

What Is He Teaching?

One could reasonably say his teaching method was essentially about detailed work on the physical aspects of playing an instrument to produce a sound of optimum quality, but such a description is superficial and incomplete. A more complete characterization of Phil's teaching method would have to include the fact that the detailed technical instructions he provided were unfailingly based on fact, rather than his opinion, and were delivered with an intense focus on each individual student's capacity to separate fact from fantasy. His approach essentially questioned their perception and behavior in order to show how their "playing mindset" was but a reflection of the habits and unconscious biases that had become part of their persona. The goal was to retrain his students' reflexive skills so they would be in a position to execute musical principles that would expand their artistic perspective.

He not only exposed how lacking I was in fundamental skills I thought I had, but he also challenged me with questions such as how I perceived myself physically, about how I thought of concepts such as beauty, happiness, and sexuality, about my motivations and thought processes, along with many other topics that didn't seem related to playing music. And then, amazingly, he would relate those seemingly disparate elements back to the musical task at hand, and in doing so, would show me how my perspective on life was inextricably related to my musical development.

Other musicians asked me what he was teaching and I told them it actually boiled down to how to blow and control my finger movement. My answer would either be dismissed as a joke or not taken seriously, probably

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because it sounded too simplistic. How could spending time on things that were so basic make any sense? It was like teaching a veteran TV newscaster how to use a microphone.

The response of the uninitiated was understandable. While it's easy to grasp the concept that complex activities evolve from fundamental principles, the idea that revisiting such primitive functions could make a significant difference in anything in which you'd already achieved a certain amount of expertise did not intuitively make sense. There were also those who would angrily dismiss the idea, perhaps because they perceived a possibly threatening implication that their apparent success as a musician was fundamentally flawed. But it was part of the dynamic of Phil's method to question everything surrounding an individual's music making process to find avenues for improvement.

In contrast with conventional teaching, very little actual playing was involved. It was all about how to approach the task of playing music by first developing body awareness and sensory perception and then learning and incorporating certain musical concepts into one's playing. The primary focus, at least for the first few years, was on fundamental procedural elements that most people assume are of minor significance or are already in place.

To help convey new and alternate concepts, or find solutions for our self-inflicted problems, he would ask questions that would inevitably trigger one of the primary tools for learning this new approach, constant analysis of the smallest details. He would dig into a problem by persistently questioning until he uncovered information that

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would help his students discover the mental or physical process needed to overcome an impediment.

“So do you have any idea why you’re moving away from the music if you don’t feel threatened by it?”

“Well, I don’t know about threatened, but maybe something about it bothers me. What difference does it make?”

“Your effort should be toward operating the saxophone, not moving your body. That movement messes with the timing you need to play the music.”

“Can’t I do both?”

“Not well! When you move, your body jerks and that causes your diaphragm to tense and your mouth to pinch – all counter-productive, a bad habit. So why do you think you have this habit?”

Answers to such questions would eventually come, but for many of the problems exposed, a lengthy and usually painful process had to run its course through my day-to-day and musical life before I was capable of finding a way to step back and take a good look at the why and how of my actions.

In the beginning, I enthusiastically practiced the seemingly rudimentary exercises he gave me and intently followed his exhaustive examination of miniscule details, but as my frustration grew, I began to question how this focus on such basic elements was going to take me to the big leagues. Also, why did his students seem to be reverent disciples after being exposed to his techniques? When I brought up these concerns with Phil, he told me he was often asked what was so different about his teaching. His favorite explanation was one that anyone could understand.

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“Take 10 excellent violinists, put them up on stage and give them the same melody to play. Each one does a good job, getting all the notes and rhythms and playing in tune with a good sound. Then I ask which one you preferred. Whatever is different from the others in that guy’s playing is what I teach.”

“You see,” he continued, “the guy who did it best not only knew what to do to make it more musical, but he also had to have complete control of his instrument to be able to make it happen. We’re working on the control part.”

He would give musicians a different answer when they asked what was different about his teaching: “Do you know what muscles you’re using when you’re playing your instrument?”

So typical of Phil to answer with a thought-provoking question! But his first example points out the fact that even among excellent performers, whether it be in music, business or other lifetime pursuits, there are differentiating factors in perceived quality that elevate one over another. In music, these individuals elevate a musical phrase from an accurate but sterile interpretation of dots on a page to a combination of tone, rhythm and movement shaped in a way that is perceived as artistic. Asking which muscles are used to play an instrument typifies the granular level of examination he pursued to enable a more complete understanding of the music-making process.

When he pointed out the parallels in other areas where precise execution is required, I found it was effective in helping me grasp, and perhaps more importantly, believe in, the idea that fundamentals and seemingly minor details can make all the difference. For instance, at my paralegal

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day job, I worked for years with a master litigator whose perspective on the execution of legal strategies, unlike any of the other excellent litigators I knew, relied on seemingly simplistic rules that he would bafflingly apply to complex problems. He unerringly got excellent results, accompanied by the respectful reverence of his peers. When I asked him how he came up with such beautifully constructed strategies, he told me, “It’s really basic stuff. Everyone just gets ahead of themselves.” I was working with this lawyer while simultaneously taking lessons from Phil, so this was powerful validation of the idea that focusing on fundamentals to solve complex problems was a highly effective approach, at least in these two disparate disciplines. Phil would say, “Even good players don’t realize they’ve skipped over basic steps that make all the difference.”

So gaining a different perspective that could separate you from the pack was one of the most significant benefits to studying with Phil. But could I actually apply this difference in perspective to improve the way I played my instrument? Phil’s answer to this question was delivered matter-of-factly, in his guileless, yet profound way, “Sure, you just have to understand what you are doing.” It took me years to learn that this meant acquiring an intimate understanding of all the elements that could possibly affect whatever you are executing, along with all of the interactions between those elements, then dealing with the most fundamental elements first and applying them in the proper order. In Phil’s universe, this meant an uncompromising quest to bind behavior, attitude and

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elements of musical artistry in a way that would maximize the musicality of any piece.

But none of this would be possible unless you relinquished your death grip on previously learned principles so that the new perspective Phil provided could either replace or enhance your beliefs about the best way to get the job done. Those with more experience, such as me, were a harder nut for Phil to crack because so much had to be “unlearned.” I might think that the way I was blowing the saxophone worked perfectly well, but when he would point out some detail that was incorrect, he had two jobs. First, he had to teach me the correct method, and then he would usually have to find a way to get me to change my well-learned “bad habit.” Otherwise, I would claim comprehension, and then revert to the way I’d been doing it for years. This was generally the most frustrating aspect of learning the Lindeman Method via Sobel (Lindeman-Sobel Method).