



Harp

A Sound has No Legs to Stand on or... Ask a Simple Question

by Valerie Weber

For the past four years, I have had the good fortune to call private harp instruction my profession. It has become my passion. My spare time is spent pondering pedagogy and philosophy, grand issues and the detailed ones. How can I foster the discovery process? What to do about a student's collapsed knuckles. Learning styles and repertoire, motivation and thumb bumps.

The profession is one of constant discovery, and therein lies its beauty and also its ephemeral nature. Just when I think I've found the solution for one particular problem, its magic vanishes for the next student. A lesson I keep relearning is that complacency and formula have no place here. Teaching must always be renewed, freshened up, customized to fit the student: their learning style, personality, mood, technical and musical needs. The question to constantly ask yourself is, "How will this student best discover his/her own solution?" Not to teach, but how to learn. This is my biggest challenge.

Much of what I have learned comes straight from my students, for they often have answers to their questions and solutions for their needs. It happens simply when I ask the simple question or find a creative way to focus on the problem. This is the one key concept I can trust to guide me: expand their awareness.

A student and I had a fun lesson a few Mondays ago. She is beginning to put her hands together in *Cricket's Song* by M.K. Waddington. As this involves a complicated pattern of replacing fingers on the strings, and left hand in contrary motion to the melody, it is a milestone achievement! Her problem was a case of second finger anxiousness, hovering with tension over its targeted string. Inspiration prompted me to begin singing the tune of *Fascination* changing the words to fit "anticipation." The student, her mom and I all dissolved into laugh-

ter, and the lesson continued with the problem solved.

Another quest of mine is to help all my students pass beyond the mechanics of playing and into the feeling of the music in a way that makes it uniquely theirs. I have just attended two workshops sponsored by MacPhail in which emotional issues of students were discussed. And I have been thinking of my own adolescent and teen years. If only I had expended some of that turbulent emotional energy at my harp instead of on the phone! We can help create an outlet for some of that troubled time by asking students to list their repertoire in categories of the emotions, and ask them to use it as a reference on a regular basis. Now challenge them to change the mood of a piece to fit a different emotional character. Can they tell a story or two with the music?

I grew up in an artistic household. My mother and sister are visual artists. When I perform I see paintings, pictures, photos and sculptures. Often the key to attaining the right mood or feeling of a piece is in visual imagery. Ask your student to paint a picture with the music. What kind of images can they suggest? How can you play in a way that sounds like many pagodas on hilltops? Shattering crystal chandeliers? Angry fluttering lace fans?

When given outside venues in which to perform, my students ask me what to perform. The answer seems obvious to me, "Your repertoire." To help them remember this, I require that they maintain a diary of their polished pieces, adding dates performed. In addition to this they maintain a cassette tape on which they record their latest polished piece. Years later, they can have a record of how well they played, or a focal point for comparing how they have improved. These great ideas came from my colleague at MacPhail, Bridgett

Stuckey, who is a harp instructor and also a creative advisor for my teaching. I am also fortunate to be guided by Kathy Kienzle who is also on the harp faculty at MacPhail.

How can we make our time spent together in the private lesson have a historical context? After all, I am a harpist because my teachers studied with harpists who studied with harpists a long way back. I am planning to put together a Harp Legacy Tree. It is like a family tree, but instead will list my harp teachers and their harp teachers, etc., as far back as can be verified. I plan to customize this tree for each of my students so that their name appears prominently at the trunk of the tree. We will be able to speak about our grandteachers and greatgrandteachers, some famous in the harp world. Perhaps some of my students will become teachers themselves, and then I can be a grandteacher!

There are important life lessons that come out of this time spent making music together. The old metaphor, "music is life," hits me right in the forehead over and over again. In the joy of it, life has meaning.

Valerie Weber teaches 35 traditional and Suzuki harp students at MacPhail Center for the Arts and in her home studio. She also teaches a variety of music classes including Adult Harp Ensemble, Suzuki Group Harp, Musical Trolley, and coaches chamber music ensembles. Freelancing as a classical and jazz/pop harp soloist, and in combinations with flute, violin, cello and horn, she recently joined the Minneapolis Harp Ensemble, four professional harpists presenting concert programs in the Twin Cities. †