

# **Reflection, Reflexivity, Learning and the Influence of Formalised and Experiential Piano Training**

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This autoethnographic study examines how music learning is influenced by teachers and socio-cultural environments and how this influences not only our musical journeys but the way we view our lives, of the progress we have made, the goals in which we hope to achieve, and the way we perceive we will achieve them. This study explores how my musical background, understanding, learning, music-making abilities, and skills have shaped my present beliefs, attitudes and identity as a musician, educator, and researcher. Focusing on teacher pedagogy and practice, the study reveals how prevailing teacher-centred and didactic approaches to teaching impact the perspectives and experiences of learning, and how music teachers have the ability to motivate, and encourage, but also demoralise and dissuade the musical learner. This study highlights understanding of reflective and reflexive teacher practice and how this can unlock impactful pedagogical and relational attributes, articulating teacher development in becoming the better musician and teacher. This study revealed important insights into the way in which I now experience and understand music through a more insightful and deeper awareness of the influences and contexts that impact the way learners engage in music instruction.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, experiential learning, imagery, situated learning, reflexivity

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## **Introduction**

An individual's musical journey involves discovery, determination, and dedication, crafting musical skills and knowledge as one becomes more immersed and engaged in the acquisition and performative thrill of music making. Learning involves the application of teachers who guide, help, and shape students' learning and development (Dewey, 1929; Eisner, 1993). Music learning requires attention to the self and to others, with literature articulating qualities and environments spanning persistence of will, but also obedience, and subjugation as learners traverse from apprentice to master (Burwell, 2013; de Bruin, 2021; Sichivitsa, 2003). This may require resilience in accepting the calm and gentle, but also the demanding and authoritative declarations of being "not good enough yet." The road to proficiency requires teachers and students making adjustive behaviours and reflexive acts that become personally attuned (Wegerif, 2019). It requires an evolving perception of self and growing self-reflexivity of how one's learning needs and strengths are developed and refined over time (Wojciszke, 2005).

Music learning has been described as an experiential and situated event (de Bruin, 2016) in which weekly learning events with music teachers guide student knowledge and skill acquisition. The studio teaching climate has been described as aspirational and personally motivating, but also autocratically didactic and frustratingly stultifying (Carey & Grant, 2015; de Bruin, 2022; Gaunt, 2008; Swanwick, 2008). The teaching of piano has a history of

pedagogical approaches ranging from the tyrannical to the empathically holistic, spanning the rote and repetitive, to the personalised and idiosyncratic (Leffler, 1998; Ponce, 2019; Swinkin, 2015), its practice providing direct and individual access, “secrecy of the craft” (Davidson & Jordan, 2007, p. 730) and “businesslike intimacy” (Burwell, 2012, p. 150). Little doubt then, that (Young et al., 2003, p. 144) describe the studio music lesson as a “secret garden.”

Learning an instrument requires focus and concentration within the weekly lesson, but also application, reappraisal and self-reflection on musical performance that must be done alone in the music practice room (McPherson & Renwick, 2013). It can involve moments of jubilation and achievement, but also anger, frustration and anxiety associated with the acquisition of dependable skill (McPherson & Zimmerman, 2002). This involves the grappling of ones’ ability, and self-realisation that determines, “Where am I now?”, “Why can’t I play this yet?”, and “What do I need to do to accomplish performance success?”.

Whilst many instrumentalists operate within a group or ensemble dynamic, the piano soloist as learner is often left to their own devices of practice, process, and product (Hasikou, 2020). Learning requires students to develop a capacity to learn how to learn (Zimmerman, 1990), incorporating evolving strategies and mental processes through which we teach ourselves when only in the company of our instrument, and the well-designed fading of teacher influence as the student asserts confidence and self-efficacy in their learning processes (de Bruin, 2018).

This autoethnographic study involving my music learning comprises unfolding successes and failures, the “*sturm und drang*” of learning\*, the acquiring of skill and knowledge. It also involves the mediating of various teachers’ approaches experienced, and my cognitive oscillation between these teachers’ methods and personalities that impact and direct learning, as well as my emerging aspirations, motivations, and actions. I recollect these experiences, outlining my developing sense of self direction, ownership, motivation and responsiveness to the learning process.

This self-study examines my learning journey, the encounters and experiences that range from the authoritarian to the caring, that have shaped my concept of learning, revealing what I now value and believe to be important in the teaching of others. I investigate my experiences through self-reflection on reactions, defences, and the embracing of teaching approaches that have impacted my development as a performer, and also as a teacher. I consider educational and relational perspectives of teacher-student dynamics. I reflect on what I as a learner responded to, and the teacher attributes that promoted student growth and confidence, as well as those that did not. As a now professional performer, I reflect on teacher behaviours and pedagogy that impacted my learning and this demand on the self. As a now trained teacher, I reflect on my teachers’ actions and attitudes, reflecting and understanding both theirs as well as my own embodied, experiential meanings (Finlay, 2009). Infused with the evolution of reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) is the emerging, dichotomous dance of identity between self as performer and self as teacher. This identity work reflects the duality of teacher who performs, and the performer who teaches, and how this dynamic is performed, embodied, and precarious (Baker & Macdonald, 2017). This reflective analysis alerts others as to how learning journeys may be positive and impactful, but also challenging and hurtful. Reflecting on the experiences and relationships that have shaped me, I conclude by considering my experiential exploits and what the qualities are that constitute the better teacher.

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\* *Sturm und drang* translates from German as storm and stress. Figuratively, the phrase refers to turmoil, whilst in music it was a movement which emphasised individual subjectivity and freedom in emotional expression.

## Prelude

I am a doctoral student in music education, a pianist and piano teacher. I have learnt piano for over 22 years, experiencing several different piano teachers. These learning experiences provide insight into the approaches and beliefs held by these teachers. This ranges from reliance on repetition and limited variance (Creech, 2012), to illumination and thoughtful guiding of planning, practice, and self-reflection that maximises learning (Burwell, 2016; McPherson & Renwick, 2013). This study explores what might be the coming together of a full circle of appreciation and analysis of my development from student learner to becoming a now professional teacher, performer, and PhD student, and the skills and attributes I hold as a teacher and lifelong learner.

Willingham (2009) suggests that “we teach who we are” (p. 59), signifying the importance of exploring “who I am” and how my background has shaped my musical learning. Investigating this involves the exploration of significant people and events that have shaped my musical experiences, mind, and identity as a student and now teacher. The study makes sense of how teaching practice can be positive, and empowering for students, but can also negatively impact with such force that it may submit many students towards the rejection of music learning (Kochevitsky, 1995). This study first and foremost enlightens my teachers’ impressions upon me, and the impact this had on my learning. I also seek to help other teachers sift through the trials and tribulations of their learning and current practice as a means of becoming the better educator.

## Learning

Learning involves myriad processes and affordances that span the cognitive, social, cultural, and personal (Dewey, 1929; Eisner, 1993). The music lesson has been described by Southcott and de Bruin as a:

Relational and temporal space of physical modelling, dialogic scaffolding and coaching that is unfolded in a sequence of preplanning, action-reaction, and post-performance evaluations. In this, practice and performance coalesce in the cascading moment-to-moment interactions between teacher and student that may reveal evolving understandings of self and other. (Southcott & de Bruin, 2022, p. 1)

My own learning and teaching identity is indelibly linked to experiences, transformed through the changing of teachers, their relationality, connectedness to student and music (Colwell, 2011), whilst subject to their emergent self-realisation of professional development and growth (Walton et al., 2012). Through self-study, I discover and better understand the reasons that shape my core values as a piano practitioner and teacher and the educational values and beliefs I hold in the teaching of others.

This involves examining incidents that have shaped my life, contemplating writing about things that I prefer not to write about. But by doing so I open a chasm that delves into who I truly am and what I have experienced. This writing offers insights into how significant people in our lives such as teachers, institutions, learning cultures, parents, and social contexts can influence people as developing learners and teachers.

### **Autoethnographic Approach**

I utilize an autoethnographic approach to understand my own situated learning experiences by describing and systematically analysing them (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Personal experience can influence the research process in profound ways and Ellis et al. (2011) offer an approach that “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research” (p. 274).

Combining autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography can be defined as a form of autobiographical personal narrative that explores the experiences of the author’s life (Mallet, 2011). I seek a confluence of autobiographical narrative, where I, the author, recall certain past experiences of significant influence, and ethnography, where I, as an observer, study and analyse these experiences with methodological and theoretical tools to help the reader gain a deeper understanding of the context and culture of these experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). This affirms the importance of the autobiographical awareness and understanding of identity and background (Antikainen et al., 1996).

Autoethnography offers my unique voice and personal lived experiences (Chang, 2008; Van Manen, 2016), helping me understand the self and others by reflecting on lived experiences (Chang, 2008; Karpiak, 2010). Through this autoethnographic narrative (Mallet, 2011), I disclose a personal identity, social contexts (Reed-Danahay, 1997) and the phenomenon of learning and teaching the piano through my lived experiences. Autoethnography provides a lens of negotiation between my current and former self (Ellis, 2020), phenomenologically reflecting and bestowing meaning on my lived experiences, particularly within the highly cloaked and hidden domain that is the studio music lesson (Gaunt, 2009).

### **Music Learning and Autoethnography**

Autoethnography has been used successfully in music studies (de Bruin, 2016; de Vries, 2010; Mercer & Zhegin, 2011; Nethsinghe, 2012). By using autoethnography, selected stories of my learning journey are vividly remembered, shared, and written upon to trigger finer and more personal details. I chronicled significant musical experiences and events, and selected moments that had a considerable and meaningful influence on my musical journey. Whilst I have kept a life journal, I utilise music books, learning diaries, reports and photos to revisit and rekindle thoughts and act as aide memoirs, recollecting thick and layered experiences conversations, and feelings to capture “snapshots” of memories (Muncey, 2010, p. 55). Memory plays a significant process in ethnography (Wall, 2008) stoking recollections of teacher action, dialogue, relationality, and how these shaped my judgements and becoming teacher identity (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011).

I embrace the entanglements of self (the auto of autoethnography) as subject, as subjective reviewer of my lifeworld exploring how “with each intra-action, the manifold of entangled relations is reconfigured” (Barad, 2007, pp. 393–394). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) supported the significance of the embodied through which we perceive, discover, and know. I seek to look beyond the training, to my becoming a musician and music educator, a work that remains in progress. In doing so, I seek to articulate “an overt ethical orientation toward change, one animated by the work of standing at one’s post, mapping the contemporary terrain, arranging newly productive relations, and generating different effects” (Kuntz, 2021, p. 216).

The one-to-one lesson is a “site of negotiated interactions, and behaviors of awareness and focus, frustrations, disappointments and epiphanies” (de Bruin, 2018, p. 2). Through the lens of piano learner, I reflect upon and analyse selected past experiences and remembered moments which had a significant influence on my musical life (Bochner & Ellis, 1992). I

looked through diaries, music books, certificates and reports that acted as aide memoires used to bubble forth events, remembrances, and emotions. These events were then chronologically ordered, analysed and thematically organised. I selected events that were meaningful and had a powerful impact on my musical journey, both positive and negative. These stories were written and rewritten, as I tried to accurately recount the essence of these events and decipher their meaning and influence on my life. The transferring of lived experiences through reflection and introspection transformed into textual expressions facilitates the animation of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Autoethnography allows me, as a research-observer to study and share my experiences and help others understand the nuances of a learning culture and the approaches and attitudes that may inhabit it, whilst also unveiling my alignments and resistances to such experiential enculturation, allowing others to reflect and learn from their own lived musical experience (Ellis et al., 2011). The following section uncovers my musical flight from the initial take-off to where I currently am in my musical research journey.

### **The Beginning of My Musical Flight**

I was two years and three months old. The piano was far bigger than me, stretching up, as I struggled to reach the keys. My mother lifted me onto the piano stool. The row of grinning white and black keys smiled back at me. I poked at the keys, enthralled with the results. My mother guided my hand, shaping the resemblance of a melody. She was my first teacher, but soon gave up the struggle of accommodating an unrelentingly curious child, taking me to my first formal teacher. From then on, the piano was part of the everyday – practice, practice, and more practice. The week was punctuated with lessons reinforced by my mother across the week, that followed the same routine: theory, scales, technical exercises, pieces. Annual examinations and end of year concerts were the two major climaxes of each year.

Early music making was shaped by the corraling of enthusiasm and desire to experiment and play, with a sense of determination and perseverance towards these drills. The words of my mother, “nothing comes from a lack of hard work, but anything can be achieved through consistent effort” guided me through not only music but many aspects of life. I am perseverant. Having chosen to do something, I stick at it, especially when it came to the piano – the instrument I was determined to master from a young age.

My next teacher was one who was kind, and grandmotherly in manner, allowing curiosity to blossom. Her small white upright piano rested against the wall in the living room, with bright open space designed in a such way that was conducive to listening, moving, observing, and learning. Importantly, my mother was in the background, always supporting me through every lesson. Although this teacher emphasised correct technique and drilled many scales and exercises, she also gave me the opportunity to choose the pieces that I wanted to play, and approach them sharing our curiosity for what lay inside the notes. As a young child of four or five, this was an exciting prospect, finally given the choice to choose and explore. This freedom – meshed with developing technical proficiency and inquisitiveness for exploration - was a joyous experience for me.

### **Isolation and Challenge**

My family moved overseas from Australia for a short while when I was six, living in China. The next teacher I encountered was a shock to me. Walking through his living room – its lurid colours and musty smell surrounded me whilst my mother remained in the anteroom, making her disappear into the darkness. The curtains were often drawn shut, the only light was provided by the dim yellowing light above the piano, which only illuminated the gleaming black and white keys, the teacher a looming figure and ominous presence. Once again, scales

preceded tedious finger exercises that were practiced to military precision. The monotony of repeating the same Czerny exercises over and over again, seemed mindless. A first slip was met by a nudge on the shoulder, the second slip up, a more forceful push to the same shoulder and a stern look. I resumed my playing more cautiously. Inevitably, the third mistake happened, and the shouting began. By the end of the lesson, I departed with tears rimming my eyes. I felt small, inconsequential, and of no value, my passion incinerated in this teacher's hot-headed rage. I dreaded every lesson.

With my choice of repertoire removed, I was indoctrinated into a repetitive cycle of technical exercises played again and again, up and down the keyboard. The teacher insisted on choosing pieces that I had to play, selections I had no affinity with. I reeled within in response to this tyrannical nightmare – I felt my life force being sucked up, my energy and enthusiasm melting away. I wanted to stop. But I didn't. This opportunity to learn from such a supposedly prestigious teacher was one that I could not discard. I was stuck in a situation where many Chinese children may culturally find themselves in, a filial piety and respect to elders that was indoctrinated in me since I was young (Liu, 2008). However, my mother listened to my fears, who whilst not withdrawing me, organised relaxed playing at home. We made a deal. I was to decide what I wanted to play at home – I could set my goals, organise my time as I liked – at home I was free from the birdcage.

I reflect upon these experiences feeling the importance of connection and understanding between teacher and student (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015). I acknowledge the need for the ability to teach not just the instrument, but the student as well (Raiber & Teachout, 2014). I see the importance of the relational and not just the technical (de Bruin, 2021; Rogoff & Bartlett, 2001) and realise the passage of discovering different ways of teaching to meet the needs of the student. There are those who teach the instrument with unyielding and mechanical employment to technical mastery. There are those who teach the student, who are willing and able to enter inside the mind of a child to understand what it is that makes them curious, and how such a learning journey may be created (Bruner, 1996; Wegerif, 2019). When I first began teaching was the first time I placed myself in the shoes of a teacher – and the first that I realised I could not approach teaching with the singlemindedness of demand, or the coldness of heart. I realise that from that moment, I compared teaching experiences. I balanced and judged these formative experiences, these teacher behaviours, contemplating why teachers taught the way they do.

Gaunt (2008) argues that experienced “teachers are the musical agents, the models, and the motivating forces for their students” (p. 215). Yet, Creech (2012) and Gaunt (2010) both suggest that the studio music lesson is a place of cloaked and concealed actions and behaviours. Kingsbury (1988) further asserts how dynastic traditions as well as highly individualized approaches and schools of thought dominate instrumental tuition. In practice, the studio music lesson is a place where standards of teaching are often not measured; there is no peer review, or critical appraisal of teaching. I place myself epistemologically in the shoes of the teacher, making sense as learner but also as teacher, seeing myself in that position of power – the arbiter of student curiosity and joy, or the authoritarian who silences with fear.

### **Complexity of Musical Growth**

Back in Melbourne, primary school brought musical friendships and camaraderie. I attended the local primary school, where all my neighbours attended, many of whom were also learning the piano, but with different teachers. I found myself amongst fellow musical kindred spirits with whom I could share challenges, accomplishments, and fears. Our learning relationship was of equals sharing music, performing, and helping each other as we grew in capacity and confidence.

We involved each other in our music making together creating a thriving social circle, and this created a compelling and industrious learning environment. We shared challenges, successes, and failures, and “not there yet” moments much like a community of practice (Wenger, 1999). Such a community promoted a competitiveness and motivation to excel. I thrived in this environment, yet just as soon as I found tangible benefits of my inclusion in it, I again moved to a different school and teacher.

Here at an independent catholic girls’ school, I was eight, I was the solitary piano player – the school pianist. Every week, I departed from my class, walked across the large green courtyard to the senior school where my piano lesson awaited. This action reinforced the isolation of the music studio, metaphorically offering a traversing, or boundary riding between child to adolescent, from open to the hidden, from good to better performer (Higgins, 2012). I moved from peripheral and shared communal participation to the leading role (Wenger, 1999) in choirs, the jazz band, and the orchestra.

Each of these musical experiences connected me in some way with a wider community, providing me with multifaceted ways of music-making that oriented us socially (Gyarmati & Kyte, 2003). This collectivity empowered us and humanised our community (Ruud, 2010). Small (1998, p. 94) asserts that “musicking is about the creation and performance of relationships ... a type of ritual situation, enacting ideal relationships which then become the foundation of community.” This was a foreign concept in my piano lessons to date.

### **Growing Independence**

My next teacher presented a palpable and viscous experience, profound in its simplicity. This teacher treated me like an adult, even though I was just entering my teenage years at thirteen. A responsibility was placed upon my shoulders – deciding my own practice choices, autonomy, direction, intensity and focus of vision. “What are we going to play today?” “What have you prepared for me to listen to?” I felt daunted and liberated being able to choose what I could present to the teacher and present what I had worked on.

This teacher had two grand pianos side by side, and large shimmering windows. He played a phrase and looked at me calmly: “Try and play this with total focus, not moving any more than necessary, and when you do move, make sure it is deliberate and purposeful. Stay very still, yes, good, keep going. Look at your hands like they are detached from you, take in every detail, think about what you are about to play – hear it in your head.”

Here I discovered new ways of playing, learning, and thinking about how to get better. I found depth in conscious practice and subconscious reinforcement opened a new realm of learning. I became equipped with strategies and approaches to analyse, plan and aim for what I wanted to achieve. I found a way of matching the sounds in my fingers to those that I heard in my head.

### **Synergy and Resonation**

It was a warm sunny Wednesday afternoon. I was dressed in my pilot uniform, having just left senior high school science class early, I was fifteen, waiting at the airport for my flying lesson. The instructor arrived. I mentally ran through the procedure – checks signals pre-and post-start... Pre-flight inspection complete, Seats Upright and locked. Brakes... Fuel... Flaps... I repeated this, day after day, week upon week.

Aviation studies brought about an epiphanous realisation. Regular flight simulations demanded this motor sensory process, control and movement procedure. Difficult and tedious at first, the mental practice of observing, engaging, and embodied adaptation and response to stimulus became second nature (Weinberg, 1981). I found a synergy between the mental

practice and imagery in the cockpit and my mental approach to music study. I brought the music practice room to flying, and flying to the practice room. I adjusted my use of imagery and mental practice on piano, to moving my hands over the keyboard and hearing the perfect rendition in my head with clarity, establishing a clear mental and physical conviction to accomplish this. This was revelatory.

From a phenomenological perspective, this resounds with Sudnow's (1978) personal observations in learning the piano over several years, that offers an intriguing exploration into the acquiring of pianistic skill. Sudnow establishes three broad phases of development. The first, labelled "Beginnings," describing the development of a vocabulary and establishment of motor skills. Phase two – "Going for Sounds" is the establishment of motor sensory movement with audiated (inner hearing) clarity and accuracy. The final phase reveals a synchronization between the ideas heard in his head, with the actions of his hands. He tells us, "I take my fingers to places so deeply mindful of what they will sound like that I can sing these piano pitches at the same time, just as I make contact with the terrain" (Sudnow, 2001, p. 129). Sudnow's detailed description of learning experiences captures my experiences, and the insight into a self-perceived pianistic development and progress through imagery. This process – of my brain hearing, comprehending, and embodying the act of faultless playing (Covington, 2005) became a fundamental aspect of successful learning for me with my last teacher.

Whilst the university environment demanded independence and discipline, it heralded a reflective practice and imagery use that through practice refined my performance. Whilst the high sandstone walls of the Conservatoire provided the physical disposition of shrouded knowledge, the democratic and egalitarian approaches of my teachers made knowledge and process accessible and attainable for the first time. Imagery for me was the missing part of the puzzle to my learning. This was not founded in rote repetition, gruff mannerisms or endless repetition. It was borne from a connection and relationality with my teacher, of uninhibited feeling, and of shared communal participation in the learning journey (Isohätälä et al., 2017).

### **Discussion: Reflection and Reflexivity in Studio Teacher Practice**

Instrumental music teachers are often left on their own, lacking contact and guidance as to what to do to find resources to resolve issues in their practice. Rodgers (2002) points out that reflection can happen "in solitude" (p. 863) with a teacher's isolated music studio teaching practice working against reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Instrumental music teachers lack opportunities for sharing experience and knowledge with no time and space for reflective practice (Guillemette, 2017).

The problem underlying this inquiry dwells in the lack of importance attributed to reflection by the studio teaching profession (Georgii-Hemming & Westvall, 2010), and the lack of professional development opportunities for studio teachers (Zehner et al., 2010). Reflective practice is often presented as an individual process that does not foreground collaboration or participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and that does not account value in working with others. Many teachers teach as they were taught (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019; Korthagen, 2017), reinforcing more didactic approaches and restraining pedagogic and relational innovation (de Bruin, 2022).

Dewey established the concept of reflective practice as a process of inquiry for problem-solving "through teachers' deliberate thoughtful dwelling on a specific event, incident or situation" (Burhan-Horasanlı & Ortaçtepe, 2016, p. 372). Schön (1983) defines a reflective practice as the ability to reflect on actions by engaging in a process of continuous learning rooted in professional knowledge and experiences. Mann and Walsh (2015, p. 17) describe "a process which helps teachers make appropriate adjustments to their methodology, adapt and supplement materials and create as ideal as possible an experience." Freshwater et al. (2008)



approaches reflection as retrospectively making sense of an experience in order to influence future practice. Whilst (O'Donovan, 2007) illustrates reflection as a more critical process of deliberative thinking, looking back, examining oneself and one's practice in order to improve future practice. Reflective practice offers a critical questioning of how professional knowledge and power operates (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) and how it can present opportunities for student centred approaches to teaching, as well as "dangers" of oppressive teacher-centred approaches (Baeten et al., 2010).

Reflexivity, however, implies being able to take an objective stance and look at ones' self or action from an external position. This distanced perspective can be with others, but usually occurs with our own self. Reflexivity is beyond critical reflection, more a "practice wisdom" (Camilleri, 1996), a "practical consciousness" (Young, 1990) and "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983). Reflexivity can be better understood as "a self-defining process that depends on monitoring of and reflection upon psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life" (Elliott, 2001, p. 37). Whilst de Saint-Laurent and Glăveanu (2016, p. 2) suggest reflexivity can facilitate a "*de-centration*, that prevents us from becoming trapped in unitary, singular and egocentric views of self and world", isolated occupations such as music studio teaching may render this safeguard limited. The symptoms of such centration include inflexibility, lack of creativity (Glăveanu & Lubart, 2014), but also a lack of sociality and relationality as humans (Gillespie, 2006; Mead, 1934).

It is only in my last years of learning that I have experienced reflective teachers able to reflexively adapt to me as the student. These learning experiences have provided a profound opportunity and realisation of how reflective practice in teachers positively impacts the technical, emotional and social paradigm that can make the music studio an inviting one. Investigating my learning experiences reveals a complexity of micro-moment teacher and student interactions, and the inter- and intra-psychological connectivity that promotes how teachers and students come to know "each other's minds" (Bruner, 1996, p. 12). Such classroom climates provide the impetus for deeper, and more profound learning and teaching experiences (Wegerif, 2008).

### **The Process of Learning and Imagery**

The attaining of personal musical goals requires an evolving autonomous cognition where individuals plan and adapt self-generated thoughts, feelings and action (Zimmerman, 2000). Mental imagery across many domains provides a cognitive experience of creating or recreating an event in the mind, but for musicians' imagery can bring in alignment that which they can imagine, with that they can do now, clarifying what they need to do to attain the desired goal (Connolly & Williamon, 2004; Munroe-Chandler & Guerrero, 2017).

The piano is a percussive instrument. It requires us to hit 88 wooden keys with all ten of our fingers. Imagery can involve hearing sounds before we play them (Covington, 2005), moving our hands over the keyboard in seemingly subconscious ways as if possessed (Sudnow, 1978), supplanting colours, metaphors, and images that help paint an aural picture of what we wish to create with our hands and our minds (Woody, 2002). Imagery as a practice tool is a powerful mode by which goal setting and goal attainment can be used as a short and longer-term goal setting device (Martin & Hall, 1995). Imagery use assists the learner imprint the embodied "end goal" as an auditory, motor sensory, imaginative or self-regulative strategy (de Bruin, 2016). Imagery places focus on the performer to what will "become" through a mindful process of crystalising what needs to be done to achieve what can be heard in the mind's ear.

### **The Better Teacher**

This study of my learning lifeworld has divulged various teaching approaches, and the varied success I found with them. In analysing the benefits of self-reflection and reflexivity, I contend the qualities and attributes that teachers may seek in being impactful in studio practice, in applying benefit to the learning of music and the growth of the child learner. In doing so, I hold myself up to scrutiny and self-assessment in my own teaching, hoping to attain those qualities I now hold in high regard.

I reflect on the unconnected attempts by previous teachers, the rote and drilled models and teacher-centred approaches that left me disheartened. I take solace that I am a more informed teacher because of these experiences. As a novice professional teacher, I fuse together what not to do with what I know, and how I can help a student become empowered by owning their own learning journey. As I teach now, I realise that I am continuing to learn about different ways to teach my students. Reflecting on what went well and what could improve, establishes a confidence and expectation in my teacher practice.

Numerous piano teachers have influenced the way I teach and relate to my students. Various teachers have shaped who I am today, and I build upon this knowledge with the aim of creating an environment that allows students to safely explore ways to express themselves musically, and a physical space that is welcoming and favourable to learning. Part of becoming a better teacher is putting one's experience as a learner, and the knowledge gained in teacher education into practice. This is easier said than done. As a beginning teacher I stand within a continuum between beginner learner and expert teacher. Yet, my experiences inform me of what I believe, what I value and what I wish to become still.

Teacher work is emotional, somatic, and personal (O'Connor, 2008). It is shaped by often uninspected perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions about approaches to teaching that are formed by professional, educational, and personal experiences across a lifetime (Bukor, 2011). As a perceiver of learning success, I hold a "historical thickness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 248) to which I draw experiences to and from my teaching of others. As a beginning teacher, I draw my myriad learning experiences to consider what the better teacher is and does with students, as well as question their practices and modes of operation.

Teachers feel the need to assert the rule for right learning and playing. In their way they may strip a student back to conform to their mould of apprentice to the master. The better teacher is mindful that each student is different and requires no mould. The teachers' journey to understanding learning is through respect for each of their student's qualities and needs, teaching so that these will evolve over time. My reflections as learner and now teacher inform that teachers should have the capacity to grasp the essence of a student's personal learning trajectory. A better teacher gives respect for progress made and work accomplished and sees both process and product as a valuable learning opportunity. They understand the learning journey of each student and how it may be different across a range of students. They celebrate both small and large moments of progress, and the difference in each.

A teacher is not an autocrat or a tyrant, and the better one will see limitations to such a strategy. Beginning teachers often teach the way they were taught (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019; Korthagen, 2017), and the better teacher balances between that which has been a learning impression upon them, and what is sage informed best practice. The better teacher listens and entrains positive and supportive feelings and connection. They can promote spoken, embodied and musical responses to discoveries, epiphanies, and joy. They are often the instigator and purveyor of these student affects. The better teacher sees and senses a student's growing awareness; perceptions, discernments, and does not just emphasize skill and knowledge but also growth and maturity (Halstead, 2004).

The better teacher engages in a self-awareness that is created through analytical reflection, shifts in perspective, and continual monitoring and adjustment of practices. This relies on comprehending current teaching behaviour and moving towards a desired outcome as an optimization of their pedagogical and relational activity (de Bruin, 2022; Guillemette & Tardif, 2016)

The better teacher guides empathically and is a fellow music maker engaged in their learning journey. An empathic teacher is aware of seeing and hearing through the senses of another; they can recognize this position of need and adjust their thinking and actions in responding for the now, as well as to make better the possibilities and feelings toward improvement. Palmer (2007, p. 10) purports that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from identity and integrity of the teacher.” The better teacher has the capacity to understand through observation and interaction and invests in the learning relationship of their students (Southcott & de Bruin, 2022).

### Coda

This autoethnographic study reveals how significant experiences with teachers, my early childhood social contexts have all contributed to creating who I am, as a learner, a teacher, and now researcher. It explores my experiences as a child of Chinese parents growing up in Melbourne, Australia. It shows the life choices I have forged, my childhood experiences driven not by austere teachers or a “tiger mum” stereotypical of many Asian children (Fung, 2016), but by my curiosity, desire, and enjoyment I experienced in the journey of learning. I know that I am not alone and offer acknowledgement of Heraclitus’s dictum “character is destiny” (Heraclitus, as cited in Liddy, 1998, p. 1975). This study explores the many complexities one experiences in a musical learning journey, and that such adventures are laden with twists and turns. It further examines my intent to improve upon my own professional practice as a developing teacher by reflecting on the pedagogic and behavioural traits of some teachers that sit at odds with philosophies of teaching oriented around enjoyment, curiosity and inclusion. Through sharing my experiences and knowledge with others, I hope to unveil elements of the cloaked nature of studio music teaching. Understanding better my social contexts and life experiences have has illuminated the shaping of my identity. Smilde (2008) suggests that “significant parts of a life story actually form a musician’s (professional) identity, within the concept of lifelong learning, performance and professional development is closely interconnected” (p. 244). Autoethnography uncovers ways in which we may shape our beliefs and how we are influenced by others and our surroundings.

Reflective practice of this kind compels me to consider the role of memory in the crafting and forging of my previous self, and the way I view my current self (Ellis, 2020). My increasing capacity for self-driven learning lay across a continuum, ranging from content-based descriptive reflection – occurring after an experience, to metacognitive reflection – being aware of and monitoring our thoughts during the experience, to transformative and intensive reflection – a higher level of reflection where the reflection may generate positive change (Grossman, 2009). Ryan and Bourke (2013) argue that transformative and intensive reflection become reflexive processes. Reflexivity needs to be “contextualised to specific teaching practices in order to lead changes to teaching and learning” (Feucht et al., 2017, p. 238).

I consider the duality of my perceptions, in that my observational self is tied to the world that is directly experienced from my social reality, and the motivational self – that is driven by past, present and future goals (Husserl, 1970). In recalling temporal objects, I am mindful that I cognitively mediate how reflection is not retention and reproduction (Husserl, 1964), but my memory creating meaning endowing conscious experiences (Husserl, 1970).

This self-study examined through a musical socio-cultural learning context has exposed intricacies of such meaning making experiences and interactions with others that influence the creation of my teacher values and beliefs. The revelations from this study have provided important insights into the way I learn and teach music, and the factors which have influenced this. I acknowledge the many teachers, instructors and mentors who have guided and supported, transferring to me not only their knowledge, but the strategies and techniques of their many years of experience that have shaped me to become who I am today.

Research suggests that we as humans are constantly rewriting ourselves to present as ever changing, yet continuous and coherent (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bochner, 1997; Smith & Sparkes, 2006). This autoethnography marks a point in my life, and I draw upon (Ellis, 2020) who urges that “at all times until death, we are in the middle of our stories, with new elements constantly being added” (p. 150). With each new teaching experience and learning environment, I will continue to interweave a constellation of experiences that become part of my evolving teacher identity and practitioner that I am, and what I hope to be.

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### Author Note

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