

# Improving Your Teaching with “Why?”

**Phillip Clements, 2016-17 TBA Treasurer**

William Arthur Ward said, “*The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, the great teacher inspires.*” As we work to become better teachers, these are important words to remember.

I have noticed over the years that we spend a great deal of time in rehearsal discussing the “what” and “how” of music. We discuss “what” the dynamic should be, “how” the students should approach the articulation, “what” note they have in the chord and countless other details of music making. While all of this is vital, I have come to believe that the students need not only this information, but they also need to know “why”? Students are more engaged when they can understand why it is important to do something or the reason the composer wrote something a particular way.

I have observed that master teachers commonly relate new concepts and ideas to similar ideas or concepts the students already know. This is done through analogies, by illuminating relationships within the music, and by helping the students understand *why* it is important to play something a certain way.

Consider the following common statement in a rehearsal: *Please lower your dynamic from mf to mp.* This is efficient, effective and probably accomplishes the desired effect. However, according to William Arthur Ward, this is mediocre teaching. If we take it just one step further and simply say: *Your dynamic must be lowered from mf to mp so that the melody can be heard,* we have already made an

important distinction. We have described “why” and we have begun the discussion of melodic/accompaniment dynamic relationships. **We have begun to teach concepts instead of simply giving information.**

Concepts, once learned, can be transferred to other similar music or passages. The most effective concept teaching takes place when students are engaged in the rehearsal, and the easiest way to engage students is with questions. If we begin to incorporate questions into the rehearsal in order to have the students arrive at the “why” themselves, we will have added yet another level of communication, engagement, and comprehension. Although telling students the information may seem more efficient in the short-term, it does not promote long-term learning. Ask questions and allow the students to respond while you guide them to the correct answer. Be sure to call on students who may not be as engaged in the rehearsal as others and don’t give them the answer if they fail to respond immediately.

Listed on the next page are just a few of the countless examples of how we can change “what” and “how” to “why”.

(continued)



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WHAT/HOW (Telling)	WHY (Explaining)	WHY (Leading Questioning)
Please lower the A natural in m. 14.	Please lower the A natural in m.14 since it is the major 3rd of the chord.	What part of the chord do you have in m. 14?
Listen to the trombones in m. 18 for tuning.	Be sure to listen to the trombones in m. 18 since they have the Bb concert before you enter in m. 19.	Do you hear someone in m. 18 that has the same note you have in m. 19?
Be sure to play with a firm “D” articulation on that accent.	Be sure to play with a firm “D” articulation on that accent so that we hear the clarity at the front of the note, but still maintain tone quality.	What kind of articulation do you think we should use on that accent?
Make sure you crescendo as written in m. 5.	Make sure you crescendo as written in m. 5 so that we arrive at the most important note of the phrase together at the downbeat of m. 6.	Where in m. 1-8 do you think is the most important note of the phrase? How should we emphasize it?

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The “how” and “what” are still very important, but by adding the “why” we will have turned our rehearsals into discussions about music making rather than musical corrections. The students will begin to understand more about the composer’s intent, the reasons why we are asking them to do certain things, and will begin to understand larger concepts of music making. In learning these concepts they will be more engaged and able to transfer these ideas to each piece of music they encounter. We will be creating independent musicians; which after all is one of the primary goals of music education.