

# A Musician's Reflection on the Importance of Empathy

While there are various ways of describing “empathy”, at its core it is about seeing and understanding how another person feels. That includes a character in a story or even an image in a painting. While music is not exactly human, it does convey emotions as potently as any art form, and sensitivity to that expressiveness is a form of empathy.

I began piano lessons at age four. With my mother a professional musician, the approach was serious but, for me, also deeply pleasurable. I loved the music that I was playing, and carried the melodies around in my head beyond the hours of daily practice. Still a child, playing Chopin, I wondered, “Where is this paradise? Is it real?” That wonder and delight in music has never left me.

Even now, after so many thousands of practice hours, I find the work not laborious but, rather, the highlight of my days. Along with the considerable physical and mental skills necessary for high level music-making, it is the emotional, empathetic dimension that gives music its life and extraordinarily communicative power, and that brings me the greatest joy.

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Making my own music and teaching others to do so are closely allied. I apply similar standards, discipline, and ways of thinking to my students. Where teaching differs from my own work is in the realm of empathy. Having trained for decades at my art, I both understand and empathize with the complex technical and musical challenges my students deal with, which makes me a better teacher. And since each student comes with a different background and a unique personality, I must gently discover for each individual the approach that best fosters learning.

I must also cultivate empathetic perceptions in them that are beyond the printed score. I do so by demonstrating with my own playing and by having Socratic conversations with them. Once their music is memorized, I ask countless questions such as “What does this (chord, rhythm, key change, melodic shape, etc.) FEEL like to you?” “If this music was being used in a movie,

what would you be seeing on the screen?" These help to focus their attention, to analyze, and to discern meaning from aspects of the music, large and small. While assuring them there are no wrong responses to such subjective questions, I do fan the tiny embers of their impressions in an effort to move them ahead. As their perceptions mature with age and experience, so does their ability to breathe life into their own playing. In time, the musician's empathy with the emotional content of the music must grow to such a level of intensity that it feels like actual, lived experience. It is such playing that can connect with a listener's heart and create a memorable experience.

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## *Professor Hans Boepple*

*Piano Faculty, Music History*

*American pianist Hans Boepple debuted with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at age 10 and continues to be the featured soloist with orchestras of distinction. Concerto performances include critically acclaimed collaborations with the LA Philharmonic, Denver Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Long Beach Symphony, Metropolitan Opera House Orchestra, Santa Rosa Symphony, Oakland, Napa, and Santa Cruz Symphonies. He has collaborated with eminent conductors that include Zubin Mehta, Johnny Green, Minas Christian, Dennis de Coteau, and Corrick Brown.*

*This highly regarded performance career earned him a place on the Steinway International Artist Roster. A popular and frequent guest artist, his live performances have been broadcast by National Public Radio, Voice of America and Südwestfunk. Recitals include respected series such as Carmel Music Society, The Maestro Foundation & IU Jacobs School of Music.*

*A student of renowned American pianist Sidney Foster, Boepple holds both a Bachelor & Master of Music in Piano Performance from Indiana University as well as an honorary Performer's Certificate. A former full-time member of the piano faculty at IU, he has been Professor of Music at Santa Clara University since 1978. Boepple balances his demanding performance activities with those of a dedicated and successful teacher. His students have earned over 200 state, national, and international awards.*

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