The Music Educator's Crucible #4 – The Versatile Music Teacher

Hello and welcome back to the Music Educator's Crucible. My name is Merlin Thompson and I'm the creator of this podcast series devoted to exploring music education – in particular topics related to teaching and learning to sing or play a musical instrument. So, if you're a music teacher who teaches private or group lessons - in your own home studio or an institution - you've come to the right place. And I'll also mention that this series has lots to offer schoolteachers, parents, and community leaders as well. Be sure to tune in as often as you like. And before I get any further, a special thank you to John Harrison and the Wichita State University Chamber Players for their recording of Vivalidi's Four Seasons.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm a classically trained pianist with nearly 40 years experience of working with students of all ages, parents, and teachers across Canada, the USA, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Spain. You can find out my background and what I'm up to on my website merlinthompson.com.

The title for this fourth episode of The Music Educator's Crucible is – The Versatile Music Teacher and I'm grateful to the New Zealand Suzuki Institute for their inspiration. In 2018, organizers of their National Suzuki Teachers' Conference contacted me about giving a presentation – which in turn led to a lengthy period of research into the concept of versatility – a topic that I thought could have an amazing impact on music teachers with anywhere from one-year to forty-plus-years of teaching. What I'd like to share with you today is an expanded adaptation of my October 2019 presentation in Rotorua, New Zealand for close to 100 instrumental music instructors.

Versatility may be defined as a person's ability to adapt to different contexts. I like to think of versatility as the knowledge and skills people use in response to all kinds of situations. In music teaching, versatility has an immediate application because teachers typically bring a certain amount of diversity to their teaching – for example - teaching individual and group lessons, or working with students from beginner to advanced levels.

A versatile teacher might have the expertise to teach trumpet, voice, and saxophone. Or be comfortable with various musical idioms like classical, popular, or jazz. These are all great examples of versatility in music teaching, but the direction I'd like to explore is more about the specific actions that teachers take to make their teaching effective. What I've got in mind is an examination of eight different actions that characterize versatile teachers. My hope is that looking at these eight distinct perspectives will shed light on things you already do, things

you've thought about doing, things you may avoid doing, and things you may want to do – you've just been waiting for someone to give you a push – or maybe invite you to be more of the teacher you already are.

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Number One – Versatile teachers lead the way.

Learning to sing or play a musical instrument is a lot like learning to cook, or drive a car in that it's easier when someone more knowledgeable like a teacher leads the way. When teachers lead they way, they zoom out to guide from a big picture perspective. And they zoom in to make sure details get taken care of. They use their experience, skills, and knowledge to come up with plans of action that address students' musical needs.

I say – plans of action – because leading the way involves several really fundamental areas – starting with teachers figuring out what methodology or overarching framework suits their teaching. Methodologies come with all sorts of emphases and priorities. Like the issue of starting with learning to play by ear or Starting with learning by reading. How do learning to play by ear and learning by reading complement or interfere with each other? What about learning to play with lead sheets and chordal-based notation?

Tone and technique are topics that occupy teachers' attention – how to teach them? What are the beginning steps? How does beginner technical development relate to higher levels of technique? What kind of information is helpful and when to introduce it?

Repertoire choice is an essential element – and here the options are infinite including everything from classical to jazz to folk to pop to contemporary. Will teachers put together their own preferential lists of repertoire or follow some one else's selections? What kind of tailoring to students' inclinations will teachers make?

Exam-based programs occupy a recognizable position in music teaching. Teachers need to decide how they'll approach ear training, scales, chords, and other technical elements, sightreading, theory, and music history.

My impression is that leading the way is the main stay of music teaching – and for a good reason. It's because students depend on teachers to carve out a secure path that gets them where they want to go without hitting dead-ends or getting off-track. This means teachers need to figure out the long-term and short-term routes that'll streamline students' development, minimize guesswork, and optimize progress. Leading the way describes a lot of what teachers do, but when it comes to versatile teaching – there's more to come.

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Number Two – Versatile teachers follow their students' lead.

Picture this – my student Jamie – 5 years old – his second or third beginner lesson. I'm demonstrating how we can move our fingers freely all over the keyboard. I'm leading the way, when Jamie interjects with an observation – Spider fingers! He exclaims and I agree. The expression spider fingers perfectly captures the movement and feeling I'm going for. So I follow Jamie's lead. I shift my approach from leader to follower and I take up Jamie's observation – even continuing with it in our subsequent lessons. I follow his lead because there are a couple things I want to accomplish.

Firstly: student participation. I want Jamie to feel he's an active participant in learning to play the piano. That he's the primary owner of his own musical journey. Telling me what he's doing at the instrument provides confirmation of his own involvement rather than a passive compliance with my instructions. So I look for Jamie's participation and welcome it at all times.

Secondly: it's Jamie's musical journey not mine – even though I play a huge role and have enormous influence as teacher. My purpose in promoting his active participation is to avoid taking over his musical journey – of making his experience of learning to play the piano into a replication of my own. Following my students' lead is a simple but effective way for me to make sure we're going in directions they feel interested in taking.

Student participation in music learning processes may look differently on different occasions. For example, in Jamie's situation – his word choice and spontaneous response provided verbal confirmation of his active participation. Students also communicate participation through their breathing pace and the time they take to answer questions. Other signs of participation are contained in students' body language – the way students move their eyes, how they enter the studio, physical gestures like pulling in the chin, tightening their hands, lifting shoulders, tensing their lips, their posture.

Students also indicate participation through the sound quality they produce and the speed they may use to perform. Finally, student participation is directly related to their mindset – their overall attitude as a combination of desires, fear, confidence and readiness. In this way, student participation pulls together various cognitive, emotional, and physical indicators of involvement.

When teachers follow their students' lead, they keep close tabs on the various indicators of student participation. Like – When my 14-year old student Jasmine cringes in response to a new repertoire selection, it

appears I may be better off in suggesting an alternative. When 8-year old Nathan *shrugs* his shoulders after three unsuccessful attempts, it's obvious I've overestimated his readiness. When 6-year old Seth comes up with a solution, I can see how he's kept the activity within his own timeframe and capability. When 17-year old Andrew describes a passage from his piece, I marvel at the detailed analysis he's given me to work with.

What seems potentially dangerous about teachers following students' lead is how this process may be interpreted as teachers blindly following students down the rabbit hole. So let me say – nothing could be further from my mind. Teachers following students' lead is about teachers picking up on the clues students provide - investing in students' own curiosity, insight, their hopes and dreams. What I appreciate is how this process brings a counterbalance to teachers' primary focus of leading the way. How it repositions the interactions between teachers and students. – Calling on teachers to create the conditions for students to share greater responsibility for clarity in their studies. Calling on teachers to maintain an open dialogue for students to communicate meaningful thoughts about the direction they hope their studies will take.

Thus far - Versatile teachers lead the way and they follow their students' lead.

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Number Three – Versatile teachers advocate on their students' behalf

For me, there's something quite extraordinary about including advocacy in what music teachers do. To advocate means standing up for someone or something. When we advocate on a person's behalf, we give them our wholehearted support. We may even go so far as to be protective of them – if they need protection. Or we might champion them or their cause – if that's appropriate. Advocacy is an intentional action. It's deliberate, purposeful, and anchored in our beliefs. We stand up for others because we have faith in whom they are. All of which brings me to two of my students – Alex and Janine – two students for whom I routinely advocate.

My memories of Alex begin somewhere around the time he turned 4 years old – when following his older sister's lesson, he thrust open the door of my studio, jumped in, and cried out – Boo! I remember thinking – This'll be fun to have a student who starts every lesson with an impromptu burst of energy. Over a year later, I found out that not everyone in Alex's family was so enthusiastic about his energetic demeanor when his older sister said, "My Mom is going to start Alex on piano lessons soon. She's hoping it will settle him down." I kept quiet.

I knew my approach would certainly advocate for Alex becoming more of his energetic self than changing him into something else.

For Janine, my advocacy has to do with how I help students develop as fluent performers. Typically – I use a two-part framework that consists of growth and rest pieces. What became clear early on in Janine's case was that she got bogged down with the length of the growth pieces – not with their difficulty. So I opted for a reversal in which I treated the growth pieces as Janine's rest pieces and vice versa. With the long pieces, I'd check off each page one at a time just as I would for a short rest piece. As for the rest pieces, I treated them as Janine's growth pieces – investing the necessary time to master the smallest details. My approach was to advocate on Janine's behalf.

What I've noticed is that advocating on my students' behalf brings an openness to my teaching. It's helped me to see that I can teach students as whom they genuinely are and still get things done – without having to give up standards of musical performance or rework my students into some idealized version of students that some teachers might think is necessary to music studies. Being an advocate means that – I stand up for my students with a kind of two-tier approach. On the first tier – I'm protective of them. I shield my students from excessive demands that may undermine their vulnerability and integrity. That's my way of setting up a safe and trusting environment so that on the second tier – I can advocate for what they have to offer. I focus on opportunities to champion who they are and what they bring to music studies. I advocate on their behalf.

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Number Four – Versatile Teachers challenge their students

All human beings – teachers, students, parents, young and old – we all have a natural tendency for challenging ourselves – an awareness that compels us to test our ability to learn and make improvements on our learning. It's as if challenging ourselves is hardwired into our DNA as a way of making sure that what we've learned is strong enough for the task at hand. That what we've learned isn't going to disappear any time soon. That we're not going to be stuck with an inferior model just because it was the first one we tried out. Almost intuitively throughout our entire lives, we take on challenges to strengthen what we want and also to reduce the possibility that what we don't want will take over.

When teachers challenge their students, they build on students' own experiences of challenging themselves – Experiences that confirm if any of us want to seriously test, retain, or improve what we're learning, then challenges are the way to go. Here's an example of

what happened with my student Nathaniel when I challenged him to go beyond our usual discussions.

After a year of lessons, Nathaniel had arrived at an important destination in his piano studies - only a few weeks before his Volume 1 repertoire graduation concert. It seemed like he'd already explored all the challenges I could come up with like - Playing with eyes closed. Keeping the accompaniment softer than the melody. Playing with no mistakes. So I asked, "Nathaniel? What challenge can you think of that you haven't already done?" For a moment he was deep in thought. Then he stood up, pushed back the piano chair, and played one of his hardest pieces with a challenge I could never have anticipated. Standing at the keyboard, Nathaniel played while standing only on one leg with the other crossed at his knee. I was impressed. He'd chosen an immensely difficult physical challenge that was well beyond what I was looking for, but interestingly – he achieved exactly what I was hoping for.

What makes challenges like Nathaniel's so effective? For me, it's the matter of desirable difficulty. For challenges to be effective, there needs to be something that triggers students' desire to participate. - Something that pulls them to be emotionally involved in the process. That's the desirable part. We can see it in Nathaniel's choice – he's got the desire to prove something to himself. For the difficulty – effective challenges present students with a task they value – something manageable and doable that's worth their investment. In contrast to challenges so hard that students might never succeed, or so easy that students feel their time is wasted.

This means not all challenges are created equal. Like Nathaniel's – standing with one leg crossed has difficulty that suits an 8-year old first year student – trying it with a 16-year old advanced student seems less practical. Some challenges obviously resonate more than others especially when we take age-appropriateness and students' performance level into consideration.

Finally, if we ask another question about challenges – like - What makes challenges so important? The answer has to do with going beyond students' comfort zone - the need for teachers to guide their students beyond the place where students only do what's easy – I'm thinking of how students can so easily get locked into relying on one aspect of technique, or a particular performance tempo.

Even things like always using the metronome, starting at the beginning of the piece or playing with the book – things which have definite benefits – may prove to be inadequate in the long run. I like to think of challenges as falling into three categories: Firstly - Exaggerations allow students to explore more deeply in directions

they're already familiar with. Next, Opposites encourage students to find out what happens at the other end of the spectrum. And finally, using imagination keeps creativity and spontaneity at the forefront. Challenges are a great way for teachers to stimulate aspects of performance development that students don't even know they possessed.

To recap what we've explored thus far – Versatile teachers lead the way, they follow their students' lead, they advocate on their students' behalf, and they challenge their students.

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Number Five – Versatile teachers are resources

When we think of music teachers as resources, it seems obvious that their musical knowledge, skills, and experiences take center stage. And I agree - So it may come somewhat as a surprise that's not what I'll be talking about in this section. While keeping musical expertise on center stage, I want to bring two other themes to the forefront – the idea of teachers as resources on learning and teachers as resources on life. Two areas that are important for versatile teachers.

Teachers are resources on learning – on the principles involved in the strictly educational process of learning to sing or play a musical instrument. Typically, I think teachers develop an understanding of learning from their own personal experiences of learning – at least that seems to be what occurred in my own case. I took it for granted that my own experiences of learning were sufficient for guiding my students – and for the most part – I would say I was initially successful.

Luckily for me, during the 1990s and 2000s I was able to tap into some amazing research on learning that significantly altered my understanding. Research that helped me to understand – for example – why many of my students could practice with the book day after day and make next to no progress. Or what kept students from finding the first note of their piece even after an entire week of practice on the whole piece.

What I understood from the research literature was that I had a rather limited interpretation of learning – in that I treated learning as a strictly linear process wherein students' mastery of elements takes them step-by-step up the ladder. When I took a closer look at examples around me – like learning to ride a bike, or learning a language, or even learning to cook – I could always detect a kind of organized linearness going on, but there was more to it. Learning is also characterized by less-organized periods of forgetting, revisiting, confusion, plateau, refinement, and application.

Learning from this broad perspective isn't smooth progression. It's a process that anticipates setbacks, introduces intentional obstacles, allows for resting periods, and doesn't take growth for granted just because students' practicing occured. Looking at my previous interpretation of learning, I saw that by attempting to streamline the learning process, I'd basically eliminated opportunities for students to tackle the nuances involved in learning.

These days, I find myself repeatedly explaining to students how learning works in age-appropriate ways - because they have their own personal inerpretations of successful learning that quickly blot out my advice. That means reminding students that when learning is easy, it's often superficial and may soon be forgotten – like when they use the book to practice all week or never think about the first note of a piece before they start. I talk about how certain difficulties make learning stronger and more permanent. How striving for excellence may trigger setbacks, and setbacks often provide the information needed to achieve mastery. Mostly what works for me is keeping in mind that while learning may share traits with assembling a car and building a house, those depictions of learning only touch the surface of what learning is all about.

Next, teachers are resources on life – through our actions, the words we use, the conversations we have, the way we walk the talk – teachers provide a living model of what life can be. Our values and how we uphold them are front and center – like on the day when a student of mine walked through the door of my studio and asked, "Dr. Thompson. Do you think you'll ever get mad at me?"

All I could think was – How many people had gotten mad at him that day? His teachers at school? His friends? His parents? Maybe even his sister had gotten mad at him riding over in the car? What about himself? Had he gotten mad at someone that day? I replied, "That's a good question. Give me a week to think about it and I'll have an answer for you."

That week I thought a lot about getting mad. When my student returned for his next lesson, I explained, "Here's what you should know about my getting mad at someone. I wouldn't be honest if I said that I've never gotten mad at anyone, because I have. What's important to know is that getting mad at someone is **my** final option - when I can't think of anything else to do. So, on the day when I think I've run out of options for helping you, that most likely will be the day I get mad at you."

Looking back at this event, what stands out for me isn't that I came up with getting mad as final option explanation. Although it's a good one for sure! What seems most significant is that I brought out two

phrases that I've relied on throughout my career - I said, "That's a good question. Give me a week to think about it and I'll have an answer for you." Those statements sit on the tip of my tongue, ready for use – because I never know when or how my life resources as a teacher will be put under the spotlight.

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Number Six – Versatile teachers get out of the way

I feel a great deal of responsibility towards my students. They've chosen to study with me – to come to me for what I have to offer. So when I indicate that versatile teachers get out of the way – it feels a bit like I'm neglecting my job.

What seems important for me to remember is that long before my students arrive even for their very first lesson – they have extensive experience with teaching and learning for themselves. They've taught themselves – or learned for themselves – how to walk, to talk, how to observe the world, how to ask questions. They've put together all kinds of solutions through their own processes. And sometimes, I've got to admit - my teaching can get in the way. The problem is that very often I've got multiple ways of solving the same problem – so if I'm unsuccessful with getting students to adopt my Plan A, I've got Plan B, and Plan C as backups. I've got things organized down to the smallest detail if necessary. When really – I should just get out of the way and let students put their own processes into action.

So that makes six actions thus far - Versatile teachers lead the way, they follow their students' lead, they advocate on their students' behalf, they challenge their students, they are resources, and they get out of their students' way.

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Number Seven – Versatile teachers have a grip on fear

Here's a scenario for you – Mr. Finch is a clarinet teacher who teaches from his private studio in a large metropolitan city. After chatting with a colleague several years ago, Mr. Finch decided to implement a studio policy outlining various studio standards. Policy clause #4 is particularly important to Mr. Finch – Students shall not begin lessons with a list of excuses regarding not practicing for the previous week. Mr. Finch included this clause in order to maximize his efficiency during students' lessons. It obviously wastes a lot of time to hear students' excuses. Also Mr. Finch felt that teachers and students are accountable to each other – that teachers can't start lessons with excuses for why they might not be able to teach well that day – and so – neither should students start lessons with excuses regarding not practicing during the previous week.

First of all, let me follow up by saying – I think studio policy documents are great. But, I'm not sure about Mr. Finch's clause #4 – even though I get his rationale. My reason for bringing in Mr. Finch's example is because I want to address the topic of fear – and more specifically – how versatile teachers have a grip on their fear of failure.

So what is fear of failure all about? Well… Teaching is an occupation that comes with certain expectations regarding student achievement. And because of those expectations, teachers are concerned with how they'll produce student achievement – and what they'll do to avoid student failure. Unfortunately, worries and anxieties about failure can show up without much warning. Teachers can be struck by questions like - What'll I do if my students don't achieve a certain level? What if I can't find a solution? Will people think I'm inadequate? Will students switch to another teacher?

I've noticed there's a tendency to treat fear like a bad guy who's waiting around an unspecified corner to disrupt our normal everyday existence. As if fear is something external to who we are. But, when we think about it for a minute – it should be obvious that fear isn't something out there – it's something inside us - reflected in the internal struggles and tensions that arise when any of us find ourselves in positions of uncertainty or apprehension. In this way, I think fear operates as an internal watchdog – a personal defense system that sets off an alarm when things need taken care of. What makes fear the most fearsome is that it often underscores teachers' insecurity and lack of readiness. Fear plays havoc with the sense of security teachers derive from our experiences, from our values and beliefs.

Returning to Mr. Finch's example for a moment, it's interesting to consider what's going on in terms of fear of failure. My impression is that Mr. Finch is a teacher with no time for the fear of failure. He brings in the agents of efficiency and accountability to wipe out any possibility that fear of failure might intrude. But I'm not convinced that just because he's got efficiency and accountability as shields that he's really resolved issues related to fear of failure. It feels more like some kind of cover up job.

As solution to fear of failure, I suggest that teachers teach with a grip on fear. Fear isn't our enemy. Nor is its counterpart of failure. Fear is a signal that we send from ourselves to ourselves. When teachers feel worried or anxious – those feelings are a signal that something needs our attention. The problem is that it's not fear itself that needs our attention – it's what's behind fear that we need to attend to.

While it might seem like the best thing to do is to get rid of fear or banish it from our teaching, getting a grip on fear means that teachers

isolate their fear long enough to purposefully investigate fear's roots. They don't misinterpret fear as some kind of undesirable intrusion. Teachers recognize how fear plays an important role as the signal to go beyond what they already know about teaching and learning. Fear is our prompt to explore the uncomfortable, the uncertain, and the vast unknown – it's a signal the time has come for taking things apart, for reexamination, for looking with fresh eyes at what may be getting in the way of student achievement.

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Number Eight – Versatile teachers reflect on their work

Sometime around 25 years ago, I started writing report cards for all my students. The goal for me was to be deliberate in keeping track of what students were doing. Twice a year, I shared the report cards with students' parents during parent/teacher meetings and because I kept the documents for myself year after year, it didn't take long before I had acumulated a considerable amount of information on my students. What I hadn't anticipated was that my students' report cards would shed light on my teaching. Report cards turned out to be a turning point for me in helping me become more reflective about my teaching. To ask the question – how can I tell if my teaching is actually on track?

Reflection is the process of delving into our experiences and using them to understand what's going on in teaching and learning. When teachers reflect on their work, they open up avenues of understanding by drawing from cognitive and emotional information. They tap into visual, kinesthetic, auditory, and tactile sources. They take into consideration aspects of personality, socialization, and communication that impact teaching effectiveness. Reflection is our way of synthesizing and evaluating information about what we've done in the past, what we're presently doing, and what we hope to accomplish in future engagements.

My experience is that reflection follows several distinct timelines. In a first timeline, reflection is proactive – it's what we do before to get organized – the process of planning and setting things out for the short term and long term. In a second timeline, reflection occurs spontaneously in details explored during the teaching process – like when I guide my student Anna through the process of reducing mistakes and how I introduce small changes to that process to keep her engaged. Or when – at the end of Matthew's lesson – I discover there's been an unexpected commonality to every activity we've explored. By sharing my reflection with Matthew, I make sure he's also got a handle on things.

In a third timeline, reflection is precisely the example of doing report cards – the process of teachers looking back over a designated period

of time. I find this process helpful in evaluating my teaching effectiveness across the breadth of my studio and for individual students. For example – when I realized my teen students seemed to have reached a common threshhold in junior high, I took it as an opportunity to introduce explorations that captitalized on their own musical stories. In the case of an individual student like Michelle, stepping away from the busy-ness of her weekly lessons, I can see where I'm most and least influential with her development.

Finally, reflection in a fourth timeline is concerned with applying what I've learned from my experiences. This means figuring out what comes next in my teaching. What new conversations I may need to introduce? What things I may need to make certain that I continue to use?

What seems meaningful is that reflective activities help to reinforce the notion that teaching is an inherently malleable undertaking. I emphasize malleable because reflection is more than a confirmation of teachers' knowledge and experience. Reflection encourages teachers to incorporate flexible thinking and openness in their teaching. In this way, reflective teachers interweave their knowledge and experience with creativity, risk, following intuition and emotions, and on occasion – leaving it all behind so that new possibilities may emerge.

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I started this podcast with a definition of versatility as a person's ability to adapt to different contexts and situations. With versatility as the overarching theme, here are the eight different actions that emerged –

Versatile teachers lead the way

Versatile teachers follow their students' lead

Versatile teachers advocate on their students' behalf

Versatile teachers challenge their students

Versatile teachers are resources

Versatile teachers get out of the way

Versatile teachers have a grip on fear

Versatile teachers reflect on their work

What strikes me as remarkable is how these eight actions fall under two clear headings. On one side - the actions represent what versatile teachers bring of themselves to their teaching. They bring leadership, resources, a grip on fear, and reflection to their teaching. On the other side, the actions represent what versatile teachers do in response to their students – the actions of following, advocating, challenging, and getting out of students' way. So it's pretty simple – really – that

versatile teachers bring who we are and respond to our students' needs – all because of what music means to us. We're versatile in our approach because we know how music enriches our lives – how music irradiates a sense of inner wellness and expressivness that enlightens the mind, heart, and spirit like nothing else. We're versatile because music matters.

And that seems like a good place to leave things for now. My hope in the Music Educator's Crucible – is as always – to provide a fresh perspective on music teaching and stir up awareness and questioning in the process. If you want to let me know how things turn out as you work through the ideas related to versatile teachers or other themes from this podcast series, please be sure to drop me a line.

Until the next time – this is The Music Educator's Crucible and I'm Merlin Thompson. Cheers!