TO BE (TALENTED), OR NOT TO BE: IS THAT THE QUESTION?

by Martín Kutnowski

"To be, or [forever] not to be?" Just like Hamlet pondering eternal sleep, in our society we generally take talent to be a permanent state. Either a student is talented, or he, apparently forever, isn't. It seems that students (and teachers, and everybody else) are talented in the same way that we are tall or short, attractive or unattractive, alive or dead. It's one or the other, it has always been, and it will always be. In turn, permanently being one way or another means that we can cosmetically fix things here and there about ourselves and others, but, in the end, there is not much that we can do if the Muse did not grace us with her magic wand. Any potential improvements (brought by education in the sphere of knowledge and skill, by makeup and wardrobe in the dimension of physical beauty) will not alter the "factory setting" of the individual, his or her permanent—genetic?—configuration. An old saying expresses it boldly: "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

I have seen enactments of this unexamined truism time and again in my career as a musician and music teacher. I've lost count of how many times, in a reception after a concert, a distinguished-looking individual would confide in me, with a resigned, apologetic smile: "I love music so much! The problem is that I have no talent." Or, worse, perhaps a teacher, a colleague no less, would say to me, with a commiserating face: "John Doe is a wonderful person and tries really hard to be a good student, but he has no talent." If the student is not learning, it must be because she or he has no talent. This judgment is convenient, because it instantly and permanently absolves me, the teacher.

But the problem is not just that thinking that all students have a set amount of talent (and therefore a fixed ceiling for their performance) is a damaging notion for education generally and for music pedagogy specifically. The problem is that the very premise seems to be entirely wrong. A recent book by New York Times journalist Daniel Coyle, The Talent Code (Bantam, 2009), sheds light, finally, on what talent really means, from a scientific perspective, and, crucially, how talent can be developed. In a nutshell: Talent is the result of highly motivated, focused, relentless practice, expertly guided by a master, over a long period of time. Given sufficient amount of excellent practice (what is commonly called the "10,000-hour rule"), innate talent becomes indistinguishable from acquired talent. In his book, Coyle shows step by step how talent develops; he also explains why, from time to time, a talent hotbed springs up somewhere in the world: from baseball in Curaçao, to tennis in Russia, to golf in Korea, to soccer in Brazil. (Although Coyle does not mention it, we could easily add youth orchestras in Venezuela to the list, a phenomenon now known to most music teachers in Canada.) In his detailed description about how learning transforms the anatomical composition of the brain, pulling together recent research from various fields, Coyle explains that expert practice traverses the optimal gap between the student's current knowledge and his or her next challenge. When this sweet spot is properly assessed (the challenge is neither too small nor too great, but just right), and hard practice ensues, learning takes off.

Any formally trained musician knows that practice makes perfect, and so does every experienced music teacher: Nothing new there. The notion that talent has a ceiling, however, like a conceptual brick wall, has so far remained an inexpugnable limit. Once this wall is torn down and music teachers accept that talent is an acquired skill (by the way, I don't think we have a choice, given the solid scientific research in this regard), we must grapple, either with the painful notion that our pedagogy is not working, or that our student is not motivated enough to make the effort to learn. The reason a student may not feel the motivation to seriously learn music (particularly in North America and Europe, as compared to Asia) deserves its own extensive discussion, which I will not address here. Instead, I will focus on the pedagogical issue. The matter boils down to one question: What does the teacher need to do so

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that the student learns? Of course the teacher must be as proficient as possible in terms of his or her own skills:

the more artistic and technically proficient, the better. The teacher will surely have expertise in different teaching schools and methods, as well as different aspects of musicianship development (Suzuki, Orff, Dalcroze, Kodaly, Schenkerian analysis, Russian school, French school, movable Do, fixed Do, the Guidonian hand, among many others). But techniques and tools will translate into excellent teaching and learning if and only if the teacher can adapt to the student's needs. For no pedagogical method can be comprehensive enough to generalize every hand, every voice, every life-long learning journey. That is why I believe that no single teaching tool, school of instrumental technique, or analytical orientation is inherently important; what truly matters is that the teacher assesses the mental map of the student (where he or she is at that moment), defines the learning challenge (the sweet spot), and provides the tools for deep practice until the next meeting.

The private music lesson is a unique environment where personalized expert guidance can take place. As such, it is indeed a relic from the past, and perhaps a miracle that we should cherish, given the technological and increasingly impersonal age in which we are immersed. But this privileged pedagogical setting comes with specific obligations, and not putting too much (or any) stock in innate talent should be added to the list. Empathy is paramount: One can hardly visualize the other person's mental map if one is not willing to pay much attention to others and be ready, if necessary, to abandon one's comfort zone. To develop the student's true potential, the enterprise must be learner-centered: The teacher must figure out where the student stands, what she or he needs, and, forgetting any one-size-fits-all approaches, create the tailor-made pedagogy that is going to help that one student conquer the skill or topic at hand, so that she or he can get into the groove of deep learning.

Knowing that talent is largely an acquired trait means acknowledging that what we teachers do in the lesson, and how (and how much) the student practices the remaining 167 hours of the week, will determine the amount of learning that will take place. This notion forces us, teachers, to squarely face a choice, both ethical and practical. The way we respond to this choice defines who we are as teachers: Should we figure out the mental map of each one of our students so that we create a unique pedagogy to suit each and every one of them? Or should we conclude that turning each student into a research project would represent too much time and effort? No matter the answer, what's for sure is that we can no longer use the excuse of innate talent (or alleged lack thereof) as an easy way out.

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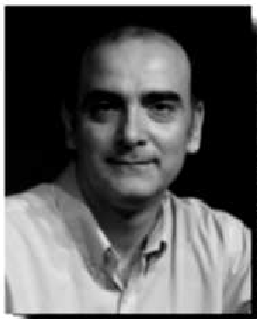

Martín Kutnowski's is a composer, writer, and teacher. His music, fusing folk, world, and classical sources, has been performed in four continents, including venues such as Carnegie Hall in New York, Wigmore Hall in London, Izumi Hall in Osaka, and Colon Theater in Buenos Aires. He received numerous awards and commissions, from the Canada Council for the Arts, Arts New Brunswick, Fulbright, and ASCAP, among others. His music is published by Billaudot (France) and FJH (USA). Kutnowski teaches at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, where he currently serves as Dean of Faculty; he also taught at City University of New York and the Aspen Music Festival, and maintains a busy international schedule as lecturer and clinician. He is an Associate Composer of the Canadian Music Centre and a member of the Executive Council of the Canadian League of Composers. More information can be obtained in www.contrapunctus.com.