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Mr. Greco

English III

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Taking the Detour

On a Tuesday afternoon, Sandra Wright Shen teaches a lesson in her living room in Palo Alto. The furniture is carefully placed to resemble a mini-theater, and when I look around, Monet's water lilies vibrate a gentle purple from the wall. The comfortable glow from the small lamps above the pianos completes the friendly ambiance. Sandra stands next to her student at the grand piano in the center of the room, who plays through what they have prepared for the lesson. She listens, nodding, and occasionally intervenes when necessary to give pointers at tricky sections. Then, she gives feedback.

Sandra asks her student about her thoughts on the story of the music, inquiring, "What is the story of the music?" Focusing on the visual details seen in the composition of one section, they compare the music to hikers at Rancho San Antonio.

"What do they do on the way up? Is the way they hike up and down the same?" Sandra poses open-ended questions, giving her student an opportunity to interpret the music.

"Maybe they are arguing on the way down," her student suggests, noticing the cascading descent of octaves toward the end of the section.

Sandra receives this with a laugh. "Really! I would think they would agree!" she says. She takes a seat at the second piano against the wall of the room to reinforce her words with a visual demonstration.

Sandra takes time to explain how certain techniques might function with the music in a better way than others, which helps her student understand *why*—beyond simply following the instruction. She emphasizes having a unique characterization of each section throughout the piece, which shows through her suggestions about the conversations, emotions, and spirit the composer generates through their music. Praise is not lacking in any way. I hear, “That’s it! Again. Beautiful! Let’s try one more time.” When her student successfully implements a new technique, Sandra encourages her: “I want *everyone* to hear that sunshine coming through.”

From my own experience as a student as well as hearing the perspectives of her other students, I already knew that Sandra is a wonderful teacher, but I had never directly asked her about what inspired her to be an educator in music. I was surprised by what I found from the interview: teaching had not initially been her intended path. Instead, teaching became a passion over time, transforming from a difficult task into a rewarding opportunity to connect with unique individuals.

Today, Sandra educates selflessly by passing on her techniques as well as the values she learned from experience during her journey of becoming a concert pianist. She inspires her students through maintaining quality relationships focused on their development. Despite teaching not being her originally intended path, she gains personal fulfillment from interacting with her students and develops wisdom as she gives back to her community.

Sandra was destined to be wise. Before she joined the world, Sandra’s mother had a dream that her baby was going to be born with the “ears of an elephant.” Concerned, as soon as her daughter was born, she asked the nurse, “[Are] her ears okay?” As Sandra grew and developed her passion in music, her mother realized, “Oh, maybe she has a musical ear” (Shen).

Music had already been present in Sandra's home in Taipei, Taiwan. She attended preschool, where she often heard the national anthem being played. One afternoon, Sandra came home and began picking out the familiar tune on the piano. And her mother thought, "Hey! Maybe this kid has some talent!", enrolled her in music lessons and later, an elementary school with a focus on music. There, Sandra experienced her first rush of excitement from a musical victory. She reflects, "There was an exam everybody took. And all of a sudden, one day I got called out and stood in front of the whole school and I was receiving this paper. It was an honor that I got first prize...and that sense of honor felt really good. And I didn't, at that time, know what that meant. But later I saw how happy my mom was, how happy my dad was. And so I just kept going and going" (Shen).

Her elementary school education brought her to play a great variety of pieces, including sonatas by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mozart's sonatas today are not necessarily known for their technical complexity, but the way they were composed places light on the simple elegance we see around us, appealing to listeners' emotions and their imagination. "It gave me this sense almost like a mini opera, like I'm playing theater music, and I could see some characters come alive in my imagination, just hearing the music and trying to conduct this little play in my mind," Sandra elaborates. Mozart came to be an important musical influence on Sandra in the rest of her journey. "I think Mozart really unlocked something very special, the meaning of this joy, transcending joy. Despite how I felt at that moment, when I start playing, [it just] lifted me" (Shen). Mozart's music helped Sandra begin the journey of discovering what music meant to herself.

Sandra was able to experience more learning opportunities beyond those offered by her school. When she was thirteen years old, she had the chance to travel to Europe and study in a

music summer festival. There, she heard performances of the final string quartet pieces composed by Ludwig van Beethoven. It encouraged her to know that although Beethoven suffered so much from losing his hearing toward the end of his life, including while he had composed these pieces, he could still produce music that brought so much joy to others. “In the middle of the performance, I just sensed that there was like this elderly man who went through so much in life, and he's turning to us and telling us, ‘Keep going’, and there is this encouragement from somebody who had been through so much...that that sense of positive encouragement just touched me so deeply. And that was the point where I decided this is something I would like to do. I saw the meaning of music's touching the heart without words. There's this direct channel and bringing something so beautiful into the soul and the spirit” (Shen).

Sandra decided to pursue her interest in music by attending the Peabody Institute of Music in Maryland, majoring in music performance. Although she flourished in the new communities she got to know and benefitted from the learning opportunities that Peabody presented, it was difficult to express herself with confidence. This was a characteristic that had carried over from high school, and the greatest challenge lay in stopping herself from plummeting down the rabbit hole of telling herself, “I'm not good enough, and I need to do more” (Shen). Sandra reflects, “There is always self-doubt” (Shen), especially being a performer. Even today this is a common mentality, not only among aspiring performers but all students in our product-driven society, showing it to be a universal obstacle. Compared with how Sandra carries herself today at a performance, she has truly come a long way. In the stories she shared with me, her husband, Raymond, played a monumental role in helping her to develop the confidence of a pianist. “When we got married, he just said, ‘Sandra, you need to start thinking you're the pianist. And not just *sometimes* you're the pianist’” (Shen). Sandra’s philosophy today

reflects her husband's faith in her, which later became her own. "If I want to be a pianist and I know I am born to be a pianist, I *am* a pianist, and I start living in that lifestyle. I start breathing like a pianist" (Shen). When I listened to her performance on April 9th, hosted by Steinway Society, I saw how she was able to apply the confidence of *being* the pianist as she spoke about each composer whose piece she was about to perform, took a seat at the bench, and simply paused for a few moments with her eyes closed, composing herself with a moment of peace, before launching into Mozart's joyful variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman", or Twinkle, Twinkle.

On the subject of personal challenges, I asked Sandra if any part of the experience has changed for her in overcoming the mental game of a performance—especially the pressure to fulfill the expectations that are placed on her to deliver something meaningful—since her time in college. I received a monsoon of wisdom, which I plan to apply to the rest of my own journey and hope other students will be able to be inspired by as well. "I remember hearing Yo-Yo Ma [say] that the butterfly will never go away," Sandra describes. "Before the concert there is always this little momentum where the adrenaline is going and you have this little stomach thing going, but the difference with more and more performance opportunity is that you learn to embrace it. So instead of allowing this adrenaline to [be steered] in the wrong direction, you embrace it and let that be like a friend" (Shen). This was an important value that Sandra learned from her experience as a performer: practicing and continuously engaging in these situations that challenge us can help us become familiar with our own dynamics and emotions. With more exposure, we can feel beyond the raw emotion and take the extra energy to focus on the task at hand. "Before, you know how we're worried about who's in [the] audience, and on Facebook, [when] I posted my concert, "Oh, somebody is coming. Oh, no, that person is coming!", you are

all worried...but [it] come[s] down to just focusing on what is in front of me, and really soaking into that music, and also not making the performance a big deal. There shouldn't be big or small performances...They are all equally important, but they're not like [a] life or death situation” (Shen).

Her next words spoke to my heart. “If you set so much expectation on that one event, then you could hardly breathe. You're too afraid of messing it up...So the thing is, just take it easy,” she advises. “Not a big deal. If I make a mistake, nobody dies, right? And enjoy the whole journey” (Shen). Ultimately, the most important thing is to keep growing as an individual. “I remember during a competition, my teacher said to me, ‘Sandra, if you win the competition, you're still the same person the next day. It doesn't make you a better person. And if you don't win the competition, you're still the same person. It doesn't make you less worthy.’ So I think that is also [a] very important thing that the event doesn't make you greater or less worthy. It's that consistency of striving for what's better, that journey” (Shen).

At Peabody, Sandra had not gone through the program to obtain a Doctor of Musical Art degree, which applies to students studying music history, theory, and education. “I took the route of competitions,” she says, “and I was preparing—I really wanted to be a performer.” And a performer she did become—a dedicated and successful performer. So what brought her into teaching, a completely different field? I sensed that Sandra’s attitude toward her role in teaching upon graduating from Peabody had been far from enthusiastic, as she responded, “There's very few performers that can get away from teaching, right? Everybody needed to teach.” For Sandra, teaching presented a side career to maintain a source of income after college; it was something that was necessary to do in order to support herself and pay for more lessons, ultimately to prepare for competitions, she explains. Many music performance majors still reflect a similar

mindset today, according to Jason Heath, a former professor at DePaul University who currently works as a freelance musician. In his Double Bass blog, Heath points out that education is often a secondhand choice of career for those who aspire to be performers. And,

There is a perception among music performance majors that music education majors are infantile performers, with abilities only slightly greater than the high school students that they may soon be teaching...I have frequently witnessed surprise and astonishment among music performance students when they find out that the really excellent player they just heard was an...education major! (Heath)

When asked the reason they hadn't chosen to major in musical performance, these education majors typically responded that "this education degree is just a fallback" (Heath). Heath argues that "teaching must be a calling, not a fallback," since it affects students so substantially. This hadn't applied to Sandra when she first began teaching, but today I can say with honesty that teaching is one of her greatest passions. She has experienced many core life events since the time she'd taught her first lesson, the most emotionally significant being the loss of her mother. She shares,

I still remember, two years ago, my mother passed away and I was quarantining in Taiwan, but we were doing online lessons while I was in the hotel room—and having this heavy heart, meeting with my students, every one of them, just felt like the greatest comfort at that time. That really strengthened me. I had no idea the meaning of having this relationship with [a] student that carried me through my difficult moment. So now it becomes a community and it becomes perhaps a greater love for me than performing, and greater meaning too. (Shen)

Clearly, Sandra finds a profound importance today from interacting with her students. I wondered if that had always been the case. When I asked her to elaborate about the very first lessons that she taught, Sandra laughed out loud. “First, I was not prepared to be a teacher at that time. I was teaching as how I was taught...just trying to dump all the information that I know as much as possible onto them...I did not consider their level, their understanding, their vocabulary,” she lamented. One of her earliest students was a boy of six years old. Within the music he was learning, there was “this note that had a little dot. And that usually means short...you let go of the note a little bit quicker.” Sandra tried to explain verbally to the student that the note was staccato; “you want to bounce it, letting go quick.” Week after week, the student came to the lesson and still played the note quite long. It was difficult for Sandra to keep herself from expressing impatience, but she fared better than the student’s mom, who “got so frustrated that [she] jumped up from the seat and said, ‘Take your hands off! Teacher told you many times, it’s short!’” Finally, a moment of epiphany came when Sandra asked a friend to come and give a masterclass to her students. She recalls, “the kid played, and of course, the teacher observed that he didn’t let go. What the teacher said was: he asked the kid, ‘Is there any insect that you’re afraid of?’ And then sure enough, this kid [said], ‘Yeah, I really don’t like spiders.’” Having this newfound knowledge, the teacher crafted a creative solution for this particular student’s case. “[He] drew these little spiders underneath that note with the dot. ‘And then whenever you go there, you want to really bounce away, because otherwise there’s a spider beneath that note. And he would jump up and bite you. And you don’t want to get a spider bite, right?’” (Shen). The problem was fixed. When the young student reached the dotted note, “he’d just go like this!” Sandra reenacts the movement by tapping her fingers against the wooden picnic table where our interview took place. “He totally jumped away” (Shen).

This experience was an invaluable event for Sandra to establish several standards for herself in the rest of her career as an educator. She realized the significance of observing the unique qualities of each student and the style of learning which worked best for them. “That taught me so much about speaking and understanding my audience. Who am I trying to communicate with? And using their language, what they can understand, and then lead them from there” (Shen).

To gather more insight into how Sandra came to develop a style of teaching, I interviewed an 8th grader named Chloe, who is one of Sandra’s longest-time students. Chloe recalls her first piano lesson with Sandra, when she was six years old, describing plainly, “She grabbed my hand and dropped [it] onto the piano a couple of times” (Chung). This was surprising for me to hear about now, and I imagine it was even more so for young Chloe during that time. She adds, “I think I remember her saying it was so I could *feel* the piano...So she held my hand, she told me to relax and then just took it away and then it dropped. It made a really loud sound, and we did that for a couple of times.” This approach takes hands-on learning onto a whole new level. Having zero musical structure, this activity seems to be an introduction to simply the sound of the piano—creating the very first building blocks for a musical journey ahead, before even learning notes. In this interactive manner, Sandra first opens up the world of the piano to young minds like Chloe, before moving on to identifying the sound of each note, learning to use dynamics, and applying musicality to inspire emotions. Her progression reminds me greatly of a method called the Orff Schulwerk teaching method which I learned from reading *Chapter 4: Approaches to Music Education* of Natalie Sarrazin’s book, “Music and the Child”. According to Sarrazin, the adaptation of Orff Schulwerk that is widely used in America organizes the process of teaching music into four stages: imitation, exploration, improvisation,

and composition. Improvisation suggests altering a piece of music on the spot, such as jazz improvisation, but in this context it is defined differently as the ability to apply learned rhythms, pitches, and dynamics. Overall, “these four stages establish the fundamental building blocks for children to develop musical literacy” (Sarrazin). Sarrazin also compares the Orff Schulwerk method to the four stages of Bloom’s taxonomy: remember, understand, apply, create & analyze. After reading, I felt this taxonomy matched what I’ve seen from Sandra’s teaching, together with hearing Chloe’s thoughts on how she felt Sandra’s ways of teaching her have changed as she grew over the years. “In the very beginning, it was very hands-on...when I was learning something new, [she would] sit right next to me and play it and teach me how to play by physically pressing my hand into the piano....Now, it's more instruction. She would tell me how to use something, and I would usually get it” (Chung). Chloe has since moved on from remembering and understanding, to applying and analyzing, under Sandra’s guidance.

These parallels between Orff Schulwerk and Bloom’s Taxonomy also mark music education as a natural, fundamental aspect of human cognition and development. Music is almost like an internal language we use to communicate without words. Perhaps this could be one reason that having experienced education in music is so beneficial for language development in children. According to Laura Lewis Brown’s “The Benefits of Music Education,” music education helps enhance the natural abilities of children “to decode sounds and words” with which they are born. Furthermore, a child must also engage multiple skill sets while playing music, making it an integrating activity. Thus by educating young generations and helping them to develop interdisciplinary skills, Sandra contributes to the future of the community, and most importantly she accomplishes this through placing emphasis on each student, their starting point, personality, and experiences, pinning the definition of a dedicated educator.

Today, Sandra continues to seek improvement in herself as she practices and perfects her pieces, gives performances in the busy spring season, and shares her learnings with her students. Now teaching at the San Francisco Precollege Conservatory of Music every Saturday, she experiences what it is like to work in a Masterclass environment. The setting of the Conservatory creates an ambience that is entirely different from her experience teaching lessons one-on-one in her home studio, which she still maintains throughout weekdays. “You have a whole group of students” attending the class, all under age 18, Sandra describes. “They're all there that day, and they're doing musicianship class, they're doing their chamber music groups, and they're doing all various things about music, and jazz improvisation...then kids get to have friends that love music, right? So they're excited. I'm excited...I get to have really wonderful musical colleagues...and it's only a walking distance to the Davies Symphony Hall! So I've been benefiting so much from it” (Shen). As a Steinway artist and one of Silicon Valley’s most well-respected musicians, Sandra inspires millions of people both in far away areas of the world and in her own community of students and local audiences.

Sandra’s wisdom extends beyond the music world. She imparted valuable advice during our interview, addressed to young adults in general as they discover their passions throughout life, while comparing this to her concert experiences. “You don't know where the opportunity is going to be,” she says, of her own schedule of performances. “This is different than having an engineering job: you can schedule your calendar, you know you're going to work. But with the concerts, you never know where the next concert is. People call you and then you, you write it down, right? Sometimes you have a lot in one month and sometimes you have several months that's nothing, or one year that's really crazy, and then another year; it's not in your control” (Shen). Sandra advises us to learn the rhythm of the different seasons, which she defines by the

levels of productivity she mentioned above. “We just have to have the faith and keep going, and whatever the season is, if it is a busy season, you thrive and you give. If it is a quiet season, you rest and then you restore and then you learn new things” (Shen). Her experience connects us with knowing that some things are beyond our ability to control them, but being reminded that there are always aspects that we have the power to improve.

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