

The potential of the masterclass

A conversation between Isabelle Perrin and Ingrid Maria Hanken

Isabelle Perrin is a harp professor at the Norwegian Academy of Music, where she also heads the Strings and Harp Department. She has participated in the CEMPE-project on teaching and learning in masterclassesⁱ. Ingrid Maria Hanken is Professor of Music Education at the same institution and manages the project. In this conversation between the two, we learn more about the project and the students' experiences from participating in masterclasses.

What do the students learn in masterclasses?

Isabelle: I have taken an interest in how we teach and learn in masterclasses for a number of years. I think it began when I was a student at the Juilliard School and noticed how there could be big differences between masterclasses, even when they were given by outstanding musicians. Sometimes it was very interesting and educational to be in the audience, and you noticed how the performing students made progress in a short space of time. Other times it was simply boring, and you would struggle to hear any improvements on the part of the participating students. I now give masterclasses myself on a regular basis, and that has made me even more interested in finding out how to ensure that my students get something out of them, whether they are performing or just observing.

Ingrid: I have also been interested in the masterclass from a pedagogical perspective. It's quite a unique form of tuition, whereby the student is being taught by a teacher who doesn't know them in front of an audience who is also expected to learn something from it. The whole event may last no more than half an hour, but both the performing student and the audience expect to hear audible results. I can't think of a more challenging learning situation for all the parties involved.ⁱⁱ This is why I'm so intrigued to hear that you have tried to find out more about the students' thoughts and experiences surrounding masterclasses. There is *some* research looking at this from the students' perspective,ⁱⁱⁱ but we don't yet know much about it.

A student questionnaire

Isabelle: I've created a simple questionnaire that the students complete anonymously and return to me after I've given a masterclass. So far I've visited the Royal

Conservatoire in The Hague, the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Royal College of Music in London, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff, the Festival de Harpe en Avesnois and Hong Kong Harp Chamber. I've also distributed the questionnaire to students at the Norwegian Academy of Music when we've held masterclasses with outside teachers. The harp classes are usually quite small, so I've received responses from a total of 36 students.

One of the questions is how many masterclasses they have participated in either as performers or listeners. They had the option of ticking 1–3 or more than 4. It turned out that most of them had participated in four or more masterclasses both as performers and as listeners. I also asked them how many masterclasses they were planning to attend in the coming years. Most of them answered 1–3 masterclasses a year, while 13 said 4 or more a year.

Masterclasses as inspiration or to show off

Ingrid: What are your thoughts around that? Is it better the more masterclasses they attend? I can see that one of the students who ticked four or more masterclasses has written in the comments:

I do learn a lot from masterclasses. When you are young and want to learn about music and your instrument it is very inspiring to meet people and to hear their experience and their views on the music.

Another states that "...they are very useful, both as good deadline points in the year and as performance practice." This suggests that the students use masterclasses as an inspiration, as a motivational interim goal, and as an opportunity to hone their performance skills in front of an audience.

Isabelle: At the same time it can be problematic that some students want to go to that many masterclasses just to be able to put on their CVs that they have attended masterclasses with such and such. This is not good, because they are not doing it to learn, just to show off. One student writes:

Masterclasses are not only good to receive some musical advice on the piece you are playing, but also to meet and get to know extraordinary musicians who sometimes sit on your competition jury.

This could suggest that in some cases the students think tactics above everything else and use masterclasses to further their careers. And that's not really the intention behind them.

Ingrid: Those very same concerns were raised during a survey I carried out, in which I interviewed experienced masterclass teachers.^{iv} One of them admitted that he, too, used masterclasses in that way:

It is only about status, it has nothing to do with knowledge. I also write on my CV that I have had master classes with (world famous musician), but I have actually learned more from a lot of other people. (...), but he is such a big name that I signal that I wish to be associated with him.

Learning as listener

Isabelle: Still, it's clear from what this student writes in the comments that they are primarily there to learn. Particularly interesting were the answers to my question of which is more beneficial during a masterclass: to perform or to listen – or both. All but four of them say they benefit as much from performing as from listening. Many of them state that they learn different things in the two different situations, such as this student:

In my opinion it is really good to do both: listen and play! You can learn in so many different ways! You learn while playing very intensely (with the muscles and the brain). When listening you can pay attention to things you don't notice while playing.

Ingrid: I was slightly surprised to find they were so convinced that they also learn by being an observer. Studies conducted by both Stabell and Creech and colleagues^v have found that students are less motivated to attend masterclasses when they are not

performing themselves. At the same time there is a good deal of research that concludes how much we humans can actually learn just by observing.^{vi}

Isabelle: Yes, I believe that first and foremost they learn to listen. If you can't listen, you can't be a musician. It's much easier to listen during masterclasses where you are not performing, because you don't have to worry about playing correctly. They learn in a more relaxed way because there is no pressure; they don't need to demonstrate their skills. So listening in on a masterclass means you learn to listen in an effective way, an active way. They can listen and understand what is good and what is less good and why, and how the student can make changes in order to improve. And if they learn to do that by listening to others, they are well on their way to doing the same for themselves. And that is what is so important to me.

They must be able to cope by themselves after they graduate. They shouldn't need me or anyone else to tell them that "you should've used a different finger here", or whatever. They must learn to find solutions and to make their own assessments. So when I give masterclasses I ask a lot of questions, because I want to make them think. I don't want to serve them the answer on a plate. They must find the solutions themselves.

Another good thing about being a spectator during a masterclass is that they may come to realise that they're not alone – they discover that others are struggling with the same problems and face the same challenges.

Ingrid: Absolutely. Albert Bandura^{vii}, who has studied how we learn by observing others, points out how important this is to our confidence in our own abilities, which in turn has an impact on how we perform. When we see others strive to achieve things that we, too, want to accomplish, and then discover how they make improvements by working hard, then that can reassure us that we, too, will succeed and motivate us to make an effort. It also helps us to understand that learning is a process that takes time, that it's essentially hard work and not "talent" that is the key to success, the latter obviously being more difficult to do anything about.

Learning from each other

Isabelle: This way masterclasses can also help create a feeling of being part of a class or a sense of kinship that is very important where the students trust each other rather than vie against each other.

During a masterclass the audience usually sit still and observe. I have wondered about how important it is to audience members to be able to ask questions and make comments along the way. I therefore created a question to that effect in the questionnaire and asked them to answer on a scale from 5: very important to 1: not important. The answers given went right across the scale. Fifteen respondents had ticked 5 or 4, clearly indicating that they feel it is important to be able to comment or ask questions, while 12 ticked 1 or 2, thus not considering it to be important. Their comments give an insight into their reasoning. For instance, students who don't deem it to be important write that they would rather ask questions after the class has ended in order not to interrupt the flow, or they find questions and comments along the way distracting. One also writes that any questions they may have will usually be asked by the performing student or indirectly answered by the teacher during the masterclass.

The students who feel it's important to be able to comment or ask questions provide comments such as this: "It is very important as a sort of exchange between me and the teacher/harpist". They highlight the issue of making direct contact with the teacher. One of the students says something interesting. She or he has ticked both 5 and 2, justifying it like this:

The openness and inviting atmosphere where everyone FEELS welcome to ask questions is important, not necessarily that I get to open my mouth, but that the possibility is there.

In other words, she wants to be given the opportunity, but she doesn't necessarily need to take it.

Being included

Ingrid: That is interesting in light of what Creech and colleagues^{viii} found in their survey. They discovered that one important reason why students didn't turn up to masterclasses as observers was that they didn't feel included.

Isabelle: It's clearly very important that the audience feel included. I try to ensure that they are included in a variety of ways. One obvious thing is to speak loudly enough for them to hear what is going on. I also make it clear to them that they can just ask if something is unclear or if they have questions, so they know that the opportunity is there. Besides, I tend to address the audience a lot, ask them questions, encourage feedback on the student's playing and ask them to consider different methods of execution. I need to talk directly to them and not just to the student performing if they are to feel involved and included. But the most important device is perhaps my own enthusiasm and passion for what I do. I think that rubs off on the audience.

Ingrid: I think we can conclude that the students who responded to the survey confirm that the students who are performing, as well as the audience, are given ample opportunities for learning during masterclasses.

ⁱ CEMPE is the Norwegian Academy of Music's *Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education*.

ⁱⁱ For more information, see Hanken, I. M. (2008) Teaching and learning music performance: The master class. *Finnish Journal of Music Education*, Vol 11, (1-2), pp. 26–36.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Creech, A. et al. (2009) Conservatoire students' perceptions of master classes. *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 26 (3), 315–331 and Stabell, E. M. (2010) *Mesterklassen. Læringspotensiale og funksjon i musikkutdanningen*. Master thesis, Norwegian Academy of Music.

^{iv} Hanken, I. M. (2011) The benefits of the master class: The masters' perspective. In Holgersen, S-E. & Nielsen, S. Graabræk (Eds.) *Nordisk musikkpedagogisk forskning. Årbok 12, 2010*, Norwegian Academy of Music: NAM research publications 2011:2 pp. 149–160.

^v See Creech, et al. (2009) and Stabell (2010).

^{vi} See Hanken, I. M. (2015) Listening and learning in a master class. *Music Education Research*, Vol 15 (4).

^{vii} Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy. The Exercise of Control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.

^{viii} See Creech, et al. (2009)