

The Rise of the Master Class

by Trevor Wye

The master class has become so commonplace world-wide that the recent listing in *The Flutist Quarterly* showed around seventy summer master classes—and this was not a complete list. But it was not always so.

What is a master class? My understanding is that it is a public lesson given by a master player to a master performer. It provides an opportunity for students to get a glimpse of what teachers have to offer and also affords an opportunity for teachers to impart information to more than one performer. It can be a powerful and effective tool.

When I began professing at a music college, I decided that I would adopt this form of teaching because I found it to be the most efficient way and I had been taught by that method with Marcel Moyse. Geoffrey Gilbert, my former teacher and colleague said, “I wouldn’t advise that. Students prefer to consult their teachers in private. In France they have a tradition of classes: here in the UK, the students are likely to feel uncomfortable discussing their problems in public.” I ignored his advice and taught only in classes for the next twenty-two years. I cannot remember anyone else teaching in classes at this time in the UK (1969), and I imagine that if any classes took place in the United States, they were few. The International Summer School in Canterbury, England, in 1971, was the first time that both James Galway and William Bennett had taught master classes.

Incidentally, Geoffrey Gilbert also changed *his* mind; when he agreed to teach at the International Summer School, he did so provided that he gave only private lessons. However, having observed both myself and William Bennett giving classes, he allowed a few observers to his private lessons. Then, after a couple of years, he agreed to take the main evening master class—his first master class—and extremely good at it he was too. There were well over one hundred flutists at these evening classes.

Through Moyse, one could glimpse how Taffanel and Gaubert’s classes were organised and how the great tradition of class teaching at the Paris Conservatoire was established. Moyse provided the model although his classes weren’t without problems. The different sides of his temperament have been discussed elsewhere¹ though those students who found they were unable to accept his occasional ill temper should have had lessons with their bank clerk. Moyse was at his most encouraging with those who had limited technical competence but who were doing their best. These were wonderful classes and a blueprint for the aspiring class teacher.

It is either the week-long class, or class teaching as a permanent arrangement that is the most useful to the student in the long term.

The obstacles for students are, of course, their fear of failure, fear of publicly displaying their deficiencies, and fear of making mistakes. Students who have been taught only in private lessons may find it difficult to see that their technical or musical problems are common and few students present a difficulty at a class that hasn’t already been encountered by others at some time or another. The

students may also learn something about teaching. Observers can identify with the performer and learn faster and more efficiently. There are no secrets: they observe a peer struggling with the same problem and can console, encourage and sometimes rebuke. Each student knows just how well the others can play, both on good and bad days. At my studio, the interaction between students is a major part of the exercise. The students' comments are far more valuable and telling coming from them rather than from me. In private lessons, repetition can be tedious both to teacher and student.

When I retired from college teaching, students were being admitted at a level comparable with that formerly attained after four years of study. With the great increase in the number of master classes, the standard of performing should now be reaching even greater heights. But is it? Students are better at tone production and finger technique than, say, thirty years ago, but there has been only a modest improvement in articulation. By articulation, I refer to the performer's ability to express the music clearly. Intonation is almost as bad as it ever was. Perhaps players are not playing quite as sharp as they were fifty years ago, but professional players are still playing badly out of tune. Intonation related to loud and soft playing isn't difficult to learn, *yet it is usually ignored at a master class*. Why? It can only be lack of basic knowledge of the mechanics of playing in tune. I have heard master class performers asked what advice they were given by their teacher to overcome this problem. The varied answers have included "Use more support," "Think sharper" and even "Move around a bit" or "You must listen to yourself."

Use more support? Baloney. When will the first students sue their teacher? (It is, after all, the national sport!). Poor intonation is an obstacle to musical performance. Playing loudly or softly is not an option for the flutist; it is the major tool of musical expression. *Support* is the primary tool of designers and makers of medical appliances and of scaffolding erectors and, though it is important to fluting, it is not our only tool. Intonation problems can only be solved by understanding the way air speed and manipulation of the jaw and lips interact. Yet *support* has become the Holy Word of teaching, the pedestrian teacher's solution to any performing problem, whether articulation, tone, octaves or whatever. I wonder what would happen if we used less support?

Think sharper is an absurd remark and requires no comment.

Moving around to solve a musical problem is pure vaudeville. This aspect of performing should be firmly assassinated. I have attended classes where the teacher has suggested moving around according to the phrasing. "Move to the left for this phrase; step back at the next pianissimo." Nothing said about the *sound* of the music, but only how it *looks*. If this witless philosophy continues, composers are unlikely to write anything decent for us at all! Theobald Boehm was not the first person to observe "You should strive to move your audience, not yourself." We may have to emulate the pop groups and make videos to show how expressive the performance is.

Moyses wanted the flute to be taken as seriously as the violin, 'cello or the piano but I can't see that ever happening. Flute players worldwide have first to learn to play with good intonation. Go to recitals at a flute convention and listen to the standard of intonation. I am not referring to odd notes here and there, nor indeed, the use of expressive intonation; I'm referring to a performer's inability to control the pitch of the note relative to its loudness. I'm not referring to amateurs, but to professional performers: big names. When a note is loud, the pitch is sharp and when soft, it is flat. What sort of professional is that? It isn't surprising that composers have been reluctant to take the flute more seriously.

How does one deal with *that* at a master class? Intonation problems are worse as the bore of the instrument increases; alto flute solos can be dire unless the performers know what they are doing. A well-respected player told me recently, "Intonation? That's an obsession of the English!" It certainly isn't an obsession of flutists! Incidentally, if the reader thinks that I am obsessed with intonation, you are wrong; I have no particular interest in intonation—provided that it is correct.

Teaching classes worldwide, one notices the difference of approach by students to learning and to master classes. Attitudes have changed considerably in the last three decades. I remember both Finns and Russians telling me that, when necessary, they enjoyed being told the hard truth about their playing. The students respect this. Compare that with some United States universities where a teacher may have to adapt to eighteen-year-old students' demands rather than to give them what they really need. One teacher told me of her first two semesters at a university: "The students were unused to practising scales so I started them off with a daily scale routine." After three months, there were negative assessments of the teacher to the Dean: "I did not come here to play scales and études; I came to learn the flute repertoire." The teacher had to back down. For the next two years, she attempted to teach Mozart concerti to students who were unable to perform scales. On obtaining tenure, she changed her methods. But, for the first two years who were the losers? To teach in this way is unrealistic in a profession where democracy leads to mediocrity. Democracy and music are not good bedfellows. Teachers assume that students wish to be instructed in how to play the flute in order to perform well. This involves certain disciplines that, after explanation, are not up for discussion, in my view. If good reasons have been given to students why they should practice daily exercises, and they disagree, they should be shown the door. One assumes that students are paying the teacher to help them. Students who admire James Galway, William Bennett, Michel Debost, or Julius Baker, would do well to emulate those fine players in their firm belief in the daily practise of scales, arpeggios and études. Moyses's advice was, "Find a good teacher and love and respect him... If you don't—find another." To return to my point: at a master class, if one asks the performer to play a scale or arpeggio in the key of the concerto just performed, they are disappointed: it wasn't what they came to hear.

Some classes take place at festivals, conventions or as the result of the visit of a master player to a university. The norm seems to be that each student gets a 20 - 30 minute slot. What can the teacher do in that time? The one-day class is most often a cosmetic exercise designed to amuse rather than instruct. Students sometimes play their prepared piece and then leave with friends to have dinner instead of staying around to hear the others. After a convention class some years back, a well-respected teacher remarked to me, "You really worked too hard with those students: why don't *you* do what *we* all do at master classes? Tell them they are good, ask them to change a couple of things, then tell them to play the piece again. Finish off by assuring them that they are terrific! It's what they have paid to hear." Sometimes the student is a fine player and then discussion of the piece is possible and it is a pleasure to do so. We are encouraged to tell young players that everything they do is wonderful; that's fine if what they are doing is excelling themselves within their talent. It is unrealistic if what they are doing is musical codswallop.

In the United States, students are encouraged to believe in themselves and in what they do. They also present themselves very well at a class: a new dress, a hairdo, a suit and a thorough preparation of the piece. That produces a convincing presentation. The flip side is that this self belief can make them difficult

to handle at a class: one has to consider bruised egos. The intelligent student realises that remarks are directed at the performance and not at him. A music school teacher advised a student—by e-mail—on preparing a piece to play at a master class: “Practise the piece and memorise it so that you can play it in your sleep.” Fine, but then the teacher has to deal with a piece engraved on stone; changes or modifications suggested by the teacher are barely possible. Just occasionally, a perceptive student says, “I am playing this piece to show you the problems I have with articulation. Please help me.” When there is a choice between études and repertoire, études are rarely chosen. Études are for beginners.

Often, the reason for choosing a piece for a class is the upcoming competition, a quick fix. But competition technique is a subject all on its own. There are ways to increase a student’s chances of winning which can go counter to musical integrity or correctness. But then, it is far better to win than to be right.

Competitions tied in with classes can encourage both talent and mediocrity. Does there always *have* to be a winner? The International Competition Rules—not so far adopted by the United States—say not. At a recent competition, the Coordinator of the Jury told me that they were required by the rules to choose a winner. Three contestants performed prepared works with varying degrees of skill, but with rhythmic mistakes, impractical breathing and wrong notes. Yet, there were still three prize winners and *their mistakes were endorsed with cash*. What are we encouraging? There should be a certain level of performance before a prize is awarded. Of course, the anticipated level can be jacked up or down according to circumstances of the competition. In the long term, people will respect the winner—and the winners will have greater cause to be proud of their achievement. What would happen if the first contestant played three bars and walked off; the second played an A and the third didn’t play at all. A ridiculous comparison but the line has to be drawn somewhere. Why not clearly define the line and then the winners would really have something to be proud of.

The most common problem I encounter at classes is the misunderstanding of stress and accent in phrasing and of the appoggiatura. Vocal and instrumental appoggiaturas are important features of eighteenth century performance and were a large part, also, of nineteenth and twentieth century phrasing. An appoggiatura is a musical caress, a musical cuddle. At the end of a cuddle there has to be release or it is not a cuddle. Phrases are built on the loud/soft, cuddle/release, suspension/resolution, dissonance/consonance philosophy. It is part of the way everything in nature works, day and night and life and death. To attempt to mend a student’s misunderstanding in the time allowed for their “spot,” is difficult. Commonly, students also choose pieces that are too difficult for them, or for which they are not yet ready. Occasionally, one comes across someone with real feeling and respect for music: teaching is then a great pleasure.

If, at the end of a class, one asks for questions, the most common is about vibrato. (It is the other national obsession!) There is nothing wrong with vibrato per se. At a certain stage in the student’s development it may need to be discussed, practised and then absorbed into the player’s musical palette of expression. There it should remain without too much further discussion. Vibrato is one of the tools we use—not the only one. A good proportion of flute forum e-mail is about vibrato. No wonder Moyses got mad at students when they asked him about it. “How do you do it? How many wobbles a second? Should this note have vibrato? Is it better to play this note without vibrato?” When Moyses talked

about the shaping of a phrase or of its colour, the student would interrupt to ask about vibrato. The students were happy to discuss the mechanics of making love but had little notion of how to *express* love. Imagine you are kissing your partner who asks, "Should I have kissed you with more pressure? How much more? Did I hug you closely enough? Should I have put my arm closer around you?". I'm sure we all know someone who wants to know the inside workings of the most intimate human activity. I once saw a film of a woman having a tiny TV camera put up her nose and down her throat...the objective being to observe vibrato in action. Where else could that have taken place but at a flute convention? Forgive me if I sidestep the issue of mentioning the country in which that occurred....

I have met some lovely people at master classes, some of whom have become lifelong friends. I have certainly learned as much from the students as they have from me.

These are early days of the master class but let us hope that this mighty tool will be put to better use, to sow sensible ideas, to inspire students towards the idea of making music and not just of making money and to focus their attention on playing the music and not the flute.

I love the flute—but I don't always like the noise it makes.



ENDNOTES

¹ Moyse, Marcel. *An Extraordinary Man*. Trevor Wye. Winzer Press, 1993.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TREVOR WYE began playing at the age of fifteen. He had a few private lessons with Geoffrey Gilbert, and was fortunate in not attending a college of music, a conservatory or a university, the result of which was rapid progress. He has no diploma or a degree, nor did he win any competitions. His formative years were influenced by Alfred Deller and William Bennett and his teacher, Marcel Moyse.

Though untrained, he Professed both at the Guildhall School of Music, London and the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, at the latter for twenty-two years. Trevor Wye is the author of the *Practice Books for the Flute*, which have been translated into nine other languages, the royalties of which keep him in a style to which he is gradually becoming accustomed. His biography of Marcel Moyse was published in English and in three other languages. With friends, he is currently working on an encyclopedia of the flute which he hopes to finish before turning his toes up.

Trevor Wye teaches at his studio in Kent, a one-year residential course for postgraduate students, and gives annual master classes in the USA, Switzerland, South Africa and Japan. He enjoys serving on juries for international competitions, and presenting his unique *Flutes Fantastic!*, an hilarious recital in which he plays on more than fifty different flutes.

He collects antique spectacles on which he lectures, and in 1990, he won the annual Quiz on the subject of the Mapp and Lucia novels, awarded by the E.F. Benson Society.