

TEACHING PIANO PEDAGOGY

We Need All the Trees

BY BARBARA ENGLISH MARIS

Once upon a time, not so very long ago and not so very far away, there was a woodsman who lived in a deep forest. One fine day the ruler of that forest sent a message to the woodsman. "Find for me the most wonderful, the most beautiful tree in the forest." The woodsman knew that he had been assigned an important responsibility, and so he appointed three other people to serve with him on the Selection Committee.

The following day, the committee gathered and began its task of selecting "the most wonderful, the most beautiful tree in the forest." Solemnly they walked from one tree to the next. Whenever a member of the selection committee noticed any sign of a defect or damage, that tree was tagged for elimination. Gradually the Selection Committee identified all the trees that did not meet their high standards and did not qualify as "the most wonderful" or "the most beautiful tree in the forest".

At the end of the day, only two trees had not been tagged and rejected. Both were tall and straight. Both had even branches covered with healthy leaves. As darkness invaded the forest, the Selection Committee agreed to adjourn until morning. "We have selected two semifinalists," the chairperson announced with fatigue. "Tomorrow morning, we will reconvene to make the final decision and inform our ruler."

At dawn, the Selection Committee gathered again in the heart of the forest. The two trees that had not been eliminated stood tall and leafy. They were magnificent specimens. But suddenly the woodsman realized that something in the forest was missing. "Where," he asked his companions, "are all those other trees? Where are the trees we tagged yesterday? Where are the trees we eliminated because they were not the most wonderful? And where are the squirrels and other creatures who lived in those trees? Why is it so quiet in the woods? Where are the birds that we heard singing yesterday?" The Selection Committee looked around the barren land and realized sadly that the majestic forest had been transformed.

The formal report of the examiners presented the following conclusion: "Although we have located two magnificent, verdant trees in the woods, the committee has been unable to select a single winner. Because of that impasse, we have decided to have both trees cut down and sent to our ruler. Then she can examine them, decide which is "the *most* wonderful, the *most* beautiful tree" in the forest, and announce the grand winner.

The moral of this tale is: The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts. Sometimes looking for the *very best* may prevent us from seeing and valuing *all the rest*.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

To have a beautiful and healthy forest, there must be room in the woods for many trees, even those that are not the tallest or the most verdant. The strength and richness of ecological environments depends on more than identifying the most majestic tree.

To have a healthy musical culture, there must be room for many people who create and enjoy music—even those who have not been acclaimed as great musicians. The health of our musical culture will not be sustained by identifying and rewarding only those who obtain perfect scores from Selection Committees, Judges, or Boards of Examiners.

And yet, in today's culture, children and students are surrounded by activities that identify the best through a lengthy process of eliminating all the rest. In spelling bees, beauty pageants, talent contests, basketball playoffs, tennis tournaments, and Olympic events, individuals and teams continue to participate until only one remains. Only one winner is declared, and even the winner realizes that, on another occasion, she or he might be a loser.

As parents and teachers, we have a responsibility to be aware of the long-range negative effects of activities and events that seek to remove those participants who are less than perfect, those that are declared unacceptable. What do we gain and what do we lose when we celebrate the elimination of "the weakest link"? What are the benefits of demeaning others and shouting, "You messed up. You're fired!"?

When my daughters were little girls, learning to ice skate, the instructor began the first class by leading the children to the middle of the rink and having them kneel on the ice. Then she showed them how to get up and balance themselves on the runners of their skates. The dramatic result was that as soon as the youngsters learned how to get up, they lost their fear of falling. Yet it was those early tumbles that enabled them to practice getting up with ease. Because of their initial struggles, my daughters soon learned to maintain balance and to enjoy skating.

What about those adults who harbor painful memories of being told to sit in the back row of music class and just mouth the words of the songs? How many of yesterday's "crows" now serve on school boards and control budgets that affect music programs? If only the most beautiful songbirds are permitted to sing, the woods will be very quiet. If only the most wonderful trees are allowed to remain in the woods, the forest will disappear. If we eliminate all but the very best performers in our musical environment, we undermine the strength of our entire cultural environment.

We all suffer when our children and students decide that there is no room in the world for weak links and runner-ups. If young people focus their energies on avoiding the demeaning words, "You're fired!", how can they grow through new experiences? If they do not learn to find their own voices and recognize their own ideas, we all become losers.

As piano teachers, we face an important responsibility. Our challenge is to become nurturing, supportive teachers who seek to enhance the musical growth of all our students. Now, *that* is a worthwhile pedagogical assignment! ■■■