



**FULL BENEFIT
MANY WAYS OF LEARNING**
by Laurie Riley

Learning obviously comes from many sources and in many ways. We can learn music from our families, peers, friends, teachers, recordings, and/or You Tube. We can learn from notation or tablature, by rote, by ear, and/or from observing performances. We learn aurally, visually, and/or kinesthetically.

Many of us rely on just a few of the above resources and on whatever strengths are naturally easiest for us individually. Because of that, most of us end up limited. Why do I say “most”? Because the number of less-skilled musicians far outweighs the number of very skilled ones. IMHO, that’s a result of ignoring the full spectrum of sources of learning that are available to us.

If something is missing from your skills, how would you know? After all, if it’s missing you probably wouldn’t know it was, and if you did know, you’d do something about it. The fact is, no matter how good we are, we are *all* missing *something*. (The best musicians are just so good at what they *aren’t* missing that it outweighs any inadequacies they may have!)

There is no “best” way, no “only” way, or even an only “right” way. They are *all* best if they’re all used *together*.

Our reluctance to utilize all possible resources, routes and techniques stems from being accustomed to doing things in whatever way is easiest. But there’s an interesting phenomenon we can take advantage of: *when we have to struggle at something, we learn it better*. If we are persistent and keep struggling until we see results, the learned skill is set securely and never goes away. If, on the other hand, we do whatever is easiest to reach the learning goal, the information doesn’t always stick and it’s not always complete.

We humans love shortcuts. Any old way to make something quick and easy is what we gravitate toward. Thus we miss a great deal. Sure, you might be able to play that tune by tomorrow if you do it the easy way. But will you be able to play it next week? And will you be able to play it *well*?

Sometimes taking the longer route is more effective. I’ll tell you a story that may be

analogous. I was on my way, in my motor home, to a music camp in Deckers, Colorado several years ago, using the written directions to get there. At an important intersection, the directions said to go straight and that Deckers was 20 miles from there. But there was a large sign that said “Deckers 10 miles” with an arrow to the left. It seemed obvious that taking the shorter way made sense, so I turned left. Bad idea. About 100 yards up that road, it turned to gravel and narrowed considerably. My motor home barely fit on the road, and going around the blind curves was hair-raising. When another car had to pass me going the other way, finding enough space for it to do so was nearly impossible. That ten miles of road felt like driving on marbles, which was nerve-wracking because to my left there was a deep ravine. Furthermore, the road was washboarded. Even at about 10 mph, the vibration felt like the entire vehicle would shake apart. (In fact, it ruined my computer, which was costly to replace.) I arrived at the camp somewhat sooner than I might have if I’d followed the written directions, which as it turned out would have taken me on paved roads the whole way there. So... was the shorter way the better one? Not at all.

Using all available resources makes sense too. If we learn only from our peers, we miss finding out where our peers stand in comparison to others in the field, so we have inadequate perspective on what quality of instruction we’re getting. If we learn only from formal lessons, we miss the joy of learning spontaneously, and vice versa. If we learn only from paper, we miss learning by ear, and vice versa. If we learn to always play from a reference, we miss learning to memorize and to improvise and to arrange. If we play only from memory, we miss out on becoming good sight-readers. Each method or source has merit, but none stand alone.

Many of us believe we can teach ourselves, and have evidence to prove it: the ability to play at least to some degree, maybe even pretty well. But the truth is that we can only teach ourselves the totality of what we already know intellectually and/or can imagine, so we have no way to even guess at what else is possible. There are a few people who are notable exceptions in self-teaching, but let’s face it - the majority of people don’t get far without some instruction. Teachers exist for a reason. Self-teaching materials also exist, of course, but they are not the same as getting feedback from a real person.

Learning from a teacher can be challenging to the ego. When we’re alone we can convince ourselves that we’re pretty good. When someone points out that something could be better, we deflate. I’ve often wondered why what we play seems to be so tightly associated in our own minds with who we are, and why we get so attached to the idea of being good enough to not need improvement. Or why we can allow ourselves to think there’s even *such a thing* as “good enough”. No matter how well you play, there’s always further to go. No one knows everything, and if you tried to, you’d become a Jack of All Trades and Master of None. We do have to narrow our focus to become good at something. Even so, no matter how narrow the focus, the knowledge involved is infinite, and we do best to cast a wide net for ways of learning it.

That said, don’t be the student who never feels they’re doing anything well enough, and even after years of study never feels they’ve arrived at a place of any proficiency. If your

teacher doesn't give you enough positive feedback, that too is good reason to seek more learning resources.

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