

Appetite for Learning
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C.S. Lewis once wrote, "What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience." I would argue that this statement is directly applicable to our learning experience as musicians. As a teacher, I have observed that many players are not aware of how they approach learning. It is my belief that the root of our ability to learn stems from our openness to learn. In this regard, not only can we realize our individual potential, but create a learning environment that allows students the flexibility to grow uninhibited.

I. Desire for a variety of ideas is a trademark of avid learners, teachers and students alike. Gather ideas from those outside your current learning situation. A good starting point would be attending or creating workshops, festivals, and conferences. We need different approaches to sort out the best information. Seeking ideas outside of our everyday routine allows for the best chance for success. The premise of this discussion, however, is not the various ideas and avenues themselves, rather the importance of desire itself.

When I first began playing the trumpet, my family could not afford the financial obligation of studying with a professional trumpet player. As a result, I listened to audio tapes of the Canadian Brass and Wynton Marsalis. I used each as a model for good trumpet playing and tried my best to copy the sound that I heard. This was a very effective tool for me and spawned a deep desire to seek out further instruction. After I began my collegiate studies on the trumpet, I was introduced to concepts developed by Bill Adam as taught to me by Robert Baca at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. This approach remains the backbone behind my trumpet playing. I think it would have been easy for me to stagnate at this point; however, I continued to seek out great artists and, each time I took a lesson with someone, I discovered further profound ideas. Artists such as Manny Laureano, Gary Bordner, Robert Dorer, Arnold

Jacobs, Louis Ranger, and later, John Rommel, Edmund Cord, Adolph Herseth, Ron Hasselmann, Carl Lenthe, John Aley, and Uwe Kleindienst all have influenced me to a great degree. Without the help and instruction I received through these individuals, I would not be the musician that I am today. I began without private trumpet study before college and built my career on endlessly seeking out help and advice. If I had not been eager to pursue new ideas, I would not be where I am today.

Some of the most useful information I have encountered has derived from non-trumpet playing musicians, both in lessons and through recordings. A few summers back, I audited a trombone workshop given by Michael Mulcahy of the Chicago Symphony. It turned out to be one of the best workshops I have attended. Hearing familiar concepts interpreted from an alternate perspective proved invaluable.

A good anecdote is a story shared by a friend who went to study trombone at a prestigious American conservatory. At his first lesson, his teacher explained to him that he (the teacher) was simply one piece of the puzzle. There was so much information out there that he needed to learn from many different people. His best chance for success was to gather a variety of ideas and advice. In other words, give yourself up to learning from experienced people. Be a sponge.

II. Work with and learn from every situation. Even in negative situations, there is always something to learn. Not all teachers are the perfect fit for certain students; however, something can always be gained, even if it may be learning what not to do. It is our responsibility to always be the consummate learner. Some of the most respected educators are those that are constantly searching and learning. Just as their students learn from them, they learn from their students.

In the music business, it is not surprising to encounter musicians who simply cannot work well with others or have a difficult time in certain conditions. Of course, every situation is not always ideal, but yet, we must be able to work with it. How can we truly learn as teachers and students if our personal

identity is involved in the process? By concentrating on the goal or end result, rather than our ego, we operate more effectively and maximize our potential. W. Timothy Gallwey writes in *The Inner Game of Tennis*, “it is the constant ‘thinking’ activity of Self 1, the ego-mind, which causes interference with the natural *doing* processes of Self 2 [unconscious mind].”

When doing graduate work, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to play in the Wisconsin Brass Quintet. Even though I was nervous about playing, I decided that I would work more diligently to contribute everything that I possibly could. I practiced much harder and made it my goal to improve at every rehearsal. I learned there is no substitute for hard work. At each rehearsal, I also noticed the variety of personalities at play; however, everyone brought something unique to the table. It was an interesting dynamic that taught me how to effectively work in a small chamber setting. I learned that it is possible to bridge gaps and emerge on a unified front when the music is put first.

III. An open approach to learning also involves a willingness to help one another.

In 2004 I co-wrote a grant, the *Western Wisconsin Cultural Initiative*, which enabled our brass chamber group, Contrapunctus Brass Trio, to perform at five rural Western Wisconsin school districts. In addition to the performances, we were involved in cross-disciplinary teaching at each school. Throughout the three year program, we worked with students of every age and background. In districts where there was no live classical music other than school band and choir concerts, we set up evening community concerts featuring local talent of all ages in conjunction with our brass trio. I gained invaluable teaching, performing, and organizational experience. Figuring out how to be better musicians often leads us to helping others, in turn, sharing our acquired knowledge.

I remember my undergraduate trumpet teacher, Bob Baca, reiterating time and again the importance of helping one another. He encouraged practicing with players who excelled at a particular aspect that you wanted to improve upon. “We all,” he would say, “have something to learn from each other.”

IV. Finally, an open approach to learning translates into acceptance of ourselves and where we are at.

I'm not referring to a lack of vision, however. As Maltz states in *Psycho-Cybernetics*, "The self-image can be changed. Numerous case histories have shown that one is never too young or too old to change his self-image and thereby start to live a new life." Goals must always be on the horizon, however, along with this, a sense of calm and confidence is essential (akin to being comfortable in our own skin). I often find students so "gun shy" of making mistakes that they are tied up in knots when they play. Being able to let go of this fear may be the most important step they take. As Gallwey writes, "The first skill to learn is the art of letting go the human inclination to judge ourselves and our performance as either good or bad. Letting go of the judging process is a basic key to the Inner Game...When we *unlearn* how to be judgmental, it is possible to achieve spontaneous, concentrated play."

Throughout my years as a student and, later, as a professional, I learned to keep a notebook with a list of what I need to work on. Being utterly honest about your weaknesses is healthy. Keeping a daily list of exactly what needs to be improved can empower us as performers. In the words of Michael Mulcahy, "Diligence, patience, determination."

When aware of *how* we are learning, we can begin to understand how to maximize our learning experiences. As musicians, we are all students of our craft, and, therefore, it is our responsibility to nurture an open approach to learning in order to best serve the music.

Endnotes

Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. New York: Bantam Books, 1979, 21, 24.

Lewis, C.S. *The Complete C.S. Lewis*. New York: HarperOne, 2002, 303.

Maltz, Maxwell, M.D. *Psycho-Cybernetics*. New York: Pocket Books, 1969, 3.