



Episode 068: Cheers to Symbiotic Studio Relationships

What follows is a rough-edit of the episode, so please forgive typos and/or formatting errors.

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Hello there, music teacher friends! This is me, Christina Whitlock, welcoming you to episode number 68 of the Beyond measure podcast. I am so happy you chose to join me today. As you probably know by now, my goal with this little show is to help you feel like you have access to a friend in the profession any time you need one. That's why I call myself your Anytime Piano Teacher Friend!

My oldest daughter is in a program where they begin studying Latin in the 4th grade. One of her words on the first test was "symbiotic". The definition she was required to know was, "Good for both, mutually beneficial." She seemed to really struggle with this one at first, so – like any good music teacher parent – I helped her put the definitions to music. We would sing together, "Symbiotic. Good for both. Mutually. Beneficial. It's symbiotic!".

Okay, so it's not the best-ever text setting to the Hallelujah Chorus, but it worked. It worked so well, in fact, we both still sing it to each other as a joke sometimes. Several years later. 😊

(My apologies if that gets stuck in your head this week, because it tends to stick in mine once I think about it).

And, probably due to the way that little ditty would play on repeat through my mind, it was about that time when I had one of the most important “ah-ha” moments of my teaching career.

See... at least in the circles I'd traveled, I always sensed some kind of power struggle between studio teachers and their families.

I felt as though some teachers approached their studios as though they were basically servants to their student families. Bending over backwards for every request, putting up with all kinds of questionable treatment, you know the idea... doing whatever is necessary to keep the students happy. I feel like all of us carry at least a few of these stories. Just a few years ago – long after I knew better – I found myself trying to appease an angry parent and offering to cancel my church choir practice just so I could accommodate a makeup lesson for her daughter....when I don't even GIVE makeup lessons. I cringe even thinking about it. There are just some people who are very hard to stand your ground with, right?

After all, THEY are the ones paying. I mean, the customer is always right...aren't they?

Well, I've also always felt as though there were OTHER teachers who took very much the opposite approach. The customer wasn't always right. The customer was lucky to be part of the studio. Of course, these were typically teachers who had earned their stripes, so to speak, and treated studio families however they pleased. These teachers NEVER made exceptions. They would tell families, essentially, “It's my way or the highway”. I remember talking to a teacher at an MTNA gathering who told me, when a student signed onto her studio, the spot they took was theirs until they graduated. Meaning, if a first-grader began his studies with a 5:00pm lesson on Mondays, that was his spot until he graduated. No exceptions. No trades. No nothing. She was very no-nonsense about this. The same teacher also told me her husband patrolled the aisles during her studio recitals to make sure no parents were playing on their phones. She even told me she locked the back door of the recital hall so no one could sneak out early. I promise – I'm not making this up. And the thing is – she was very successful in what she did. She was very in demand as a teacher, and put her kids through medical school on her teaching income. Her methods may seem extreme to some, but they worked for her.

And, here's the thing – I've said it a million times; I just love studying this stuff. It is endlessly fascinating to me to see how teachers approach their studios and their relationships. I will rarely stake my claim on what's right or wrong... that's not my angle here. It's not what this podcast is for. I just like observing it all and trying to analyze what works and what doesn't.

So – I'd been taking mental notes on these different approaches to studio teaching for years, and I couldn't help but wonder which way was better. In other words, in the studio situation, who works for whom?

Well, when my daughter and I hatched that little riff on the Hallelujah Chorus – Symbiotic. Good for Both. Mutually. Beneficial. It's SYMBIOTIC.... Something clicked inside my head. THAT is what we should be aiming for. Studio relationships that are symbiotic. Good for all involved. Mutually beneficial.

And, hooray for me, I realized that was exactly the kind of studio I have built. And I absolutely, 100% believe this is why I hold the high student retention rates I do.

I make symbiotic relationships a priority. I **want** my studio families to see the benefits I bring to their lives very clearly. I mean, making sure families are **AWARE** of the positive impact you have on their lives is an art all its own, right?

At the same time, yeah... this is my **ACTUAL JOB**. Meaning, sure, there are all sorts of warm and fuzzy feelings I have surrounding my students...but at the end of the day, I have to make money. I have to feel respected. I have to be content with how I'm choosing to spend this **HUGE** portion of my life. So, in other words, my studio families have to benefit me, too.

I'm really curious... where do you think you rank on this? If I asked you to rate "who works for whom" on a 10-point scale....where 1 signified "I work for my students", and 10 was "students work for ME", where would you rank yourself? Would it be square in the middle at a 5? Or would you lean a little more into one side? A 4? A 7? What would you rate yourself? I think this is a really interesting reflection on how you view your studio dynamic.

And, again, I'm not here to say what's right or wrong... I'm just curious about it all.

Another context for this same question involves your interview and onboarding process. I'm a huge fan of the initial student interview. I actually call them assessments, but, whatever you name it, I like getting a chance to meet with a potential student and their parents before contracts are signed. That's a whole episode in and of itself... but because I know many of you operate with a similar set-up, I'm now asking this question: In that initial student interview, who is interviewing whom?

Are YOU interviewing the student to see if they are a good fit for your studio? Absolutely.

Are the PARENTS interviewing you? You might not like this answer, but I would argue... absolutely they are.

Again, I've talked with many teachers over the years who are quite insulted at the mere suggestion that PARENTS want to meet with them before enrolling their children in their studio. Again, these are teachers who feel like they're doing students a FAVOR by even considering them.

Honestly, I find cautious parents to be a welcome sign. I'm actually pretty weirded out at how casually some parents entrust their children with a teacher before they have even met them. I'm thrilled to meet a family who wants to take care in selecting a teacher for their child. Now – maybe it's because I'm very confident in my ability to make families fall in love with me – haha! But, regardless, I think it's only fair to understand that parents have every right to decide you're not the right teacher for them.

I mean, it's hurtful to hear, for sure, but it definitely falls under rights of parenting, as far as I'm concerned.

So, again, I'm super-curious to know where you fall on the spectrum of who-is-interviewing-whom in the student onboarding process? I can't help but think we are wise to acknowledge it's a 2-way street.

Truth be told, I feel like my specific brand of Teacher Magic only works if I know a family is happy with me. It's a character flaw, for sure, but the second I start feeling like a student or their family is skeptical or unappreciative of me, my magic is gone. I just can't operate under those conditions.

Remember that situation I mentioned about offering to cancel my church choir practice to accommodate a reschedule? That parent flew SO FAR off the handle at me – despite my extreme efforts to appease her – that I had to cut ties with a student I dearly, dearly loved. It's been several years and, honestly, it still breaks my heart. But, in the end, I knew I couldn't do all the things I do that make my lesson experience special if I didn't feel supported and appreciated by the family.

That relationship suddenly turned from one that felt mutually beneficial – to one that was very clearly one-sided. And after being called a bunch of terrible names and accused of some rotten things, I had to remind myself this was my BUSINESS and I didn't have to take that. Sigh. Tough life lessons, friends...

Back to student interviews: I'll give you a for-instance from many years ago, that I still feel conflicted about to this day. Many, many years back... we're talking, probably, 2007? I received a phone call from a mother who wanted lessons for her young son. He was probably 7. And, you know... familiar story... she was convinced he had all this musical potential... yadda yadda... and she wanted to make sure I knew how to help him nurture his ability to play by ear, as well as learning to read music and build proper technique. Well, I explained to her that I tried to take a balanced approach to all musical skills. Emphasis on reading and technique were my primary focus – especially in those days – but we would also work on building his aural training and working on all those functional skills, including playing by ear.

Well, she seemed satisfied with this response and decided to bring him for an interview – though she definitely made it known she wasn't sold quite yet. At this stage in my life, I think I took myself a little too seriously and I was DETERMINED to make sure she loved me. Well, the interview went fine, and she and her son both asked a ton of questions, which meant we quickly ran out of time. As they were on their way out the door, the mom pulled out a CD. And she showed it to me and she said, "you're lucky we ran out of time because I was planning a test for you. I was going to make you listen to a song from this album and show me you could play it back to me by ear."

I laughed it off and walked them out... but once she was gone I couldn't BELIEVE the bullet I had just dodged! I mean, I don't know about you – but I've never been put to an actual TEST by a potential client before. To this day, I don't know how I would have responded had she led with that challenge. My pride felt insulted... I mean, I held two degrees and had a solid number of years of teaching experience

under my belt. I didn't need to prove myself to her! And I still don't think that is a fair request.

And yet, we DO need to prove ourselves to our clients. Just maybe on our own terms. I don't know. It's an interesting concept, eh?

I know many teachers who would have seen that challenge as a HUGE red flag and decided against enrolling that particular student. And they would have been well-within their rights to do it.

I will also say, that student ended up being a fixture in my studio for many many years, and he proved to, indeed, be a very talented musician. I am grateful I took him, despite the awkwardness of his mother's request.

So, friends, that was a lot of storytime today... but I hope I've given you an opportunity to consider how symbiotic... how mutually beneficial... how good for both... your studio relationships are. If you feel a struggle for power on EITHER side of this, I would simply suggest there's a better way.

And while you ponder that, I'm going to offer up a toast, to you:

Music teacher friends of the world: today I wish you a studio FULL of symbiotic relationships. May you be confident in the fact that your studio families support you and appreciate you. And, likewise, may you be grateful for the fact that their money keeps you in business. There are weeks when I am simply overcome with gratitude for the fact that I earn a full-time income directly from these families I adore so much. And, to be sure, I work HARD for it. I earn it. But I can still be appreciative of the fact that people show me support in such a tangible way – with their wallets. So, cheers to you AND all your supportive studio families, my friends. Here, here.

Well, that's Episode 68 for you! As always, I hope it's given you something to think about, and some assurance that – whatever side you're on – I've been there.



It's a new month, which means it's a great time to jump into my Patreon community! If you aren't aware, I release a bonus video on my Patreon site each month, as well as host a private Zoom chat for subscribers at the end of each month. We're scheduling this month's chat THIS WEEK, so now's the best time to join so we can do our best to find a time where we can include YOU. \$13 gets you the Zoom invite and bonus video. Or, if you just want to contribute to my virtual tip jar, you can do so with a \$6 contribution as well.

That's it for now, friends! Onward and upward toward those symbiotic relationships, right? I hope life is kind to you this week. We'll talk again soon.