

NFA Convention 2006 Report by Susan MacLagan (Edited by Jennifer Cluff)

**Lessons Learned: My Greatest Discoveries About Performing, Practicing and Teaching:
A Distillation of Knowledge Gained from a Life in Music
with Jeanne Baxtresser**

I thoroughly enjoyed the lecture given by Jeanne Baxtresser on "Lessons Learned" during her career. Her delivery was so personal that I almost felt like she was just talking to me. The lecture was split into three sections: Practicing, Teaching, and Performing, and was dotted with humor and quotes throughout. What follows are my notes from the class.

Part 1: Practising

Many times during this part of the lecture, Jeanne emphasized the reduction of tension while playing.

-During practise sessions we focus on small muscles. Break up your practising with physical exercises where you use big muscles.

For example:

1. Shake your arms at your sides
2. Circle your arms at your sides. Do 20 forward rotations. When done, hold your arms still without moving. Repeat the exercise with 20 backward rotations.
3. March in place to get the blood flowing, etc.

- Work on difficult music until it is easy. To do this, ask yourself what you have to do to make something easy. For example, to work on a difficult run or a solo (e.g., Daphnis & Chloe, Ein Heldenleben solos), find the smallest element that you can do easily, thus building from your strengths, not your weaknesses. Practise it briefly; then add on other notes, a few at a time, to build confidence.

-When you practise an exercise, work to get something good for no longer than five minutes so that you stay focused. Get as much done in that five minutes as possible and then move on to something else. Don't work to finish the exercise. If you practise something too much, you may get frustrated and discouraged, etc., and bring that mood to your practise session the next day.

-Keep your shoulders down; don't crunch up your face (pretend you have botox in your forehead). The work that you need to do is at your mouth. We don't play with our foreheads. Play as if you have weights on your eye-lids.

How to practise orchestral solos like L'Après Midi:

1. Play the solo on one note without vibrato (i.e., play the rhythm of the excerpt at one pitch)
2. Repeat #1, but play expressively
3. Practise only the long notes in the solo
4. Practise the end of the solo and build backwards.
5. Practise bringing the flute up to your lips and starting the solo.
6. Imagine yourself playing the solo in a concert with the conductor watching you, etc.

MISCELLANEOUS PRACTISE POINTERS

- Bring your environment into your performance. For example, play with your chest, head, and eyes up and play 'out' to the audience. Do not play down into the stand.
- Be creative in your practising.
- Slow down.
- Make discoveries. The most important lessons are from YOUR hard work of discovery.
- The basics of flute playing must be mastered.
- The greatest weapon against insecurity about your playing is practicing and preparation.
- Don't practice what you can't do - this leads to fear, and insecurity.

Practicing what you CAN do helps to relax your body and mind.

- Practise relaxation.
 - Practise one element at a time.
 - Practise with your eyes closed
 - Practise the ends of pieces and solos. Work from the end towards the beginning.
 - Use a mini-disc or some other recording device to tape yourself doing a mock performance. Then listen to yourself like a jury.
- When you listen to the recording, listen to ONE thing at a time.
- Practise imitating your musical heroes. Through imitation you will find your own voice.
- "Mediocre artists borrow; great artists steal."

Enjoy the journey of learning to play the flute. Do not focus on trying to be the best flutist in the world as this will never come. Jeanne said with humour: "It's so great to finally be phenomenal. My work is done. Bring me a glass of wine."

-----end part I

PART 2: TEACHING POINTERS ON HOW TO BE A GREAT STUDENT

-As important as talent is, discipline, motivation, and intelligence, etc. are more important.

-If you come in playing bad notes, etc., YOU make the teacher stoop to your level. YOU are making the teacher less. Come prepared so as to make the teacher teach at their highest level. For example, Jeanne doesn't like saying something thirty times (e.g., play the articulations as marked, or that note is too sharp). Correct any errors - it's YOUR job.

POINTERS ON HOW TO BE A GREAT TEACHER

-Teach the person, not the student by adjusting your knowledge to fit the students needs.

-What are the most common things shared by great teachers of music, sports, etc.?

1. The first teacher gave them the passion.
2. The second teacher instilled reality and discipline without ruining the passion, teaching them a concern for their future without being discouraging.

-Find something good about student's playing and then work on the stuff that isn't good.

-Do not worry if a student knows something better than you. Reduce these feelings by complimenting the student on that aspect. Remember, too, that you know more overall than the student. That's why they are there for YOU.

-Don't insist that the student have a cult-like devotion to YOU. In the first year of teaching a student, Jeanne gives students the basics of flute playing (i.e., the roots and foundation); during this phase she thinks of herself and the student as moving in parallel lines. By the third year, she gives the students wings or has them move away from her and teach themselves.

-Instruct the student on how to be organized and encourage respect for yourself and how you run your business.

-Ask yourself, am I too tough or too lenient as a teacher?

-Don't prejudge students.

-When you feel that you are way too tired to teach a student, remember that this hour is the

most important hour of a student's day or week. This thought will hopefully inspire you as a teacher and you will get through the hour more easily.

-Don't pit one student against another by saying things like "The last student that was here was great, etc."

-----end Part II

Part 3: Performing

-Don't follow others regarding how they feel before and during performances. Jeanne illustrated this point with a story that she read in the New Yorker magazine about two famous skiers (I didn't catch the names, so I will identify them as "Expert Skier #1" and "Expert Skier #2").

The story went something like this:

"If you want to know the difference between "Expert skier #1" and "Expert skier #2", just watch them ten seconds before they perform.

"Expert skier #1" is thrashing around like a bull in a gate before a rodeo to get pumped up.

"Expert skier #2" hardly moves. He looks at the valley, and the mountains. To tell you the truth he looks stoned. At the last moment, he puts his poles on the line.

[Editor's Note: Each performer will have a different way of mentally/physically preparing, and there are several different styles of doing so, so don't think you have to follow the methods of other players before or during a performance. We are all experts on what works for US" -Jen Cluff]

Thoughts to help calm your nerves:

-Don't work to have everyone love you. It won't work.

-Embrace the adventure of performing. There are no guarantees.

-Accept your (nervous) feelings as being normal for you.

-Pretend that you are comfortable when playing. Work on getting your pretend person closer to your relaxed person.

-Feel like a hero.

-Corral your feelings and make them work for you.

-Know your own worth or you can't be confident. If you allow nasty conductors to make you feel inadequate, you have given *them* the power.

-Be humble. Think that you are one of many. If you don't, you will have a farther way to fall if your performance is not good.

-Joy is letting go of expectations. Don't keep to a code of how your performance should go.

Things to do to help calm your nerves:

-Jeanne used visualization and meditation to help calm her nerves. When visualizing, Jeanne liked to imagine the event. When meditating, Jeanne liked to concentrate on one thought.

Baxtresser's Greatest Discoveries

-Humor is critical. Helps release tension.

-Read sports psychologist books. Remember though, that there is a big difference between sports people and music people. It's about them breaking a record. "They could die, for heaven's sake." You're going on stage and saying "I want you to hear Prokofieff. I'm the middle man who is bringing the Prokofieff to the audience."

-Jeanne mentioned that Don Greene wrote a great book Performance Success: Performing Your Best Under Pressure ISBN: 0878301224

-Find a schedule that helps calm your nerves. Jeanne had a ritual that she followed on concert days which helped her to cope with any nervous feelings: She had a great warm-up in the morning. If she didn't do this, she found that she was nervous all day.

Morning Warmup ~ Rehearsal ~ Nice lunch ~ Teach 2-3 hours ~ Sleep 1 hour ~ Light dinner.

Unsuccessful Performances

-Pick yourself up and keep on. It's not how hard you fall. It's how fast you can get up and continue on.

At the end of the lecture, Jeanne quoted Martha Graham.

"There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, not how it compares with other expression. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

~ Martha Graham ~

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