

Reminiscence on Studying with Jeanne Bamberger

By

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I studied with Jeanne in the late 1970s and early 1980s when I was an undergraduate at Harvard and cross-registered to take classes at MIT. Jeanne and I have stayed in touch since my time studying with her. When my own children were looking at colleges in Boston, I visited Jeanne there. She had a spunky dog that liked to chase a ball back and forth in her home office. As Jeanne sat at her computer or talked with me, she tossed the ball for the dog, who brought it back to her over and over and over. I asked Jeanne what topic in music she was researching, and she said “repetition.”

When I was in college, I house-sat for Jeanne and took care of her dog, Rufus. Rufus was my first dog friend because my mother hadn’t let me have a dog when I was growing up. Rufus was a warm-hearted companion who missed Jeanne very much when she went out of town. I still have a vivid mental picture of watching Rufus through Jeanne’s picture window in Wayland one January as he refused to come inside. He stood proudly and adamantly out on a hill in 3 degree weather. I suppose I eventually got him inside, as he didn’t freeze to death so I am still friends with Jeanne. The next time Jeanne went out of town, Rufus came to stay with me in Cambridge. When Jeanne returned, she gave me the two volumes of the *Norton Anthology of Music* as a thank-you. I still consult those yellowing, fraying books in my own teaching. A few weeks ago, I found my own puppy chewing on the corner of one of them. In fact, I think most aspects of my teaching,

and indeed probably many aspects of my life, are richly informed by what I learned from Jeanne. I can't paint a door or wall in my house without the earworm "a paintbrush is like a pump" resonating in my head, a line from an article Jeanne wrote on metaphor. I'm still fascinated, and a little mystified, to see how the paint moves through the bristles!

Around 1980, Jeanne was writing about nonmusicians who were asked to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" on Montessori bells, which look alike, regardless of how high or low their pitch is. She observed people who struck the bell for "twink" and then went looking for another bell to play "kle." Any musician knows that "twink" and "kle" are "the same note." Jeanne showed us that the musicians don't really know so much, that twink and kle only share the same pitch, but not much else. They are not really *the same note*. "Kle" is a weak beat, like an anacrusis, and moreover, has a different syllable attached to it (and probably other differences too). People who were looking for "kle" on a new bell, despite having the "twink" bell right in front of them, understood some important things about music that music teachers tend to overlook. I wonder how many times each week I encounter someone who is, metaphorically, looking for a "kle" where they won't find it, but in the process will uncover some more interesting truth.

It seems to me that in Jeanne's research, no student ever makes a stupid mistake! I learned from Jeanne to respect the seemingly ignorant things students say, to look for how they are making their own sense of their own experiences, and to realize how much I can learn from my students about the mind, about music, and about the world. Beyond its pedagogical value, Jeanne's approach strikes me as profoundly ethical. Jeanne listens so closely to what people say. She listens to their ideas as closely as musicians listen to music, delighted to hear how people think in unexpected ways, and she often responds

with her generous laugh. Jeanne is open to the possibility that a child who is labeled a bad student in grade school might turn up an idea about physics, philosophy, or music that scholars have not yet uncovered.

When I was an undergraduate, Jeanne invited me to be a student member of a research group that, among other things, looked at mistakes students make in ear training class. We discussed, at one point, how students can hear a rising fourth to the tonic as a *settling down*, believing that the pitch has gone down, because *the music* has gone down. Again, Jeanne showed that where teachers might see a stupid mistake, students are onto a more significant truth about music or a more important layer of music. I think this way of thinking, of understanding that a rising interval can be experienced as a downward motion, is at the crux of a problem many people have in talking about music. Too often, people who analyze musical scores have a hard time making satisfying conversation with people who care about music as a representation of experience. Jeanne's use of metaphor gives us a way to bridge these two positions, a way to bridge the objective and the subjective, a way to look rigorously at subjectivity, and to use subjective experience to study objective properties of forms and processes.

Recently, I visited Jeanne in her splendid new house in Berkeley. She has a marvelous collection of witty toys on her coffee table, mostly little moving sculptures that seem to defy gravity and several other principles of physics. Perhaps they are metaphors of Jeanne, in that she seems to have delightfully more energy, vigor, wit, and new ways of thinking than should be possible. When my twin children were about 5 years old, I had brought them to visit Jeanne, and for years after, they referred to her as "the

woman with the guy running on her toilet paper.” She has a small wooden figure that jogs when you pull the paper!

Perhaps another metaphor of Jeanne could be the glorious, wide view she has of the Bay Area from her garden. How much more perspective she has than the rest of us, and how generous she is to share her perspectives with us.