IT IS WITH THE GREATEST PLEASURE that we announce the winner of the 2019 International Performer of the Year Award: Joan Lippincott. More than 200 votes were cast by the Chapter membership, and it is clear that many people hold a deep appreciation for all Joan has done and continues to do in the world of the pipe organ and its music. Brava!

Joan has been acclaimed as one of America's outstanding organ virtuosos. She has been a featured recitalist at Alice Tully Hall, Verizon Hall, Ozawa Hall, the Spoleto USA Festival, the Boston Early Music Festival, the American Bach Society Biennial, the Dublin International Organ Festival, and at conventions of the American Guild of Organists, the Organ Historical Society, and the Music Teachers National Association.
The Art of Teaching
Joan Lippincott Interviewed by Larry Biser

LARRY BISER: After studying at the Curtis Institute, you went to Westminster Choir College to teach piano and organ for the first time. What influenced the way you approached teaching?

JOAN LIPPINCOTT: In my early work as a teacher, I was especially influenced by the way I had been taught, by pedagogical studies with Frances Clark, and by the writings of Carl Rogers. When I was a student of Dr. McCurdy at Westminster, he required all of his students to take a piano class with Frances Clark, who also taught pedagogy. I particularly remember a lecture in which she said in her very colorful way that “teaching is not telling.” Carl Rogers, about whom I learned from my counselor husband, was a leading proponent of non-directive counseling and I was fascinated by the insightful things he had to say about teaching and learning. I remember him saying, “the only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.” The influence of Frances Clark and Carl Rogers led me to believe in approaching students with the goal of teaching them to teach themselves.

What do you believe is the single most important trait as a teacher?

I believe to be a good teacher is to be a good student; that teachers are older students, and that in teaching in a one-to-one context there should be a lot of communication of the teacher’s love of the subject and love of the process. It is necessary, of course, to give the student the tools he must use in the process. By this I mean details of posture, hand position, fingering, etc. Then the student must use the tools and engage in the learning process as if he were teaching himself.

What advice can you give about the efficient use of a student’s practice time?

I believe that practice means playing perfectly, which is to say we should do whatever it takes to play the right notes at the right time.

At first hearing, that is a rather startling thought. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

In the case of difficult music, this probably means, in the beginning of one’s practice, to play the parts separately before combining them. By proceeding in this way—and playing perfectly—one learns to be accurate and gains confidence in playing.

Is there anything that a teacher can do to assure the success of a student?

Careful learning, guided by the older student—the teacher—is critical in giving the student the confidence needed to be successful. It is the teacher’s job, in my opinion, to impart everything he or she knows to give the student this opportunity for success. In a sense, the teacher is really teaching and learning when students are able to achieve that which they didn’t believe possible. I have enjoyed growing and learning and getting better throughout my life and I have a special joy when I can teach that concept to someone else.

Is it enough to insist on correct notes or does generating heightened motivation on the part of the student lead to that end?

On one occasion, a colleague asked me how much of the motivating of a student was the responsibility of the teacher. My response was that it is THE responsibility of the teacher. Sometimes in my teaching I have been insistent on certain students following a certain procedure until they learn from the experience that it is going to work. This experience of success is then highly motivating.

In your teaching career at Westminster, you had students of all levels of ability. Would you approach a beginning student differently than you would a more advanced student?

People sometimes have said to me that I am especially fortunate teaching advanced students. My response has been that I think that teaching advanced students is not so different from teaching beginners in that in both cases the teacher wants to teach something that the student doesn’t yet know.

Buy Joan Lippincott: The Gift of Music at Amazon
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