

Personal philosophie on teaching the accordion

“The core and fulfilment of good musical quality lies in the skill of listening”

Andreas Nebl: Experiences and thoughts related to teaching the accordion

My career as a classical accordionist started with the winning of the international competition of chamber music in Val Tidone, Italy in 2001. I went on to holding performances worldwide together with my brother Frank Nebl in the duo Nebl&Nebl and receiving numerous invitations to music schools, conservatories and universities to teach students and scholars in the art of playing the accordion as well as performing chamber music. I was employed in 2003 by the Conservatory of Trossingen. Since then many of my students have won national and international competitions competing as soloists and in ensembles. In addition I was invited by various national and international associations to work as a juror at significant competitions.

My pedagogical work as a teacher for accordion differs from others, essentially in my complex views on the cultural life of music, which I experienced in former periods of my life. From classical chamber music, Jazz, Folk to New Music – in the past phases of my life I’ve immersed myself into a real and vivid musical environment when making music for any length of time. As a young adolescent accordion player I underwent the Austrian-Slovenian world of folk music intensively. For five years I played in a quintette performing semi-professionally, in the German-speaking area. Although my teacher at the time taught music solely by playing off sheet music, in the ensemble we transcribed all pieces ourselves by listening to them on CDs. Because of this very practical method of using our listening skills we were able to adopt personal qualities and features of each player, formation and style. I understood for the first time what it means to experience music between the lines. With merely sheet music this would have been unthinkable. Notably it was a lucky circumstance to train our sense of hearing – unmethodically and drawn from life.

Later, during my ‘phase of Jazz’ numerous ‘Jazz freaks’ were among my friends of which several subsequently studied Jazz at various universities. We’d perform in pubs and officially in concert halls playing the Real Book through and through. I created arrangements for various formations up to the development of a Big Band. At that time we expected to know the records of the ‘greats’ and we were crazy about them enough to try to sing along all the solos of our role models while driving to concerts. This marvelous music with its freedom of improvisation and it’s alternative conviction was very formative in that stage of my life.

Since my graduation two decades ago I have been living and working for example participating at concerts such as the “Würzburger Mozartfest” in 2014 or the “Internationale Bachakademie” in 2015, within the culture of classical music. And still today my fascination to explore music to its core is unbroken. Permanent engagements at the State Opera House of Karlsruhe, as well as concert series to Japan with my wife Naoko Nebl (née Takeuchi) are very inspiring fields of activity in addition to each time confirming my principle of continuous learning. Bach’s, Scarlatti’s, Haydn’s or Mozart’s music have become the emblem for aesthetic fulfilment. My belief that there are artistic perspectives for the repertoire of the accordion is strengthened by composers like Hosokawa, Gubaidulina or Tiensuu. When searching for clues about famous composers I began to understand, that it is essential to analyse the score very closely in order to interpret pieces adequately!

Even though I’m acquainted with the “accordionistically rose-coloured glasses” opinions of essential university and music school educators, I’m not wearing set glasses and of which I’m not opposed to. I’m not opposed to it because one principle has been there from the beginning. First and foremost it’s about the music we create not about the accordion. Hugo Noth as my most important

teacher didn't look through set glasses either. During my studies he hadn't just been an excellent musician but a renaissance man with a spectacular education, profoundness, intuition and vision.

I only became acquainted with repertoire for piano at the age of 13. This took me aback when I considered the norms of musical content in addition to the form the education was given. At the time the quality of making music was going through an evolution. That opened a totally new dimension for me in creating music, especially in emotional matters.

The most important goal of my educational vision and my own artistic work is the expression of music. This grows through the work by a colourful sound and when shaping clear musical visions. When playing the accordion it's all about communicating to the audience the intent of the music rather than focusing on side paths such as demonstrating perfectly trained patterns. Although this might flatter one's ego it's not relevant when expressing the musical content. I'm convinced that in the end mastering techniques and a good sound aren't enough, because both are mere means of a musical intention. They can solely be sub-goals on the way to a genuine and personal expression of music.

I try to show that a pure pitch might be lacking when it isn't set in a clear relation to another aspect. I ongoing seek to create a bigger emphasis on the many musical languages because these pitches shouldn't be accepted as a norm. Music needs to be understood as a whole – not just obvious parts of it. To reduce music to its pleasant beauty means to lose sight of it in the end.

In my lesson technical phenomena are developed intensively on one hand, yet they are always seen in relation to the players self. Technique without a concept of music behind it is merely loose noise and becomes simply void. When we don't learn to understand this, technique without concept, or take this to heart we are only able to counterfeit music. As musicians we should hold ourselves to higher moral values than to simply sell counterfeit music.

Musical expression and being able to show its relation to one another are alike to the body language of actors and dancers. Actors have to phrase sentences so the audience is able to understand at once and follow the plot. It has to be emotional distinctive – that is most important in my opinion. All utterances have to be felt and lived in order for the listener to notice and if so sympathise with these feelings. Therefore accordionists too should create music with their whole being. When this happens there are no deceptions and in turn no room for questions.

The core and fulfilment of good musical quality lies in the skill of listening. It is also the essential platform of communication where player and listener encounter each other. A basic principle of my education is to thoroughly challenge the listener. I mean listening in a larger sense of one's perception. For a musician it is important to walk through life listening, to observe all resonances of material in our environment and to learn to understand them. Only by actively listening to oneself play, it is possible to develop a good sound. In a strict sense the vision of music, to alleviate our work – we just need to allow it. Through observant revision step by step we achieve the ideal that our ear has previously heard.

A healthy coenesthesia is a very important and worthwhile condition when making music. For accordionists especially a healthy body particular a healthy spine is primarily significant. It is possible to develop conditions and improvements regarding playing an instrument through sport and yoga for instance. On the one hand one has to activate one's body, on the other hand one must be attuned to one's internal state, so it can truly fulfil its mental and musical purpose. In return every once in a while it is important to loosen internal blockades which one got due to one's socialisation.

I challenge and encourage my students to try to discover the music behind a piece themselves. It is about helping the student in finding methods that lead to the truth about their own musical identity. Through practice the student ought to learn to direct music themselves especially in areas of intuition, comprehension, and absorbability. Central aspects of my teaching include advancing physical possibilities, emotional abilities and imaginativeness. In my point of view to learn a musical instrument is an ongoing act of balance between responsibility to the artistic aspiration and assembly-line work. Yes, assembly-line work, because practicing means repetitions, the act of doing something over and over again to achieve a 'flow'—comparable to many rituals from spiritual nature.

Theories of education help to organize our methods, though to me they sometimes are too restrictive. In my teaching, I very seldom use such pre-made recipes. I believe in the intuition to react immediately to what is heard and mental, physical, spiritual and emotional situations a student is in. I try to make my students feel my respects to their humanness and to their efforts to understand music, independent to their skill or level, so that each and every of my students' perceives an individual and genuine approach in developing themselves when studying the accordion.

Another aspect of my lesson is the preparation to learn independently once a student has graduated. Every now and then I point out that a steady obedient student, can be successful in school but might encounter some issues later in life once they are beyond the set system. Because at some point of time one must take responsibility to one's active education. Another important aspect is a healthy balance between self-esteem and self-criticism. To the students who criticise themselves too much, I try to present the already achieved goals. Students who overestimate themselves, I attempt to put them into challenging situations where they can compare their skills with others and therefore higher their standards.

For each student there is a personal path that leads to one's goal. The new generation of instrumentalists should accept to master established and emerged styles, at the same time every teacher should help to develop the individual potential of each student in equal measures. Goals set in the right direction are therefore needed, because the human stands in the focus of the education not the ideology relating to the instrument.

For more than 20 years I have been active at the summer course held every year. "Accordion Plus" organized by my treasured colleague and friend Karl Huber. Each year I experience an exemplary teaching at the music school. I was also able to see that students in middle and high school similar to students in college, university and conservatory can be taught at eye level, of course by varying the literature in technical matters, in response to their skill level. This is possible when they are taken seriously and when their level of education is shown and conveyed in everyday life. These children and teenagers wouldn't accept 'counterfeit' music lessons. Because they can tell the difference between the two, the music and the counterfeit. They'd be simply bored.

The field of chamber music and accordingly ensemble play is another very important area of my teaching. In my opinion that field is obligatory, because to play in an ensemble means communicating with musical bodies and sounds. It has a big educative, common humanly, artistic and communicating value. It is always about a qualitative cooperation. The play in ensembles is a form of free musical communication not depending on age or technical skills. People encounter other people, each with their own life, musical socialization, different attitudes, and skills. This process of finding one another when playing fascinates me every time when working with ensembles.

When all participating musicians are able to lead and accompany, the ensemble has achieved a very good quality. Then the ensemble has got all possibilities to produce fields of tension and colors as they wish. Anyone who has experience in ensemble play knows that that can mean a

complex process of evolving personalities among the group. The outstanding literature that exists in that field is an additional motivation to play in an ensemble.

To conclude, the instrument accordion still has the chance to contribute valuable input to the yet so young 'collective memory'. Behind us there lies a field full of misunderstandings, meanders, and clichés. Together with my students I seek to contribute to the understanding of music as a whole in our environment through the cultivation of the accordion. The increasing diminution to formalities needs to experience a countermovement. We attempt that the original value of music comes back so music can be understood and taken as a whole pur sense again.