

The greatest learning obstacle that I've faced presented itself freshman year at the University of Michigan School of Music. My music teachers and peers had warned me about Prof. X, the bassoon professor, before I auditioned for the bassoon studio. Prof. X had created quite a reputation for himself over seventeen years of teaching bassoon at U of M, he was a genius yet ruthless and brutally honest. Crazy tales about his teaching only intrigued and pushed me to practice harder for the fast approaching lesson. I scheduled a lesson with Prof. X before my audition so that I could experience his teaching style and judge whether I could learn from him for the next four years of my college career.

Rather unexpectedly, Prof. X accepted me into the School of Music on the spot. He asked me into the studio before I even played any repertoire that I'd prepared. Prof. X claimed that my F major scale was the most beautiful F major scale that he'd experienced by a freshman. Those eight notes were enough to get me into the School of Music and they included quite a hefty scholarship. My audition was only a technicality. As an eighteen year old, looking forward to attending college not too far from home, this was a dream come true.

Freshman year started off well, I recall really looking forward to lessons during the first part of the semester. We spent the beginning lessons setting the foundations for playing bassoon by working on my embouchure, posture, tonguing and support. X believed very firmly that until the basic foundations of music were strong and second nature, actual music was non-existent. Most students in the studio didn't touch repertoire, only using etudes, scales, and exercises, until their third year! I had very little bassoon training outside of music class, which is rather unusual for music students. I would take some lessons with my band teacher, who was a bassoonist, however most of my bassoon knowledge was self taught. I had a good tone, but my technique

was a nightmare! Prof. X noticed this immediately and set me to work on a surefire cure-Herzberg scales.

Herzberg scales are a scale pattern which is to be done proficiently in all keys, created by Norman Herzberg, a well known bassoon performer and teacher. Prof. X believed that Herzberg scales were essential to bassoon pedagogy. Herzberg scales teach several concepts such as muscle memory, crescendo while ascending, air support, and proficient tonguing. Before every lesson, until you proved that you were beyond them, Prof. X wanted to hear the scales played flawlessly. Typically the entire sequence, if played at the correct tempo with no mistakes was about five minutes in length. Those five minutes, which turned into hours for me, were the greatest learning obstacles I've ever had to face.

There were obstacles to learning the Herzberg scales embedded within the demands of the scales themselves. I had a really hard time with positive transfer from previous musical concepts. They were unlike anything that I'd played before. I had learned scales in my band class in high school, but I was never required to play them perfectly in three octaves, with a crescendo while ascending, and quarter note at 120. Herzberg scales are technically tricky. They involved a quick tongue and fingers, two things that I don't have. My musicianship has always been with the "musical" side rather than technical side of music, so my natural ability was wanting. Also, Prof. X demanded perfection. I was so unfamiliar with the concept of musical perfection because I'd never been responsible for polishing anything to perfection before entering college. These were some initial obstacles to learning the scales.

Additional obstacles had nothing to do with the scales, but rather available practice time, Prof. X's teaching style, and my professional interests. Prof. X produced great bassoonists, but his process was rather harsh, seemingly built upon fear rather than comfort. This clashed with

my personality. I'm quite sensitive and any criticism will cause me to work harder, Prof. X's "fear factor" wasn't necessary. I also came to U of M with the intent of becoming a music educator rather than a performer. Prof. X felt that all bassoonists should practice with the focus and intent of becoming performance majors, which also conflicted with my college priorities. I never intended to spend a majority of my time locked in a practice room. I've always felt it more important to do well in all of my classes, rather than neglecting other responsibilities for bassoon.

Each week, lessons would begin with Herzberg scales. Prof. X would sit at his desk, turn on a metronome and gesture for me to begin playing. He would often have headaches so the bassoon studio would be dark besides a dim lamp located near the music stand. It was reminiscent of an interrogation room. The first several weeks of playing the scales went alright until he decided it was time to increase the tempo. That's when my playing seemed to fall apart. Prof. X's response to my inability to play Herzberg scales was highly critical. He expected a standard of perfection that seemed rather unattainable. If there was a single, minuscule imperfection, the entire scale exercise had to be restarted. It seemed that because I had difficulty executing the Herzberg scales, he became more set on them. He tried many different teaching strategies for the Herzberg scales such as playing for a grade, slowing them down, changing the rhythm, and writing them out, yet nothing worked. He couldn't understand that I needed to work through scales and his teaching objectives in a different way, which was very frustrating for both of us.

By sophomore year, I began to anticipate failure before each lesson. My roommates would joke that each Monday evening (the night before my lesson) I would prepare for death. I experienced major anxiety, and shed lots of tears before, during and after lessons. Its effect on

my attitude toward the bassoon and music appreciation was devastating. He essentially caused a fear of playing bassoon and of lessons. I began to lose confidence in myself as a musician. Prof. X would often draw comparisons between me and fellow sophomore bassoonists “who seemed to get it.” Performing in front of other people became a chore, and I was very unsure of my abilities.

In considering learning theories behind his teaching, Prof. X’s critical response toward my learning and his obvious system of rewards and punishments suggest that he was largely a behaviorist. When I was “slacking” during the scales, whether it was due to practice time or difficulty, Prof. X knew how to walk the line of disaster. He delicately balanced teachable moments and cutting me a break based upon my behavior. When I thought he was going to kill me, suddenly he would have mercy. His most common form of reinforcement was negative reinforcement. When I did a fair job at the Herzberg scales, Prof. X would take away the scales for one week, which allowed me to really focus on other music.

There were also hints of Information Processing Theory in his reactions to my poor Herzberg scale skills. Prof. X attempted multiple learning strategies to find the way that I might approach the Herzberg scales and commit them to memory. Firstly, he claimed that my practice of the scales must be so regular and often that automaticity would be achieved. This was a problem because I didn’t have the time to put in with all of my other classes and responsibilities, meaning three to four hours a day! We tried slowing the scales down, which made them accessible until I had to speed them up again. I had a really hard time understanding the concept of Herzberg scales from my previous knowledge base and playing experience so Prof. X had me write out the exercise so that I could read the music as I played. He thought that might bridge the gap in my knowledge base. Lastly, we even experimented with visual imagery where I

would imagine the keys of the piano as I went through the scale. All of his learning strategies were helpful, however, they didn't do much considering the stress and fear in his approach to the scales. During lessons I was so scared to play that I couldn't even play up to the level I was achieving alone in the practice room.

At the end of my sophomore year, Prof. X decided to take a prestigious job at a music institute in across the country. This was a blessing because I would've transferred to another university had Prof. X decided to stay. By the time he left I still hadn't mastered the Herzberg scales. I worked on Herzberg scales for two years, at least four to five hours each week and still didn't have the scale study under my fingers. This was so unusual and disheartening to me because I had never come across something that I couldn't do after spending time and effort on it.

As my private teacher, what could Prof. X have done differently to assist my learning? The most obvious change is within his teaching style. Because bassoon lessons are one on one every week, I wish that Prof. X would've asked me how I learn best. Even as a freshman at U of M, I had a pretty firm grasp on self-learning. I recognize that a lot of the bassoonists at U of M flourished under his authoritarian teaching style- the friction and fear caused action, whereas for me, stress and anxiety cause me to shut down. I also can handle criticism if I'm hearing some encouragement on occasion. Prof. X didn't provide the uplifting, reprimanding yet encouraging environment that helps me learn best.

Prof. X could've incorporated more Constructivism in his teaching. Rather than a locked down curriculum and all musical knowledge coming from him, I wish he had considered my knowledge base and previous skill set in deciding weekly assignments. I didn't begin college where other bassoonists my age did, and I didn't play in youth symphonies or take lessons from

professional bassoonists in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He could've adjusted his strictly set bassoon pedagogy. Prof. X was from the Western classical "music camp" where he thought the best way to practice was like a musical machine. It involved as much rehearsal and repetition as possible, which may not be possible within the busy schedule of a music education major. The musical concepts that the Herzberg scales cover are available in thousands of other studies and etudes! You'd think after two unsuccessful years of Herzberg scales, Prof. X might have recognized that they weren't helping me technically or musically.

Since Prof. X has left, my current bassoon professor has helped me regain what I lost during the two years working strictly on etudes and Herzberg scales. He teaches music concepts through actual repertoire, so playing music has become fun again. Because I'm a music education major, my professor has me working through the Michigan state mandated list of bassoon solos so that I can experience as much repertoire as possible before leaving U of M to work with bassoonist students. I recently gave a presentation to the bassoon studio on choosing proper music to address students' needs. My growth has been slow but steady and it's encouraging to feel my passion for music and the bassoon return.