in a private home setting or business. Operational expenses require a significant financial outlay. With tuitions soaring at colleges, universities, and conservatories, the debt held on outstanding loans can be oppressive. And, if the hourly rate is not substantial enough to outweigh studio costs, this situation may prohibit a likely candidate from pursuing private music instruction as a possible career choice.

Obviously, we cannot control economics, but we can ensure positive outcomes by remaining flexible and adaptive. We can approach fees and offerings head on, recognizing the investments in time and effort through comparisons. Example: the cost of fuel, travel accommodations, food, uniforms, registrations fees, medical procedures, health club fees to participate in any given competitive sport activity versus the cost of individual private instruction. This comparison will emphasize the positive and negative short and long term outcomes based on financial outlay. Or, compare the hourly rate of a lesson from a college educated private instructor to the hourly rate of a plumber. Either comparison brings into question the basis of present discrepancies.

On a practical note: a teacher cannot be expected to offer a professional setting if a comparable salary does not justify the means. The music profession in general possesses a sad history of selling to the lowest bidder. In retrospect, it

The Persisting Pendulum

is no wonder we are losing prospective teachers who are choosing other careers because they cannot afford to market their talents. And, the trickle-down effect shows itself even at institutions of higher learning. The numbers of capable incoming freshmen or transfer students interested in pursuing private teaching has fallen because it is less attractive than it once was.

It should not surprise a member of a music association that after forty years of private teaching, they may still be one of the youngest private instructors in the organization. Guilds literally disappeared in the early 1900s, and were replaced by local, state and national music associations. With recent decline in membership the current trend looks bleak. All music teachers of the 21st century face a dismal diagnosis.

How then can we “catch the wave” and offer society something less instantaneous yet more respected? Focusing on the opportunity to explore music which is based on personal development--character being a key, a hidden treasure can be discovered. We can promote this vision by networking beyond the studio.

The solution may be simple: commission a liaison with a mission to develop a closer connection between the private studio and institutions of higher learning. This may be a straightforward answer manifesting tremendous benefits to both. The bond between student, teacher and professor is critical; without a human connection, a career cannot be considered or realized. This exchange will nurture music careers and elevate private instruction. The freedom to “link and engage” will guarantee that the valued art of centuries past remains present and current. Without this critical link, our legacy is in jeopardy. It will be increasingly difficult for the next generation to receive the many privileges and benefits of private instruction. Which way the pendulum swings is in our hands!



Professionalism and Piano Teaching

by Patti Duthie



About the Author

Patti Duthie earned a B.A. in Music from Wittenberg University. She is a past president of Portland District OMTA, and of Mu Phi Epsilon Portland Alumni Chapter. While primarily a private studio teacher, she enjoys collaborative performance and performs with Donna Maebori, flute, as "Irides-cence." Their upcoming projects include making a recording.

What does it mean to be professional in the realm of private piano teaching? There can be many aspects to explore in answering this question, but for our purposes here, let us look at two of the more important ones, those being the exterior of the teacher and the interior of the studio.

First and foremost, professionalism begins with the personal impression one makes upon the world at large. Psychologists tell us that the first seven seconds in someone's presence determine what one thinks of that person. When teachers interview prospective students, a wonderful education, fascinating piano performance and nurturing rapport with children cannot be unveiled in seven seconds, so it follows that what the prospect sees in the teacher's attire and personal upkeep will define whether the teacher is deemed professional or unprofessional.

Many teachers use the nomenclature of "private" to mean that it is no one else's business how she/he walks and talks and dresses when teaching because it occurs in the privacy of the studio. That is to say, if the student (often a mere child) doesn't mind how the teacher presents his/herself, then the teacher doesn't have to mind either. Unfortunately passing muster with a 6-year old is rather like stooping to the lowest common denominator and not necessarily the right choice for a professional teacher.

That said, a professional profile includes impeccable hygiene, moderate hair shape, modest attire, and avoidance of extremes. It should go without saying that a professional's personal identity should not reveal political leanings, religion, or age if it can be helped. Timeless, classical clothing says that one is a professional teacher more loudly and more consistently than any resume or interview could.

One should recognize that professionalism wins out over any whimsy or personal expression; for examples in the extreme that would mean no tattoos or kinky fashion. If you think chartreuse and pink polka-dot capris from the

Professionalism and Piano Teaching

pages of a youthful magazine spell “Fun,” please do everyone a favor and save that outfit for vacation spot a long way out of town.

Professionalism is actually a 24-hour identity. The teacher should want to visualize her/himself as a professional so that every moment contributes to that refined image. A professional teacher doesn't dash to 7-11 looking disreputable (hair matted, clothes rumpled) in the “hopes” that no one he/she knows will see him. Murphy's Law rules that one will always be seen by a student's family or a potential student's family when one doesn't make or take the time to make a good impression before leaving the house.

The mature professional takes the maxim “never stop selling” to heart and cultivates a business image with care and precision. Hair styles should not be a distracting issue. Clothes should be kept one-step more upscale (formal) than the most sophisticated family in the studio. Learn how to copy an expensive look on a budget, because it can and should be done. The student's family is the patron or customer who needs to have respect for the professionalism of the teacher in order to respect and desire the services.

On an individual basis, think for a moment on how you might select whom to provide you with services: a doctor, a dentist, and even a barista at a coffee kiosk. Isn't there a low point where the server's hair, clothing or hygiene can no longer persuade you to spend your hard-earned money? The same goes for any student's family. If you look like you can't afford clothes that fit and flatter, should the family really be confident that your studio is profitable and will remain viable long enough to complete Little Johnny's musical education, whatever period of time that may be?

An added plus for the professional teacher is that the obvious signs of a consistent and successful studio will confirm a family's good choice of that teacher. Upon examination one might see how a successful studio affords the teacher ongoing ability to maintain the studio equipment, invest in emerging technologies, and continue education, all of which will offer the superior education for deserving students, which, face it, all families are looking for.

Once a teacher settles in to an integrated personal identity that is professional, by extension it warrants the reviewing of the internal studio space itself to insure that it too reflects the professional touch. This inward and outward detail reinforces the family's assessment of a teacher as a worthy professional.

As professionals we acknowledge that one can never stop building a reputation of professionalism in and throughout the instruction of music. This essay chooses to focus on the organization of the studio materials as a second aspect of the professional music teacher. Specifically mentioned are the repertoire and skill books/materials used by students during the lesson.

Organization of the studio library has three essential contributions to the professional music teacher: respecting teacher time, respecting student time, and respecting community time. Let's examine each one.

Professionalism and Piano Teaching

1. Respecting teacher time is what one owes oneself. Imposing a system of organization on the materials means that everything has an assigned place from which it is taken when needed and to which it is returned when no longer needed. An insert here is that I do allow a few days' accumulation of books needing re-shelving before I re-file them, so this item is my own professional evolution in process. As one continues to tame the animal that can be the Teaching Materials, consider the addition of labels. Although one knows that the duet books are on the 3rd shelf on the right, when the shelf is labeled, one will know when it is time to re-size the space because the collection has grown or shrunk (does that *ever* happen?)
2. Respecting student time is the conscientious use of time in front of the student. Not being able to locate needed materials at the moment needed means leaving the student alone on the piano bench, often daydreaming, as one pokes one's head in piles of books or worse yet, runs out to the back room to look somewhere else! Once the student's attention is lost, it's rare to get it back during that lesson or even the following weeks. Before being tempted to ransack the house looking for an item during a student's lesson, ask yourself if you want the student to tell his/her friends or parents "Yesterday at my lesson was so funny! You should have seen my teacher looking all over the room for my new book. I hardly have to do any work at my piano lesson because my teacher can never find what she needs". Obviously finding an item in the shortest possible amount of time will cement a professional image in the minds of all those who witness it.
3. Last but not least is the respect of community time. Community is an eclectic term here used to denote whoever might need to understand the cataloging system of studio materials if or when the teacher is not the primary handler of those materials. Ideally the studio organization is so logical and transparent that any assistant could instantly locate whatever might be needed for lessons. Someday a teacher might be challenged physically by an injury or simply aging, yet mentally still be vigorous and able to teach. When that happens, an aide will be a welcome addition and professional materials organization now will facilitate that person's ability to help. In the worst case, at a teacher's demise, although it is never pleasant, the executor of the estate will appreciate the organization efforts and be able to more easily disperse the contents of the studio to those who might put it to good use.

As one takes personal inventory of the career as a professional teacher of music, take solace in the words of a grandmother's adage "An orderly life is a reflection of an organized mind." All efforts at organization greatly help the perception offered the public as

students' families ask themselves, "Is this teacher the professional my child needs?"

In conclusion, attention paid to personal grooming standards and neatly tidied studio materials offers each teacher every benefit by being rated professional. When teachers measure at the top of these scales, professionalism radiates wherever they go, and ultimately there will be success in attracting and keeping students.



In the Service of Music: An Interview with Susan Todd, NCTM

by Rhonda Ringering, NCTM



Susan Todd, NCTM

Susan Todd's philosophy of leadership is simple:

Listen a lot, and don't say much.

You get into a lot less trouble that way.

A recognized leader on the local, state, and divisional level, Todd's philosophy has earned her a reputation as a calming influence. Her expectation that other professionals will be their best frequently brings out the best in other teachers.

"I know that it's in there," Todd says. "That best is in there somewhere. If you expect that from your colleagues, they give it."

Todd has made a career of expecting the best from herself, her students, and her colleagues in her forty years teaching private and group piano. She has a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano Performance with a teaching emphasis, from Wichita State University in Kansas, and has taken further training at both Kansas State and Portland State Universities. Todd has started local music teachers' groups in Kansas and California, and, along with Susan Foust, founded Hillsboro's West Side Recitals Club, has been active in the Piano Ped-L, an online piano teachers' discussion group for over fifteen years, and created a studio policy site for group members to share their studio policies. Her OMTA works has included serving the Portland District as Certification Chair, Carnival of Ribbons Chair, Recording Secretary, and District President. She has served on the State level of Competitions Chair and State President, and she has served on the National level as NW Division Certification Commissioner. She currently teaches twenty-five piano students each week in her private studio and unabashedly loves the work.

"I started teaching piano in high school—40 years ago!—and I still love it," Todd says. "I'm teaching to 8:30 several nights a week, but I love it SO much. It's the best job in the world."

At five years old, Todd started begging her parents for piano lessons. At age nine, family finances allowed her a piano and lessons with the proverbial "little old lady down the street." That little old lady proved to be an excellent teacher and Todd soon knew with certainty that she wanted a career as a piano teacher. That dream kept her teach-

In the Service of Music: An Interview with Susan Todd, NCTM

ing part time when financial obligations forced her to supplement her teaching with part-time non-music jobs, and when family obligations curtailed the number of lessons she would teach each week. When her dream of full-time music teaching became reality seventeen years ago, Todd was recruited into leadership positions by members of OMTA.

"I was asked to be certification chair at the district level," Todd remembers. "Once I took that job, I had to get myself certified!"

Later, when Eileen Knox and Sharon Sadilek came up with the idea for the Carnival of Ribbons, Todd volunteered to run it. Portland District Presidency followed, and then State Presidency—jobs Todd found both challenging and rewarding.

"I became State President when Roma Eicher passed away. Dorothy Fahlman called and said I should take the job. I said, 'no, no, no!' but when I ran it past my family, they said 'go for it,'" Todd says. "Of course I was president for about thirty minutes when something blew up in my face."

That "something" was the board decision to limit the Bach festivals to Bach's music rather than any Baroque composer. The ensuing firestorm helped Todd and her board create policies that allowed the committees, rather than the board, to make those sorts of decisions. When asked about the most challenging aspect of her job as State President, Todd responds candidly:

"Bringing people to consensus on authority issues," Todd replies. "And it's a 24/7 job. You're always on. I'd get phone calls on holidays."

The best part of the job was getting to go to all the Districts and meeting so many of the members around the state. Another rewarding aspect of the job was being involved on the division and national levels. Todd credits the Wisconsin State President for the idea of a state office administrator, an idea that had a rough start in Oregon but is now doing much to streamline OMTA communications.

Listening a lot and talking just a little does not translate to not talking at all. When a firm response is needed, Todd "speaks straight"—a term (and skill) her father-in-law taught her that translates as "speak your mind." When members phoned her on national holidays, she reminded them it was family time, not work time. And Todd is responsible for one of the most famous emails ever sent to Portland District members in response to some sniping and back-biting that had grown out of control:

Her message? "I have two words for you, Portland District: Play Nice!" Words to live by.

As Todd continues to teach and perform and serve in positions of leadership locally and nationally, she hopes to encourage newer, younger members to become more integrated in the teaching profession.

"Come to focus group meetings," she says. "Find a mentor. See who's talking to other people and who is interested in others. Don't be afraid to ask. We'll probably say yes. Don't be shy about contacting us."

In Todd's forty-year career of looking for—and finding—the best in herself, her students, and her colleagues, she has earned a reputation as a consummate professional.

In the Service of Music: An Interview with Susan Todd, NCTM

With her philosophy of listening more and saying less, her “talk straight” communication style continues to remind her colleagues that we live our own best in our own studios and lives.

“What does it mean to be professional?” Todd asks. “Part of it is respecting yourself; part is respecting your colleagues.”



New Voices

by Joy Novak



Joy Novak is past president of OMTA Portland District. She studied music as well as business administration at Oregon State University, and maintains a private piano studio in Hillsboro. She is also a former journalist whose writing has been published in a variety of Northwest publications, including the *Portland Business Journal*, the *Salem Statesman Journal*, the *Corvallis Gazette Times*, the *East Oregonian*, the *Bremerton Sun*, and the *Wenatchee World*.

Whenever I consult with a transfer student, I always ask why he left his previous teacher. Whatever the reason, knowing prevents me from making a similar mistake in my own studio.

As a result, I've heard a wide range of reasons why students leave their teachers, and those reasons often come down to a lack of professionalism — a failure to conduct oneself in a manner that commands respect, reliability, or credibility.

In this column, I will share a handful of my personal commandments for conducting oneself with professionalism, all gleaned from the stories I've heard, as well as from personal experience.

I know what you may be thinking: *These seem really obvious, Joy.*

I know, right? Wrong. The alarming frequency with which I hear such similar stories tells me that they're not so obvious to all of us.

Your other thought: *These can't be OMTA teachers! I can't think of any my friends/colleagues who would do this!*

Wrong again. Most of these are OMTA teachers. My students often mention their previous teachers' names in passing, and although it saddens me when I learn who it is (often someone I know or even admire), there is much to be learned from these cautionary tales:

Thou shalt dress impeccably.

One of my adult students told me that one of the reasons he chose to leave his previous piano teacher was because he didn't think she took their piano lessons seriously. How so? She often taught wearing a bathrobe over pajamas or sweats. Once she even had curlers in her hair.

Like it or not, people are constantly judging us by the way we look. Your appearance sends silent but powerful messages to everyone you interact with, revealing how you feel about yourself as well as how you feel about your job. Teaching from your home is no excuse to look as if you don't plan on leaving it. Dressing poorly is distracting and damaging to your credibility. How would you feel about a schoolteacher who showed up to teach class in a bathrobe? Or in sweats?

I have two words for you: business casual. A professional music teacher should always dress a step above his students. There are those who believe that spending money on a decent wardrobe is a luxury, but that's not true. Spending money on presenting yourself with confidence, authority, and professionalism is not a waste — it's one of the wisest investments you can make. After all, your appearance speaks louder than words. Let yours communicate that you are take yourself, your students, and your job seriously.

Thou shalt ignore the telephone.

I can't tell you how many times I have phoned a colleague only to have her answer, "Sorry, I can't talk right now, I'm teaching."

Then don't answer your phone.

I even have a friend/colleague who answers my texts while she's teaching. "I can't text right now," she'll type. "I'm teaching."

Then don't text me!

When you are teaching, all your attention should be directed at your student, who should feel like he is the most important person in the room. Interruptions of any kind break your student's concentration and take the momentum out of your lessons. Most phones can be silenced. Turn off your ringer, turn down the volume on your answering machine, and check your voicemail during a break, when your students are no longer present. But if you absolutely must answer, excuse yourself and take the call in another room.

Thou shalt be present and ready to teach at your student's lesson time.

One of my students—we'll call her Nancy—previously took piano from a well-known performer, teacher, and adjudicator in OMTA. However, Nancy told me that when she showed up for her mid-morning piano lesson with this teacher, she often had to ring the doorbell several times and wait several minutes. Her teacher would finally answer, looking groggy-eyed, hurriedly dressed, and rather disheveled — as if she had just rolled out of bed (which she had). Then when their lesson started, she would disappear for a few minutes to make tea or coffee in the kitchen.

"You just keep playing," this teacher would tell her. "I'm listening."

Only Nancy didn't feel like she was listening. As a beginning-level adult student, Nancy felt that this teacher's behavior showed that she didn't feel Nancy was advanced enough to be paid the attention she wanted during her piano lessons. So she left.

I recently had a consultation with a parent who was unusually concerned about whether or not I was going to start and end my piano lessons on time. Apparently, her

daughter's previous piano teacher ran so late so often that her daughter's lesson frequently started and ended 10 to 15 minutes late, which would cause her to be late to other after-school activities.

These days, families are extremely busy. Your students don't just play the piano. They also play violin, attend Eagle Scout meetings, play soccer, and take ballet. In other words, your students have other things to do and many other places to go. So do them a favor: start on time and end on time. And if they show up late, you should still end on time. Their tardiness was their wrong, not yours. Trust me, if you always end on time, frequent latecomers will eventually learn to show up for every minute of your lesson.

Thou shalt not speak disparagingly of your students' previous teachers.

I have had a number of piano teachers in my life. Although each of them taught me something important about playing my instrument, none of them could teach me everything there is to know about playing it. For me, studying the piano is a lifelong experience.

And just as students transfer into my studio, students also transfer out. But I always hope that those who leave can say that they learned something valuable from me, just as I learned something valuable from my own teachers.

The other day, I was explaining how to build major chords to a new, 13-year-old transfer student. Her previous teacher had attempted to teach this concept to her before, but she never quite understood how to do it until now.

"Oh, I get it!" She said. "I can't believe that my old teacher couldn't teach this to me right! It just seemed so hard when *she* told me how to do it!" She exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

Part of being perceived as a professional is minimizing trash talk and keeping comments focused on the business at hand. Instead of commiserating with my student about her former teacher, I diffused her comment by responding, "Well, maybe it was harder for you to understand back then because you were younger and the concept was newer. But now you're older and you already sort of knew how to do it. I bet that's why you got it so fast this time. Now let's talk about minor chord construction . . ."

Never speak disparagingly of another teacher. Every student presents unique challenges at different times in their lives, and every teacher must prioritize which issues to address and correct during his time with a student. Making presumptive statements about a teacher's skill (or lack thereof) when you have not witnessed it firsthand can be arrogant and inconsiderate. Even if you agree with a disparaging remark, you can never go wrong by keeping such opinions to yourself.

I sincerely hope that some of my stories made you think about how you conduct yourselves in your private studios. Nevertheless, doing everything I described here will not guarantee you a smooth, obstacle-free ride. There is an old Chinese proverb that states, "The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials." I have found that achieving professional presence is a lifelong learning process that changes according to situation. We must always be conscious and aware in all our

student-teacher encounters, and we must constantly evaluate what we have learned in order to continue increasing our effectiveness with people, presenting ourselves positively, and managing ourselves and our students in a way that enhances our professionalism and credibility.



Ask Artsmentor

by Dr. Jill Timmons



About the Author

Jill Timmons, professor emerita at Linfield College, performs internationally as a solo and ensemble artist and has recorded on the Laurel, Centaur, and Capstone labels. She is the author of the upcoming book: *The Musician's Journey: Crafting Your Vision and Plan* (Oxford University Press). You can find her in her Lake Oswego studio teaching, practicing, or writing her next book!

Dear Artsmentor,

I am an independent piano teacher here in the Portland area. I can't decide if I should expand my studio offerings, increase my clientele, or return to graduate school to complete a doctorate with the idea of moving into a teaching position in higher education. In weighing this decision what are the advantages of a private studio over a university position? Is there a downside?

Pondering in Portland

Dear *Pondering*:

You have raised an important question. Particularly if you have completed a master's degree, the doctorate can loom large with the promise of a college or university job. In answering your query, I would like you to consider a paradigm shift. *Jobs are never careers*. Your career mandala contains the sum total of all your professional activities. For instance, I could imagine performance, teaching, composing/arranging, writing, and consulting as comprising someone's career. The topic you are exploring, that of how you wish to teach, is only one part of your career. I believe the larger question to ask yourself is what are all the components of your career mandala? How does your career inform and sculpt your teaching enterprise? Here *enterprise* is an important word because it reflects the need to be entrepreneurial and "enterprising" in all our work as artists.

As an independent music teacher you have an enormous advantage in that you are your own boss. You can sculpt your business to reflect precisely those talents

and skills that are uniquely your own. You can organize your time with great flexibility and when you must be away from the office for performances, continuing education, or other professional pursuits, you have flexibility in rescheduling students. Students in turn, are attracted to those teachers who are professionally active. In other words, you are not bound to a weekly lesson come rain or come shine!

Independent teachers are also able to structure their curricula around the kinds of students they choose to teach. With MTNA guidelines, the NCTM certification, professional degrees, and all manner of ongoing continuing education opportunities, today's independent music teacher can be on the cutting edge of the profession, working from the highest standards of rigor and ethics. Teachers in the private sector are able to respond swiftly when presented with new sources of information, ground breaking curricula, or collaborative teaching opportunities. They are not bogged down with needing permission from a university curriculum committee, sometimes taking up to a year.

From an entrepreneurial model, the independent teacher is also able to freely include all the other rich and savory components of a multi-faceted career. Perhaps for one year, teaching might be the primary focus. Another year, performances might take center stage. Writing an innovative textbook could be yet another project to captivate a fine teacher. The point is that entrepreneurs are able to adjust to the changing and fluid demands of a lifelong career. In many ways it is a journey both in the professional world and in the mysterious inner world of the artist.

Likewise, a teaching post in higher education can be a stimulating and rewarding job. It can be a wise choice if it fits with your larger career vision; the cost for the doctorate is manageable; the meetings, politics, and committee work seem reasonable; the highly structured teaching load is workable; and the students you wish to teach are indeed found in this environment.

Ultimately, how we work as teachers requires a clear vision of our professional mission in the music industry, how our teaching fits into that vision, and a clear grasp of what entrepreneurial skills are needed to realize that vision.

Good luck with your journey!

Dr. Jill Timmons, professor emerita
(having just left higher education for the private sector!)



Coda

I am always struck by the model and standard of the neighborhood piano teacher. Their devotion, curiosity, and loyalty to both child and cause inspire us far more than the examples of our presidents, CEOs, and other pros. One is grateful for their indomitable spirit in the face of merciless odds. And they prove that music and piano playing are ultimate, sustaining gifts.

—Russell Sherman, *Piano Pieces*

