

The Art of Teaching: Joan Lippincott at 75

Larry G. Biser



Joan Lippincott

Joan Hult Lippincott was for many years the head of the organ department at Westminster Choir College of Rider University, the largest organ department in the world at that time. She was born in Kearny, New Jersey, where her early keyboard studies were with William Jancovius. When she entered Westminster Choir College, she became a student of the legendary Alexander McCurdy. After completing her Bachelor of Music degree at Westminster, she was accepted as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where she again studied with Dr. McCurdy. Upon graduation from Curtis, she returned to Westminster to obtain her master's degree and was asked to join the faculty as a keyboard instructor. She later became a member of the organ faculty and, upon Dr. McCurdy's retirement in 1965, accepted the position as administrative assistant to Alec Wyton, who had been appointed to succeed McCurdy. The following year she was named the chairman of the department. In 1967 she was appointed head of the organ department, a position she held until she became the University Organist at Princeton University in 1993. Over these many years she has produced scores of extremely successful students who are active in churches, schools, and as performers across the country and abroad. On Christmas Day, 2010, Joan Hult Lippincott will turn seventy-five years old. I felt this occasion should be met with some recognition from her loyal and loving students, suggesting that as a body we produce a *Festschrift*, *Joan Lippincott . . . the gift of music*, to honor her. Some thirty-five

of her students, friends, and colleagues will be contributing articles to this book. I had the pleasure and delight this past September to spend a brilliant fall weekend with Joan and Curtis at their home in Wellfleet on Cape Cod, interviewing her for the biographical section of this book. The following excerpt is a portion of that interview.

Larry G. Biser: When you went to Westminster Choir College from Curtis to teach piano and organ for the first time, what most influenced the way you approached teaching?

Joan Lippincott: In my early work as a teacher, I was especially influenced by the way I had been taught, by pedagogical studies with Frances Clark, and by the writings of Carl Rogers. When I was a student of Dr. McCurdy at Westminster, he required all of his students to take a piano class with Frances Clark, who also taught pedagogy classes. I particularly remember a lecture in which she said in her very colorful way that "Teaching is not telling." Carl Rogers, about whom I learned from my counselor husband, was a leading proponent of non-directive counseling, and I was fascinated by the insightful things he had to say about teaching and learning. I remember him saying, "The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change." The influence of Frances Clark and Carl Rogers led me to believe in approaching students with the goal of teaching them to teach themselves.

LB: What do you believe is the single most important trait as a teacher?

JL: I believe to be a good teacher is

to be a good student; that teachers are older students, and that in teaching in a one-to-one context there should be a lot of communication of the teacher's love of the subject and love of the process. It is necessary, of course, to give the student the tools he must use in the process. By this I mean details of posture, hand position, fingering, etc. Then the student must use the tools and engage in the learning process as if he were teaching himself.

LB: What advice can you give on the efficient use of a student's practice time?

JL: I believe that practice means playing perfectly, which is to say we should do whatever it takes to play the right notes at the right time.

LB: At first hearing, that is a rather startling thought. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

JL: In the case of difficult music, this probably means, in the beginning of one's practice, to play the parts separately before combining them. By proceeding in this way—and playing perfectly—one learns to be accurate and gains confidence in playing.

LB: Is there anything that a teacher can do to assure the success of a student?

JL: Careful learning, guided by the older student, the teacher, is critical in giving the student the confidence that he needs to be successful. It is the teacher's job, in my opinion, to impart everything he or she knows to give the student this opportunity for success. In a sense, the teacher is really teaching and learning

when the student is able to achieve that which he didn't believe possible. I have enjoyed growing and learning and getting better throughout my life and I have a special joy when I can teach that concept to someone else.

LB: Is it enough to insist on correct notes or does generating heightened motivation on the part of the student lead to that end?

JL: On one occasion, a colleague asked me how much of the motivating of a student was the responsibility of the teacher. My response was that it is THE responsibility of the teacher. Sometimes in my teaching I have been insistent on a student following a certain procedure until he learns from his experience that it is going to work. This experience of success is then highly motivating.

LB: In your teaching career at Westminster you had students of all levels of ability. Would you approach a beginning student differently than you would a more advanced student?

JL: People sometimes have said to me that I am especially fortunate to teach so many advanced students. My response has been that I think that teaching advanced students is not so different from teaching beginners in that in both cases the teacher wants to teach something that the student doesn't yet know. ■

Larry G. Biser is a retired organist-choir-master and an adjunct faculty member at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was one of the early organ students of Joan Lippincott at Westminster Choir College. This article is excerpted from a Festschrift he is editing, Joan Lippincott . . . the gift of music.

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