

[Instrumental and Vocal Teaching in the Postmodern Era]

Instrumental and Vocal Teaching in the Postmodern Era

Tau Wey

Here's a bit of astute advice: Don't tell people how to do things. Simply tell them what to do. Well, actually my wife tells me not to do either! So instead today I will be exploring and elucidating the 'why' behind what we as instrumental and vocal teachers do- and by the way for simplicity I shall hereafter just say 'instrumental teacher' to refer to both. It is my hope that by beginning to understand and formulate the 'why', our instrumental teaching will be intellectually, and practically, galvanised. Knowing why we do things in a certain way will of course affect how we do things, and ultimately what we do.

It has been said that it is better to give a talk which makes people twitch with disagreement, than one where everyone is just silently nodding their head, or worse, nodding off! Where better to start than with the concept of postmodernism! 'Oh no, not another ism- it reminds me of the lectures at uni in which I fell asleep...', 'Postmodernity- all this rubbish art, and bleak moral relativism...'. Anticipating these attacks, I'm first going to distance myself from the most fervent forms of this movement, many of which were in strong reaction to modernism. It is not the purpose of my talk to digress into a discussion of the concept per se. Rather, my approach will be based on the many positives that it has imparted us- a modernised postmodernism if you like! With this movement generally agreed to be the contemporary cultural-dominant, I will be uncovering its implications on instrumental teaching practice. Some of it may be startling, yet it is my objective to validate these as best practice.

A Secret

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I am now going let you in on a traumatic event that happened some years ago in the course of my teaching, which triggered my wholehearted embrace of a postmodern teaching approach. I was teaching a girl called Sabrina, who was at the time in Year 11. An advanced player, she had already achieved a diploma. I tried to build up a picture of what repertoire she had already played, and noted that she had not played any music by Beethoven. Believing that students should get to know each musical era by playing a work by one of its masters, I proposed that she should play a sonata by Beethoven. I assumed that this would be uncontroversial.

But lo and behold, Sabrina vehemently rejected my suggestion, and went further on to say that she did not want to play any music by Beethoven, ever, because she didn't like it. Uh, ok, I sat back and took a breather... erm, how could someone reject the genius that is Beethoven, whose name is etched in the musical canon, and whose 32 sonatas are the pianistic equivalent of the New Testament? I was at a loss. Having studied at an institution that never really questioned Beethoven's place in the musical repertoire, I was completely unprepared as regards how to win this argument. I tried, pleading 'But everyone plays Beethoven', and 'It's really good music', but to no avail.

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Sabrina wouldn't give in, so in the end I had to, and in retrospect I am grateful for the lesson that I learnt from it. Later in the talk I will argue that many modernist,

or if you like, traditional teachers, view the music of the 'great masters' as unquestionable. These are supposed to be above the fury and complexities of everyday life, making the educative process insular and often irrelevant to the student's everyday life. The proposed solution to Sabrina, as I will explain, is both practical, and intellectually justified.

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Another personal motivation for formulating an up-to-date teaching practice is my recent reading of Janet Mills' book on instrumental teaching *[Click for picture of book]*. She frequently says that good teaching practice develops (in inverted commas) "better musicians', whatever that means'. I feel that it is exactly the question of what is a 'better musician' that is crying out for a definition. The inability to articulate what a good musician is is evidence of divergence and disagreement. My talk, I hope, will go some way towards positing what a good musician is in a contemporary context.

[3 more clicks until opera singer appears]

[I'm just going to give you a couple of minutes to discuss amongst yourselves what attributes make a good musician, before asking you for some answers.]

Playing accurately? Knowing a big repertoire? Able to score high marks in an exam? Or the ability to improvise? To communicate on an emotional level? Able to re-imagine interpretations and repertoires? The ability to appreciate varied interpretations and styles? The ability to create peak experiences?

My development of a systematic and coherent teaching practice grounded in the tenets of postmodernism comes out of many years of studying and reflecting on my own teaching, performing and listening. I routinely made notes about what worked or didn't work well in lessons, and analysed many hours of recordings of lessons I had given.

I shall now commence to explain the limitations of the old status-quo teaching style, give a definition of the core postmodern tenets, before outlining its implications on you as teachers, as well as on students and the practice of music in general. Throughout I will refer to real-life examples, and with the help of my guinea pig-student Jake I will give live demonstrations to make palpable my points.

[2 clicks, Modernism and its shortcomings, with first bullet point appearing]

Modernism and its shortcomings

Postmodernism defines itself against the backdrop of modernism. Therefore I feel the need to briefly define what modernism in instrumental teaching means. Its core ideas are belief in human progress through science and technology, and the rightful authority of institutions and the educated elite.

[click again for second bullet point]

I shall now make the first of several references to Donald Hughes, a music educator who has written on postmodernism in music teaching. In a musical context the old status quo perpetuates the Euro-centric canon of classical music. 'A music educator in this paradigm', he says, 'is someone who perpetuates these canonic aesthetic beliefs and their associated pedagogy'. As such, he suggests, the modernist approach to music education is insular to change, and utilises a teacher-led approach based on the authority of tradition, which is not very conducive to meaningful student participation in the learning experience.

He even goes so far as to claim that such an approach is the reason for the increasing marginalisation of music in schools in general. 'Instead of continually searching outside the music profession for reasons for the increasing exclusion of music from the curriculum', he writes, 'it is now time to look critically inward at our profession for more fundamental causes of the limited success of music education, which is too often viewed as a non-essential subject that is dropped when resources become scarce'.

'The modernist stance of music educators is elitist, and tends to restrict itself to the high art of the museums and concert halls rather than including the ongoing cultural experiences of everyday life', so Hughes argues. 'Music educators need a larger and more inclusive vision of what qualifies as music. Moreover, they need to develop a teaching pedagogy which enables students to be a part of the artistic experience and learning process.'

Our music conservatoires are still to a large extent steeped in this traditional mode of teaching, where the musical score is the truth and the professor the unshakeable authority. Hughes retorts that, 'The notion that the teacher analyses the performance, identifies the problems, and suggests the remedies is consistent with the modernist view of education in that the teacher is the transmitter and dispenser of knowledge and the student absorbs and assimilates the privileged information.'

Some of us may well knowingly or unknowingly subscribe to these ways of teaching. There probably will be a few surprises in store for you as outline the alternative.

[Postmodernism and its main tenets]

Postmodernism and its main tenets

So what is postmodernism? *[Show HSBC cow advert]* This advert resonates with the postmodern mindset, because it acknowledges different points of view. A cow may be seen as food by some, as a deity by others. Neither view is more right, each being equally authentic to the beholder. In the next two adverts we can see direct applicability to music. *[HSBC beauty advert]* What is beauty? A baby, a veil, a cat... and I could carry on... Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* or Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance*? 'The more you look at the world, the more you recognise people's different values.' *[HSBC accomplishment advert]* Becoming Miss World, landing on the moon, tying your shoelaces for the first time... or how about passing Grade 1 singing, giving your violin concerto debut? Each in their own right matters to the individual concerned, and is equally worthy an accomplishment.

This way of thinking relinquishes such categories as high-brow versus low-brow, classical versus popular music, art works versus consumer goods. There is no such entity as a transcendental work of art, whose greatness is immune to changes of opinion or the passing of time. What makes a piece of music accepted as good music is simply what people like you or me or anyone else say about it and do with it. Postmodern thought rejects the idea that things have a fixed meaning, embracing instead multiple points of view. Meaning is always plural and unstable, and we are alerted to the dangers of simply accepting previously-held views. Taken to the extreme, there are no facts, only interpretations.

I will now take you on a whizz tour of four French philosophers central to this movement. *[Derrida]* Jacques Derrida says that, without a global, objective truth, we

must always remain open to new possibilities and endless interpretations. *[Barthes]* Roland Barthes heralded 'the death of the author' in his eponymous and infamous 1968 essay. What he proposed was that texts can gather new meanings. There is no reason, for example, to assume that Bach means the same to 18th-century audiences and us. The author, or composer, has little control over where the text, or musical composition, goes and what people do with it. Musical works, so Barthes concludes, generate meanings free of the composers' wishes. To illustrate that a piece of music does not have just one meaning, let me show you that Beethoven's Für Elise is the rubbish collection alert in my native Taiwan!

[<http://estream.sevenoaksschool.org/view.aspx?id=4076~4r~SCdwPEeZ>]

Grand narratives perhaps satisfy our need for convenient explanations for things that are important to us, but postmodernism is keen to avoid total explanations. *[Lyotard]* Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his book called 'Postmodern Condition', investigates how forms of knowledge come into being, who controls them, and who validates them. The truth is not 'out there', but rather, each discipline, music included, constructs its own set of truths. It is the aim of this group of thinkers to explode grand narratives and notions of progress.

They are also keen to acknowledge the diversity of people and lifestyles. *[de Certeau]* Michel de Certeau, in his book 'The Practice of everyday life', proposes that to understand the present way of life, one should attend less to a total picture of society as a whole, and move instead to the seemingly insignificant details of how people go about their lives.

In summary, the viewpoint adopted is sceptical of any totalizing or universal ideals, instead seeking to maximise the freedom of the individual against such forces.

Now some of you might be thinking, 'Heresy, are you saying that everything is relative and anything goes?' Some cautious criticism is always important, and those questions have a place. But the crucial strength of postmodernism is that it can lead to a critical engagement with musical works and their history, prompting us to review what constitutes our musical repertoire, to reflect on the way we teach and the kind of student we develop. Crucially it seeks to preserve diversity at all costs. Hence nowadays we talk about histories (multiple), not history (singular), belief systems, rather than belief. How about extending this to words we as musicians frequently use: a favourite that spell-checker never approves of is 'musics'. And what about repertoires, musicalities, pianisms? Diverse perspectives and experiences always exist to disrupt the status quo, and I guess my student Sabrina was just such a one!

Before I go on, let's have a little breather. I am told that the attention span of most people is around 15 minutes, so please just check that the person sitting next to you isn't day-dreaming. Please feel free to do a few stretches while I play some chill-out music.

[palm tree slide]

[<http://estream.sevenoaksschool.org/view.aspx?id=4078~4t~UZIjCBj>] somewhere from the middle

Ok, let's carry on!

[Caveman slide]

Just to clarify before we go on, for the purposes of my talk, I take modernist teaching practice to mean the traditional status quo, and postmodernist teaching practice to refer to my new proposed method. And I'm not actually going to talk about caveman music teaching...!

[Postmodernism applied to the practice of music]

Postmodernism applied to the practice of music

Applied to the practice of music, what I am doing has implications in three broad areas: repertoire choice, interpretation, and the acknowledgement of the individual perspective.

The canon of great composers is like the unwritten English common law. Convention and tradition dictate what is accepted as proper. A couple of months ago I went to a concert with a friend to listen to Elgar's 2nd Symphony. He was not impressed by the music and went on a rant about how he only liked composers of the musical canon such as Bach and Beethoven, and only they deserved to be performed in our concert halls. I vehemently disagreed, arguing that Elgar's music should not be seen as second-rate Brahms, but evaluated on its own merits. Furthermore, I pointed out that there is actually no such canon engraved with the names of the great composers. To this he insistently replied, 'but there is!'

It is precisely convention and tradition that I seek to lay bare. Why should we uphold and teach Western Art Music from 1500-1900? What about non-Western music, what about earlier music, and later music such as pop? There are so many questions. The answer is that Western classical music has no intrinsic special status, and that all music, from a lullaby sung in a remote place on the earth to a symphony played in a concert hall here, is equally valid a musical experience. Great composers gain their special status because of a history of constructs by people who have a stake in that particular repertoire. I would like to unpick this, and take caution not to apply the same standards to different musics.

Let's welcome Jake into my teaching studio now.

[1] I ask student how they are, and what piece they would like to start with today. They eagerly show me a Monstercat tune downloaded from the internet. I am slightly startled, but then smile agreeably. Jake plays.

Traditional music education focuses mainly on the study of the great composers, without considering whether this music is relevant to the student's life. Each year I send a survey to all piano students at this school, and the vast majority state that they want to play well-known tunes.

Well-known tunes in our time may include some by Mozart and Beethoven, but are as likely or more likely to be 'this tune I found on the internet', by Einaudi, Taylor Swift, Monstercat (I love this name!), and so on. It is tempting to sneer at this music, but perhaps it is worth remembering that even Franz Liszt in his own time predominantly performed transcriptions of songs, operas and folk melodies contemporary to him.

My new approach gives equal worth to all musics, and it is not my intention at this present moment to argue for or against whether all music is equal, or whether there is indeed one kind of music that deserves special status because of its intrinsic qualities. The lesson to be learnt is simply that we ought to acknowledge that different

musics exist, and that it is important not to deny someone like Jake the chance to play the music that they enjoy, even if it happens to be music that we don't personally like.

This is what I might do if someone like Sabrina walked into my teaching studio again:

[2] *Propose a Beethoven Sonata Op. 10 C minor, and play it for Jake. Acknowledge what Jake says about Beethoven 'I don't really like Beethoven, I don't think I want to play it', delve into why, say why I like Beethoven 'the struggle, defiance, also touches of lyricism and humour. Jake, 'That's not my kind of thing'. But also discuss criticism of his music, 'I suppose you are right, it's not everyone's cup of tea, and for sure Beethoven, moody as he often was, was not everyone's best company all the time. His aristocratic patrons promoted his music, and they did have a bit of a fad for music that sounded like someone was having an argument.' 'What do you think you're interested in? Watched any films recently?'... 'Ok, next project will be to play a song from the film'.*

One of my colleagues, Alex Ho, is a wonderfully versatile piano teacher at this school who is willing to teach any style of music that the student is interested in. In an amusing conversation, he mentioned that one student brought a piece of hip-hop. Open-minded though he normally is, he looked at it shaking his head saying, 'but how can you play hip-hop on the piano...!' Perhaps there are limits as to what repertoire is feasible after all!

Just as the western musical canon arises from the institutionalisation of the preferences of a particular society, every aspect of instrumental playing, including what is good technique, is likewise dependent on context.

[3] *What picture to paint? Mysterious, dark. Student plays a passage from Grieg 1st movt. 'Point out a technically challenging passage.' I propose a technical solution, saying. 'I know that it is said 'thou shalt curl your fingers', but let's try a flat LH at the beginning, and notice what difference you sense in your arms and shoulders, and crucially, what difference in sonority you get... Which technique is preferable to you for this opening, curled or flat fingers?'*

Normally the hand is at 90 degrees to the keyboard, but let's try my baby crawl technique with your RH [demonstrate]. Play the opening phrase like so. Now play the rising passage without tucking the thumb under for the arpeggio, but going for a crawl to the right. What difference do you sense with the baby crawl technique?

In this way of teaching, I propose solutions without imposing them. Most importantly, the student learns kinaesthetically, deciding for themselves on the best course of action.

Amongst musicians, there is often a lot of conviction but little agreement as regards what is the best interpretation for a particular piece of music. Tradition and authority still remain a part of music conservatoire teaching that won't easily give way to new trends. My professor Yonty Solomon frequently claimed to pass on the privileged knowledge of the great masters. Had I wanted to, I could endorse what I teach in my lessons by referring to my lineage of teachers, which I can variously trace back to Schoenberg and at some remove, to Chopin and Liszt!

Of course this hardly makes me authoritative on their music, and in any case, in the light of the notion of 'the death of the author', the student as the player has every bit as much right to follow their own interpretation of a piece of music. This new method acknowledges that there is no one right way of playing a piece of music, and

perhaps more crucially, that there is no wrong way either. Different approaches, however unorthodox, are all equally valid.

[4] *Student plays Chopin Ballad No. 1, in a rather unreservedly happy way. I refrain from immediately imposing a normalised interpretation, but allow time to reflect. 'Tell me a little as regards what you know about this piece? ...When was it written, and why did Chopin write it? ...Can you think of a cartoon character that would match this music? So what are you trying to convey?' 'Ok, I take your point of view. Now bear in mind that this piece was written in response to the failed Polish uprising, which saddened Chopin's patriotic heart. As you practice this piece, weigh up the options and think about how you want to interpret the piece.'*

The acknowledgement of individual perspectives is, as previously mentioned, a symptom of postmodernism. Crucial in this is that an individual's choices and feelings must always be acknowledged, if not heeded.

An individual's attraction or repulsion to a particular piece of music is always authentic to them, and we would do well to refrain from imposing any notion of 'correct' feeling. After completing my music degree, I was under the illusion that I could listen to, understand, and feel music better than the non-musically-educated. My subsequent engagement with people who love music (which is almost everyone I've met) has taught me that all people, however little their formal music education, have their own equally valid ways of appreciating music.

Music educators Janet Mills and Paul Harris, who gave last year's inset talk, echo some of these sentiments. Mills writes that teaching does not happen in a vacuum, and that we need to acknowledge the student's sphere of music. Compare this to the postmodern precept of 'the artwork does not exist in a vacuum, it becomes a work of art of by its context'. Paul Harris's 'simultaneous learning' also seeks connectedness in the learning process. We can show the relevance of great composers, rather than just taking it for granted and imposing it on the student.

[5] *Example of me setting a research task. 'Jake, one of the pieces you are going to play later is Mozart's Turkish March (Play excerpt). Now, who do you think is more famous, Monstercat or Mozart?... And why? What's amazing is that people nowadays are still listening to Mozart. Imagine people still listening to Monstercat in 200 year's time, you would love that wouldn't you? The first bit of research I would like you to do is to find out how many hits Mozart has in the Classic FM Hall of Fame top 100. Tell me three interesting facts you know about Mozart... For the second part of your research I would like you to use the internet to find out how prodigies like Mozart achieved fame and fortune- it might come in useful for you! And I tell you one little known fact- his father sometimes lied about his little boy's age!*

A postmodern music education should offer a critical stance, teaching students to be aware of issues of power and domination, in order to make possible a move towards a more equitable society. This, so the previously-mentioned Donald Hughes proposes, is a socially reasonable objective, and 'one which is certainly better than a silent complicity which simply perpetuates the status quo'.

This stance would question the institutionalisation of music-making by organisations such as the ABRSM. The proliferation of exams as the norm has meant that teachers and students focus on questions of the 'how can we do it better and meet the marking criteria' variety, rather than questions such as 'why are we playing these pieces in the first place' and 'what motives are being served'.

[Attributes of the Postmodern Teacher]

Attributes of the Postmodern Teacher

[click again for picture of Confucius]

‘Teacher’, in Chinese culture, is a salutation that is difficult, nay impossible, to drop once it has been applied in a teacher-student relationship. A student would for the rest of their life have to address their mentor as ‘teacher’. I would like to view the teacher more as a catalyst, whose presence induces learning, and whose status is equal to the student’s.

[click for Confucius to disappear]

So what are the attributes of the postmodern teacher? The world is always changing, and we need to acknowledge contemporary learning contexts. That means as teachers we need to be aware not just to teach the way we were taught. For instance, given youtube’s omnipresence, students can access hundreds of interpretations of any one piece at the touch of a button. ‘But I heard a different version on youtube...!’, I frequently hear. We can no longer claim our version to be the only one or even best one.

Here’s the next example:

[1] *‘G minor Scale’ Pupil plays scale unevenly, I ask them to play it again and notice that fact, and discuss the character of the scale, ~~and when such a quality would be of use [a drunken character!]~~. Put in random accents and tempo changes- like modern music, great way of winding up examiners!*

Rather than straight-jacketing the student’s rendition of pieces or scales, I observe and allow their idiosyncrasies, be that to do with tempo, evenness, or fingering. One of my bugbears is the Associated Board rubric for scales, which demands an ‘even, firm tone’ from the candidate. Any attempt at this invariably results in monotonous, dull, and indistinguishable playing, lacking the heightened inflection and impassioned rhythm of great scale playing in real music.

A brief perusal of some of the most celebrated pianists attests that it is not uniformity which made them great, but their unusual artistic choices. As an example I could think of Glenn Gould’s highly unorthodox renditions of ‘sacred’ classics.

As a teacher I aim to cultivate an un-premeditated, concept-free, liberal way of listening to what the pupil’s playing might have to offer. I refrain from imposing my own view, which can so often be disguised as ‘the composer’s intention’, and instead seek to elicit the student’s personal response to the music.

We shouldn’t impose how one is to feel something ‘correctly’. Quoting Donald Hughes, ‘modernist forms of teaching tend to deny the voices, experiences, and histories through which students give meaning to the world, and in doing so often reduce learning to the dynamics of transmission and imposition’. In my teaching practice it is imperative to acknowledge the student’s response to music as primary and true for them. Here’s an example:

[3] *‘This is Aural Test C, Please describe the character’. Play G&S, ask audience [let’s see if these teachers can answer aural tests!], pupil says it sounds angry.*

In aural tests, I always accept the student’s response to the ‘character’ question, even if it contradicts my feeling or the model answer. But, importantly, I do look for consistency in Jake’s response. So if I played a similar piece next time, I would expect the same response from him.

This approach extends also to the aural identification of cadences:

[4] *Play perfect cadence with tonic on top, then with mediant on top. Student identifies one as perfect, the other as imperfect.*

The temptation is to tell Jake straightaway that he is wrong about the second cadence. But I would actually acknowledge that he has responded sensitively to the difference in sonority. Rather than to be constrained by the language of academic harmonic analysis, my approach seeks pay homage to the student's individual experience, and help them sense music in a way that is not prescribed.

In this approach, the pedagogical goal is not just to have the students arrive at the 'right' musical answers, but, as the founding theorist of critical pedagogy [[click for Henry Giroux name to appear](#)] Henry Giroux states, 'we must create opportunities for students to better exercise reasoned choice through a critical understanding of what the codes are that organize different meanings and interests into particular configurations of knowledge and power'. In other words, student must be engaged with ideas, and not the mere reproduction of model answers, sounds or technique. In my teaching practice I aim to tolerate my students' wildly different approaches and ideas. As a vital corollary to this, I talk to them and ask them to scrutinise their choices. Furthermore, I lead them to understand the implications and consequences of their technical or interpretational decisions.

A symptom of postmodernism is the hesitancy to teach knowledge for all its pitfalls, instead seeking to release the student's creativity and inculcate skills. Sure, we need to be the upholders of knowledge versus ignorance, but as importantly in the digital information age is that we show students how to retrieve and store knowledge, and crucially how to critique it.

All music and all individual perspectives are equally worth our attention. In such a context, the teacher's role is chameleon-like, adaptable to each viewpoint, and not six feet above contradiction. Or to use a term that is very much in vogue, the teacher's role is to facilitate learning.

[Attributes of the Postmodern Student]

Attributes of the Postmodern Student

Three key skills are central for students in the contemporary context: The ability to discern differences, critical literacy, and the capacity to make informed choices.

[1] *Lesson on Einaudi Nefeli, which I demonstrate first. After finding it a little uncomfortable, student asks me 'can I play the right hand an octave higher and the left hand an octave lower?' I encourage their curiosity and let them try it out. I prompt them to notice what difference it makes to the sound and to the physicality of playing it. Finally I ask them to choose between the original or the altered version.*

In the absence of a fixed set of knowledge and truths, the student's best educational tools are curiosity, the ability to sense the world, and the ability to discern differences. Curiosity prompts them to be always eager to know more, the ability to sense enables them to become aware of the world around them, and the ability to discern differences helps them to be non-judgmental and yet able to make the best choice for themselves.

[2] *Student plays Einaudi with weird sound on keyboard. 'Mr Wey, can I try it on the keyboard?' I listen amusedly, but do not tell them it is wrong. I carry on by discussing*

keyboard repertoire, joke that the student has a unique selling point by playing piano music on keyboard, and discuss how Einaudi sounds on this instrument.

Critical literacy means the ability to question authority and re-evaluate hitherto accepted notions of what is right and wrong. It is so easy for teachers to stifle the inquisitive, if sometimes wayward, questions that students spring on us. But so often their ideas are right, and I am wrong. Admittedly, more than once I have denied a student their way of playing, just because I had never come across it.

[3] *Student plays Turkish March in a rather weird way, such as contradicting the composer's markings and playing the ending loudly with a bang. I point out the discrepancy- 'did you intentionally play the ending so loudly?', and go on to discuss the consequence of varying interpretational choices. These could be personal enjoyment, 'what would be the effect if you played like so in an exam', marks lost in an exam; 'or in a concert', rapturous applause from the audience, etc.*

In the absence of me providing an off-the-shelf answer, Jake has to make his own decision as regards what course of action to pursue. The teacher's role is to expose the student to a range of possibilities, and refrain from changing their view. However, they are to be made aware of the consequences of their choice.

I welcome students to challenge me with questions like, 'does playing it like this really work?' Rather than to propagate the view that my more-educated opinion must be better, I would say, 'You're right, let's use measures such as Facebook likes, Youtube clicks, and audience response, to get to know how this interpretation would fare.' Hereby students are given the ability to unseat assumptions and authority-based truths.

All three skills develop the student beyond being just a musician, and lead them to develop interest, ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

[Postmodern perspectives on the practice of music]

Postmodern perspectives on the practice of music

The paradigmatic 'death of the author' gives us freedom to adapt and appropriate music and make it into something new and equally authentic. An example is the validity of playing arrangements and adaptations, from symphonies to TV tunes. Even the Associated Board is catching up here, having allowed arrangements of songs onto the piano syllabus very recently.

This free spirit pervaded a concert featuring toy pianos here at school last year.

[1] <https://vimeo.com/122084205> at 1:01:31

Students revelled in the inauthenticity of performing renditions of famous classics on toy pianos. That was Grieg played on toy piano. Students also performed Bach. Bach's music played on a toy piano, I proposed, is as valid as Bach played on a Steinway grand piano, since neither were invented in the composer's lifetime! There is a sense of liberation in not being a slave to the supposedly unnegotiable composer's intention, and of not submitting oneself to cultural hegemony. Postmodernism would reject prevailing customs as merely customs, and propose that all ways of performing Grieg or Bach are equally valid versions.

An enlightened outlook also helps me cope with errant young students.

[2] *Student plays Turkish March with the pedal left down. For a moment I am annoyed!*

Little boys and girls sometimes wilfully or accidentally press the piano pedal down through an entire piece. But why not, since I even heard my teacher Douglas

Finch play Chopin preludes with the pedal cranked down all the way. Now, this is artistry and risk-taking, something he is renowned for. In my teaching I endeavour not to deny the same exhilaration to my students, but delight in and encourage their enjoyment and curiosity in sound. The obligatory corollary of course is that I ask them what differences they perceive when a piece is played with or without pedal, and what the effects might be, be that personal satisfaction, or perhaps parental disapproval if the occasion was a school concert!

Art, so the thinking goes, is connected to everyday life. It is something that every human being experiences and understands within their particular social and cultural context.

In my teaching practice I aim to expose my students to music that has connection to their lives, and to embark on exploring all aspects that the musical experience might touch upon. I might for example proceed like so:

[4] *Jake plays Ode to Joy.*

'Tell me a little about this amazing piece'

'Did you know that this piece is now used as the European Union anthem? Why do you think it might have been chosen?'

'It certainly is a nice tune, but there's more to it. The Ode to Joy comes from Beethoven's gigantic ninth symphony, and near the end, after almost an hour's music, voices enter for the first time, singing the words of universal brotherhood, and nowadays we should say sisterhood too of course, to the famous tune. That of course makes it perfect as the anthem for the union of the European nations.'

'Do you know what instruments the piece was original written for?'

'Symphonies in the classical period were supposed to be light and entertaining. The sheer length and seriousness of Beethoven's ninth makes it a big social statement.'

'You play French horn as well, don't you? How do you find playing in orchestras as compared to playing solo piano?'

'The famous conductor Daniel Barenboim drew on the fact that orchestral playing requires collaboration and listening. He has been running an orchestra called the East-Western Divan Orchestra, which consists of Israeli and Arab musicians playing side by side, often playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It's a project to initiate peace and understanding between these groups of people.'

'I hope you are now able to appreciate that music is much more than notes or nice tunes. It is very much a social act situated in the real world.'

By going down this path of enquiry, Beethoven's music becomes much more than just a string of notes. By showing that art is not separate from the world, the student is led to understand that music is an expression of life's everyday joys and struggles, and that it can be a springboard for social awareness leading to reflective action.

Given the teacher's diminishing role as an authority, and the notion that the world is the classroom, I would emphasise that any source of learning for the student is good. In this digital age, we need to acknowledge and show students that they can learn from a wide range of sources, such as youtube, Wikipedia and so on. With the idea of a single source of authoritative teaching loosened, students should also not be prevented from seeking the expertise of other teachers. Perhaps I can compare the teacher to a petrol station. Students may choose to go to any petrol station and tank

up on knowledge- however loyalty points are available for those who return to me regularly!

[The broader educational picture]

The broader educational picture

You may or may not be personally inclined to teach with a postmodern approach. Nonetheless it is evident that such a method finds agreement with contemporary educational values.

Looking at the educational context at this school for example, these are the stated core values: Students are encouraged to nurture a set of skills and attitudes comprising curiosity, creativity and critical awareness. Let's examine each in turn.

The personal quality of curiosity inclines students to be open-minded and eager to know more. Students are encouraged to ask questions and examine 'real world' implications of what they are learning. The school also promotes interdisciplinary approaches, allowing different subject areas to intersect with each other. This is a parallel to the postmodern approach of recognising the situatedness of music in real life, and the possibility of engaging the student in the wider social and cultural impact of it.

Creativity means 'to see existing situations in new and different ways', and to 'try out different solutions and evaluate their effectiveness'. In instrumental learning this equates to encouraging students to propose untested ways of playing their instrument or untried interpretations.

Critical awareness means students learn to 'explore strengths and weaknesses of multiple answers and question assumptions'. Students should be encouraged to ask all sorts of seemingly wayward questions, such as 'why do scales have to be even?'

A postmodern education seeks to unmask dogmatism, and aims to develop general intellectual curiosity, and not just a technical skill. In the context of an ever-more tightly-knit world, vitally students need the ability to tolerate different beliefs and practices, and to understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right.

In Summary

[HSBC advert]: 'The more you look at the world, the more you recognise people's different values'

[Monstercat, as well as Mozart!]

[There isn't one correct way of feeling music]

[Teacher is facilitator of learning, and click again for animation]

[Think about what kind of student you want to develop]

Final words

You may or may not agree with my concepts and practices, but don't worry, I am not here to start a revolution (so overused a word). As one of my students said, if I am truly a liberal educationalist, then I should also allow a pocket of didactic teaching to continue to exist. You are however invited to consider what, if any benefits might be gained from a postmodern approach to instrumental and vocal teaching.

[Open floor Discussion]