

The Power of Silence

Extend the “Rest” in Music Teaching

by Gloria Chu

This past summer, I met with a few other passionate educators, and engaged in casual conversations on teaching methods. We challenged each other to share clips of our teaching sessions, and we discussed teaching strategies. Watching myself teach was an enlightening experience! It brought to my attention something I never noticed before: how much time do I give a student to respond to each of my questions? How many minutes did the student speak, compared to me? The accounting side of me took over and I started analyzing the numbers. The data revealed I took centre stage when it came to talking. Seventeen minutes of the half hour lesson was spent making music, either by the student, the teacher demonstrating, or playing together. Of the remaining 13 minutes, I talked for 8. That left only

5 minutes when the student had a chance to say anything in the lesson. Speaking does not have to be the only form of communication; however, it is a useful method to cultivate reflective thinking. It was also astonishing that there was only 3 minutes of silence in the entire 30 minute lesson. The silence was intermittently spread between the 44 questions I asked; and I never waited for more than 2.5 seconds before I jumped in.

Research studies from Mary Budd Rowe and Robert Stahl demonstrate that pausing for 3 or more seconds shows a noticeable positive impact on learning. Yet studies show a teacher waits less than 1.5 seconds on average. It is interesting to discover that with a minimum of 3 seconds, there are fewer responses such as “I don’t know,” a

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shrug of the shoulder, or no response at all. The additional time allows the student to reflect, consider, and perhaps ask follow-up questions. This develops more complex information processing and higher-level thinking.

The study finds that 5 seconds of silence yields even better results, perhaps even 15 seconds. Time is necessary for cognitive thinking. There is a widespread practice of a teacher interrupting or cutting a student off to spoon feed knowledge. This deprives the student from completing his thinking and composing a proper response. This practice is especially prevalent when a student pauses beyond 0.5 seconds. Extended silence fosters learning. Process is how a learner makes sense of ideas, formulates her thoughts and prepares a thoughtful answer. So I challenge you: the next time you ask a question, pause for 5 to 15 seconds before stepping in. This silence or “rest” may feel intolerable, yet it is not longer than a 4/4 four bar introduction at 69bpm. An extra few seconds empowers students to process and gain confidence in their response. Let’s appreciate the “rest” in music teaching.



Gloria Chu is a pedagogue, RCM examiner, festival adjudicator, composer and performer. She holds a Master of Arts in Piano Pedagogy, and mentors students in piano, violin and voice. Gloria is passionate for music education and has explored learning with the Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Shenandoah University, the Juilliard School, and the University of Ottawa, in vocal, string and piano pedagogy. She is currently studying her second Masters at the University of Chichester focusing on violin pedagogy.

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