

TURNING TEACHERS' COMMENTS INTO YOUR OWN WISDOM

One of the essential parts of the retraining program is learning to discern what truly matters for you and what does not. The confidence, freedom, mastery, and knowledge you have gained can easily slip away under the pressure of old patterns and unresolved trauma — especially when returning to your former teacher.

A familiar feeling may surface: your teacher once again offers a vague, confusing comment about your technique, expression, or style. It is crucial that you develop the discernment to see through such remarks and recognize the agenda behind them. If you fall back into the old patterns of shame, confusion, and “never good enough,” you can lose yourself very quickly.

Most teachers give comments to the best of their ability. Yet by now you know that your knowledge and skills in approaching a piece in detail far exceed what many teachers are willing — or even able — to share. Sadly, many remain in the profession out of necessity, or from an unfulfilled need for recognition, superiority, or authority over students. Careless remarks, delivered without much thought, can be dangerous if you take them too seriously, leaving you confused and disempowered.

My advice is to approach such comments with a healthy dose of skepticism, without naïveté, and with wisdom. Listen, but then translate the comment into your own system of learning and performing. If a suggestion sounds vague or confusing, ask questions:

Precision Questions for Evaluating Advice

1. What exactly is the problem here?
(Clear definition of the issue — no vague words.)
2. What is the cause of this problem?
(Identify root cause, not just symptoms.)
3. How exactly does your suggested solution eliminate this cause?
(Direct, logical link between problem and method.)
4. What are the 5 steps I should take, one by one, and in what order?
(Concrete sequence of actions.)
5. How much time should this process reasonably take?
(Set expectations and timeframe.)

On rare occasions, you may find a comment that truly clarifies — where the issue is identified correctly, the cause is accurately understood, and the solution blends seamlessly into your playing without disturbing other elements. If that happens, think about how you can adapt it into your own approach. But, as I said, such cases are uncommon.

Most often, the wisest response is simply to acknowledge what the teacher says, show the respect they expect, and once the lesson is over — let it go. Leave those words behind, and recognize that you've used the opportunity well: you have practiced performing in a new venue, before a challenging and judgmental audience, on an unfamiliar instrument. Then move forward with your own program.