



## Master Music Teachers: What Makes Them Great?

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SPECIAL  
FOCUS

The Making  
of a Master  
Music Teacher

# MASTER MUSIC TEACHERS

## *What Makes Them Great?*

by Manny Brand

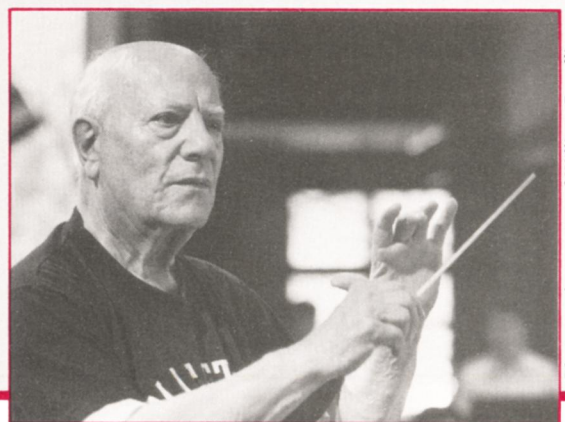
*Music educators' mastery of the art of teaching can be expressed in ways as varied as the backgrounds and personalities of the teachers themselves—but these dynamic individuals share a few traits that illuminate their roles and their students' lives.*



Photograph by Mark Regan



Photograph by Peter Gridley



Photograph courtesy of William Revelli



Photograph by Mark Regan

I wanted to applaud, but I couldn't. The rhythm, structure, dynamism, and unity were extraordinary. No, I wasn't in a concert hall, but rather in Mary Gregory's fifth-grade general music class. I had come to observe Mary's student teacher, but arrived early enough to experience one of the special moments in my professional life.

In her twelfth year of teaching, Mary, with her fifth graders, was preparing an original opera about "beings" from Saturn landing on Earth. As I watched in this crowded classroom, she questioned students about compositional techniques and the subtleties of combining words with music. Moving from one side of the room to the other, I saw a musician, actress,

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dancer, set designer, opera director, and coach/accompanist.

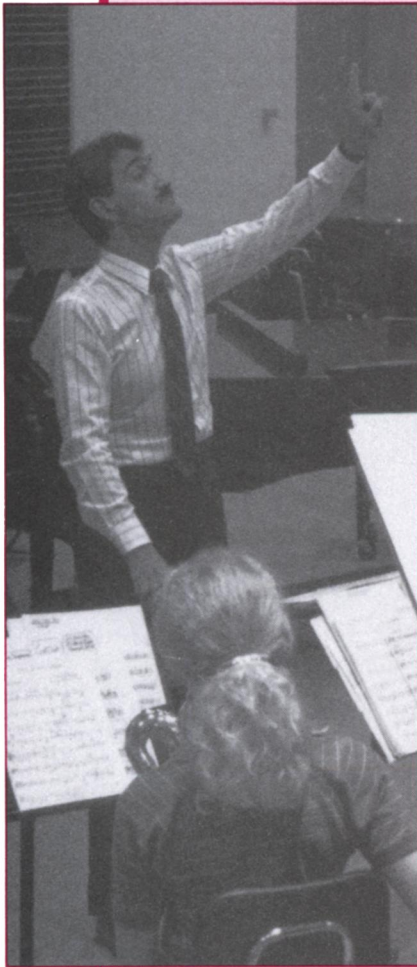
Other than Mary's student teacher, I was the only adult to observe her remarkable performance. She received no standing ovation, for her students were participants, not members of an audience. Mary and thousands of other music teachers perform day after tiring day with few rewards and little recognition apart from the knowledge that they are truly master music teachers.

#### **Qualities of master teachers**

No single description adequately describes all great teachers. Personalities of master music teachers vary. Some are charismatic, some have great personal warmth, while others are more staid. Their classroom and rehearsal styles differ, too. Some are gentle and congenial; others rule more firmly. Most are master music teachers as a result of some combination of skill,

local customs, tastes, personal magnetism, and political savvy.<sup>1</sup> Despite such personality and style differences there is a common thread that characterizes all such teachers: they fervently believe in the value of music and music education. Moreover, all master music teachers are highly devoted and share an underlying zeal—and they get results.

Although their classrooms might be fun and exciting places to be, the musical content of their classes and rehearsals is serious business. All great teachers have a special commitment to their students. Master music teachers never underrate the musical ability of their students. Always expecting the best, demanding more, and pushing students further, these teachers are great precisely because of their ability to challenge and inspire their students. In return, master music teachers earn the admiration and respect of their students.

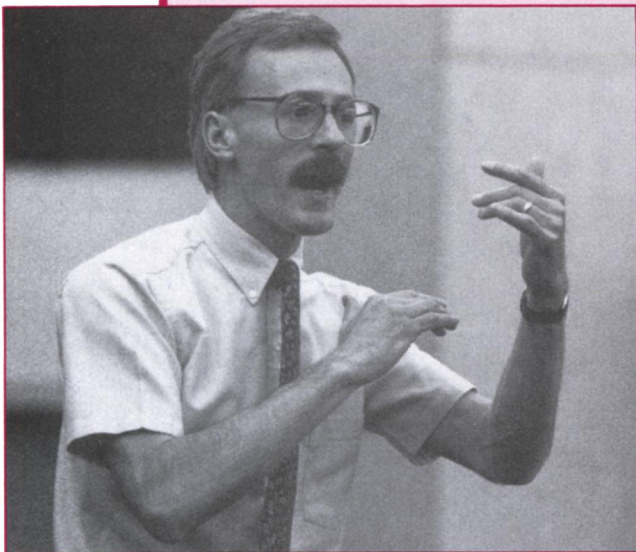
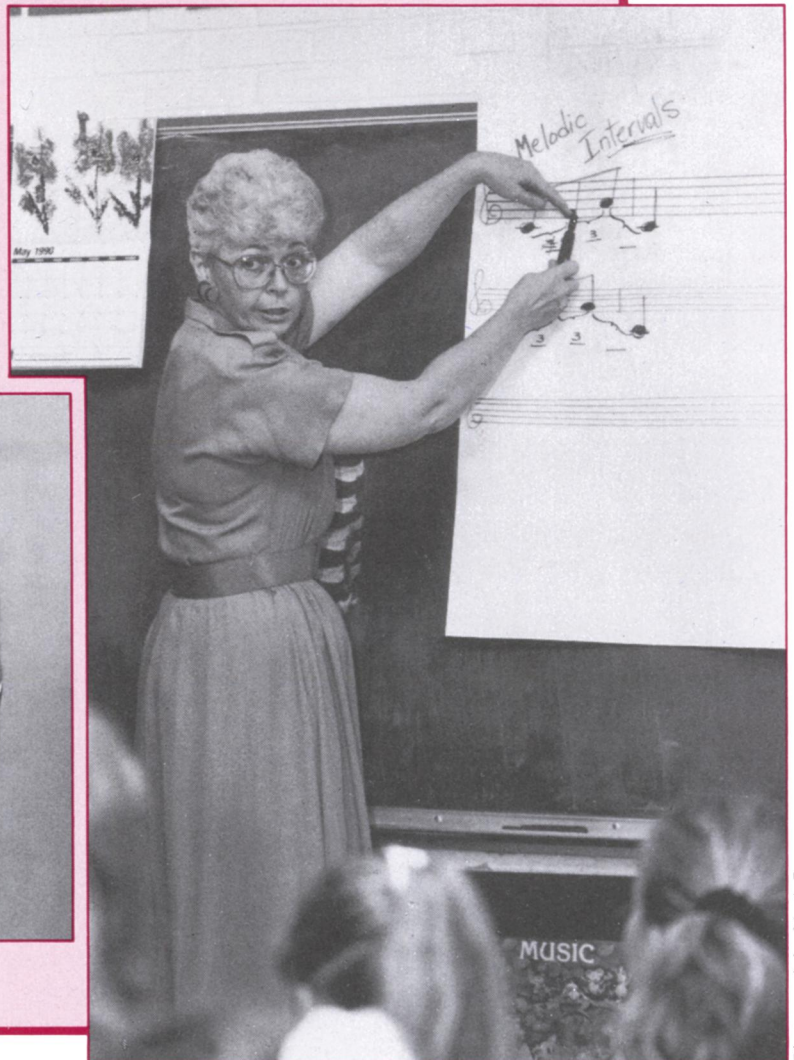


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### Ingredients of a Master Music Teacher

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- A sixth sense for understanding his or her students
  - Pride in his or her remarkable competence
  - A fertile imagination
  - A theatrical flair
  - Instructional urgency—a drive to accomplish the highest musical goals.
  - The drive to work hard—and obtain enormous satisfaction
- 



Photograph by Peter Gridley

Photograph by Mark Regan

# The master music teacher's classes and ensembles are exciting.

- What to do?
- When to speak?
- When to stop talking?
- When to rant and rave?
- When to teach with a flick of a finger or a twinkle in the eye?
- When to stretch the students beyond their perceived limits?
- When to smile and say they're proud?
- Whom to call on?
- When to try something that they've never tried before?

Master music teachers intuitively know the answers to these important questions.<sup>2</sup> They have a "feel" for what is right for their particular students—and this feeling guides them to teaching techniques that work! The great teachers go out of the way to keep their eyes on students. They know who is falling behind and who is getting in trouble—and they care enough to do something about their students' difficulties.

Being a master music teacher means selecting musical goals of high worth, finding creative ways to achieve those goals, and using extraordinary music teaching and rehearsing skills in the pursuit of musical excellence. The master music teacher's classes and ensembles are exciting, and many of his or her students respond with delight. Long after the lyrics, the fingerings, the definitions, and the specifics of lessons or rehearsals are forgotten, a more permanent influence remains. The musical mind and spirit linger in those students who are fortunate enough to have studied with a master music teacher.

## Theatrics of teaching

As Louis Rubin has noted, truly superior teachers often have theatrical talent.<sup>3</sup> Many master music teachers are skilled at incorporating dramatic episodes into their

teaching to illustrate the essence of a lesson. Such dramatic episodes, which may be brief vignettes or stories, have the students literally sitting on the edge of their seats with interest and anticipation. "It is dark, and you are all alone walking down a deserted road. You sense a presence high in the sky. You look up. There is a bright, scary light. . . ." Mary used this scenario to stimulate interest in her opera production lesson. Techniques such as this captivate students and lure them to become committed to the lesson.

Master music teachers are not only effective storytellers, but they possess marvelous acting skills as part of their virtuosic teaching repertoire. Mary whispered, laughed, yelled, threw her hands up, paced around the room, role-played, mimicked, and made "funny" sound effects. Mary's acting, of course, was part of her enthusiastic personality. It was also an indication of her charisma and classroom presence—and her fifth graders obviously enjoyed her acting. Moreover, Mary was quickly able to turn the acting part of her teaching on or off, and, most important, everyone knew that her antics were meant not only to entertain but also to stimulate learning and fine musical performance.

Another theatrical concept associated with master music teachers is staging: the activity or means that music teachers use to achieve their goals. For example, a master music teacher preparing for a rehearsal that will teach rhythmic reading to a junior high school performance class might consider an array of "staging" approaches: repetitive drill, games, contests, lecture, demonstration, listening exercises, and, possibly, computer drills. The master music teacher's class or rehearsal doesn't grow

stale, because each class seems different from the previous class. Drawing from a menu of staging techniques reduces student apathy and encourages student motivation and absorption. Involved students are learning.

Do all master music teachers use such theatrical techniques? Most do, but the extent to which they do so certainly varies with the nature of the class and the personality of the individual teacher. Regardless of how much they use these techniques, however, great teachers share a theatrical bond: they all use ingenious means to accomplish their musical goals. Such goals are set high and are designed to help students become excellent musicians.

Master music teachers work harder than most of their colleagues, but they also obtain greater pleasure and satisfaction from their teaching and students. Such special teachers are proud of their many accomplishments, are confident in their abilities, and treasure their consummate musical and teaching skills. Master music teachers have a glorious mission; they revel in their day-to-day work with children and adolescents and delight in their students' many musical accomplishments. Such teachers possess great gifts. Their students are, indeed, fortunate—and our profession is the better for master music teachers' idealism and teaching artistry.

## Notes

1. Walter Doyle, "Effective Teaching and the Concept of Master Teacher," in *Teacher Competence*, ed. Gayle C. Hall (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1984–85).
2. Elliot W. Eisner, "The Art and Craft of Teaching," *Educational Leadership* 40, no. 4 (January 1983), 4–13.
3. Louis Rubin, "Artistry in Teaching," *Educational Leadership* 40, no. 4 (January 1983), 44–49. ■