Interdisciplinary and Relational Approaches to Embodiment Conscious Music Performance Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: In this commentary on the fascinating study completed by Anderson César Alves and Marcos Nogueira, I discuss two avenues for considering the complexities of embodiment conscious music performance pedagogy. In the first, I contend that music, including but not limited to music performance pedagogy, is inherently interdisciplinary. In the second, I offer that music performance pedagogy, in particular "studio" or one-on-one pedagogy, is necessarily relational. It is my hope to add value to Alves and Nogueira's work, while also broadening the lens through which we observe the competencies of both teacher and student within the private lesson context. I close with suggestions for future studies, continuing the important conversation around exceptional teaching and learning for musicians.

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INTRODUCTION

THE role of the private studio teacher for young professional musicians, or, as we might call them, "emerging artists," is often the main focus in considering what it means to provide quality music performance instruction. In some settings, especially from the perspective of a university hiring committee, the most important driving factor in bringing on a new colleague to serve as a studio instructor is performance reputation. However, implicit in Alves and Nogueira's study (2024) is that performing and teaching are related - but separate - abilities. It is therefore wrong to presume those with the highest performance accolades are the best teachers; it is equally wrong to presume those who are the best teachers have less aptitude when it comes to the multifaceted activity that is music performance. Another important point, of course, is that successful pedagogy in no small part depends on the student. Additionally, and noted by Alves and Nogueira in the accompanying article, the work of teacher and student, individually and together, is also highly individual and deeply personal.

My background includes two decades of work as a professional singer and voice teacher of students of all ages and abilities, including aspiring and emerging professional singers. While the content of instruction and repertoire selection in my own work is obviously different from the observations in Alves and Nogueira's study, the overall processes, including skill acquisition toward technique development and expansion of expressive potential, are analogous, as are the ways we define quality or high-level teaching. I write on play theory and embodiment in music and so was pleased to learn of Alves and Nogueira's important work, which connects to many of my academic and artistic interests in direct and indirect ways. In this brief commentary, I explore two extensions for context around Alves and Nogueira's work: first, the interdisciplinary nature of music performance pedagogy; and second, the dialectical nature of pedagogy that includes the role of the student. While this response is not comprehensive, it will serve to briefly introduce broader connections to both the philosophical implications of this work as well as practical applications related to student experience. I hope my contribution might inspire additional studies exploring embodiment-based processes and pedagogies in the field of music performance.

MUSIC INSTRUCTION IS INTERDISCIPLINARY

One of the most important things to remember when considering how multifaceted music instruction is, whether in the classroom or in the private studio setting, is that music itself, or musicing (borrowing from Elliott (1995), "*musicing* in the collective sense to mean all five forms of music making: performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and conducting" (p. 40) [1]), is an interdisciplinary endeavor. The doing of music in all forms draws upon a multitude of skills, including but not limited to physical or embodied practices, knowledge of history and style, spatio-logical reasoning, language, and expression. Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences theory, when applied to the different competencies

required to play [2] or make music (to "do" music), can provide a particular set of competencies; Alves and Nogueira's (2024) study provides its own useful set as well, tailored to the role of the teacher (p. 4). Of course, we must attend to the usual warning in embracing lists, that is, not to approach understanding of the arts in ways that can become reductive in application. However, as starting points for considering the multiplicities of understanding, expression, and communication in music, and here specifically in music performance pedagogy, a list of competencies lays a foundation for examining the synthesis of cognitive and embodiment processes in the expressive practices of musicing and its respective pedagogies. This is per se interdisciplinary in scope, and necessarily so.

Alves and Nogueira's point about "embodied consciousness" is an important contribution to conversations about kinesthetic awareness (LeBorgne & Rosenberg, 2021; Friedlander, 2018; Brown, 1996) [3]; Howard (2008) notes, "Put another way, how performing artists think *from* and *through* their bodies *to* the complex movements or vocalizations they must make is to become one with their art" (p. 68) [4]. By extension, of course, is how the teacher communicates with the student, including how the teacher's body engages in the process of teaching. We can speak of empathic kinesthetic awareness (Brown, 1996), for example, recognizing our own "embodied consciousness" (Alves & Nogueira, 2024) in response to that of the student's developing awareness. In this example, the teacher can frame their response or instructions through synthesizing a multiplicity of awarenesses, so to speak: awareness of the student experience, as described by the student and in connection to the teacher's observations of the student, as well as the teacher's own embodied consciousness or kinesthetic awareness in the moment. This should be determined or assessed through an ongoing dialogue with the student. The days of teachers placing hands physically on student bodies without consent are and should remain in the past. Rather, teachers must help students learn to articulate their experiences in ways meaningful to the student. Understanding the student experience connects to what I will briefly explore below in the student's role, but the overall point is to emphasize the need to synthesize multiple elements of information, knowledge, observation, and experience through both embodied and cognitive reflection, as per Alves and Nogueira's competencies (2024), and then discern how to proceed. This requires calling upon a variety of skills, knowledge bases, and reflective processes, often in the same moment; in the lesson, the integration of these happens in real time.

One final point here for consideration is the possibility that synthesis of a variety of competencies required for virtuosic performance (Howard, 2008) does not suggest the existence of virtuosic teaching, something Howard (2008) notes as only metaphoric: "several independent aspects of exceptional teaching as a performance can be identified, even to the point of allowing the *metaphor* of virtuosity in teaching, particularly as it appears linked by causal-cognitive relations to virtuosic achievements" (p. 52) [5]. While we might consider the synthesis of competencies itself a virtuosity, recalling Helfgot and Beeman (2002) and Brown (1996), successful integration of this synthesis in teaching and learning is dependent on a wide variety of human factors. Private music teaching is therefore not only interdisciplinary, it is also relational, and as such depends on the capabilities and responsivity of both teacher and student.

THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT

An important aptitude in teaching lies in the teacher's ability to synthesize, prioritize, and present feedback in real time and in language specifically tailored through the teacher's relational history with an individual student. [6] This complex web of communication in music performance pedagogy involves layers of competencies, including but not limited to Alves and Nogueira's (2024), and requires both parties to engage in ongoing development. In order for a student to act in accordance with feedback, for example, to try a suggestion or respond in some other way, the teacher must explain concepts and instructions so the student can understand, often drawing upon previous lesson content specific to the student. Since student–teacher relationships change over time, we might say the synthesis of pedagogical competencies is filtered through the ever-evolving lens of each student–teacher relationship. As this may be different for different students, it requires a high degree of empathy and often ingenuity on the part of the teacher.

It also requires a level of responsiveness on the part of the student. This is especially true with embodiment processes. While teachers can rely to an extent on empathic kinesthetic awareness, the best information comes from the student articulating their experience. This helps the student learn kinesthetic awareness and develop vocabulary for describing embodied expressivity, or what Alves and Nogueira (2024) term "embodiment consciousness." In singing, for example, the teacher cannot grasp how sound production feels in the student's body if the student does not tell them. The teacher must give the student space to speak and the student must participate (Heisel, 2017). Students will often describe embodiment in individual and creative ways; some conversation alongside musicing allows for experimentation in verbal and musical expressivity, leading to deeper shared understanding. This also holds students accountable to the lesson process, a crucial component of music performance pedagogy success.

Bodies, and by extension, kinesthetic understanding and learning, are highly individual and not easily quantifiable; however, we do know certain skills are necessary for technical development and proficiency in music (Gardner, 1973). This is true of both singing as well as instrumental music-making. Standards, benchmarks, and other such tools are not without purpose and can motivate students, guide practice sessions, and provide measurable feedback. Alves and Nogueira (2024) note that expert teachers look beyond these or approach them creatively and experimentally (p. 6), two strategies dependent "upon the learner's receptivity and capability" (Howard, 2008, p. 54). Students must be able to participate in their own learning as agents with some autonomy. This means the teacher must sustain an open environment for questions and discussion and the student must take a measure of responsibility for their participation as well. It is only when all parties engage that the deepest learning can occur – the learning that results in lasting skill, technique, and expressive growth. While full discussion of the distinction between skill and technique [7] is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is useful to recall Nachmanovitch (1990) who notes, "To create, we need both technique and freedom from technique. To this end, we practice until our skills become unconscious" (p. 73) and "When skill reaches a certain level, it hides itself" (p. 74). Expert musicing is achieved through synchronicity of mind and body. This level of "embodied consciousness" is what the effective teacher models and seeks to evoke in the student, such that skill and technique are hidden in service of expression (Nachmanovitch, 1990; Helfgot & Beeman, 2002). Assessing student capabilities and guiding students toward success means assessing students individually and holistically (Alves and Nogueira, 2024), including observing their ever-expanding potential (Howard 2008; Heisel, 2013, 2017) beyond, as well as, inclusive of what benchmarked, quantitative data ascertain (Alves and Nogueira, 2024). Success requires active and engaged student participation. Exceptional teaching can and should be considered exceptional collaboration (Heisel, 2013, 2017; Gallwey, 1977; Brown, 1996). Such collaboration in embodiment conscious music performance pedagogy may utilize as well as transcend quantifiable measurements, even as it expands into the more amorphous but all-important realms of expressivity, communication, and connection.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to extract absolutes from studies on private studio lessons because of wide variations in subjects, materials, contexts, and relationships. This should not deter multiple studies, but rather encourage diversity of scholarship in this area. Since studio teaching is highly individualized, the more studies available, the broader our collective understanding of teaching and learning in this context becomes. This not only offers more options to teachers, it also offers more examples of multilayered synthesis, communication, connection, and expressivity.

Alves and Nogueira's study (2024) provides a useful framework for considering a specific set of competencies involved in teaching, recognizing what Howard (2008) alludes to when he notes, "Potential in the area of human performance involves many variables, including personality, persistence, tolerance of criticism, and the like, that may or may not be quantifiable but are measurable and estimable in the judgement [*sic*] of those who have *done* it or know what it is to do it" (p. 20–1) [8]. The study leaves room for follow-up studies to both broaden and deepen our understandings of the complex, multifaceted, relational, and interdisciplinary activity of music performance pedagogy, especially in connection to "embodied consciousness" and the ways we process, develop, create, and communicate new knowledge (Elliott, 1991) through the acts of musicing. Future studies might include teachers and students of different genders (all interview samples here are men), ages, and backgrounds; more student experiences and reflections; and further exploration of what competencies inform exceptional learning, which might be explored within the supplied framework of proposed competencies involved in expert teaching.

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NOTES

[1] Original emphasis.

[2] Here, I have chosen "play" music to connect directly to the notion of "musicing," and have argued (Heisel, 2013) "music needs play" (p. 76); that is, we call the "doing" of music "playing" music. Through the play theory lens, we might also consider things like composition, improvisation, and even music scholarship "playing with music" (perhaps in addition to "playing music"), this latter extension suggesting new scholarship establishing play in those activities connecting to and through music but not specific to performance, practice, or pedagogy.

[3] Many voice or vocal pedagogy textbooks include discussions of kinesthetic awareness and proprioception for singers and teachers of singing. The parenthetical list here is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to show three distinct examples of authors connecting this concept to the fields of vocal performance and pedagogy.

[4] Original emphasis.

[5] Original emphasis.

[6] This discussion presumes the teachers in question are fair, personable to the extent necessary to evoke and sustain connection (the same here can be said of the students), and balanced in their approach, not considering themselves to be the sole experts and not behaving unethically (Brown, 1996; Helfgot & Beeman, 2002; Heisel 2013, 2017).

[7] I go into this in greater detail in my dissertation (Heisel, 2013).

[8] Original emphasis.

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