

ROBERTA GARY ON TEACHING AND LIFELONG LEARNING

PART I

BY ROBERT L. BOZEMAN

I've found the use of Zen to be generally helpful. Some students will always laugh it off and they won't really go there. But, if week after week they have to do it, then they can and eventually they will hear it.

ROBERTA GARY is professor emerita, having retired in August 2013 at age 80 from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM), where she taught for 46 years. In October 2012, I interviewed Dr. Gary as part of my doctoral project titled *Gesture, Movement, and the Keyboard Performer: A Somatic Approach to Learning, Practicing, and Performing*. The complete project, including the full video of this interview, research results, and other supporting documents and videos, may be found at Robertbozeman.com. What follows is a portion of that interview, which was recorded in the organ studio at CCM, focusing on her as a musician, her legacy as a teacher, and lifelong learning. This is an edited transcript from the recorded interview. The natural conversational style of that interview has intentionally been retained.

Robert Bozeman: Good morning, Dr. Gary, and thank you for being here with me today.

Roberta Gary: Good morning, Robert. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm here lots of days every week, but this is a totally different experience.

Yes. Well, I hope it's a good one.

It will be, I know.

Before we delve into our exploration of gesture and movement, I'd like to talk just a few moments about you and your teaching. How long have you been here at CCM?

Well, I could say since way into the last century—which means I started in 1967. I'm beginning my 46th year of teaching.

However, you did some previous work here as a student.

Yes. I was an undergraduate at the College of Music of Cincinnati, which was one of the two predecessors of CCM. I started back in 1953. Not, 1853 . . . 1953.

That's quite a tenure, to be teaching for 46 years. Not often heard of these days. What has kept you at this particular place for so long?

Well, it's not only because it is my home, as I was born in Ohio and I've never lost that love for this part of the state. It is also because CCM has developed and continues to become even more wonderful as a school and a place that not only values its faculty, but also wants to help students in the variety of programs here. While I may have looked at other places, it always ended up that this was the place to stay.

Would you talk about the evolution of your teaching over these past years and what's been an influence on your teaching?

It's always difficult to say why you changed or how you changed. However, in trying to discern the answer to that, I would start with the rediscovery of wonderful mechanical action organs. For a lot of my playing life and teaching life, we didn't have those kinds of organs. So there had to



Roberta Gary and Robert Bozeman

be something else besides the instrument and that would have been the repertoire. The repertoire itself and how you find out more about it is always going to change how you teach it. My own teachers have been an influence on me as well. Being a fan of lifelong learning as you know, after I graduated with my DMA from Eastman with David Craighead, I did a lot of coaching and studying with other people, which continued to influence me. Then, I have to give much credit to my students who influence me without their realizing it and maybe even without realizing it myself. Because, if I'm asking my students to do something, and they do it and I realize it may not be just "the thing," then I'm going to change it. Or vice versa. If a student does something I've never heard of, it can turn into an influence. Even with all these influences, I'd like to think, actually I know, that I'm still changing.

One memory I have is giving my first recital here as a doctoral student and playing a Bach chorale on the Taylor & Boody organ at North Presbyterian. Within a few months another student played the same piece and it was registered very differently. I asked you about that and your answer was something like, "It was a different student and it was a different day."

Maybe it could also have been that the student had a different approach to the piece. I think that in the case of chorale preludes you have wider latitude for different registrations and different interpretations. However, even with pieces you might have done with the same registration, when you play them again there might be a different tempo or interpretation, even on the same organ. So, you're right. That just means it's more interesting for the teacher. I'm remembering somebody I won't name, a well-known player, who

I heard play a concert with very slow tempos. During the performance I kept thinking, why are the tempos so slow in all this music that I know so well. He must know something I don't. Afterwards, I asked him, "Tell me about these slow tempos." He said, "Oh, it was just an experiment. It didn't work." I'm glad I asked so I just didn't think that's the way it was supposed to be!

I'd like to bring the focus back to you for a moment. What sort of physical challenges have you experienced that might have contributed to your approach to pedagogy?

When I was seven years old and had just started studying piano, I had polio. It was actually a very mild case of polio or I probably wouldn't be here today. However, I do carry the result of that disease, which means that I don't have complete use of my right leg. I could always walk and

move my leg, but I didn't have the greatest control. I remember once saying to a movement teacher, "I suppose organ is the very last thing I should have tried to play since I had a problem with my leg." She said, "No, it's the very best thing you could have done." Of course I didn't know that at the time, it just happened. Now does that change my teaching? Probably, because I don't have any students who don't use their right legs and I've had to imagine what advice to give in pedaling or to help students be more aware of the possibilities when using both of their legs completely. I don't have a control group for myself, but, when you have any physical challenge, I think the best approach is not to worry about how it should have been or what you should be able to do. You should just be concerned and interested in what you are doing and what you can do.

Then, as you know, about three years ago I fell and broke a couple of bones in that same poor right leg. A year after that, I fractured my right hip and broke my right shoulder. All those bones heal and the body repairs, and again you find out what you can do and what you can't do. To a certain extent, I'm positive that it improved my teaching because I was focused even more on finding more possibilities than I had before and tried to encourage students to do the same. Perhaps you zoom in a little differently on the reality of what the situation is. While I could never say that I'm glad I broke bones, I'm actually glad I had polio! I think I would be a totally different musician and different person had I not.

Having studied with you for several years now, I've become accustomed to starting the lesson with something unique I've not had with any other teacher. This is a Zen saying that you share with your students. Would you talk a little bit about where that came from and why you use it?

I haven't always done it, but certainly

in the length of time that you and I have known each other and somewhat before that. Over the years I noticed that it was often difficult for students to get focused at the beginning of a lesson, especially if they were nervous. They might be thinking, "I'm not sure I can do as well as I think I can after practicing all week" or "What is she going to say?" I had recently bought one of those Zen calendars that had a saying for every day of the year. Most of them I didn't think were very interesting, but I saved some that I liked. I would hand one to the student at the beginning of the lesson. They had to read it and tell me what they thought it meant. Now, it happens that I brought an example! So, you're going to read this. This is a good example.

"A man should look for what is and not what he thinks should be." And this one's by Albert Einstein.

Right. They're not always Zen masters. But, they're what we and they call Zen sayings. What does this one mean?

I always think first about my recent work at the organ. It is my goal to think about exactly what's on the page and where I am right now when I'm learning the piece, rather than trying to play it at the performance level.

Right. It's a good example. That often happens in lessons. The student would be thinking, "I can't play this at the right tempo, but I probably should." They might start at a fast tempo and try to do something they couldn't really do. They might be thinking they can't put all these parts together yet in this trio, but they should try anyway. This idea of seeing the reality of a situation is something we would all like to be able to do, and not just at the organ. I think you and I have talked about the book, *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey and the quote: "The ball is seldom where it should be, but it is always where it is." Not that I play tennis, which I don't, but anticipating my op-

ponent is going to hit the ball over here next so I go to that part of the court. However, the ball goes to the other side of the court and now I'm sunk. I'm playing a game that didn't exist rather than the game that's being played.

I've found the use of Zen to be generally helpful. Some students will always laugh it off and they won't really go there. But, if week after week they have to do it, then they can and eventually they will hear it. One of my Korean students said one day, "Oh, I don't want to do this." I said, "Go on, try it." Then she said, "They all say the same thing," which they did—they just all said it in a different way. I said to her "You are right. What is it that they say?" She replied, "They say . . . Be there."

Another resource that you've given to me that I find very helpful is a book titled *The Now Habit* by Neil Fiore. My first quarter, when we were still on the quarter system, struggling with working and commuting and full-time graduate study, I found it to be very helpful. This book delves into, in a more psychological realm, the Zen of being "in the now." I think this comes into place in my next question about your "levels of practicing." Your approach is broken down into three levels that you've already begun to talk about, seeing where you are in taking your tempo, for example. Could you talk just a little bit more about these three levels of practicing?

Of course, practicing for many people is very personal. They have their own approach and their own routine. What I'm concerned with is for two kinds of people. One, the student that has no routine and just goes in there and, as we say, lock themselves in a room for however long and just play through things and figures that will work. Then there may be another sort of person who has a routine, but is always doing everything the same way. First I do this, then I

do this, and so on. I created this handout on how to practice based pretty much on how I practice, myself. In doing so, I became a better practitioner. I've changed the handout over the years though not in a while. In trying to teach somebody how to practice, I figured out that often peo-

ple don't realize where they are in their work. I called Level I, "working it out" and I gave a lot of directions on working it out. It's the most important level because if you don't work it out thoroughly, you don't have a firm foundation for what you're going to do next. Many people bypass this saying that they're in a hurry to make it sound good, get it to tempo, or ready to perform. So, "working it out" has several instructions on how to do that. The second level is "putting it together." This is again where you could stumble. You could now try to go too fast. You could put too much together. You could work too long on one piece, losing your focus. We are guiding the person into short bursts of practice, if you will. Use a timer. I think that a timer, set for 20 or 30 minutes, is a focusing device. It allows us to realize "I don't have to practice more than 20 minutes on this part," or "I wonder how much I can get done in 20 minutes?" During the third level, you are "polishing and performing" the music. Now you're learning to perform.

This concept of the three levels presents a different solution to practicing. Does the student or do I recognize where I am on everything I'm learning? I could have pieces or parts of pieces at Level I, some at Level II, some at Level III, so that I can go back

and forth and make it like a game, in a sense. Or, I can make it like a choir rehearsal. Most of my students have choirs, and I ask them how they set up their choir rehearsal routine. When they think about that, they realize that it's in a similar way to how they should be practicing themselves.

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One thing at Level I, especially for someone who's just beginning to study with you, is that of touch. You have a particular name for touch that I'd like you to talk about.

I know you're talking about what I'm calling the "cat touch." Cat touch has other names, which I'll get to, but it's simply referring to how we release notes. We should think first about Baroque music in which we're not connecting most notes to the next note. We are connecting them, of course, but we're not connecting them seamlessly.

We put the key down and then we have to go to another note. If you stop and think about it, once you put the key down, everything after that is "release." You have attacked the note—I don't like the word attack—but you have put the key down and now you're going to release it, and that release will be the movement to the next note. That movement may remind us of petting a cat. I happen to like cats and everybody knows what it's like to pet a cat. You pet a cat gently and slowly, not harshly or pressing too hard. You are not hitting the cat, but you're stroking the fur. By doing that as a release on mechanical action organs you get a better sound at the end of the note because the valve closes more slowly and there's a slight *diminuendo*. On other types of key action, that change [in the sound] does not happen. But, the change in our own bodies and the way we feel because of it in the sense of continuous motion is still there. It is for the music as well as for us, too.

On a non-tracker instrument, this could delay the release of the note by milliseconds and can create a different musical effect as well as a physical difference for the player.

Right. I don't think there's a good physical reason for changing our basic technique between electropneumatic

Level I . . . It's the most important level because if you don't work it out thoroughly, you don't have a firm foundation for what you're going to do next.

One of the things in Level I is "see everything on the page." Another phrase that I think is the hardest or was the hardest for me and certainly has been the hardest for students that I have taught since I came into contact with it, is learning to "stop in place."

Ah, right, stopping in place. I was already doing this in my practice but I didn't know what it was called until my husband, who is also an organist, and who for many years taught Suzuki Piano, told me that this was an integral part of beginning piano for the four- or five-year-old child. It means that when you have this level of awareness, even from the beginning of your work, you're playing along rather slowly when you suddenly realize that you don't know what's coming next. You don't know where you are right now, and you don't even know what the next thing is. It is the ability to calmly just pause. Some compare it to pushing the pause button on a remote. Instead, there are two things that students most often do. One, they keep going, though they know they're going to miss it and they crash. Or, they do stop but they stop, throw their hands off the keyboard and make an awful face, and then they try to come back. Well, they just wasted a lot of time and got their blood pressure up! If they would just pause and gather them-

or electric action from mechanical action. We have to change enough things as we go from instrument to instrument.

Even mechanical action instruments are unique and require a different approach.

They are going to be different.

So, changing fingering and having two sets of scores with different fingerings for different organs doesn't make a lot of sense.

No, I don't think so. I wanted to mention, too, that back when I was still an undergraduate piano major, just a piano major, my teacher Olga Conus, who was Russian and a friend of Rachmaninoff, talked a lot about the "caressing touch." So it appears in piano as well. Apparently, even Rachmaninoff was doing some of this. It is not the only touch that pianists use, of course, but it is certainly important. Sometimes it's called "scratching" in other articles or treatises. I don't like that as much because it sounds like you're going to be on the nail. That's why I think that this motion of petting a cat is better. I've even gone so far as to say to some people who were having trouble learning it, imagine that you are trying to "go up the down escalator"! You're in continuous motion.

In [Girolamo] Diruta's treatise, which was one of the first to distinguish between harpsichord and organ, he uses the word "caressing" about the release.

Ah, good.

Not like you're about to strike someone. It should not be hard, but with the hand being soft. We often quote him by saying "the arm leads the hand." That is something you use a lot to achieve the cat touch.

Yes, and it's not just for cat touch. I have to wonder if Diruta was the first person who discovered some somatic technique! If I'm sitting at the keyboard and the hand is going to the upper part of the keyboard and it leads,

the arm stays behind and is no longer in good alignment. Then I'm in a bad position of ulnar deviation and it doesn't feel good. But if I already know that I'm going to that part of the keyboard, I can allow the arm to be moving first and it takes you up there. It's going to be opening your whole thoracic area and it's going to activate the spine and other joints and you're going to be encouraged to move in a way that you are not if you lead with the hand.

Well, you've used two or three terms that I want to talk about further, because some of us may not know what these are. The first one is "somatic," which is the topic of my project.

I would just say the easiest definition is that it's something relating to the body. It's something we don't first think about. People in my generation did not think about this when we were playing music or when we were being taught. We were not taught anything relating to the body, other than you've got to be strong so that you can pound those piano keys! That's an exaggeration, but to think that it could be helpful to study movement and gesture was not in most people's minds, I would say. We wouldn't have known what somatic studies or anything like that would be.

The other term you used, which begins to move us into more in-depth topics about the body, is "ulnar deviation." That's a common issue with keyboard performers who have problems or pain in their arms.

Right. It's a problem with computer users, too. People who use their hands in a restricted area can end up turning their wrists to the right or left, toward the ulna, and pinching the nerve on that side of the wrist, which is defined as ulnar deviation.

We probably don't realize at first that the rotation of the forearm is actually around the little finger because of this (ulna) bone rotating like it does. If the hand leads the arm, which is

how we got to this discussion, that's what happens very easily. But it doesn't have to. I could start with the hand leading the arm, and I could right away lock myself into this position and only play in this position. However, because the wrist is a wonderful thing and it can go in all kinds of directions, our default position should be a neutral one. We know we are going to be in and out of many positions all the time, but most people are not aware of that until you bring it to their attention.

As computer users, all we have to do is think about it. We don't have to use an ergonomic keyboard. In fact, I don't really like them for the computer. Some people do, but all we have to do is think about it and remember not to tighten up and do our typing with a neutral wrist, and most problems are resolved. It is also important to get a good chair, make sure we're at the right height, looking directly at the screen, and then take five percent off our speed so that we can think about it.

Because we can't have an ergonomic split keyboard at the organ.

Or the piano, that's right, you can't.

So, we have to adjust there automatically.

That's right. And one of the things that I said sometimes is "the keyboard is flat, but we are not." So, we're not going to change the keyboard, but we can move ourselves around it.

Part II, covering movement studies and pedaling, will be published in the April issue.

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