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It's not about the piece: what happens when we focus on the student first?

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Introduction

“When I was not fully prepared, I did not want to go to my piano class, as the teacher would be furious, make me feel guilty, and her bad mood would continue until the end of the lesson. This is how it always happened. So many times I pretended I was sick so that my parents would allow me to miss the class.”

“I loved playing the guitar, but I hated going to my guitar lessons. They were so boring. Always the same, since I was 9.”

“All my piano teacher cared about was the examination pieces. Over the course of a year, I learned 3 pieces. I got a distinction, but it was only 3 pieces. Anyone could get a distinction if they practiced 3 pieces for 9 months!”

Over my 27 years of teaching pedagogy courses in a university in Cyprus, working with undergraduate and postgraduate students who reflect on their own instrumental studies and early teaching practices, I have repeatedly encountered accounts shaped by examination-driven Western classical traditions. Drawing on these recurring experiences, presented here as fictionalized quotations and scenarios, I identify a pattern in which one-to-one exam-oriented instrumental and vocal lessons often follow a recognizable routine. A student arrives, warms up, performs one or more pieces, receives feedback, and leaves with the assignment for the next lesson. Although these routines are so familiar and effective that they provide structure and comfort for both the teacher and the student, they can become dull over time, leading to a focus on the music itself rather than on the person playing or singing. This pattern aligns with research characterizing conservatoire-based studio teaching as frequently teacher-directed and repertoire-centered (Young et al., 2003; McPhail, 2010), often rooted in master-apprentice traditions in which authority is primarily located in the teacher (Hyry-Beihammer, 2010).

“I don't really have to prepare for my younger students,” a postgraduate student and piano teacher recently admitted. “I know the pieces by heart.” This is a common view. Having taught the same material for many years, one's confidence is high. But does it result in responsiveness? Traditional instrumental and vocal instruction in a studio setting (especially through the influence of conservatory models and curricula focused on exams) generally uses “teacher-centered” approaches. The teacher selects the repertoire, decides about the pace, demonstrates interpretation, and monitors progress. While this can, at the end of the day, help prepare students for music performances and external assessments, it might fail to acknowledge the fact that no two students are identical. This limitation can be addressed by adopting pedagogical approaches such as student-centered teaching,

learning of music in an inclusive, responsive, and humane way. Instead of focusing mainly on the curriculum, they prioritize the learner, recognizing their experiences, backgrounds, abilities, and choices as central to the learning process. Recent research has also shown that autonomy-supportive teaching environments in instrumental and vocal music education may significantly boost students' motivation and emotional wellbeing, emphasizing the advantage of a classroom that values the learner over the repertoire (Xu and Li, 2025).

Reimagining the students' role

Student-centered instruction has been defined as an approach in which planning, teaching and assessment “revolve around the needs and abilities of the students,” with teachers sharing aspects of control while maintaining pedagogical responsibility (Brown, 2008, p. 30). Student-centered learning starts with a fundamental shift: when you begin to perceive that students are meaningful stakeholders in the learning process, have a voice that should be heard and interests and requirements that should be addressed. In music education, this includes involvement of students in the decision making process on their learning, practice, performance, and their assessment of progress (Economidou Stavrou, 2024a), encouraging dialogue and shared problem-solving rather than passive reproduction (Brown, 2008).

Let's imagine a scenario: Marina arrived at her fourth-grade piano lesson on an afternoon noticeably withdrawn. Instead of jumping straight into scales, her teacher asked, “What kind of music have you been listening to this week?” Marina hesitated and then replied, “Honestly? Mostly... pop.” Instead of dismissing this as irrelevant, the teacher invited her to improvise something in that style. Within a few mins, Marina was smiling. Eventually, when they returned to the exam piece, she performed it with greater freedom and expressiveness, an achievement “saved” not through technique but through listening. During these moments, the teacher moves from more directive to more facilitative, adjusting the flow of each lesson according to what the student brings, whether excitement, frustration, curiosity, or fatigue. It is this ability to be responsive that does not lessen the expertise of the teacher, but rather necessitates a more adaptable and relational response that fosters growth on the part of the student. This change reflects evidence suggesting that student-centered studio strategies promote student voice, shared decision-making and reflective dialogue; they also aid in rapport, motivation and engagement in one-on-one music classes (Goffi-Fynn, 2024).

Teaching to differences

Related to student-centered learning is the concept of differentiated instruction. This approach acknowledges that all students are different learners, with various levels of readiness, learning styles, interests, cultural backgrounds and so much more (Economidou Stavrou, 2024b). When a colleague recently asked how she would teach a particular Grade 3 piece in a seminar of instrumental and vocal music instructors, she hesitated. “Actually,” she said, “I don't think that's the right question to ask.” Instead,

she rephrased: “How can I best help Mark learn this piece, knowing how he learns, what interests him, what he struggles with?”

This approach demonstrates how differentiation recognizes the journey each student takes and challenges the idea of fairness as treating all students the same. And indeed, let's imagine a teacher with three students working on Grade 3 materials. Christina, 15, is an expressive musician who finds rhythm challenging. She is a visual learner. Another is Andreas, 13, who is tired of notation but can play anything he hears back. He excels at improvisation. The third is Mark, 10, who asks questions constantly, relevant or irrelevant to the music he studies, and learns best when he can move around and when he analyses sections and phrases of the music he plays. Their musical skill levels might seem similar, but they have entirely different needs and learning profiles. What can a music teacher do in this case?

Discussions about differentiation focus on adapting materials, processes, and assessments to students' particular learning profiles; recent evidence shows that learning experience is enhanced through multiple intelligences and learning profile frameworks in a music system (Economidou Stavrou, 2024b; Zhang, 2025). In instrumental and vocal instruction, differentiation comes from making thoughtful choices and modifications to repertoire, methods, and tools to serve students best in their specific strengths and weaknesses. This may involve adjusting technical exercises to some extent to support students' physical needs and varying abilities. Sometimes, starting with ear training helps boost students' confidence and facilitates a smoother introduction to notation. Other students might also benefit from visuals, movement-based approaches, or chances to verbalize their learning.

Teachers who differentiate their teaching remain attentive to each learner's profile. They observe, ask questions, and make deliberate adjustments to methods or materials. Progress is recognized through individual growth.

Letting go of control

A major challenge in student-centered and differentiated practices is letting go of some control over the learning process. Instrumental and vocal music teachers often decide what students will learn, choose the repertoire, give guidance on interpretation, control the pace of learning, and judge when a student is ready or unprepared for a test or performance. Although such an approach may create clarity and structure, it can end up blunting students' voices and initiative. In one-to-one classical music contexts, controlling teaching styles can weaken students' motivation, whereas autonomy-supportive approaches strengthen engagement and persistence (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2020). Statements like “I know what suits them better than they do,” or “we don't have time for messing around with popular music or improvising, we've got exams to prepare for,” stem from teachers' pressure to get students ready for the exams. If, however, students are excluded from decision-making, lessons risk becoming rule-based rather than exploratory experiences.

Research into one-to-one conservatoire tuition has highlighted ongoing tensions between fostering student independence and inadvertently encouraging dependency, particularly within teacher-led and modeling-dominant lesson structures

(Carey and Grant, 2015). Brown (2008) clarifies that this does not mean that students are in control of the classroom, but rather that teachers share control while maintaining structure and direction.

The idea of involving students in decision-making about teaching and learning may seem too risky, as they might lose focus, choose easier options, or skip important content. However, research and experience suggest otherwise. Fostering and facilitating reflection, choice, and experimentation has been found to be effective for student engagement (Economidou Stavrou, 2024a). This is consistent with research demonstrating that autonomy-supportive teaching fosters deeper flow experiences, collaborative learning, and student wellbeing in music classrooms (Xu and Li, 2025). Students begin to make decisions, solve problems independently, and share and discuss their musical ideas. This shifts the learning process away from reaching a specific music performance-related goal. The music teacher is no longer the sole gatekeeper of progress; rather, teachers and students become collaborators in shaping the student's artistic identity. This transformation not only does not lower standards but also redefines them. Success is then about more than performance or covering the material; it also relates to the student's readiness to learn, adapt and grow as a musician.

Relevance and engagement

Student-centered learning, incorporating creative activities into one-on-one instrumental and vocal lessons, and applying differentiated instruction are highly effective because they boost relevance and engagement and students feel seen, valued and understood. This promotes greater engagement and a stronger emotional connection to learning.

Let's put down some more scenarios: A teenage student was asked by her vocal teacher if she wanted to work on one of her favorite songs alongside her exam repertoire. She was excited, and her parents told the teacher that she had practiced all week, so she was prepared to sing this song in the next lesson. A 14 year old boy enthusiastically composed and performed a short piece in the style of a game soundtrack after his piano teacher asked him to do so during a discussion about how he spent his afternoons. Gaming was one of his favorite hobbies. He even performed his composition at his music school's annual concert. Another student, who had told his teacher many times that he enjoys improvising, was able to dedicate 5 mins per lesson to try out improvisations of certain musical elements they had been working on in class, as he was preparing for his Grade 8 exam and his time was limited. In each case, these moments supplemented rather than distracted from their engagement with the formal material. All these connections are not substitutes for traditional practices; instead, they reinforce them. They position instrumental and vocal instruction as a blend of pedagogical tradition and innovation, creating a space where all forms of musical expression are welcomed in music teaching and learning.

The shift toward a more human model for teaching

Teaching music is much more than simply instructing people on how to perform. Research examining instrumental and vocal teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns revealed how central physical presence, shared acoustics, and interpersonal intimacy are to one-to-one studio pedagogy, with teachers describing the relational dimension of lessons as irreplaceable (Vaizman, 2022). There are many ways a studio can be joyful, challenging, revealing, and a space for discovery and growth. When instrumental and vocal music teachers adopt student-centered, differentiated approaches that allow students to develop their creativity, they create environments that encourage personal interaction, the development of technical skills, and the creative expression of ideas. To do this effectively, teachers need more than solid instructional skills. They must be willing and ready to guide their students through the learning process rather than simply passing down information. This approach involves cultivating students' curiosity by asking open-ended questions, and requires from the music teacher to resist the urge to give immediate answers. This teaching style requires teachers to understand their students, their strengths, interests, and needs, and to come prepared with flexible responses, working toward progress, not perfection. It also means instrumental and vocal music teachers should trust the learning process, even if it does not always follow a familiar path. This approach aligns with current research highlighting that student-centered methods support students' motivation and critical thinking (Goffi-Fynn, 2024).

Applying these concepts by no means implies abandoning proven instructional approaches. Instead, it involves a change in attitude: it begins with understanding who the student is before deciding what they should learn. This approach develops gradually, inviting student input, providing instruction more relevant to them, and recognizing effort as well as success. The combined effect of these small adjustments turns the lesson into a space for musical skill development and personal growth. At the same time, the music teacher shifts from being merely an instructor to becoming a mentor, leading together with the students on a new learning journey.

Coda

In a domain often defined by curriculum standards, competition, and performance goals, it's easy to overlook each individual learner. Music teachers should not expect students to change and adapt to how they teach; instead, they are the ones to meet them where they are and support them throughout. Doing so, they address, not only the development of their musical skills, but also their psychological needs, which recent studies have identified as key predictors of wellbeing and long-term engagement in music education (Xu and Li, 2025).

By incorporating student-centered and differentiated instruction and by providing opportunities for students to make music, instrumental and vocal teachers can do much more

than just teaching techniques and repertoire; they can also involve students in creating music, fostering their feeling of autonomy, curiosity, communication and connection. This way, they shift the focus from merely teaching pieces to teaching people; the emphasis becomes more on who they teach rather than what they teach.

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