

My Teacher

In 1987, I was hired by Aaron Shearer to edit his “Learning the Classic Guitar” series. What follows is a synopsis of my experience with him. I intend no opinion on the merit of his method—others can decide that for themselves.

Shearer hired me on the basis of a letter I’d sent him. Before sending this letter, I’d read an article in which he said he was working on a method, one that had occupied him for 25 years. He hoped to finish it soon. Having studied with a former Shearer student some years earlier, I was somewhat familiar with this method. But I was worried. From what I had read of Shearer’s earlier writing, I knew he wasn’t a good writer. And I believed if Shearer wrote his new method as badly, it would be misunderstood or ignored. Mulling this over, I wrote to Shearer. I took samples from his writing, explained why they were poorly written, and then rewrote them. I also explained that there are professional editors who do this kind of work, and urged Shearer to look into hiring one. I mailed the letter, thinking I’d done my good deed for the day. I vaguely expected he would ignore me.

Mind you, I’d never met Shearer, and he knew nothing about me.

A week later—as it happened, on my 31st birthday—I got a phone call. To my astonishment, it was Shearer. At first I expected him to scold me for my impertinence. But he didn’t. Instead, he assured me that writing was something he’d struggled with all his life. He’d tried working with editors before, with mixed results. To compound my astonishment, he then asked me if I would consider working with him on his method. Again, bear in mind we’d never met.

In spite of my trepidation, one thing led to another, and I soon pulled up stakes in Texas and moved to North Carolina to work with Shearer.

Our initial working relationship wasn’t smooth. I’d go to Shearer’s condo in the morning. He would explain to me what he was thinking. Then I’d go home, sit at my Macintosh, and try to write something. Invariably, it wasn’t what he wanted. So we’d meet and try again. And again. And again. I recall sitting in front of my Mac, staring at the blank screen and wondering: “what does he want?” It seemed Shearer was blocking every path I might take. Indeed, I seriously questioned if he knew what he was doing.

In hindsight, I now see we were in a perfect storm of mutual incomprehension. On the one hand, I didn’t know what Shearer was trying to say. On the other hand, Shearer didn’t yet know how to organize his ideas. Further, he was new to a crucial part of editing. Prudent writers always ask themselves: can this be misunderstood? If so, then it needs rethinking. Facing this brutal process, Shearer likely saw me as a callous nit-picker, destroying what he thought was a good idea. And when his idea lay in shambles, he lacked the experience to go through the wreckage looking for something salvable. Since I didn’t know what he wanted, I was of little help to him.

So that’s how it went for a time. For two months, I wrote not one page of useful text. Nor do I exaggerate when I say that I was in a mounting state of panic.

Yet incredibly, Shearer persisted. Against all evidence, he sensed we were getting somewhere. He soon grasped that, rather than insulting him, I was sifting away the dross. (It speaks volumes that Shearer could make this leap of understanding.) He gradually warmed to the process. Slowly, excruciatingly, we began to make progress. He got better at explaining. With his better explanations, I better understood what he was getting at.

Over the four and a half years I worked with Shearer on “Learning the Classic Guitar,” we settled into a productive groove. He was the idea guy. I was the quality control guy. We came to an understanding. If Shearer’s method was to be worthy, it had to withstand painful scrutiny. Better to pick it apart during the writing process than to serenely saunter into publication, only to afterward have embarrassing flaws uncovered by others.

While it didn’t register on me then, today I’m stunned at the trust and respect Shearer showed me. At the time, my most recent employment was that of a 7-11 clerk. I had no standing as either a guitarist or a writer. None of this mattered to Shearer. When I critiqued him, he always focused on my critique. My credentials were irrelevant. What mattered to him was the merit of what I said. Shearer lived by an iron rule: if it’s right, it’s right—if it’s wrong, then no amount of résumé waving redeems it.

Our association ended long ago, and Shearer is no more. But our time together instilled in me an enduring respect for thoughtful criticism. I believe it to be the foundation of anything worthwhile. And I’ve little patience for the notion that anyone is above it.

If nothing else, Aaron Shearer taught me that. Not a bad epitaph for a teacher.