

Lauri Väkevã, & Heidi Westerlund, & Marja-Leena
Juntunen: *Teacher as ignorant music master: Some
Rancièrian musings on instrumental pedagogy*

Introduction

In 1987, in a small book called *Le Maître ignorant*, the French philosopher Jacques Rancièrè suggests that, by re-narrating the ideas of maverick nineteenth-century French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, it is possible to learn from people who are ignorant. Jacotot came to this realization after being forced to take a peculiar “intellectual adventure” (Rancièrè 1991: 1). Faced with the task of teaching French to Flemish students who had no previous knowledge of its grammar or vocabulary, and knowing no Flemish himself, Jacotot decided to find out how the students would manage learning the language themselves, using a bilingual version of *Telemaque*, a popular novel at the time, as a point of departure. After his decision proved to be successful, Jacotot expanded his experiment to a method of ‘Universal learning’ that relied on the recognition that one can learn anything in the same manner one learns one’s mother tongue: by comparing expressions to each other by trial and error, tracing the logical structure of the discipline from its actual realizations, and applying what they have learned in practice. Moreover, Jacotot came to the conclusion that one can learn what the subject matter is about without it being explained: his ‘panecastic’ method did not necessitate an explicator, but relied on the more flexible role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning.

In Rancièrè’s interpretation, ignorance does not mean that the teacher in question would not necessarily know her discipline, but rather, that there is ignorance in terms of any hierarchy between different intelligences. In other words, The Ignorant Schoolmaster, as described by Jacotot, does not share the common understanding that it is the teacher’s intelligence that is authoritative to the student’s intelligence. Still, this does not prevent the teacher from teaching; nor does it prevent the students from learning.

In this essay, we will reflect on some implications of these provocative ideas—that the students learn on their own terms, and that the teacher can be ignorant—for instrumental music education. In following Rancièrè’s line of thought, we will first sketch a description of the instrument teacher as

explicator: someone who sets out to instruct the students what the subject matter is all about. Second, we will elaborate an alternative image of the teacher as a facilitator, using Lucy Green's widespread concept of informal pedagogy as a reflecting surface (Green 2002, 2006, 2009). Third, we will discuss the role of the instrumental teacher as emancipator, trying to get a grasp of the various ways that The Ignorant Musicmaster can help a student's learning.

We do not profess to explain what we imagine Rancière intends. Rather, we want to use his conceptual tools to probe what lies behind our habitual ways of thinking about what constitutes quality and excellence in instrumental teaching. Nor do we present Rancière's ideas as solutions to any pre-set problems; indeed, as philosophers often remind us, there is enough work in finding the right questions, and the righteousness of the questions depends on who is asking them, and where, when, from whom, and on whose terms they are being asked. In our case, 'the right question' may simply be something that helps us to detect new ways of envisioning instrumental teaching as an open-ended concept, the understanding of which may require more than one way to look at what Rancière calls "distribution of the sensible"; viz., "an overall relation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of saying" (Rancière 2010: 7) that coordinates our relationships to each other and to other significant parts of our world.

Instrumental teacher as Explicator

Progress is the new way of saying inequality (...) Progress is the pedagogical fiction built into the fiction of the society as a whole. At the heart of the pedagogical fiction is the representation of inequality as a *retard* in one's development. (Rancière 1991: 119)

In fields that involve clearly defined areas of expert-level knowledge and skills, reflection is based on disciplinary constraints: it is the discipline that determines the level of excellence of practitionership, and the quality of the practitionership is defined according to discipline-based criteria, which also define the qualities of an expert's disciplinary identity. This model of practice-specific qualifications has been rationalized through the work of such authors as John Dewey, Donald Schön, and David A Kolb, and labeled under such concepts as 'reflective professional learning', 'learning systems', 'reflective practitioner', and 'organizational learning'. In the discipline of music-making, disciplinary knowledge is articulated in the somatic practice of the expert musician, putting the teacher in the position of an expert even when she may not be able to execute the activities herself anymore. Thus, in a very concrete sense, the teacher embodies the practice, whether she performs or not (see Parviainen 2002). Rationales for such an embodied

view of music making can be found, for instance, in Gilbert Ryle's concept of 'know how' that underlines the role of non-discursive skills in expertise or from Michael Polanyi's argument for the role of 'tacit knowledge', i.e. knowing more than can be expressed with words.

When the teacher's reflection is focused on discipline-specific issues, the body of knowledge that defines her knowing body becomes the main coordinate of pedagogical attention. The usual way to conceptualize such pedagogy is the master-apprenticeship model, where the novice gradually develops practice-specific readinneses under the guidance of the expert teacher (see e.g. Elliott 1995). In this scheme, the teacher cannot teach unless she has herself proceeded through the tedious process of learning the relevant knowledge and skills according to the demands of the excellence of her discipline. In such a model, teaching-learning interactions constitute a linear progress where the student slowly gains disciplinary agency under the teacher's regulative gaze. Again, an important aspect of this process is the inscription of disciplinary knowledge to the teacher's body. The teacher is not only a guardian of the inscription process, but she has an important role as the explicator of the practice-specific meanings of what is learned. In instrumental teaching, the explication is meant to cover not only the context-specific knowledge but also the skill and the embodied knowledge, and verbal articulation of this know-how. In a very concrete sense, the teacher is a translator of the hidden meanings of the repertoire, a leading voice in a process of interpretation that proceeds through revealing the secrets of the canon to the student, ultimately aiming to develop a level of practical understanding where reflection merges seamlessly into action. Such pedagogy is truly 'instrumental' in both senses of the term: it helps the student to develop high-level skills in her chosen instrument, and learning itself becomes instrumental in establishing a somatically anchored base of know-how that has significance within the discourse of the discipline in question.

This process of teaching-learning is described in an interesting manner by Rostvall and West (2003). At the turn of the millennium, they describe—and indeed criticize—Swedish instrumental teaching practices as constituting a "black box", a self-feeding system of "routine actions, evolved throughout the history of the institution" (ibid. 214, 221). Surprisingly, a key procedure in maintaining the 'blackness' of the system was the combined analysis and explication of musical codes through written music, rather than through the teacher's own actions. In the examined lessons, the subject content was "broken down into separate notes or chords as read from the sheet", and music was addressed "as sight-reading exercises" within "asymmetric distribution of power" that took the teacher's epistemic authority as self-evident but that did not demand modelling from her part (ibid. 213, 219, 220). Rostvall and West (2003) describe this logocentrism as follows:

The teachers were more verbally active than the students were... Teacher's utterances had, to a great extent, an instructive function... the teachers did not explain *why* students should play an exercise, nor did they set up any short- or long-term goals for the tuition... the teachers often ignored, and sometimes ridiculed students' verbal initiatives with sarcastic comments, and dictated what was going to happen, what the issue was and how it was to be addressed. Teachers showed little or no interest in students' perspectives... When students made spontaneous comments the teachers interrupted them... When teachers asked a question, they often answered it themselves. (pp. 219–220; italics original)

In other words, the teachers in this study do not so much explicate why certain actions are important, but concentrate on signaling whether they judged the student's reaction to be right or wrong. Using sheet music as the authoritative text, they also emphasize their own authority as representatives of the musical discourse by demanding docility under the rule of exercises, the significance of which, however, is left unarticulated.

While Rostvall's and West's study gives one snapshot of a teaching practice in one culture in one time, it provides a reflecting surface for thinking about the role of the explication in instrumental pedagogy. Interestingly, this rather gloomy representation of disciplinary teaching reveals a practice where the students are expected to behave in a certain way even without the teacher exemplifying the practice or explicating the meanings of its subject matter, as described by Rancière (see also Peters 2010: 109). What is missing from the above-described cases is a motivation on part of the teacher to clarify why certain ways of doing things are better than others (Rostvall & West 2003: 220). This appears to be something that the students are expected to arrive at on their own terms, without the teacher's advice. The teachers' acts of ridiculing the students' ideas (*ibid.*) define what is intelligible and what is not. As Rancière (1991: 6) writes, the act of the pedagogue divides the world into two realms of "knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable."

In classical instrument tuition, an important procedure of explication takes place through the interpretation of the printed score as a kind of knowledge exchange. Hultberg (2002) approaches the printed score as a text that mediates certain meanings relevant to Western tonal music. A printed score can function as "an explicitly normative document, which prescribes how to play, and through which the performance is to be assessed" (Hultberg 2002: 185). Noteworthy is that also Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster used text for his students' auto-didactic learning; it was the explicit explanation and progressive teaching that was missing. In instrumental teaching, the teacher is expected to both explain and exemplify the meaning and the interpretations of the markings in the score: in short, how the music should be performed. It is assumed that the student should accept a teacher's

interpretation and imitate her, in order to play ‘in a right way’ according to the norms of a particular musical style or tradition that the teacher embodies. Hultberg (2002) argues that this kind of reproductive approach to the printed score, especially in early levels of instrumental tuition may obstruct student’s development and even prevent the student from applying her musical understanding later. The emphasis of such an approach is on the teacher as the explicator of hidden knowledge encoded in the score, just as Jacotot’s explicator justified her teaching on the basis of an inequality between her own and the student’s abilities to understand what the subject matter is about. It is the teacher alone, the ‘superior intelligence’ who “knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole”, thus revealing the progressive order hidden in the subject matter (Rancièr 1991: 7). Such intelligence “allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he learned. Such is the principle of explication” (ibid.).

Instrumental teacher as Facilitator

And education is like liberty: it isn’t given; it’s taken... The learned should also learn it... Let them begin teaching what they don’t know, and maybe they will discover unsuspected intellectual powers that will put them on the road to new discoveries. (Rancièr 1991: 107)

As a response to the dominance of the master-apprentice tradition in music education and to celebrate student autonomy, several scholars have turned to informal learning practices that reveal how self-taught musicians develop their expertise within a given musical practice or musical discipline. Lucy Green’s (2002) *How popular musicians learn* demonstrates how young popular musicians teach themselves by picking up skills and knowledge in popular genres, alone and with the help of their peers, watching and imitating more advanced musicians and making references to videos, performances, and recordings of their favorite artists. Later, Green (2006, 2009) suggests that this approach could be applied in “a range of musical skills and knowledge that have long been overlooked within music education”, including Western instrumental studies (Green 2009: 1). Green’s approach is based “on a diagnosis of and responses to learner-perceived, immediate need rather than pre-established teacher-set aims or objectives with long-term trajectories in mind” (Green 2009: 34). This logic is strikingly similar to the Jacotian logic revealed by Rancièr: rather than explicating what, why and how to learn, the teacher is expected to sit alongside the learner and learn together with her students who all learn primarily by getting familiar with the cultural texts (in Jacotot’s case, books,

in Green's case, records). It is only when the student begins to learn herself, together with her peers, that the teacher fades in, beginning to structure the learning situations, building her pedagogical tactic on the recognition of the importance of the student's inherent motivation to learn relevant things. However, the teacher does not assume the role of the explicator in this process. She remains a facilitator, or the designer of the learning environment, and a pointer towards the possibilities in the cultural texts.

In Green's scheme, the key for fruitful learning resides in how relevant the context is for the student. The criteria of the relevance is based on the idea that the students can find appealing material themselves, and begin to build their abilities together (in "friendship groups") by copying the music from the records without the teacher's help (Green 2009: 45). In addition to relying on the appeal of the recorded-music canon as a source of motivation, Green argues that, there are certain ways of learning that can be considered "natural" to popular music, and it is these learning practices that both generate and maintain students' interests (ibid. 42). It is through participation in the learning processes that are allegedly native to popular music that students build a continuing interest in learning music—an interest that, according to Green, can also leak over the borders between musical genres.

This trust in the power of learning a cultural canon that can be mediated through participation without the presence of a teacher and her explicative input is supported by recent trends in learning theories (e.g. of Bruner, Lave and Wenger, and Rogoff and Wertsch). Along with this uprising of social learning theories, the focus has shifted from examining cognitive representations and skills as possessions of individuals to "individuals' participation in and contributions to the ongoing activity" (Rogoff, Radziszewska & Masiello 1995: 144), as well as to knowledge creation and agency in communities of practice and networks—in short, towards recognizing the significance of participation in learning. As in Jacotot and Green's cases, the social practice and its inscriptions function as "the master" that replaces the teacher as a pedagogical authority. The situation is not unlike that of the teaching practices described by Rostvall and West: one could perhaps argue that, in the same way that the instrumental teachers expect their students in their studies to absorb the canon themselves, both Jacotot and Green rely on the students' abilities to find themselves the relevance of the "texts" learned.

The Emancipatory Music Master

Against this discursive context of music education, we ask, what would happen if we would take seriously Rancière's argument of the teacher being ignorant of the kind of intelligence that should be preferred. In Jacotot/Rancière, such an ignorance is not a sign or irresponsibility, but the

will to emancipate the learner to find her own learning trajectories (as Wenger would put it). Again, the question is not about whether the teacher judges all knowledge as equal in epistemic terms, but whether she can accept that all people are equal in their ability to learn without explication. The ignorance, then, would concern the inevitability to make distinctions between different ways of becoming knowledgeable

It would be viable to think that the ignorance of The Ignorant Music-master is a non-hierarchical concept, meaning that such a Master in this case would not subscribe to the common view of the instrumental teacher being the one who knows all, because she knows how. Instead of acknowledging a division of intelligences between the teacher and the student, such ignorance presupposes, hypothetically at least, the equality of *all* intelligences. In Rancièrè's view, such a hypothetical presupposition does not exclude the possibility that there are qualitative differences between the teacher and student's knowledge; instead, it subscribes to a view that sees all people as being equally able to find their own ways of learning.

This axiom of equality, which, for Rancièrè has deeper implications than accepting the equality of all learners *qua* learners, can also be thematized in terms of providing the learner with an opportunity to claim agency. This takes us to Rancièrè's political philosophy, which is based on the idea that political agency always disturbs the "distribution of the sensible", or "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancièrè 2004: 12). The distribution of the sensible concerns a "system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime" (Rockhill 2004: 1). Such an order is based on an alleged division of intelligences that portion the sensible according to the epistemic authority of social agents. Instead, Rancièrè suggests that we could begin with the assumption that the distribution of the sensible is always arbitrary: if we accept that the distribution can be divided in many ways, rather than only being based on the disciplinary hierarchy of intelligences, we can also think of alternative distributions that open up spaces of agency to persons and groups who have not previously been recognized as equal.

In Rancièrè's vision, such opening up of a space for agency is not a didactical project, but something that happens spontaneously as a function of particular political acts. As the question is about the distribution of the aesthetic realm, Rancièrè elevates artistic interventions to the foreground of his political attention: aesthetic is always political, and vice versa. The social order is maintained by social coordinates established by what Rancièrè calls 'police'—an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, being, and saying in a society. In turn, 'politics' consists of individual acts that somehow distract this distribution by bringing forth alternative subject

positions for those who have not yet been recognized as subjects: by calling this process ‘subjectification’, Rancière focuses our attention to the fundamental way that political acts construct agency.

In the context of this essay, we can identify ‘the police’ as a musical praxis guarded by context-specific norms, standards, and values: rules and principles dictated by the habituated ways of “musicing”—“performing, improvising, composing, arranging and conducting” (Elliott 1995: 40). From this standpoint, the instrumental teacher could be seen as an expert explicator of the given musical praxis. This idea is reversed in Green’s informal music pedagogy, where the teacher as facilitator gives away her role as the explicator of the canon and trusts in the power of the authentic cultural context of learning to motivate the students to learn more.

But how would the role of the emancipatory instrument teacher differ from the roles of the explicator and facilitator? And what, then, would define ‘politics’ in instrumental pedagogy in Rancièrian sense? Rancière emphasizes political acts as ruptures in the distribution of the sensible, based on processes where new subjectivities emerge behind the facade of conventional social order. He thematizes the emergence of such new subject positions in terms of *speech* and *voice*: before being recognized as a speaking subject, capable of expressing oneself, one’s utterances are heard as mere noises, empty anomalies amidst meaningful discourse.

In the context of instrumental learning, we could interpret subjectification, or the process of finding one’s own voice, in two ways. The safer assumption would be to associate political acts with the ways that teachers empower a student to find her individual voice as a representative of a musical tradition. Logically, it would seem to make no difference whether such process of empowerment would take place in classical-instrumental-studio or garage-band-like environments; in both cases, the teacher’s expectation is that, eventually, the student will master the discipline only if she is prepared to do the hard work. The most a teacher can do is to embody good practice and, when needed, facilitate spaces in which it is safe for students to try out their own wings as autonomous practitioners. While there might be a temptation to explicate the subject matter in cases where the student does not understand what the teacher means, it would seem to be more emancipating to let the students find their own solutions through guided participation in the cultural praxis of musicing. After all, what other reason is there for employing a master explicator than to ensure the efficiency of the learning processes? For Rancière, this would be an archetypical example of policing, where the instrumental teachers are employed to guarantee the steady production—and selection—of musicians that are prepared to maintain the existing distribution of the sensible. Interestingly, it seems that at least some instrumental teachers are unmotivated to explicate anything, but rather expect their students to find their musical voices themselves, through a teacher-regulated discipline of

exercise. In contrast, informal-learning pedagogy seems to imply that the teacher does not even have to think of herself as an explicator or master: as long as the music learned appeals to the student and is learned in ways that are authentic, the student will acquire the needed competencies, which can then be transferred to other existing musical embodiments of the sensible.

As to the more radical option, we could perhaps think about the instrumental teacher as being intentionally ignorant in the sense that she would not expect learning to be a process in which the student's eyes are opened to see how music is to be performed and thought about in conventional regimes of musical praxes. Such an ignorance would not take the predisposed order presented in musical canons as authoritative; rather, it would look for ways to disturb the existing order, by opening up spaces where the student's individual voice can be heard above the disciplined chorus of the existing voices. Would this be yet another form of policing, disguised in the lambskin of the emancipatory music master? As Bingham and Biesta (2010: 23) observe, there is no way out of policing in pedagogical institutions, but Rancièrè leaves the back door open for recognition of a better kind of policing:

There is a worse and a better police – the better one, incidentally, not being the one that adheres to the supposedly natural order of society or the science of legislators, but the one that all the breaking and entering perpetrated by egalitarian logic has most often jolted out of its 'natural' logic. (Orig. quote from Rancièrè 1991: 30–31)

Thus, better policing would allow for interference with the commonly accepted ways of 'distributing the sensible' to a degree that such distractions amount to new individualized ways of living artistic life. In other words, every music learner needs to be able to make his or her "own story out of it" (Rancièrè 2007: 10).

Concluding thought

The question that a Rancièrian reading of instrumental teaching and learning practices raises is whether one *has* to be a Master in instrumental skills and pedagogy in order to flourish as an instrument teacher and what value would a method of 'Universal learning' bring to instrumental teaching practices? Is it possible to facilitate pedagogical spaces that allow for alternative distributions of the sensible, even subversive acts of disturbing the social order? In short: is there room for politics, in a Rancièrian sense, in instrumental teaching, and how do we know when it takes place? Importantly, Rancièrè's urge for rethinking the role of teaching is not a method or description of a practice, but rather a starting point and

hypotheses. It does not deny teacher's expertise. However, only when we take equality of intelligences as a starting point in instrumental teaching, then, and only then, do we know how the practice changes and how exactly equality is verified.

References

- Bingham, C. & Biesta, G. (2010). *Jacques Ranciere: Education, Truth, Emancipation*. London: Continuum.
- Elliott, D. J. (1995). *Music matters. A new philosophy of music education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green, L. (2002). *How popular musicians learn: A way ahead for music education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Green, L. (2006). Popular music education in and for itself, and for 'other' music: Current research in the classroom. *International journal of music education*, 24(2), 101-118.
- Green, L. (2009). *Music, informal learning and the school: A new classroom pedagogy*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hultberg, C. (2002). Approaches to music notation: The printed score as a mediator of meaning in Western tonal tradition. *Music Education Research*, 4(2), 185-197.
- Parviainen, J. (2002). Bodily knowledge: epistemological reflections on dance. *Dance Research Journal*, 34(1), 11-26.
- Peters, G. (2010). Ignorant artists/Ignorant teachers. In T. Claes & D. S. Preston (Eds.), *Frontiers in higher education* (pp. 99-112). New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Ranciere, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated with an Introduction by Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated with an Introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.
- Rancière, J. (2007). The Emancipated Spectator. *ArtForum*, March 2007. Retrieved August 9 2015 from <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200703&id=12847>
- Rancière, J. (2010). On Ignorant Schoolmasters. In C. Bingham & G. Biesta, *Jacques Ranciere: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (pp. 1-24). London: Continuum.
- Rockhill, G. (2004). Translator's Introduction. Jaques Rancière's Politics of Perception. In J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (pp. 1-6). London: Continuum.
- Rogoff, B., Radziszewska, B., & Masiello, T. (1995). Analysis of developmental processes in sociocultural activity. In L. Martin, K. Nelson & E. Tobach (Eds.), *Sociocultural Psychology. Theory and Practice of Doing and Knowing* (pp. 125-149). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rostvall, A.-L. & West, T. (2003). Analysis of interaction and learning in instrumental teaching. *Music Education Research* 5(3), 213-226.
- Smith, J. E. (2011). The master in his place: Jacques Ranciere and the politics of the will. In J. E. Smith & A. Weisser (Eds.), *Everything is in Everything: Jacques Rancière Between Intellectual Emancipation and Aesthetic Education* (pp. 89-100). Pasadena, Ca: Art Center Graduate Press.