

Knowledge Interview

Name: Tasha Hruska, Music Teacher

Date: 5/19/2023

Interviewer: Kat Fritz, Sara Hruska, with Ally Okun

Topic: Music Education

Link to video interview: [Music Education Interview](#)

Keywords: music, music education, teaching, students, lessons, instruction, performance, piano, saxophone, music theory, sight reading, assessment

Summary:

Tasha, Kat, and Sara discuss Tasha's background as a music teacher. They explore her methodology, how she adapts to students, the tools and technology she uses, and where she seeks help.

Transcript:

Tasha Hruska: My name is Tasha Hruska

Kat Fritz: Can you tell us about your background and experience as a music teacher

Tasha Hruska: Sure, so I started piano lessons, I think, when I was in first grade and played all the way through high school. I went to St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin for music education, Major. I was a general instrumental. K through 12, with an add-on certification to teach music to kids with disabilities. So I taught while I was in college to local students, and I also conducted a weekly church band for a Saturday evening service. That was pretty fun. And then, when I moved out to California, I'd taken a couple of years off from teaching privately, and then started doing that again. Did that for a few more years. And then now I've been teaching in Wisconsin since 2013. 2014, something like that. So yeah, I just teach ... I was teaching out of either my studio, my private studio just at my home, or I was teaching in a studio at one of the local music stores.

Kat Fritz: Awesome. So you specialize, the instrument you specialize in is piano.?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, mainly piano, just because that's the bigger need. I do also, my main instrument in college was saxophone, so I do that, clarinet. But there is just yeah, just a higher need for piano. Often the local schools around here... Well, you're gonna teach kids in early elementary school before they get into, you know, band. So often, you'll get a lot of those kids and so like prior to fifth grade. And then, if students are interested in playing percussion in their school band. They have to, it's required now, for a lot of schools to know piano first, to have a handle on that. So I'll often get students that will come to me about fourth, fifth, sixth grade, just

for that reason, and they get a good handle and then they're like, okay, we're good. We made it into percussion. We don't need piano lessons anymore. I'll go, "Okay. You're welcome."

Sara Hruska: interesting. Okay. So you said, music's been a part of your license like first grade, right? I think,

Tasha Hruska: Forever. Yeah.

Sara Hruska: I guess we can transition into more questions about methodology. So in general, how would you describe your method for teaching music?

Tasha Hruska: So when I first meet with students, depending on their age, I teach adults as well. So if they're younger, I try to ask the students as well as the parents or the adult, what's their goal? What are they looking for? What, what's a favorite style? How much time are you going to be able to commit to practicing, or what I would kind of expect, and I think that has proven to, I think, engage students right out of the gate. If I get experienced students, I will make sure to cater to their interests. I find that I will use a lot of the same books and methods that my piano teacher used on us.

But I have also... so I'll use a series Faber N Faber series, and I will always use a lesson, and I will always use the theory book and they match up together. I think it's extremely important to use a theory book. It's kind of like a workbook. It helps with the foundation of really understanding music on a deeper level. I found that to be extremely important, because once I got into college there were a lot of music students, music majors, who had never touched, who had never talked about theory. And they really struggled. And I just realized I had such a deeper understanding and appreciation for it, because I had so much theory in my like, you know, my general education background. So I've definitely made sure that's been a huge priority.

If parents are willing and open, I will also get other, I will have them purchase other supplemental material. So that would be like a technique book. Also a either solo, they call it like a solo book, or a performance book. And then there is a, you can get an improvisation book. You can also get a sight-reading book. You can get ear training books. So there's just a lot that you can do. The most of what I will do will be the lesson, the theory, the solo / performance, and the technique. Those are the ones that I typically stick to.

Kat Fritz: And you mentioned that you use the same books that your teacher had used. Do you think there's a reason why you've gravitated towards those ones

Tasha Hruska: I think it's what I'm comfortable with, what I know. I experienced it myself. The basic books that I use are different than what she used. But when I, when I feel when I, when I notice that a student may need to focus on something specific, I'll use, for example, this one is called "A Dozen a Day." It's a very structured technique book. It's phenomenal. I've seen wonderful progress with all of my students, so I continue to use that one.

Kat Fritz: So do you think the if you notice a student is struggling. It's just more helpful for you to use a practice book that you're already more familiar with. Just because it's how you learned yourself.

Tasha Hruska: No. I mean, I'm open to other books I've just found that I've been successful, and I've reached the goal that I've been looking for. So, if it's not broke, don't fix it, I guess. I don't know. I guess is how I would approach that. If I feel that, you know, I'm like, man, I don't know

how to help this student, this book isn't working. How do I? What do I do? I will reach out to my musician friend teachers, you know. Obviously, I know a lot from college, just friends that I've grown up with, too, that have gone into that. I've honestly googled it. I've done, you know, my student is struggling with this, and I'll look at, you know, look at YouTube and I'll look at lots of different strategies. So that's been. It's been how I've approached it.

Kat Fritz That's really interesting. I guess it's kind of what the next question was, how did you come up with this method? Are you training existing lesson plans from other teachers, and how much of it developed over time as you gained experience teaching?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. So I think that's why I started with just what my teacher did. I said, "Well, let's start with what I know. I'm gonna go with that." It was really great when I worked at Heid [Music], because you know, you're surrounded by a whole bunch of teachers. So you know, you chat in the hallways when you're waiting for your students to show up, or if you have a break, and you know, you share your different strategies, your different struggles, you share your material. So I've, you know, I've adopted different things.

What's been really neat is, which I'm super grateful for, is I have this this one student. She had already been taking piano lessons for a couple of years. She's very talented, very natural talent. Her mom also was an amazing support at home, and I learned... and her teacher that she had prior to me, I could tell, was a pretty awesome teacher, too. I don't know who that was. It was a different state. But, they would say, "Oh, this is what my teacher would have me do, and this is what my teacher would have me do, and this is what my..." I'm like, "All right, if that's what you did, and that's what's working for you, yeah, let's give it a try." So, I find myself not pushing back too much, and if it continues to work for all of us involved, I'll learn from that, and use it with my other students, and I've adapted my lessons that way, too. So that's been really neat; I've been really grateful to have that experience with them.

Kat Fritz It's nice to feel that you're able to get the feedback from the students, too.

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, you know what's cool is I'm not that very strict: "No, you're doing it my way, only my way." You know? They will tell me, "No, no, I don't really want to do this," or "okay, I got...", and I'm like, "All right." I kind of let them take ownership of where their lessons go. We will get to the end of a solo or a performance piece, and I say, "You know, I don't think it's performance ready. I think you can do this, this, this, and this." I said, "I feel that you've learned a lot from it. I think you're capable of getting to that performance level. Do you want to continue with this song at that performance level, or do you want to move on to the next?" I'll get both responses. So, I think that's pretty neat. And from the same student again, this one gal, thinking about she's like, "You know. I like this one, and I want to step it up a level and let's do a little more with it." Great. And sometimes they just say, "No. I just really don't like this piece." I said, "You know that's fine. You got it down. You understand it, no big deal." But then sometimes it's a "You know what? No, I want to get a little more out of you on this one." So yeah.

Kat Fritz It's interesting that you're able to get like feedback, I guess, exactly right there.

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, I like it.

Kat Fritz Do you think that teaching music differs from other subjects?

Tasha Hruska: I mean, yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know I learned that music makes different synapses, right? If that's the correct word that I'm using, in your brain, nothing else can do. I

think it provides a creative outlet, an emotional outlet, and an expressive outlet that, you know, I don't know that sports—I'm not super into sports—you know, but I can't... I don't know. I don't see that gives that same kind of outlet, so I think it's an extra special topic.

Kat Fritz You think there are unique challenges teachers and students face when trying to like share and absorb musical knowledge. You could think on it about it.

Tasha Hruska: I didn't... ask that one again.

Kat Fritz Do you think there are any unique challenges teachers and students face when trying to share and absorb knowledge about music?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. The student, the teacher, the support group, I, you know, the parents or whatever guardians they have to be very intentional about it because it's not necessarily in your everyday life like, you know, your reading and your writing and your math, and even, you know, maybe even sports, for that matter. I think just because a lot of kids kind of fall into that, at least around here I see that sports are pretty big, so I think there's that challenge. I think it's, again, you have to be very intentional about getting involved. So, you know, if there's, and just the arts in general, I suppose. You know, going out into your community and find plays that your kids can get involved in, musicals that your kids can get involved in. I don't think the schools are as focused on providing those opportunities in communities as they are, I would say, kind of, you know, towards the sports opportunities in our communities.

Kat Fritz Do you only teach piano? Or did you say that you also taught clarinet?

Tasha Hruska: I taught saxophone and clarinet. Currently, now, my studio only is piano students.

Kat Fritz So, I guess, thinking about something like clarinet, and saxophone too, where there's something like the embouchure, where it's kind of technical, it involves your body. Do you think there are aspects of music that can only be learned by experiencing them firsthand?

Tasha Hruska: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. You know, I mean, we can talk about embouchure, and I can tell you what you need to do. But until you put that mouthpiece in your mouth, get that reed in there, know what that tastes like, know what it feels like, really getting..., you know, you can't... You can't know how to have a perfect embouchure without really experiencing it. So yeah, absolutely.

Kat Fritz So I guess if I were a student and I were struggling with my embouchure, I guess what kind of feedback would you give me? Obviously, it would depend on how I'm performing in the moment. But just...

Tasha Hruska: So, a lot of it is going to be..., you know, we can talk about your posture, which is really going to play into that too. It's about how much mouthpiece you put in or how little mouthpiece you put in, and then also creating a tight circle with the saxophone mouthpiece will make a really big difference as well. And also, your reed. If your reed is not saturated enough or if it's oversaturated, that'll make a really big difference as well.

Kat Fritz So do you just kind of try and model what they're supposed to be doing? Or do you use mirrors or anything to try and help?

Tasha Hruska: Yes. All of that. I will always have the saxophone and clarinet out with them. Actually, all the studios have mirrors for exactly this reason, as well as my home studio. I will have them, you know, sit in front of me or look at it, or I have them look at me and say, you know. I'll exaggerate, I think, like, "This is how much... you got to put a bit more in there," or "Look, you have way too much in there," you know. So I have them watch me, look at themselves in the mirror. Yeah, that makes a really big difference.

Kat Fritz I definitely struggled when I was trying to learn embouchure when I played clarinet. So...

Tasha Hruska: Oh, really?

Kat Fritz Yeah, so it's definitely interesting to hear it from a teacher's perspective.

Tasha Hruska: And you know, there is that woodwind versus brass versus percussion. Sometimes you just get one, and you don't get the other. So... Yeah, I don't know. So like a woodwind instrument with a reed was always... I never had a problem with it. Now, flute, as Sara played, I wanted to pass out every time I played it. Like, I just can't do that.

Kat Fritz Have to have a lot of air for a flute.

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, I'm like, "No, I can't do that." And then that was a very difficult instrument for me. That is probably like the lowest on the scale here. But then you know, your body, your body type, played into it too. I found guitar was really hard for me. Trombone because, man, my arm, I'm a shorter person. I can't reach all the way out to the seventh position. Tuba, I'm just too small for that thing, you know. I mean, not too small, but it just provides an extra challenge.

Kat Fritz Are your hands small, too? Like, does it ever come into piano with being able to reach?

Tasha Hruska: Yes, oh yeah, because then your range will definitely play into it. I definitely have a larger range than other people who don't play piano, obviously, because I'm used to it. You know, I've stretched out my hands straight. There's not a lot of people who can do that without all the practice. But yeah, I mean there, a lot of my kids are bigger than me, and their hands are bigger than me, and they can reach one to two more keys than I can. I'm like, "Uh." I just adapt. This is what I have to do.

Kat Fritz I think we covered this a little bit, but what is your strategy when a student is struggling to learn a specific technique or piece of music?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. So, I will, you know, I like to break it down and pull back the layers and make it as simple as possible for them and in having them understand it. We talk about it. I will model it for them because I think talking about it, hearing it, watching it, all those things will help. I've also, if a parent has kind of warned me about, "Hey, my student is struggling," if I don't feel like I have enough strategies or I've used all the strategies and it's still not working, again, I will go to YouTube. I will go to Google. I will email my friends and just say, "Hey, guys, what do you? What else do you use?" I don't pretend that I know everything, you know. I will reach out for help, and if I say, you know, hey, I will tell the student, or I'll tell the parents, you know, "I've tried all these things. It doesn't seem to work. I'm going to see what else I can come up with," you know. And I do like to share those strategies with the parents as well, so they can support it at home because that makes a really big difference.

Sara Hruska: You mentioned you work with different age groups. You also work with different skill levels. Can you describe how you kind of adapt to those different groups?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. So, well, when you look at age, so if I'm going to have someone that is older, the different series that I'll use, there's a more accelerated version for adults, so I'll have them use that. And what's neat about that instead of having all these separate, your main lesson book, and then all your supplemental material, it'll be in one large book, and it'll just be page by page. So that's kind of neat, and I'll do that.

If it's... I mean, with students, you start out with the very basic books. If it's difficult, I just, we just take it slow. If the kiddo is excelling really fast, I will, if they sight-read a piece for the first time and they play it perfectly, okay, we're done with that. We're going to keep moving. We're going to keep moving. And so, yeah, I'll just accelerate the pace of what we cover. And then if they are not feeling very challenged in just the series, then I'll add in some other material. So, and that'll typically be more of a performance solo-based type of book. So, you know, "What kind of music do you like?" "Oh, I love pop music," or "Oh, I love Taylor Swift." I've gotten that. So, okay, we're gonna... "Which song do you like? Let's find this piece and let's get you excited about it. A little challenge." You know, "I like Disney." "Okay, let's get you a Disney book," or you know "I really like... I like ballads." So, then I'll try to kind of bring in those extra things, too, to keep them engaged and keep them motivated and excited and inspired about their music. So, I think I adapt all the time. I don't... You would look at my students' books, and nobody has the same books. It's very different.

Sara Hruska: Out of curiosity, is there a different... Mix of the physicality part of it at different age groups, like more modeling if it's a different skill set or age group? How does that kind of mix in your methods?

Tasha Hruska: So if it's a really young child and... I will... like, I have a ball, right? So really, it's really going to be more of a... We take a lesson where we just talk about how to sit, where your feet go, how far away from the piano you're going to be. I take a ball and put it in your hand. Now let's drop the ball but keep your hands like that. Okay, that is how you're going to put your hand on the piano. And then for a few months, I very much watch that and critique them and, you know, give them that feedback and say, "Oh, remember that ball? Let's go like this. Freeze your hand. Can I fit the ball in there? No, you're straight." So... It's a lot more hands-on and taking it slow and very intentional about those sorts of things. The older you get, the more they understand. You say, "Hey... You know... you want to sit up straight. Pay attention. That kind of answer your question?"

Sara Hruska: Yeah, I think so. We can move on to musical expression? Can you describe more about successfully communicating nonverbal aspects of music, like something like phrasing or dynamics?

Tasha Hruska: Yes, sure. So I have never been challenged with this before until I had a student, an older student. He was out of high school.

Sara Hruska: Can you describe more about successfully communicating nonverbal aspects of music like something like phrasing or dynamics?

Tasha Hruska: Sure, so I had never been challenged with this before I had a student, an older student. He was out of high school and starting college, and he decided that he wanted to start music, and he was extremely talented. But he did *not* have an understanding, just this natural

understanding of bringing in emotion. And, I was like what I don't know how to explain it? Like you just feel it? What do you mean? Can you, can, you, you know? So I had to learn how to articulate that. It was very difficult for me, but it was such a wonderful challenge.

And I was like, yeah, bring emotion, and he's like, "I don't know what that means." It's like, okay, we'll have the phrase like, swell up, and then come—"I don't know what that means." I'm like, okay, so you're going to get louder, and then you're gonna get softer, and you know, and I mean he understood how to make loud and soft sounds on the piano. So soft you just touch it more lightly. It's loud, you gotta, you know gotta push it harder.

And so he yeah, he was more advanced, but he just didn't understand that part of it, so that really challenged me to learn how to explain that to him. you know, in more technical terms. When it comes to my traditional, elementary students, it's really laid out quite well in the books that I use. So, when you start out talking about piano and forte, it's just really about the weight that you're putting on each key.

What I remember being difficult, not understanding for a long time was like legato versus not legato or staccato, and I mean because you can be not legato and not staccato, and be something in between there. But I didn't understand, like legato versus not legato. And I just remember that experience. So I remember when I teach it, I make sure to have them understand it and kind of make a game of it and practice that a lot.

The girl student that I mentioned, who I think is really super talented, she always rolls her eyes at me. She's a little older now, so she likes to roll her eyes at me. When I say like more expression, and she's just like, "Ugh. Where? What? Where do you want me to put that? I was like, okay, well, this shows you have all this articulation through here, like use that. So she got better about it, and then I wanted to challenge her to create her own expression. So I brought in these kind of [New Agey] books that she really enjoyed and said, "There's not much in here for that. So you got to create that yourself." So she takes it for the week, and she comes back and she struggled with that at first, but over time she was able to figure it out. And then I made her explain to me, "What did you do here to create expression?" and she was able to then explain that back to me. That's a long answer, but that's my experience.

Sara Hruska: It's really helpful to hear you kind of describe it because it's such a challenge.

Tasha Hruska: It is. Yeah, it's probably one of the biggest challenges, because for me it's just always been just something that I just got and just understood. And those are typically the hardest things to teach when you, when you weren't taught yourself when you just it's just something you knew. So yeah, it's a challenge.

Kat Fritz: I keep on thinking about—I only played clarinet and bass clarinet and saxophone. So this is where my mind goes when I'm thinking about these. But I guess, for like when you were teaching that kind of stuff, how would you talk about air control? And did you model that or anything?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. Yup. So let me see what it is. Yeah, that's so different. And I haven't actually had a saxophone student in quite some time. But yeah, you know again, it's gonna be about your posture. It's all about the strength of your core, and you know, not breathing in your chest and filling your chest. It's about filling up your stomach. That's where you're going to get the most air capacity. And then when you talk about phrasing with saxophone or with wind instruments, you have to get enough air inside in order to make those long phrases. So we

would practice a lot, you know, between the phrases, taking those very large breaths and getting to the end and just explaining. It's just a lot about practicing, I mean, like diving right. The more you practice diving and stay longer underwater, the longer you can stay under. So I think it's a very similar technique to breathing. And also, when you talk about your embouchure, if you're having air escaping on the side, that's also not helpful. So again, tightening up the embouchure around your mouthpiece. It's not, you're not going to be able to fill up your sound for sure. I'm trying to think of what other techniques I may have used. Yeah, I guess that's all I can think of right now.

Kat Fritz: No that's a great answer. How do you encourage students to develop their musical intuition and instinct?

Tasha Hruska: So when they're very little, they may not understand that. But yeah, I guess it's more my intermediate students that I would introduce that to. And then you kind of talk about, yeah. So you talk about phrasing. You say, "This is like a musical sentence, right? You're not going to stop—in the middle of your sentence. That's not proper phrasing, you know." So I use that example a lot, and that seems to click. They seem to understand that when I explain it that way.

I probably focus more on that when we're getting prepared for a recital, we talk about, "Okay, what's the story you want to tell? What do you think the mood is? What do you think they're trying to express here?" So you just have more of a conversation. I also like to have them listen to the piece that they're performing being performed by other people, and kind of listen to that. I really encourage them to record themselves when they're doing a practice performance because, again, this is with this one gal. She's like, "I did do it piano. I did crescendo. I did do 'dah-dah-duh-dah.'"

I was like, "I know that you think you are, and you probably are a little bit, but it's not coming across as much as you actually think it is." I was like, "You would be shocked if you... I'm like, just please record yourself when you're practicing at home." And I've done it to where I've recorded them and played it back. And they're like, "Oh yeah, you're right. I didn't even change." I was like, "Right, you know." So I just think those are a lot of the things that I use so they can kind of learn. And then, what's okay. So really, I just... Yesterday, I just had this gal, and she goes to me, she's like, "Yeah, I decided I don't want to do that anymore, so I started a new piece." I was like, "Oh, alright. Well, it's this book." So I'm like, "Okay, with that." She's like, "Yeah, that's what I thought too." I was like, "Any other book you'd say no, but this one you're okay with." I was like, "Yeah, you're right." So she started this piece, and she had put in so much expression. It was just amazing. So, after all these like 2, 3 years of us going back and forth and bickering with each other about, like, "No, you're not doing it." "Yes, I am." She applied it, and it was so amazing, and I praised her so much. I was like, "That was so beautiful." I was like, "At this section, you know, you really it swelled, and you climaxed it here, and then you brought it back down, and I could really tell the staccato and the legato and the phrasing." Yeah, so it made her smile. So, it was really neat to take a moment and reflect on that and say, "Hey, you figured this all out on your own, and you applied it, and I'm so proud of you."

Sara Hruska: Sounds like it really helps as a technique. Over time, folks might be kind of integrating it, and then when they display it, mirroring that back to them to see like, "Hey, you did this," helps build their technique.

Tasha Hruska: Yes, I think so, yeah.

Sara Hruska: Well, I know we had scheduled for about a half hour, and we're already over that. Sorry. I'm happy to keep going.

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, I don't care. I'm fine.

Sara Hruska: Well, how about skills like improvisation or sight-reading? How do you help facilitate that development?

Tasha Hruska: Sure. So, improv is not my forte. I got into it a little bit more. We didn't—I didn't do that growing up. We didn't really do that with our teacher. And then once I got into jazz band in high school and college, you're kind of like forced to do it. I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing." So I was always very, very timid about it. I think towards the end of my college career, I was getting a little more comfortable. But then once I was out of jazz band, I kinda lost it, you know, and I didn't do too much with it. So I definitely feel if I have a student that's really passionate about it, I'm probably just not the right fit of a teacher for them. But the series that I do have and that I use, it does have some improv that kind of introduces it to them. I'm super comfortable with the pretty basic stuff, so I will do that. I never really got into improv when it came to the woodwind instruments, the saxophone and the clarinet. But as far as sight-reading, I use it every day with every student. I use sight-reading because if they finish a piece and we're going to start a new piece, I'd say, "Okay, let's sight-read." And if I find myself—you know that we've gone through all the material, I will grab a book and just work on sight-reading. And I talk about how that in itself is a skill, and they're like, "What? What's sight-reading?" I'm like, "Sight-reading is you read it at first sight."

And it's nice that you know, you have the ability to perform at this level, but your sight-reading is down two levels. What we want to do is close that gap, and they're like, "Why?" So you talk about why that's important and how it advances them in their skills. So, again, with this one girl, we've worked on hers a lot. And recently, in a lesson, she sight-read a piece, and I was like, "Your sight-reading skills are getting better. Good job." So I explain to them that sight-reading itself is something you can practice. You can get a sight-reading book where you have your lesson, and then you go home and practice for your—whatever—six days, and every day is a different piece that you have to practice. So you have to either have a student who's willing to really, truly follow that or parents who are gonna support that. Because if the student goes home and doesn't follow those instructions the way they need to be followed, it doesn't really work.

Sara Hruska: I guess you talked a little bit about this, but helping students develop their musical style and artistry. Is that kind of different than what you've described with expression?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, definitely. Because they may lean towards, like, "Oh, I really like classical music" or "I like more of a New Agey stuff or the ballads" or "I really enjoy jazz." So, if I find that a certain preference is coming out, I like to have a little conversation like, "Oh, you seem to really like this." Once we start adding supplemental books outside of the series, that's the stuff that I'll try to focus on because I want them—you know—the point is for them to enjoy it, to love it, to continue learning, right? So I really like to pull that stuff in when I feel like their motivation is kind of lost. You can tell when a student is not liking it anymore. It's not their jam. So you try to pull in those things that get them excited to practice and just play, you know, just to play at home.

Sara Hruska: What about encouraging students to listen actively or critically to music? How do you approach that? You mentioned recording them and also having them listen.

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, I mean, you know, I should do more with that, honestly. I talk about it a lot. I suppose I could be more intentional about it and get the parents wrapped in on it. Some of the things I've done... well, some books come with CDs, but man, some people don't even have a CD player anymore, so it's not as helpful anymore. But I will text the parents, "YouTube this song so they can listen to it." I encourage—if my kids are old enough where they have a phone or they have a tablet. I say, "Look this up, like you're on it all the time like. Go check it out, listen to it," and follow up the next week. "Did you listen to this, and they'll go, "No." So I will, you know I have my computer handy, and I will, or my phone, and I'll pull up stuff, and I'll listen to things when they get more advanced. my older students who have phones or tablets to look it up themselves. Like, "You're on it all the time, so go check it out, listen to it, and we'll follow up next week." So I have my computer or phone handy, and But even so, with the beginner students, if they have the CD and they're struggling, I'll say, "Listen to this piece," because when they hear it—man, there's those musicians that when they hear it, they get it. You know? No problem. So that's been really helpful.

I also have a student who doesn't have much support at home when it comes to practicing, and his attention is a little of a struggle. So I have recorded them on my phone while he's there with the metronome, and counting out loud, especially if there's rhythmic challenges, and I'll send that to the mom, and I'll say, "Hey, let him listen to this when he's practicing," and that makes a world of a difference. He comes back and just has it perfect.

So I think it's really important, and I do integrate that, but probably not as much as I should with my more advanced students, saying, "You know, I want you to listen to this piece. I want you to, you know, focus on this, this, this: I want you to kind of dissect a piece." Yeah, that I don't do too much with but for my more advanced students. But that would be a good thing to do.

Sara Hruska: When you say like, "Focus on this, this, this," like what kind of things are you usually saying?

Tasha Hruska: Sure, I guess I would point out if it's whatever they're struggling with. So if it's rhythm, you know, listen to that rhythm. If it's phrasing or the artistic part of it, listen to that. Sometimes it's tempo. It could be style, so you know there are these accents here. It's the staccato. Here it's the staccato left hand, legato right hand. Listen to where's the melody? And you know, is your right hand the melody, or is it your left hand, the melody? What can you hear? What comes out more is, you know, make sure the melody you can hear, and the accompaniments in the background. So, finding that balance. We talk about that, too. That kind of covers it.

Kat Fritz: When teaching music, what are some of the key concepts or techniques that you believe are most important for students to be able to grasp?

Tasha Hruska: Well, if I'm starting with a brand-new student, the very basic things I say are that they need to be able to sit with me for about 20 minutes, the lessons are 30 minutes, but if they can deal with 20 that would be helpful. They have to know the like musical alphabet A through G, and count 1 to 5. Those are the very basic things that I would ask of a student.

I am a big pusher on believing that music is very mathematical. It just all makes sense like math makes sense to me. I don't know why, but when I'm trying to explain the length of notes and counting, and how you subdivide them, and looking into a measure. I just I really bring in a lot of math. You know, I feel like it makes a really big difference. I think visually I visually, you know, I

have the notes and the and the breakdown of that. So I want them to understand how to count the music, I think, is pretty important.

Kat Fritz: I guess for your more advanced students, when it comes to theory, are there any like key concepts that you think make a large difference in their skill?

Tasha Hruska: So I focus a lot on scales and how those scales are developed, and really wanting them to read a key signature and build on a key signature and chord progressions. So I do a lot with that. I start scales at the beginner level, but with my more advanced students, we talk about the circle of fifths. There is a certain order in which you write your sharps and flats. We talk about the patterns that are built in their. Your major, your minor, all your minor forms. I think it's pretty important to be able to fluidly change between all those keys because I a lot kids will struggle really early on.

Like, "Oh, I can't play this piece with this piece with this piece because this is this has G major that has a sharp in it. While this this one's a B flat and has flats, so I can't play both of these songs like consecutively. I have to wait." So, I want them to be able to feel comfortable with that.

Kat Fritz: How do you help teach chord progressions?

Tasha Hruska: So I have scale books that I'll use, and it's a really, it's a concept that's like introduced almost immediately. Well, I mean probably like level 2, level 2, I guess, and it's very basic, like 1 4 5 7 chord progressions. And then, even when you get into your minors, that's that's kind of it. You'll start getting more, but when we build scales, we'll not only just, the root note, but then we'll build the scale. We'll build the chords off of those scales. So we talk about the major and the minor ones in there. And then we will look at dissect songs and say, okay, let's label the chord progressions in this song. Where is your 1, your 4, your 5, 7, your minor second, whatever ones you're using. So I'll talk a lot more about that, I guess if I'm trying to bide my time, if I'm like man. I still got like 7 min with this kid. We're all done, you know. That's when I find that I like dive in a little deeper into those conversations. And it's a nice opportunity to be able to do that.

Kat Fritz: Do you face challenges, or I guess what are some of the challenges you face when communicating complex musical ideas or techniques?

Tasha Hruska: So sometimes I have students who are almost approaching the level that I was at, like the level that I've gotten to with piano or surpassed me even. The student that I had that had a hard time with expression, like, man, that kid that could learn so fast. I kept telling him, "You know you're a lot better at piano I think than I am. Like you perform better than me." I was like, "There's things I can teach you, like I can help you, but at any point you feel that I'm not offering you anything anymore, please please feel free to find another teacher. I have some that I can give to you."

And I'm trying to think. Oh, and sometimes I guess, so we have this theory book, this one girl, and sometimes there's concepts that I just haven't touched in so long. I almost have to re-teach myself or familiarize myself with that again. So we were talking about, just recently, like meters and simple and compound, and duplo and triple and quad, and I was like, oh, you know I'm sitting there going through that. She's like, "Here check my theory." I was like, "Hold on." I was like, "I gotta re-teach myself. This, I'm sorry, like it's just been so long. I've never, you know. I don't have to. I don't deal with this. I've learned it." And she's like, "Yeah, it's kind of like math. Right now I have to learn about linear equations." I was like, "Yeah, like, you know it. It's just

been so long." She's like, "Yeah, yeah." So I don't know. I just try to be really honest about that. But if I'm stuck, if I feel like it's a concept that I don't quite understand, I'll be honest about it. If it's a concept, the thing is like, I'm usually the smartest person in the room when I'm teaching my lessons, so I know whatever I can give them, it's gonna be more than what they know, and if I need to give myself an opportunity to kind of research it again a little bit, or look into it again, or reteach myself. I have a week to do that, and I'll come back and know more.

Sara Hruska: Do you see common difficulties, or like kind of patterns in the challenges that students encounter with musical content?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, the first thing that comes to mind is, for whatever reason, a dotted half note which is 3 beats. They have a really hard time with that, and so that's one that I struggle with. A dotted quarter note, I just think, adds a little extra level of difficulty. So that is something that I'll have to focus on a lot, and I will combat that with using a metronome. I'm just like a big believer in the metronome. It just helps you count, keeps you honest. So I'll do that a lot. I think. Yeah, what else is kind of difficult? I just think, yeah, like rhythm and tempo, I feel like are 2 things that seem to kind of stick out the most for me right now. Because right now my studio is more of kind of like beginner getting into intermediate. So it's more kind of those basic concepts. So yeah. So I'm just thinking for a moment here. So those have been well, I mean, actually, I got a gal that's in high school, and she struggles a lot with actually knowing how to count the rhythm, and really understanding that, and then putting on a metronome. So I always joke with my students about having a love hate relationship with the metronome, you know, like you want someone that's gonna keep you honest, you know, when it's going to challenge you. So this is what the metronome's for, and I mean. And then, when I notice they go through a song with me without the metronome, and it's just perfect. I praise that and really make sure to point that out. But yeah. Yeah, those seem to be the biggest challenges I see right now.

Sara Hruska: You have such, like, deep knowledge in music and teaching it so like, how do you find that you share that knowledge in a way that, you know, students can easily comprehend and apply it to their practice?

Tasha Hruska: Sure, I don't know. I mean, I feel like I've just always been a very natural teacher. I've always just been able to explain or articulate things in a way that people are like, "Man, that really makes a lot of sense." I particularly remember in high school we had a math class, and we would get done with math, and our teacher would say, "Alright, guys, work on your homework." And what would always happen is I'd get like 2 or 3 of the other students that would circle around me and say, "Okay, Tasha, can you teach us this lesson?" And I would go, "Yeah," and I would take a couple of minutes and then go, "Oh, that's it! Like, why doesn't he just explain it that way?" I was like, "Well, I don't know. This is how it makes sense to me," and they're like, "Oh, okay," and they would go off and do their homework. I don't know, I just feel like I've always been able to meet people where they are or understand where people are or know how it's gonna make sense to them. I understand that there can be a million and one ways to teach one concept, and the more you can share all of those, you have to - the goal is to teach, right, for your students to understand. So, I want to use all of those concepts, all of those strategies. I mean, all the strategies to understand the concept. So, I don't know, I love teaching anything, really.

Sara Hruska: Hmm.

Tasha Hruska: I feel like I ramble on, and then I'm like, "Man, did I even answer the question?" I don't know, what was the question?

Sara Hruska: You get all the extra gems. I feel like some of these, maybe we've answered.

Kat Fritz: The only reason I'm looking over here is because you're answering the questions when you think that you're rambling. I just don't want to re-ask you things.

Sara Hruska: Do you have any memorable experiences when you've seen significant growth or breakthroughs in students' musical abilities?

Tasha Hruska: Hmm. Let me think. So, I have a student. He's an adult in his fifties or sixties. And we met, and the first thing he says to me is, "Listen, I will never do a recital." And I said, "That is fine. I will never make you." He's like, "Okay, we're on the same page," you know. But then we just talked about my philosophy, and I said, "You know, I'm just here to help you, whatever your goal is, I'm going to make that happen for you." And he's like, "Okay, great. I just want to learn. And I had a really bad experience when I had to perform once, and it made me go away from piano, and I've always regretted that." And I was like, "Okay, if you just want to learn for yourself at whatever pace you want, whatever you want, that's great. Let's hang out, you know." So, I've been teaching him for a few years, and he is always so grateful. He's a wonderful student to have. And he performed at a recital with me, and I did not make him. And I said, "You know, I think you would be very good at this." And I was like, "And even if you mess up, who cares? The challenge is just getting up there." And I said, "I'm not going to force you, but I think you're a lot better than you give yourself credit for and I think you would do really well." And he did it, and I don't think anybody noticed, but he stopped before the song was done and he just kind of got up and stopped the music. And we talked about it later on at our next lesson, and he's like, "Oh my God! I bombed it." I was like, "You did so great! Everybody in that audience, nobody can do what you did. Nobody's challenged themselves to do what you just did, like, you took your biggest fear, the first thing you said to me that you would never do, and you did it!" I was like, "That's amazing." So, I thought that was pretty cool.

Kat Fritz: So, do you think part of what you do is, I guess, teaching people how to be confident in what they're doing?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, absolutely, I mean, you can tell when a student is a bit timid. A lot of people are so worried about making mistakes so they'll play very timidly and worry about making mistakes. And I'm like, "You know, if you didn't make mistakes, there would be no point in us being here. You're supposed to make mistakes. That is the point. That is how you learn." I was like, "Make a mistake with confidence. At least you tried." So, it's like counseling, right? Like, you've got this. I'm a cheerleader, and people express some really raw emotions. I've had students cry because they're so worried or so ashamed of making mistakes. So, it's neat that I get to kind of... It's more than just about learning how to read a piece of music on a sheet of paper. You really... You see self-confidence, and I've seen students that have anxiety, it seems

to be very prominent in students, and I have one particular student that I'm thinking about. She takes these really deep, intense breaths, and I was like, "You can make a mistake. And I'm okay with that." I was like, "Who are you worried about?" And she's like, "I don't like making mistakes." So, you know, it's a conversation. Sometimes we spend 5 minutes talking about how it's okay to make mistakes and just be proud of that and keep moving forward. So, again, I forget what the question was, but I don't know.

Kat Fritz: So, do you think you see progress happen once you have these types of conversations about making mistakes and being more confident?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah, you do. This one that I was just talking about, I mean, it's been a bit more of a challenge for her. I had her a few years ago, and she had quit, and then she just came back, so it's still pretty new with her. I teach a set of twins, these girls, and one particularly, she always plays very dainty, and I was like, "You have to put more pressure." And she says, "Oh, I don't want to make a mistake." And I said, "Just make it and make it loud." And now she goes up there, and she really puts the weight into the keys, even if she messes up, and she's like, "Oh, I made a mistake." I was like, "Let's just keep going." So, I also don't make a big deal out of the mistakes. So yeah, let's just try again. You know, that's gonna happen. And I think when you kind of take away that stigma, you see a lot of progress in that too. So whenever the student makes a mistake, and they're like, "Oh no," I say, "Good job, you tried. Let's just do it again." And let's say they've been practicing the whole week, and they're like, "I just can't get this. I'm so bad at this song. I keep making mistakes." Here, I take that opportunity to talk about how you practice, what effective practicing is to help really push through those mistakes. I've been doing a lot more lately and seeing wonderful success with it. And I talk about just like, "Let's pull away the layers like an onion. Let's say we only need 2 measures. This is the issue, the transition between the measures. Okay, let's only worry about that. Actually, let's take beat 4 and let's take beat 1. Let's just go to that. Okay, you got that? All right. Now let's do the 2 full measures. Okay, now let's go back to the phrase." And I said, "This is...whenever you're at home, don't just go over the mistake and not worry about it like, stop and work it. And this is how you can do it, and I mean within a few minutes they fix the mistake, and you know they're just glowing and very excited.

Kat Fritz: I think that you definitely answered that question. And so we're just gonna move on to like a little bit of like assessment type. So how do you assess whether a student is progressing? I think we've answered in little teeny pieces.

Tasha Hruska: So sometimes I'll have students that say, "Oh, you know I've practiced, or I played before I took lessons, but it's really been a while like what books do you want me to bring." "I don't know, why don't you just bring whatever books you have at home. And we'll just, we'll go from there". So they'll typically bring some sort of series, you know, and often we'll have lessons in technique or solo in performance. And I, you know, I said, well, where did you, you know, where did you stop? And somehow it's notated by another teacher where they were. I said, okay, well, why don't, you know, and then I'll typically, I just go back a few pages and, well, let's just see where you are. And I usually within that first piece that they're going to play, I talk about very basic concepts to see what they understand. And then, you know, I just get to more,

you know, and just more advanced concepts to see, you know, where their strong understanding is, maybe where there's some holes, how advanced they are. And then I'll also ask students before they start, say like, just get something kind of prepared for me, and so you can perform it for me when you come. And I think it could take like a good 2 months to kind of get a good idea. But I have to constantly be asking assessment questions, and that's with all the students, because either way you'd be surprised at how much they know, and you can be surprised how much they don't know. I've been talking about this in every single lesson like, how do you not understand this. So I think it's, I think it's important to constantly be assessing your students.

Kat Fritz: Why do you think it's so important, or I guess just a lot easier for students to be taught by someone else instead of just learning by themselves.

Tasha Hruska: I mean, I don't think it's important that you have to be taught by somebody else, I think it's whatever or however you strive, or you know. I know that I am someone that I just want you to teach it. Just teach it to me. Just show me. Just let me do it with you, and then, and then I'll get it. But I also know that the skill of just teaching myself is something that I've had to challenge myself to be better at, be more resourceful, whatever. There are people out there that have just taught themselves, and then they go, "Well, hey, I just kind of want to maybe just take a few lessons for a while just to see what you can kind of teach me, and then I'll probably just like, go on my own again." Okay, that's fine. So I've had students that have kind of come and gone that way. Some that may just like, send me an email and say, hey, just a question on this, or how would you play this one or different things like that? So I don't think it's more important. I don't think one way is more important.

Kat Fritz: I don't like my phrasing on that. I guess, are there advantages to being taught by someone else instead of learning by yourself?

Tasha Hruska: Yeah. Oh, that's yeah, that's a good way. I mean, yeah, I think you have somebody right there that has a knowledge base. I can just answer your question instead of you having to go out and try to find that answer on the Internet, or just kind of like struggle, maybe struggle through yourself, you know, by yourself to find that answer. I just think it's, I mean, like anything. It's important to... you learn by talking to people and learning with people. I think that the interaction can be so invaluable in anything in life. So I enjoy working with people or learning with people, teaching people. Yeah.

Sara Hruska: You mentioned that someone might email you with a question. But like, how would you do this, like how - I'm curious, because like music is, I mean, it's like so physical, and also, like you know, sound and everything like, how successful do you feel like emailing about things is?

Tasha Hruska: So I mean, like it's, yeah, it's difficult. I'm trying to think of what are some things that people have emailed about. I guess you know, usually it's about like what I want to learn. What books would you suggest for this? I'm trying to figure out what level? Okay? So like. Oh, I'm trying to figure out what my daughter is gonna - she's going to audition, and the director

wants to know if she can play this level. So questions like that. What songs would you suggest or things like that? What else? With the pandemic, you know that really challenged me. I had to learn how to teach this way, and it's not my forte. I don't like it. I don't think I do a good - I mean, I get through, and I get by. I like now that we have this option instead of just having no lesson. At least we can have something. But I had to really learn to be very particular about my words, because I would usually just go, "No, put it right, you know, do that, you know." So yeah, I just really had to be like in particular about my words, and really kind of slowing down and making sure that they understand. So if it's more of a I guess, like a performance based question and like, how do you do this fingering, or how to, you know, how do you make it sound like this? Then I would probably want to get on like a virtual call with somebody instead of that. Oftentimes, my students, if there's someone that I'm currently teaching, and they send me questions. But you know, I say, oh, that's a great question like thanks for letting me know ahead of time like I will show you this at my lesson, or at our lesson.

Sara Hruska: That makes sense. Pandemic - how did technology - it sounds like it became a lot more -

Tasha Hruska: Yes, so I mean, you know, some students you just lost because it didn't work out on their end. My older student, he really did a great job of configuring a setup where his video looks down onto the keys. And so I could really see that that's the best setup, and I've told everybody about that. I was like, I don't know if you can figure this out, but like if you can just have it look down onto the keys that is super helpful. But oftentimes I will get like a phone or a tablet like propped up on the side, and like looking down at the keyboard, I mean, so this is what I'm seeing. You know it's hard. I've had parents, if I don't have the books in my music library, I will ask the parents to send me pictures of their music that they're going to play for me, and then the next page, so that I have everything to work on. So I will have my setup. I will have my keyboard next to me, and then I will also have the music up there. That's helped me a little better. It's nice when the parents are there for the younger students. That's also helpful. It's extremely difficult to try to play together just because it's off a little bit. Oh, my gosh! So I just don't do that anymore. I just avoid that completely. The lessons themselves move a lot slower than when you're in person, so I've realized that I've had to adapt my lessons like I'm just not going to cover as much as I do when I'm in person. And I just think anything is better than nothing. So yeah, if somebody just wants virtual, I won't take them. I'll say, you know, if you're not feeling the best, and you want to stay home. That's fine. Let's meet virtually, but you feel good enough to have a lesson. Let's do that. You know.

Kat Fritz: Can you explain why you think it is that it's much slower if you're only doing virtual?

Tasha Hruska: Because again, I can't be like "No, put your hand here," and also like if I need to play a piece too and show them, like, I also didn't have the setup where they could then look over and show, and they didn't have that set up, so it was hard. Yeah, it was hard to do that.

Sara Hruska: That was gonna be my question when you're describing students showing their hands like, if you also - showing seems to be such a part, like your methods and the technique,

and how you can transfer to others, and so like without that set up it. It seems like that would be pretty difficult.

Tasha Hruska: I probably should have done that, but I just didn't. But again a lot of my more intermediate and higher students, they understood those - if I needed both of my hands like they they got it, and I could just verbally talk to them more about it, and they could understand the concept where my younger ones I feel like I'm just better at teaching if I'm more hands-on. And that music is simpler, where I can probably just play with one hand and hold my phone, or you know. So that worked out okay.

Sara Hruska: We may have reached the end of our questions.

Kat Fritz: Awesome. Yeah, this has been great. Thank you so much, Tasha. It's interesting that you like talked about like the keyboard and stuff it makes me think of like video gamers like when they're like streaming on twitch and stuff. They'll show their face, and then they also show their keyboard and mouse set up. It's interesting. I was like, oh, yeah, I guess that would make sense if you're doing like virtual lessons for piano.

Tasha Hruska: Well, that was fun. Thank you guys. Thank you.