



Episode 166: Cheers to Piano Teacher Takeaways from Taylor Swift **(No Swiftie-Status Necessary)**

*What follows is a rough-edit of the episode, so please forgive typos and/or formatting errors.
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Hello there, my studio teacher friends! Thanks for pushing that play button on The Beyond Measure Podcast today. I know it's going to be worth your while. Christina Whitlock here, your host and self-appointed Anytime Piano Teacher Friend. I have to start off today's show by thanking my friends who support me over in the Patreon Community. If you've found yourself on the fence about joining, I'm just not sure what you're waiting for. Every time I think I can't love that group any more than I already do, they surprise me. 😊 All Patreon members can take part in our Monday Morning Power Hours, which are these great co-working sessions where we all come together to get stuff done... and we also had another round of Teachers Teaching Teachers last Friday that was just SO beneficial. It's camaraderie, it's learning together FROM one another, it's just all the things I love about the teacher community. And – since everyone there resonates with the vibe of this show – you get the benefits of an online teacher community WITHOUT having to worry about Mean People Of the Internet. Like, there is no judgement, there are no airs of superiority, my Patreon Crew is just a sampling of the best-hearted teachers from around the world. And, they keep me able to produce this show... SO... if you could benefit from joining a community of teachers who will always have your back – and I promise, you could, I hope you'll consider joining the Patreon Community. Check it out at ChristinaWhitlock.com/patreon.

ANYWAY – let's get on with today's show, shall we? We're looking at lessons learned from a somewhat polarizing public figure. Look. I hold a universal opinion that we ALL have something to learn from one another, right? That's what we're doing today in Episode 166: Cheers to Piano Teacher Takeaways from Taylor Swift.

Okay. I'm just going to say it: some of you love Taylor Swift, and some of you well, DON'T. Some of you saw this episode title and said, "I AM SO TIRED OF HER." (thanks for listening anyway).

Regardless of your feelings about TayTay, there is no denying her success and her ability to build a fierce network of loyal support...and that is really the secret sauce to a successful music studio, right? You WANT a studio full of families who support you in your community, who follow your projects with intense interest. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

I have two personal connections I need to mention here. First, an apology to my dearly-departed father. Granted, he's been gone for 13 years (sigh) but in HIS day, he was adamant that Taylor Swift was ruining country music. I like to believe he would have eased up on her now that she's left that genre. But who knows.

Second, here's my current situation: I have a 13-year old daughter, who is VERY adamant of her Swiftie Status. And – yeah, I have concerns about the content – but the truth is, we ALL grew up on music that contained mature lyrics that we may or may not have understood at the time.

There was this great thread in an online piano teacher group earlier this year that STARTED with a rant against young people listening to Taylor Swift lyrics, but ended with teacher after teacher sharing inappropriate songs *they* used to listen to growing up... and, it's not that my concerns are alleviated necessarily, but I am reminded this is nothing all that new.

Anyway – I have to face it – we have intentionally chosen to send our kids through the public school system to make sure they grow up in a diverse learning environment, and... well, that comes with PLENTY of exposure to things we wish it wouldn't. So, in the grand scheme of things, Taylor Swift is the least of my problems. 😊

Okay – those are my personal connections. Agree or disagree; it's okay. We'll still be friends.

ALL THAT TO SAY, rather than roll my eyes at my kid's love for Taylor Swift, or try to shut it down, I chose to embrace it. I went full-research mode on Taylor Swift. I learned the songs. I educated myself on Scooter Braun and Easter Eggs and all things the number 13.

So – back to Taylor Swift and my 13 year old daughter – I've doubled down on this as a way to show her I am interested in her interests. And I'm not going to lie; it's been at least a little fun. As someone who is really wired to notice DETAILS, the amount of

attention Taylor Swift and her team give to... well, everything... is quite impressive. Frankly, as someone who tends to think SERIOUS thoughts, and has a hard time turning her brain to frivolous things, Taylor Swift has been a welcome change of pace in my brain.

Now, if only I could score tickets to the Eras Tour and secure my SuperMom Status... help a girl out here if you can! 😊

So those are a few of my own personal thoughts. But - again – whether you love her, hate her, or are completely indifferent to her – there are things Studio Music Teachers can learn from Taylor Swift. I'm going to highlight THREE of them today.

First up: related to what I said about using Taylor Swift as a point of connection to my daughter, I want to take this opportunity to remind you to NEVER dismiss your students' musical preferences. If they tell you they love an artist, FOR THE LOVE, please don't make disparaging remarks about them. Maybe that sounds obvious, but the number of teachers out there who roll their eyes and speak to the lack of musical depth in certain styles of music is out of control. Our students like what they like. Our job is to express interest in THEM – our students! - and to help expose them to styles of music they might not otherwise experience. It's perfectly fine to want to get your students to fall in love with art music; it's a definite goal of mine. It's just NOT okay to try and do it by pitting the styles of music AGAINST each other. It doesn't have to be one versus the other.

And – of course – if that's your approach, you're probably going to lose. You'll lose the goal of getting students interested in your favorite music, AND you'll lose a point of connection that could have been really important.

It's like this: imagine you share something with someone close to you. A favorite book, a favorite song, a snack food, whatever. You say, "I really love this thing and I want to tell you about it."

Let's say you're met with a kind smile and a polite remark like, "oh, that sounds nice". And then, nothing else.

Aren't you left a feeling a little... meh?

On the contrary, let's say you share a favorite thing with a friend and they're like, "Oh, that sounds cool. Let me give that a try." Then, the next time you see them, they're like, "Oh my goodness, I love that thing you told me about. Have you ever noticed X, Y, and Z?"

THAT is relationship-bonding stuff, friends.

And we should pay attention to it as teachers. I had a college student a few years back who was OBSESSED with the pianist David Hicken. He's a pianist/composer type who has gained a large following on social media. I wasn't really aware of him, but I told my student I would check him out and she was SO EXCITED. Volunteering to go a little deeper on your students' favorite things can make a lasting impact on your relationship. It's so much better than saying, "Oh, that's nice" and never mentioning anything about it again.

So, Takeaway Number 1: Never dismiss your student's likes and dislikes. You don't have to be interested in your students' favorite music, you need to be interested in THEM.

And, speaking of unnecessarily pitting styles against each other... my Second Takeaway is this: None of us can be defined by a single activity or style. A lot of people will criticize Taylor Swift for having songs that "all sound the same", but in actuality, she has a pretty wide variety of styles in her overall catalogue. Sure, she does like to create a specific vibe for each album - even moreso in those she released two weeks ago - and that can lead to sort of a monotone experience... but at the end of the day, the girl HAS tried a lot of things. I remember how much hoopla there was around her first pop album. I found it frustrating, because I always get annoyed when we pigeon-hole celebrities (or anyone else, for that matter) into one role.

You are more than a teacher. You are a musician. You are a Creative. You are so many other things than your current professions. And maybe you are things you've only now begun to dream of being. It's taken me most of my lifetime to recognize that I am a WRITER, even though I've always loved to write.

So I say this lovingly, teacher friend to teacher friend, be so careful NOT to pigeon-hole yourself into a specific role. I thought I was "just a piano teacher" for a long time. And, for the record, there is nothing wrong with that identity... but as this podcast finally clawed its way out of my brain and onto the airwaves three and a half years ago, I began to realize I had more in me. And it's been SUCH a beautiful journey. And guess what? I'm not done. There are more things I have to do. I'm sure of it.

And this reminder of being and doing MANY things also applies to your students. Your students could - and should - play a variety of music in their musical studies. I grew up being told you either played by ear or you read notation. I was like, *"Well, I read notation, so I guess that's that!"*.

This is embarrassing to admit, but truly: I was halfway through a Masters Degree in Piano Performance and Pedagogy before I *actually* felt comfortable playing a simple lead sheet. It was even a year or two after that point that I realized I could actually play by ear. I do not want that to be my students' experience. When my students consider their musician-selves, I want them to feel versatile and imaginative. I want them to be strong sightreaders too, don't get me wrong... always and forever building those reading skills! But – I want my students to feel comfortable to at least TRY playing in whatever musical environment they encounter.

So, Takeaway Number 2: Our students are more than one thing. And so are we.

Building on that, Taylor Swift Takeaway Number 3? Her music presents us a really important TEACHING OPPORTUNITY. A lot of you get panicky when students ask you to help them play pop tunes. Believe me – I get it. It took me a REALLY LONG TIME to get comfortable playing from chords and relying more on my ear. But. IF you have a student asking about Taylor Swift music, the truth is, most of it is fairly simple.

Her melodies often hop back and forth between two notes. She also writes a lot of melodies that jump down to the leading tone and then pull back up to tonic. Chord progression-wise? Like most things on the radio, there's a lot of I-IV-V-and vi in there, friends.

Let me be clear: some of your students might love the idea of playing Taylor Swift. You also surely have students who couldn't care less. She's a polarizing artist, as most are. I just want to encourage you that her music presents a real opportunity for students to understand their music theory in action.

Not all of her songs are simple; but a majority of them are in 4/4 time and in major keys. She does not use a lot of secondary harmony or chromaticism. There are exceptions; Tolerate It and Closure have some more interesting time signatures.... Sometimes you'll find a flat six chord floating around... but really, as we teach our students those generic Primary Chord patterns, these songs provide a real opportunity to put that knowledge into actual practice. That's important, regardless of what artist you use.

So there you have it; my three Teacher Takeaways from Taylor Swift. I hope I've left you inspired today to lean into your student's interests – musically and otherwise. I hope we remember our students' identities are comprised of MANY things... just as ours are, and I hope we look for ways to EMBRACE opportunities in things that may be otherwise unfamiliar to us.

Remember, friends, contrary to popular belief, you do NOT have to appear to have all the answers to your students. There is nothing wrong with saying, “This is outside my usual comfort zone, but let’s try it.” In fact, modeling the willingness to try new things may be the most important example you ever set for your students. Tell your student, “I don’t know that song, but let’s figure it out together”. I know the very suggestion of that sends chills down our perfectionist spines, but it’s a chance worth taking. I promise.

Let’s close today with a toast, yes? Grab the nearest glass and here we go!

Studio music teacher friends from all around the world: today I remind you that we ALL have something to learn from one another. It’s one of my foundational principles about this life: everyone has something they can teach someone else, and we have things to be learned from every person we encounter. Today, I’m thanking Taylor Swift for inspiring these – and so many other – thoughts in MY piano teacher brain. May we all go forth and remember how important it is to show interest in the things our students care about, regardless of our own personal opinions on the matter. That’s how you foster relationship, and relationship is key to fostering the musical growth we all want to see in our students. Here’s to us, and the challenge of harnessing the unique opportunities that lie ahead. Here, here.

So, in case it’s not clear, I much prefer to teach pop music from chords and by ear. Most of the time, that’s how these songs originate, and the notation just feels too fussy. HOWEVER: I shared in my Patreon community in March that I did give in and buy my 13-year old a Taylor Swift piano book, and we’ve been quite happy with it. I’m going to link it in the shownotes for this episode. You can check them out at ChristinaWhitlock.com/episode166.

ONTO OUR TEACHER FRIEND OF THE WEEK! This week’s TFOTW is my pal Stephanie, who is over on Instagram @toucanpiano. Yep, toucan, like the bird, piano. @Toucanpiano. Anyway, since we’re talking Taylor Swift today, I had to shoutout Stephanie because she had THE CUTEST POST a few weeks ago with beaded friendship bracelets, but instead of names of songs and albums like Swifties like to trade, she’d made friendship bracelets that read, “Stravinsky”, “Pathetique”, Mozart, etc. I told my daughter I needed her to make me an Opus 109 bracelet PRONTO. Anyway, I just thought it was the cutest idea. I love to see teachers flexing those creative muscles, and Stephanie is always doing just that. Congrats, Stephanie, on being Teacher Friend of the Week!

That's all for today, my friends! Be sure to share this episode with a teacher friend who could benefit from it. Check out the Patreon Community and other important links in the shownotes for this episode, which can be found at ChristinaWhitlock.com/episode166. Onward and upward toward learning from ALL those we encounter, even pop stars. Take good care of yourselves, my friends!