

# Cross-Cultural Communication



*in The*

# Music Studio

*by Kenneth Williams*

**I**t is the last day of class for the spring term. I am meeting with the five students in my graduate seminar in piano pedagogy for the last time at the end of a productive year. The students are waiting outside the seminar room with a thank you card and a bouquet of flowers for me, a cake and refreshments,

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eager to make the last class meeting a celebration. I am surprised and delighted by their gestures of gratitude. We combine our celebration with reflections on how all the students have enhanced their teaching skills during the past year. When the class is over, I gather my books and papers as usual, but I am struck by how odd it seems to leave the seminar room carrying a bouquet of flowers. Noticing my uneasiness, one of the students asks, “Is it common for men in the United States to receive flowers as a gift?”

The question was more about cultural norms in the United States than about how to teach piano, but questions like this one were common in this pedagogy class. Although our university is situated in the heart of the American Midwest, none of the graduate students enrolled in this class were Americans. They were from Malaysia, Korea and Taiwan, and they all were female. For international students, a course in piano pedagogy is not just about how to teach piano, but how to teach piano in a foreign culture. Questions about culture were as common as questions about piano technique and teaching repertoire. Communication across cultural lines made the experience a process of cultural adaptation not only for the international students, but also for me. How did I answer the question about the flowers? I said, “No, traditionally men in the United States do not receive flowers as a gift, but that part of our culture is changing, and I appreciate your thoughtful gift.”

Cross-cultural encounters are increasingly common in our global society. It is especially true in the performing arts and in higher education that students are willing and even eager to cross cultural boundaries to pursue advanced studies with master teachers at prestigious institutions. Today, many pianists studying in American conservatories and university schools of music are international students, and a large

percentage are from Asian countries. Our current situation reflects a changing, but not new, trend. During the nineteenth century, large numbers of Americans studied abroad with European pianists; and Americans continued to study in Europe even after music conservatories were established in the large American cities. American music students studying in Europe must have experienced many of the same challenges Asian students studying in American music conservatories experience today.

Today’s international students learning to teach music in America usually are curious about American attitudes toward music education in general. Why are band programs so important in American schools? Why do American children try to pursue so many activities rather than focusing on one or two? A study funded by the National Piano Foundation explored the perceptions that American children, parents and teachers have regarding private piano study.<sup>1</sup> Music education researchers identified excellent piano teachers and surveyed their students and the students’ parents to determine what they consider the benefits of piano study to be. For many parents, an important benefit of piano study for their children is it seems to reduce the amount of time they spend watching television. The results of this study show a large percentage of those piano students who study with excellent teachers practice less than an hour per day. International students have grown up with far more rigorous practice habits. The fact that parents allow myriad extracurricular activities, television viewing and computer games to occupy large amounts of their children’s time is surprising to international students. Understanding the cultural context within which one teaches, though, is essential for effective interactions between teachers and students.

The benefit of cross-cultural education, especially in the arts, is the breadth and depth of insight students gain about their own cultures by comparing them to different cultures. There are challenges, though, for both teachers and students, and many misunderstandings in the classroom and music studio can be attributed to cultural blindness. Expectations based on cultural stereotypes can impede learning and communication rather than facilitate them. Although music is a universal language

that can be shared and understood without verbal communication, culture has a tremendous impact on patterns of music teaching and learning.

## **Defining Culture: Anthropology 101**

Because culture is pervasive and universal in the human experience, it is difficult to define and see in ourselves. A narrow definition of culture includes the refined achievements of a civilization—its art, music and literature. This narrow definition implies one either can have culture or lack culture. The Dutch Anthropologist Geert Hofstede offers a broader definition of culture—one that includes all the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, which one learns from early childhood.<sup>2</sup> These patterns distinguish the members of one social group or society from another. It is important to distinguish culture, something that is learned, from human nature and from individual personality. While people from one culture may share certain customs and attitudes, individuals within the group still have unique personalities. Hofstede calls culture “software of the mind.” This analogy suggests that culture shapes the way humans behave, think and feel just as programming determines how computers behave. Hofstede’s analogy may seem inappropriate, especially for artists who strive for individuality and creativity in expression. How can human feelings be programmed or automated like a computer? Hofstede is merely making a distinction between the impact of culture in shaping a person’s attitudes and behavior from human nature, which is shared by all cultural groups and is inherited. Culture is something one learns from parents, other teachers and family members. It is something that changes from one generation to the next. Culture is not fixed—it is dynamic, and it can change when one adapts to new environments. Some cultural aspects endure through generations and through centuries of change. Our current society is experiencing both clashes and blending of elements from various cultures with unprecedented frequency.

When the behavior or attitudes of students from other cultures bewilder teachers, sometimes teachers attribute the puzzling characteristics to a foreign culture, when actually the characteristics may

be unique to the individual or common to all humans. If a teacher finds that a student lacks motivation, he or she may presume all members of that culture are lazy. Misunderstandings such as this can hurt, and they hinder effective communication. Getting to know students from other cultures requires making careful distinctions between cultural characteristics and individual personality traits. In the music studio, teachers work to develop self-expression through musical performance. Achieving that goal varies with each student according to personality traits and learning styles, which may be influenced by cultural factors.

The most obvious barrier to communication across cultural lines is language, yet it is possible to teach without words. While teaching at The Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan one summer, I taught a young Korean girl who spoke no English, and I speak no Korean. We had four lessons with practically no conversation. Using modeling and imitation, the lessons included tone production, hand position, rubato and practice techniques. While this type of instruction produces results, it develops a superficial type of learning with no independent thinking on the learner's part. It solves the language problem, but it essentially is rote teaching and one-way communication with very little interaction between teacher and pupil.

Hofstede identifies language as the most superficial manifestation of culture. Like visual icons, flags and modes of dress, language is an outward symbol that conveys meaning. More important than language are nonverbal communication patterns—modes of greeting, social customs and religious rituals. Still more important than verbal and nonverbal communication are values, the essential manifestation of culture. Cultural values include concepts of what is good or beautiful or appropriate. These are preferences learned from the family and from society. Understanding students from different cultures involves considering the values guiding their judgment, actions and perceptions. Teachers and students can communicate without words at a superficial level. Effective teaching, though, especially in the arts, requires dialogue at a deeper level and respect for other values. Understanding how values operate in students' thoughts and feelings

is difficult but terribly important, especially when molding artistic sensibilities.

As we consider culture's implications on teaching and learning, we see the most poignant differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Eastern values stem from the philosophical teachings and traditions of the Confucian heritage. Western values stem from Greek and Roman sources and Judeo-Christian philosophies. While there is great diversity within these cultures and numerous subcultures have evolved over the centuries, these philosophical roots are the sources from which values emerge and more superficial manifestations of culture develop. Even when students from Eastern and Western cultures speak the same language, wear the same fashions and perhaps even share common religious beliefs, they are likely to experience fundamental confusion when learning to perform and teach in another culture.

### **Cultural Factors that Affect Communication and Learning**

Course work in piano pedagogy and music education usually includes some consideration of learning theories developed by educational psychologists. The theories of Piaget, Skinner, Bruner and others offer valuable insights into the way humans, especially children, develop cognitive abilities and process information. When training teachers from other cultures and preparing teachers for multicultural music studios and classrooms, one must question whether the theories shaping our approach to teaching are valid for all cultures or are specific for European and American cultures. Theories about how children think and learn developed by educational psychologists in the West may be relevant for only some of our students. Cultural diversity among our students encourages us to adopt a more flexible view of teaching and learning. When we meet students from other cultures, we want to learn all we can about that particular culture. In a global society, though, we encounter a wide variety of cultural influences and students from diverse cultural backgrounds. A broad view of the ways culture affects communication and learning would help us better understand all our students and ourselves.

Four questions seem to be most relevant when learning to communicate with music students from other cultures: Does the

student value individualism more than collectivism or vice versa? How does the student view authority and persons in authoritative roles? How does the student integrate the creative aspect of musical performance and interpretation with virtuosity and the technical aspects of performance? What motivates the student to practice and achieve success?

### **Individualism versus Collectivism**

One fundamental difference distinguishing cultural groups is the way persons view themselves in relation to others. Anthropologists identify individualistic cultures as those where individuals strive for autonomy and self-realization, and collectivist cultures as those where identification with an "in-group" takes priority over personal goals. Individualistic cultures predominate in Europe and North America, where an individual's ultimate goal is to realize his or her unique potential to become distinct and autonomous in identity. Self-realization is a virtue in individualistic cultures. Psychologist Abraham Maslow identified self-actualization as the highest need in the hierarchy of human needs. The "self-made man" who achieves success through his or her own ingenuity is a hero in individualistic cultures.

Members of collectivist cultures view themselves in relation to others and highly value their place in a social group. In these cultures, an individual brings distinction to his or her extended family and larger "in-groups," such as a school or corporation, through his or her personal accomplishments. Loyalty to an "in-group" is a virtue in collectivist cultures. While a child's achievements in academics, sports and the arts are an important source of pride for an entire family in all cultures, it is especially true in collectivist cultures.

For musicians, the individual attention of applied instruction and solo performance takes on a different meaning for students from these two fundamentally different cultures. The notion of expressing oneself through musical performance and individual interpretation must be considered in a cultural context, especially when one's culture might promote conformity over individuality. Some students may feel uncomfortable accepting praise for a solo performance or even for good progress in their practice. Some may view those

feelings as false humility. Other students need recognition for their unique talents that may distinguish them from their siblings.

### **Power Distance or Attitudes toward Authority**

Culture affects our attitudes regarding the degree to which we accept inequality in power as normal. Hofstede calls this dimension of culture “power distance”;<sup>3</sup> others might call it reverence for authority. Power distance separates the old from the young, managers from employees and teachers from students. In some cultures, persons who hold authority consider their subordinates to be very different from themselves and vice versa. The extent to which we are conscious of our roles is a manifestation of culture. In cultures with high power distance, a wide gulf separates teachers from students; in cultures with low power distance, persons can move easily among different roles, acting as a superior in one situation and a peer or even a subordinate in another. In these cultures, teachers must earn the respect of their students rather than presume respect would come with the position. Students from high power distance cultures would never question or challenge the teacher’s views.

Along with respect for teachers, there are high expectations for teachers in high power distance cultures—teachers are expected to have all the answers. This can be problematic in situations where the teacher from a Western culture might use the Socratic method or discovery learning. The teacher would ask questions leading the student to new insights or discoveries. It would seem very strange for a student from “high power distance” cultures to have a teacher ask a question when the answer might be obvious; the teacher is supposed to have the answers, not the questions. Likewise, students from “low power distance” cultures might be reluctant to trust the teacher’s way as the right or best way to solve a problem until he or she is convinced the teacher is correct.

This cultural dimension makes it particularly difficult for young teachers in training to participate in peer teaching exercises. To assume the role of teacher means to take on great authority in some cultures and can make students uncomfortable. International students holding positions as teaching assistants often are appalled at the lack of respect they receive from American students.

### **Virtuosity versus Creativity**

While training performing artists, teachers cultivate both artistry and skill. Pianists invest time and energy in developing technique and analyzing scores, but an artistic performance must have a unique and personal contribution from the performer. All musicians work toward a balance between the demands for virtuosity and creativity in their performances—an ideal blend of personal interpretation within the limits of style, good taste and technical mastery. Each teacher chooses whether to encourage freedom or control in each student depending on the individual’s needs and development level. The relative emphasis a teacher places on skill development as

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opposed to artistic freedom and self-expression is a function of both individual and cultural values.

Howard Gardner, an American psychologist working at Harvard University, explored cultural differences in arts education and offered his observations in a book titled, *To Open Minds: Chinese Clues to the Dilemma of Contemporary Education*.<sup>4</sup> Gardner traveled to China several times during the 1980s seeking clues to the struggle within American education between progressive and traditional forces. In China, Gardner and his colleagues observed classes in painting, singing and academic subjects. He describes a humorous incident illustrating the fundamental attitude differences between Eastern and Western cultures toward education in general and arts education in particular.

Gardner’s wife and one-year-old son, Benjamin, accompanied him on one of his

Asian trips. Young Benjamin enjoyed playing with the hotel room key, which guests would deposit into a receptacle in the lobby when leaving the hotel each morning. The boy enjoyed the challenge of trying to insert the key and its bulky key ring into the narrow slot on the key receptacle, a difficult task for a child of eighteen months. He failed at most attempts because he lacked the necessary eye-hand coordination. But he liked to bang the key on the box anyway, and sometimes it even went into the slot. Benjamin’s parents were satisfied that he entertained himself with this exploratory game. They noticed, however, that Chinese people working in the hotel or simply passing through the lobby would stop to help Benjamin place the key in the slot accurately. After this scene was repeated on several occasions, Gardner realized he was witnessing divergent attitudes between Chinese and American preferences for children’s behavior and the culturally appropriate ways for adults to teach them. Gardner and his wife preferred to let Benjamin explore the key and the slot, developing his motor skills in the process of his own discovery and entertainment. The Chinese passersby, placing far more value on skill and accuracy, would not allow the child to repeat his futile attempts and felt compelled to demonstrate the correct solution.

Gardner identifies the relative value placed on skill and virtuosity as a fundamental issue in distinguishing Eastern and Western cultures and their approaches to arts education. Western societies tend to encourage innovation and creativity. The Chinese preference for mastering skills before exploring alternative strategies has made Chinese civilization one of the world’s oldest and most enduring cultures. For generations, children have learned calligraphy by imitating models. The Chinese approach is straightforward: For Benjamin to place the key in the box, he needs to acquire basic skills. Adults know the most efficient way to do that and easily can demonstrate the “correct” solution. In Chinese societies, change occurs as a minor modification in a traditional process rather than an innovative solution to an ordinary problem.

The incident Gardner describes is relevant to every music lesson. Should teachers show students “the correct way” to do something, or should teachers encourage their students to explore a variety of possible solutions? Cultural values also would

affect the likelihood of a student exploring solutions during practice sessions. In general, rote teaching tends to be the preferred approach in Eastern cultures; discovery learning is preferred by Western teachers. Teachers from both cultures can benefit by trying different instructional approaches. Regardless of how we develop them, a willingness to explore and the achievement of technical mastery are two essential components of all artistic experiences.

### **Motivation and Achievement**

What motivates a student to practice and to achieve success? The answer may depend on the student's cultural values. Farideh Salili, a researcher at the University of Hong Kong, explored cross-cultural differences in the meaning and dimensions of achievement among young people. The concept of success for students in some cultures is linked closely with pleasing one's parents and having friends—a manifestation of being socialized in a collectivist society. Children from these cultures are driven by a sense of duty to their parents. Equally significant, though, might be what students believe to be the causes of their success or failure. And these attitudes vary along cultural lines.

The social psychologist Bernard Weiner showed during the 1980s that judgments about the causes of achievement and failure could be important mediators of learning and behavior.<sup>5</sup> Weiner found that students who scored high on academic tests tended to attribute their successes to their own ability and effort while attributing their failures to external factors. External factors include bad luck, the difficulty of the test questions or poor testing conditions. During the 1990s, researchers used Weiner's theories on motivation to compare students' attributions for achievement across cultural lines. These cross-cultural studies show that cultural factors mediate students' attitudes toward their own achievement.<sup>6</sup>

In Western cultures, students are more likely to attribute achievement to their innate abilities rather than their own efforts. Students from Eastern cultures tend to attribute their success more to effort. It is important to note we can control the effort we invest in learning, but we have no control over innate aptitude. Thus, students who believe their success depends on effort take more personal

responsibility for their own learning. The roots of this cultural value can be found in the Confucian tradition emphasizing that every person is educable. In the Confucian tradition, the fact that there are differences in ability does not matter; education and learning are associated always with effort. Achievement through hard work in Confucian-heritage societies is more highly valued than achievement through high ability. Western cultures tend to praise those who make difficult tasks appear easy because of their own exceptional ability, as in the child prodigy phenomenon.

The contrast in these views across cultural lines not only distinguishes Eastern and Western cultures, but suggests a distinct change within Western cultures. The high value placed by Western cultures on hard work, sometimes called the "Protestant work ethic," seems to be diminishing as a source of motivation for younger generations.<sup>7</sup>

### **Acculturation: Burden or Benefit?**

Culture is a dynamic force, not a static condition. Our students are shaped by influences from a variety of cultures and sources within their culture. Cultures seem to be evolving more quickly with every generation in modern society.

This article has addressed some ways culture can separate teachers and students, making communication and instruction difficult. During most lessons, our attention is focused on the music and the individual student's immediate needs. There is rarely time to explore the student's cultural background and how it affects communication in the studio. Learning individual characteristics of various cultures improves communication with some students, but understanding the ways culture affects learning in general leads to better understanding of all students.

An important question to consider when communicating with students from other cultures is, "Who bears the burden of translation?" It is possible to establish norms for communication in the music studio and expect students to adapt to them. Hofstede suggests teachers primarily are responsible for adaptation in cross-cultural learning situations.<sup>8</sup> Some students will take full responsibility for their own learning because of their cultural values and do whatever they can to meet the teacher's expectations. Communication in

the music studio can be a dynamic interaction where both student and teacher engage in cultural adaptation by rethinking the patterns forming the "software of the mind." So, if teachers bear the burden of cultural adaptation, they also reap the benefits of cross-cultural learning.

The most formidable challenge is seeing our own cultural influences. Gardner cites the following proverb: "The fish is the last to discover that it is in water."<sup>9</sup> The proverb offers an apt image for our scenario in teaching music students across cultural lines. We are so immersed in our own cultural values that we do not know what separates us from those we teach. Effective communication across cultures does not require that we reject our own cultural values—only that we discover them.

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### **NOTES**

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