

The Teaching Of Art & The Art Of Teaching

by Ron Davis

Some teachers get plaques to honour their efforts. Some get classrooms, or even concert halls named after them.

If ever a piano teacher – a music teacher – deserved commemoration, it is the late Darwyn Aitken. He has no plaque, no classroom, no hall. What Aitken has, though, is a memorial of sound and ideas, the bricks and mortar of which are the musicians whose gifts he nurtured.

Early on, Aitken showed his gifts as a piano prodigy. He was innately musical. His pitch was inhumanly perfect. Frank Falco, a student of his, and now a leading-light pianist and teacher himself, remembers Aitken would drop his keys on to the piano over and over, and then play the chord the keys' jangle rang out. Yikes.

Nothing bespeaks Aitken's gifts more than his two principal teachers: jazz god Oscar Peterson and David Saperton, a top classical name of his day. Jazz and classical.

This was category-free education, reflecting Aitken's no-boundaries beliefs. Jazz, classical, Latin, pop, whatever – music was music. It's obvious now, but in the pre-iTunes '60s and '70s, musical desegregation was radical stuff.

Aitken loved teaching. The results show. Look around

Canada's jazz piano soundscape today, and you'll find the bearers of his legacy everywhere: Nancy Walker, Joe Sealy, Aaron Davis, Gary Williamson, Tom Szczesniak, and many others.

Producing high-end pianists was not Aitken's signal achievement. What put him octaves above the norm was the diversity of his graduates. No one sounds like the other. Each has his or her own aural silhouette. Individual. Personal. Hand-formed, not cookie-cut.

How did he do this? He said he couldn't "teach" music, only piano. He focused on the mechanics and let the music blossom. So, every student endured the heptathlon of Gershwin *Préludes*, Chopin *Études*, tapping poly-rhythms, fearsome scales from Josef's book (double sixths, two hands!), Aitken's own exercises, the harmonic labyrinths of Leopold Godowsky, and Gordon Delamont's theory.

Then you played your jazz for him. He would listen and discuss. Try this! How about that? Why did you play such and such here? What about riff X or substitution Y there? He showed, not told. He rarely dictated. There was no wrong. There was only what didn't work. What did work varied for each student, so the students varied amongst themselves.

At the core of Aitken's pedagogy lay his ability to see patterns and systems for controlling the keyboard, and then communicate them to the student. Take "The Hop," for example. Figure 1 shows how Aitken wrote it out for one student, Moxy Frivous member Dave Matheson. "The Hop" was a way of moving up and down the keyboard with ease and speed, but without chopping up lines. In a D minor arpeggio, when

the right hand third finger hits the A, you prepare, and then hop off it, onto the second at D, and continue the arpeggio. There should be no disconnect in the sound.

What makes a great teacher? A loaded question, to be sure. I have no definitive answer, but if I did it would include these words: empathy, humility, trustworthiness, mastery of subject, communication skills, patience, discipline, focus, vision, and passion. Aitken had all of these, and passion



above all. He was passionate about music, about piano, about recordings, and about teaching. He would talk about them like a hepped-up sports fan.

Actor-songwriter Lynne Derogan sums it up beautifully: "The biggest and most generous thing Darwyn Aitken gave to me was permission. Permission to seek. Permission to play from where I was, not to compare myself with anyone else. He was a great teacher." Amen.

Aitken died in 1986. His wife Peggy died this year. They had no children. But we live on, Darwyn, your students, as your memorial plaques and commemorative halls, honouring your work, and passing it on when we can. Thank you for everything.

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