

Adorning the Air With Mistakes

An inner dance in two movements

By Mary DeMocker

First Movement: Beginning

It's lesson day for my newest harp student, Gina, a nurse in her mid-50s who taps our lesson times into her Blackberry and always appears stage-ready with her long skirt, high heels, and bright lipstick. Today she arrives early as usual to warm up in my studio. The moment I enter, she begins *The Apologia*.

"This week flew by and I had no time. But I practiced some." She begins her piece, falters, stops, blows air through pursed lips. "Can I start again?" she asks, ducking her head as if I might scold her. She gets farther along this time before she stumbles, and growls, "It's fine with just the right hand, but as soon as I add the left, it falls apart." Her frenetic energy continues as she fights the harp throughout the rest of the piece, wincing or shaking her head at every mistake. Near the end, there's even a loud snort. While last notes still ring in the air, she sets the harp down in disgust.

"I played this perfectly—I mean *really* perfectly—right here, just before you came in!" she fumes.

Time for *The Talk*. I wait until a student has come several times before I embark on this pedagogical tactic, since it's risky and requires a solid relationship between teacher and student. I've had this conversation with 95% of my adult and teen female

students. So far, not one man or a single student under the age of twelve has needed it. *The Talk* is the most difficult aspect of playing music, yet doesn't involve technical ability, rhythm, or anything to do with musical prowess. I judge Gina comfortable enough with me to traverse new terrain. Besides, she's come a bit unglued.

I sit back and look her in the eye. "I'm going to say something you've probably never heard in a music lesson."

She wraps her arms around herself, as if for protection. "I should quit?"

"No, not at all." I wonder if anything I say can help a person who berates herself this badly. "It's time for you to enjoy yourself."

When I listen to students play the harp, I don't hear the same thing they do. I notice how much they've improved in a week, and must remind most students of that. They witness incremental shifts through their practice. Via some strange mechanics of the musical brain, students are often blind to their own progress. I also hear a beautiful instrument—who can resist the harp? Usually, a lovely melody played by someone with healthy arms and the resources for private lessons on a pricey instrument. Gina occupies a gifted place.

And yet, I tell her, "You seem miserable."

Tears spring into her eyes. "I guess I just always hear what I'm doing wrong."

I share what I heard, everything that went well, the beauty of the melody she's chosen. "Did you hear how sweetly you played the middle section?"

"Of course not," she laughs, dabbing at her eyes. "I was too busy trying to keep it all from falling apart."

This is a metaphor for all of our lives, of course. We're always trying to keep everything from falling apart. But this is where the harp—or any instrument—can have a powerful role.

"Tell me why you want to play the harp," I suggest. Her answer is like that of many other students, some version of a decades-old dream that couldn't come to fruition until now.

"It's that beautiful sound," she says, smiling, "and the peaceful way I feel when I hear a harp." I invite her to play a single note with an attitude of complete, openhearted receptiveness, with the ears of the girl who heard her first harp. We listen attentively to the vibrating string, really taking in that gorgeous tone, the gentle, ringing timbre.



"For the next week ignore the technique I've taught you and focus instead on only one thing."

She bites her lower lip, waiting for what I know to be the most important—and, granted, unusual—assignment I give.

"For one week, play the harp as if you're praying."

She raises her eyebrows and smiles tentatively. "Praying? That sounds nice."

When we pray, we send out a thought or fervent hope and then let it go. It's out there doing its job without further meddling from us. Often it's a prayer of thanks, offered with a joyful heart—the healthy birth, the job landed, the meal around which we gather. This is the spirit in which I ask students to play music. Many of them belong to churches or have rich spiritual practices and understand immediately. Others need more imagery to work with, such as the idea to send music if not to God then to Life, Universal Spirit, or just plain old All Good Things. So far, everyone's found some way to conceptualize this.



I ask Gina to play that single note again and offer it to whomever or whatever she chooses, then envision the tone fading from the studio air, leaving to search for other ears, "big ones, if you know what I mean." We imagine that the vibration itself, the actual sound wave, dies off, but that the loving intention with which Gina played remains, winging out into the atmosphere to raise the level of beauty in the universe.

Quantum physicists report that when intention is applied to matter, changes occur on the atomic level. In my completely unscientific way I prove this to myself over and over because I witness the transformation in students when they've been invited to take their playing to a deeper, more spiritual level. They visibly relax. They remember why they took up the harp—not to argue with it, but to celebrate life through it, and maybe even share that celebration with others.

"Now let's try your piece again, this time as though you're

offering a prayer of thanks."

"I love that idea," Gina says, her discomfiture replaced by curiosity about the direction our lesson has taken. "But how do I do that with you here? You're not intimidating, but you're supposed to tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Ah, she hits on the paradox. Here I am asking her not to criticize herself, yet I perch three feet away paying close attention to every note, every movement of her fingers and arms. I struggle with this myself. But I like to think she pays me to tell her what she does *right*.

"Close your eyes, take three breaths, and just try," I suggest.

She smooths her skirt, then tries the exercise. Her whole body relaxes. She plays a short passage, and when she stumbles, I remind her to breathe, to keep going, to send the notes out.

When finished, she looks at me and nods. "That felt better."

"It sounded like an entirely different piece. It was smooth, and you looked serene."

"But how can I *stay* relaxed and prayerful while keeping my thumbs up, rolling forward on my sitting bones, closing my fingers properly, counting those triplets, *and* remembering the crescendo—all those things you're telling me to do?"

Again, her question applies to life in general. How can we get everything done and stay peaceful? I share with her the story of my own encounter with this question while in labor, when my midwife chastised me, gently, for being too tense during contractions.

"Instead of screwing up your face like that," my midwife said, imitating my strained expression, "just relax, pucker your lips and breathe out through them." She demonstrates. I try.

"No," she corrected. "Slow, controlled." Yeah, right I think. I should have practiced this new skill while pregnant instead of trying to learn it during labor. Too late.

I muttered crabbily, "Do other women actually succeed in your little assignment of relaxing during the worst pain imaginable?"

She smiled. "Yes. And you can, too." And you know what? The pain itself didn't lessen, but with my intention clearly focused, labor stopped being a gripped battle, and I no longer felt so victimized by it.

Gina agrees to try the assignment. After a week of sending out her music to something larger than herself, she returns for a lesson. She plays more deliberately, and when her fingers trip, she's more patient with herself.

"As long as I remember to think about it," she reports, "I really feel better."

In subsequent lessons, her inner critic stays away when Gina centers, breathes, and gives the music to something bigger than her. When she falters, I challenge her to refrain from speaking—or rolling her eyes, shaking her head, or any other indication of displeasure—until the last notes have faded to silence. Then, before anything else, she must say three positive things about her playing—and "I didn't mess up too badly" doesn't count. Overall, she's more joyful at the harp, confident that when she feels rattled, she now has a tool to use.

As with any attitude that needs reframing, it takes practice. But I see the difference in her and, more importantly, so does she. And when she forgets she appreciates the reminders. That's what she pays me for.

Second Movement: Performing

My student Diane is petrified. Poised to perform for family and friends on Christmas Eve, she's paralyzed by stage fright. She's already heard *The Talk*, but now it's time for its more advanced version, the one about the performer's special relationship with her audience.

I encountered this lesson myself twenty years ago. I'd been practicing the *Handel Concerto in Bb Major* three to four hours daily for months under the tutelage of the legendary Eileen Malone. The day before I took my concerto on the road to apply to music schools, I invited friends over for a brunch performance. The aroma of freshly baked muffins filled my parents' dining room, forks clinked quietly, and I ripped away at the concerto.

It ripped back. I tussled with it, swore over it, tripped over the lightning-speed runs of the Granjany Cadenza and, exhausted, stood up for my practice bow. Everyone clapped enthusiastically. I frowned. Clearing dishes, I catalogued the failures of my musical execution, which really felt as though someone had just been lined up and shot. Even so, as I filled the air with my complaints, my friends insisted it was really good, even if I stumbled. And by memory? Wow, such a long, complicated piece.

I realized they weren't just being nice. They were truly



impressed, and not just because they were easily wowed. What I'd done *was* impressive. Yet I'd diminished my performance by criticizing myself. Chagrined, I realized I'd forced my audience into the caretaking role of offering me reassurance.

That's when I understood the performer's job. It is not to show off. It is to fill the air with beauty as best we can. And when we mess up—and we will—our job is to radiate happy acceptance and non-attachment to error. We're in charge of the energy in the room: Do we force the focus onto ourselves? Or do we prioritize the experience of the listener? Because those are two fundamentally different things and we can't do both.

In contrast, a seven-year-old performer at a recital often

crashes a song, backs up and rams into it again, then stands, glowing, for applause. We love that child and cheer her, because what she's shown us is who she is, someone who doesn't attach self-worth to performance, who loves herself, goofs, warts and all. And that is who every member of the audience desires to be, someone who accepts her own humanity, which by its very definition, means making mistakes. A performer who shrugs off errors gives the audience the greatest possible gift, the one we all want: Permission to love ourselves, too.

My students always return with the same report. In their



music practice, as in all parts of their lives, everything goes better when they remain prayerful, relaxed, and grateful. But it all flies apart when busy-ness strikes. Some people—I'm one of them—fret over every decision and mistake, replaying careless comments or actions, courting regret. Others blaze through, making messes, moving on, loving and forgiving all the while. We aren't going to get it right, so we may as well forgive ourselves—and others—and have fun. I tell students (and myself), "Adorn the air with happy mistakes," because if the journey is what matters, we'll still feel good, mistakes will fade, and only intention will remain, with all of its goodness and radiance.

Diane played on Christmas Eve and though "it wasn't note-perfect, I really enjoyed myself when I focused on the kids," she said at her next lesson, eyes sparkling.

"They were delighted to hear Grandma play, and you were right, no one but me noticed the mistakes." She leaned closer and laughed. "They even demanded an encore! They all lined up to try my harp, and the older ones demanded to learn 'Jingle Bells.'" She's been invited to play at her office party, and knows she'll have to keep training her focus off of her insecurity and ego, and onto the atmosphere she creates for her listeners. As she left, I felt deeply satisfied, happy to have helped her find a way to share the music she loves with the most important people in her life.

Coda

Ask any music teacher how to master an instrument and you'll get three pieces of advice.

As it turns out, spiritual masters offer the exact same advice for detaching self-worth from performance, not because we'll never get it right, but because success lies in the development

and application of intention. The advice?
Practice, practice, practice.



Mary DeMocker studied harp at Eastman School of Music and University of Oregon School of Music. She is also grateful for the education she received playing street music and for an NEA grant to tour her program "Folk Harp Music from Around the World." President of the Willamette Valley Folk Harp Circle, she has taught pedal and folk harp for 23 years in Eugene, Oregon with the goal of keeping the sparkle in her students' eyes. Read more of her writing at www.marydemocker.com



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