Reviews
by Jenny Macmillan

Improve your teaching!
Teaching Beginners
A new approach for instrumental and singing teachers
Paul Harris

I am delighted to have been invited to review Paul Harris’s book on teaching beginners because I feel this book is essential reading for every instrumental and singing teacher who takes pupils at any level. Whether beginner or postgraduate (as Harris points out at the end of his book), the same guiding principles apply to teaching all pupils. Everything he writes is sensible and wise, and clearly expressed. Much of it is already well known, and will reinforce teachers’ own ideas. But the book also includes new combinations of ideas to stimulate further thought. In particular, each chapter ends with some Points to ponder, to encourage teachers to consider their own situation and their pupils. We are urged to try out new strategies, to be imaginative as teachers.

Harris’s framework for teaching revolves around his Four Ps:
- Posture (essential for technique)
- Pulse (and rhythm)
- Phonology (care about the sound)
- Personality (expression, character)
and also the
- Practicalities (of the instrument)

and his Five Principles:
- Positive and enjoyable lessons
- Creativity in how to practise and in making up music
- Regular, fun, thoughtful practice to develop musical understanding
- Self-evaluation (essential for effective practice)
- A love of performing

After a chapter of ideas for the first lesson (and subsequent practices at home), Harris suggests a recipe for the second lesson, summarising it:
- Further establishing the Four Ps
- Working hard
- Being musical
- Being creative
- Using the work prepared in practice and suggesting new ideas for the next practice
- Enjoying some performances
- Giving pupils the opportunity to listen to music
- Getting pupils to evaluate their work
- And, above all, having fun

There is enough in this chapter for several lessons – and this is before introducing the tutor book. Having seen Paul Harris conduct workshops, I have no doubt all this happens in lessons with his pupils.

When a tutor book is eventually introduced (Harris considers creativity and listening to be more important than reading in the early lessons), he recommends deviating from the book, and adding, substituting, moving sideways (or any direction) as appropriate. Several steps are given for the introduction of reading. All are good common sense, though it is very useful to have them clearly laid out, eg setting the pulse, dealing with the rhythm, introducing pitch, singing, and hearing in one’s head before actually playing the piece on the instrument. Harris suggests checking that a pupil understands a new concept by swapping positions – asking the pupil to teach the teacher.

Teaching Beginners touches on Harris’s concept of Simultaneous Learning which is explained in greater detail in his first Improve your teaching! book of 2006. Simultaneous Learning involves setting an agenda with tasks that (on the whole) pupils can achieve. In doing so, each lesson generates its own momentum. Using one’s imagination, teaching becomes exciting and satisfying; it moves away from simply reacting to pupils’ mistakes. Pupils are encouraged to think about the work of the lesson and to be creative. Boredom comes from a lack of involvement and imagination. Imaginative teaching can make anything fun – even scales.

Harris discusses working to produce a lovely lyrical legato. Although it is not within the scope of his book to indicate how to produce this sound, which obviously involves technique specific to the instrument, we are told that one of the best ways to teach technique is through demonstration, for a pupil’s natural instinct is to copy.

Individual chapters give ideas on improvising and composing from scratch with pupils. Another chapter gives advice on inheriting a pupil who may present various musical problems. The suggested initial solution is to work carefully through the four Ps.

Harris is aware of the psychology of teaching. His tone is always positive. When correcting faults, he is kind and imaginative, aware that a negative reaction may be destructive and upsetting, eg “Well that’s certainly an interesting way to do it! Why not try it like this instead ….”. After a concert he recommends comments such as “I enjoyed your playing” as much as “You played very well”.

I particularly welcome Harris’s emphasis on:
- Posture
- Listening to the sound
- Demonstration
- Listening and playing by ear before learning to read
- Devising creative exercises to reinforce new techniques
- Encouraging parents to sit in on lessons sometimes, and discussing with them the home situation regarding practice
- Regular performing opportunities
- Keeping an open mind
- Being creative

Teaching Beginners is a good length – not too long (64 pages slightly larger than A5) – making it manageable and concise enough for busy teachers, yet detailed enough to be genuinely helpful for anyone who wants to improve their teaching by giving serious thought to these ideas. I can
understand the relevance of the title, although it may be misleading – the book is about much more than teaching only beginners, for these principles apply to all ages and stages.

I recommend this book very strongly for all music teachers.