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A Conversation with... **Duncan Lorien**

by Guy Spiro

Guy Spiro: I usually like to start by asking people to tell their basic story. How did you get to be where you are and teaching what you're teaching?

Duncan Lorien: Well, Cliff Noted, I started teaching when I was eight years old. That occurred because I started playing at the age of three and by the time I was eight, the neighbor kids would ask and I would show them what I did. Then the parents would say, "Can you show me what you just showed my son or daughter?" And I would show them. By the time I was twelve, I had a teaching practice of about twenty.

GS: You were what is called a child prodigy.

DL: Well, there's a problem with that word, prodigy. It implies something that someone else cannot be. After teaching 16,000 students, I have never found one person I can't teach to read or write music, which would seem to fly in the face of the concept of gifts and natural ability.

There a word that has fallen into disuse and that word is aptitude. If you look it up in the dictionary, it just says quickness of understanding, the ability to grasp something quickly. Now I've always believed that you can train aptitude if you have the right motivation, the correct environmental support, the right sequence of information, and the right balance between theory and practice. Aptitude or quickness of understanding can be trained. Now, let's turn that the other way around. Natural ability, or gift, implies you have either been born with it or you haven't got it, so tough. That is what I personally object to when I hear the words natural ability and gift. I don't mean that there isn't such a thing as exceptional abilities to communicate or great artistic talent. But the actual mechanics of the subject can be taught to anyone.

GS: I have often thought that what I think I hear you saying also applies to such things as intelligence.

DL: Correct. I couldn't agree with you more Guy. It is kind of like those kids who are neatly slapped into one of those terrible labels that they give them today, A.D.D., A.D.H.D. That kid is now labeled. Drug the poor thing. Children learn at different speeds and with different stimuluses. The funny thing is, those kids, who often seem to be the most fidgety, bored, disruptive, these are the ones that turn out to be, nine times out of ten, the most artistic, intelligent, scientifically bent people. But we just say, hmm, you don't fit the mold. If you don't fit the mold by a certain age and a certain point, tough. You're left out. I guess that is what motivates me for teaching the seminar. I've had absolutely every range of ability—mentally, physically, artistically, emotionally—and yet the commonality to it is, if you teach the correct information in the correct sequence with enough humor and enough enthusiasm, there is not one person who cannot master a subject. I've had people come to the seminar who are almost totally deaf, who have been completely blind from birth, who have been missing fingers. I've had children who have been autistic come with their parents. It's incredible. These people are human beings. The capacity of a human being to learn, and another word, to yearn, for new information, for art and music, it's just a wonderful way of doing this.

I think the greatest thing with the seminar is that so often, there are subjects that we go through our lives thinking, well, that is beyond me or I'm too old for it or whatever it might be, and music often tends to be one of the things that are lumped in that category. Now, when people leave the seminar, not everyone is going to go on to be a professional musician. The

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difference is that they leave the seminar saying, "You know, I can do this!" What that does is not just affect them in the area of music, but across the board in the every aspect of their life. That is a tremendous part of my enthusiasm for continuing to do what I do.

GS: It is interesting to me how this applies in so many other ways as well.

DL: Absolutely. The thing which no government wants is a society of individuals. We all know this to be true. Let's get everyone stamped and marked and neatly boxed up and placed in their own neat little slots. Human beings don't like that. That is the wonder of the human race. That every single one of us is not only an individual, but has the capacity for individuality in areas we don't ever realize.

GS: And of course the American mythology is all about the individual.

DL: Isn't it just.

[laughter]

DL: So, how did I come to do what I do? I started delivering the seminars because I taught so many people and I found that the questions I got asked were not the questions that I thought people would ask. It was the most fascinating thing to discover that it's not the information that you need to teach, it's the sequence. If one single step in the sequence of assimilating is taught out of sequence, the subject just slips away from the person. The reason the seminar has achieved the effect that it has is because every single person who has attended the seminar has ended up contributing to the whole of this thing.

GS: Just to sit at piano keyboard can be quite daunting.

DL: Do you play yourself?

GS: I used to play bass in a blues band, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth.

DL: Well, let me show you how quickly one can grasp something. If you look at a keyboard, you have white keys and you have black keys. If you look at the black keys, they are arranged in a pattern. Groups of two, three, two, three, all the way up the keyboard. Agreed?

GS: Yes.

DL: Alright. Now imagine a group of two black keys. When I say a group of two, I mean two. A group of two as opposed to two taken from a group of three. If you imagine a group of two and now look at the white note in between that group of two black notes, the name of that note is D. D for Duncan. Now what is the white key to the left? C. What's the next white key to the left, B and so on. With that one simple concept, a keyboard that has been a mystery to someone all their lives, they can now sit down in front of the keyboard and within seconds name every single white note. One piece of correct information ...

GS: Brilliant.

DL: I started up the same way as everyone else. You know, middle C, and then I found that everyone gets to this middle C concept and struggles. Why? Because it is not in the middle. Middle C is the perfect example of false information.

GS: Is it not actually in the middle of the keyboard?

DL: Nope, mathematically count it and you will see.

GS: That's amazing.

[laughter]

DL: Any child, especially a young child ... we learn by looking at patterns, symmetry. Look how much we value symmetry, somebody's face for example. A child, looking at a keyboard, being shown middle C, may instinctively go, "It doesn't look in the middle to me." But of course the teacher says, "It's in the middle. It's in the middle. It's in the middle." And the child is not going to argue with his teacher on the first piece of information that he is presented.

GS: I've always thought that it is in the middle of the keyboard.

DL: It's not true. Isn't that interesting?

Now how quickly do we learn the names of our notes? Find the two black notes and the white note in the middle is D. One to the left, C. One to the right, E. One to the left of C, B. One to the right of E, F. How quick was that? And the reason it is quick is because it is based on symmetry. It's based on logic. It's based on a natural sequence rather than just repeating, "well, I've got to learn middle C because that is how my teacher taught me and his teacher taught him and his teacher taught him, and so on." You have to be willing to stand up and break down some of these, how shall I call it, traditional approaches. I don't claim to have the right way and others have the wrong way. What I claim is that I have yet to have someone come to the seminar who cannot by the end of the seminar name every single note on a keyboard and every single note on a guitar comfortably. They know all their scales from memory on both keyboard and guitar. They know most of their chords from memory, but they can play any chord on both keyboard and guitar. They are reading music, albeit slowly. But by the end of the weekend, with two hands, they are reading Bach and playing in front of an audience, slowly.

GS: That is barely believable. What about the issue of manual dexterity?

DL: Handled. I have a series of coordinational exercises which are revolutionary. If you asked 95% of musicians, have you ever bought some musical exercises to improve your coordination, they will say, "Oh yes." If you ask them, "Whose problems were those exercises trying to resolve?" "The person who wrote those exercises or that person's students." Who is the only person who could design exercises based on what your fingers resist playing? Answer, "Yourself." So you show someone how to create them based on their specific finger control problems.

GS: You're just going to take the specialness away from ...

DL: Ahhh, now Guy, you begin to see where there is sometimes a little resistance to what I'm doing. But I don't base my opinions on someone's piece of paper or which college or person they've been associated with. I base someone's capabilities purely and simply on, what are the products? What does that person achieve? If somebody said to you, "I've been going to the driving ed school for twenty years now so that I can learn to drive," what would you say? Time to change the school. But how many times have you heard, "I've been taking musical lessons for twenty years and I still can't play how I want to?" But you see how, placed in context, it sounds ridiculous. I don't mean to say that somebody is going to become the next great Mozart or have fantastic concert pianist skill or whatever. What do most people want from learning music? They want to be able to pick up a guitar or sit down at the keyboard and play some Elton John. Play some this, play some that. That's what I want to do. That's what gets me motivated.

GS: If somebody has musical ideas in their head, it would be nice to actually play them out.

DL: That is what is contained in my second seminar, called the Understanding of Song Writing seminar. And I take people for the same period of time, three days, and they learn how to compose. By the end of that weekend, and this is going to sound ridiculous to nearly anyone who hasn't done the seminar, but by the end of that seminar, nearly everyone is writing completed songs, intro, verse, choruses, instrumentals, in about 3–4 minutes per song.

For so long, art has been reserved to the universities and colleges. My public is not those people who go to the universities and colleges for music. I do get a good percentage of them, but this is for those people who missed out. Those people who started to play and gave up. Those people who just ran into enough accumulated confusions that eventually they just said, "I can't do this." That's my public. That's who I am interested in. The average man or woman in the street who really wants to add aesthetics into their lives. That's who I'm interested in. I've been doing this now for seventeen years. I started teaching the seminar at the end of 1990 and today it has blossomed in countries like Australia, Germany, Austria. I'm delivering to 85, 90, sometimes 100 people at a time. I will say this. It's more of a struggle to get people together in America than it is almost anywhere else in the world.

GS: Do you have a theory on that?

DL: Yes I do. I think it's because we are spoiled for choice. If you pick up the *What's going on in your area* for any week, you will see more activities, more musical gigs, more theater, more this, more that.

GS: Too many options.

DL: Here's another thing. The seminar sounds so unreal. We are taught, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

GS: It almost certainly is.

DL: And yet, the joy in countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic where they are going, "Well you know, I still have optimism. I still have that hope in man. I still have in me the hope that something is still possible."

GS: After what they are coming out of, you can see why that can be.

DL: Aaaaah, exactly Guy. Exactly.

GS: It's almost an advantage.

DL: Yes, because we're sitting here and we've become very jaded. Somebody once said to me, "Why don't you do more television and press?" And the answer to that can be summed up by a little story. I was phoned by a producer from a country who wanted me to go on their most major breakfast television show. Now this is a big television show, with a viewership of about 3 ½ or 4 million people. I'll be very polite and not tell you which country or show I am talking about here. But the producer phoned me up and said, "So what are you going to play for us?" "I'm not going to play anything for you. I'm not coming on as Duncan Lorien the artist. I'm coming on as Duncan Lorien the educator. I'll show one of your presenters how to do some things."

"Yes, well I suppose that will be acceptable. So we'll have one of the professors from one

of the local musical universities come and give the opposing viewpoint.”

I said, “Excuse me? What is the opposing viewpoint?”

“That you can’t do what you say you can do.”

I just said to him, “Thank you very much, I’m not interested.”

Why do I need to argue with someone about whether or not it works? I’ve seen 16,000 people do it. I don’t have any worries about it. Why do I want a whole bunch of people to look at something that might be possible for them and then instantly dismiss it because of the opinion of someone who hasn’t even done the seminar?

GS: I understand. Among other things, I am an astrologer. I find that the detractors, especially the most vociferous detractors, know two things about astrology. The first of which is jack. You know what the second is?

[laughter]

DL: Let’s pick something randomly. Let’s say something like acupuncture. This has been around not just for thousands, but tens of thousands of years. Now it is all based upon observation. If you talk crystal scrying for example, most people would say, “Well the crystal can’t tell you anything.” No it can’t. But does it facilitate focus? If it facilitates focus and allows you to reach awarenesses that you might not otherwise be able to access, then why attack it because it doesn’t fit within your particular realm of acceptability?

GS: Exactly.

DL: And that is how I feel about astrology. I don’t mean to say that I want everyone to go out and become an astrologer. At the same time, to dismiss it out of hand because A, you don’t know enough about it, and B, you are holding onto some viewpoint that you cannot see how personally it has affected you. If someone finds their way to an enhancement of their life or the lives of others, then good luck to them.

GS: You will know them by their fruits.

DL: Exactly, Guy. This is my point. We have become very narrow in our viewpoints. It has become a very scary thing for me. It doesn’t fit alongside a political viewpoint, but it does fit alongside this idea, “We have gone as far as we can go. We have reached the apex of our artistic, emotional, physical, mental, spiritual awareness.” The day that happens, that’s the time to climb into the box and close the lid on it.

GS: May as well be dead.

DL: Yes, exactly.

GS: I’ve got to tell you something you might find a little bit funny. I have a weekend seminar where I teach the entire basic astrology system.

DL: I love it, man! [laughing] This is what I said. There are people like you and me out there. We’ve each chosen different paths, different ways to go, but I’m a great believer that a lot of us are starting to appear around the world now as a parallel system to what else is out there.

GS: You’re using this for teaching music. I’m interested in how it applies to learning anything.

DL: The thing that comes up most often is that this isn't just about music. I think this is what makes the seminar so powerful. It's the concept that you come into the seminar with a fixed consideration. You say, "Music is something that I would love to have in my life, but I don't have the time for it. I left it too late. I don't have the dexterity. I don't have the ear. I don't have all that rubbish."

Three days later you walk out going, I know my scales. I know my notes on the keyboard and guitar. I know my chords. I can read music. My hands are starting to obey what I want them to do. I can now choose or not choose to be a musician. I have the choice. Of course, that has a huge effect on our faith in all other aspects of life. You've just taken one of those huge areas where you've said, "That's beyond me." And you nailed it in a weekend. What effect is it going to have on other considerations in your life? This is what you are doing with the astrology thing.

GS: It's the way it's taught.

DL: It's totally about the way it's taught. And you can hear it in my voice, too; you have to have the passion for the subject. I've said to people, the humor, the jokes ... we spend most of the weekend laughing because the stuff is so funny. I'll give a perfect example, the treble clef. Everyone knows about the treble clef. You know, that funny squiggly thing that appears on the line? Good, it has nothing to do with music. It's not a musical symbol. It's the letter of the alphabet G done in the writings of the monks of Ireland in the year 800. If you go online and look up the *Book of Kells*, which is an old bible which now resides in Trinity College, Dublin, you will see that when a chapter in that bible, starts with the letter G, as in God spoke to Moses, the letter G is represented like that.

GS: It looks just like the treble clef.

DL: It's a decorated way of writing the letter G. What's it trying to tell you? It's trying to say, it actually circles around a certain line on that sideline system and it is saying that any circle appearing on this five line system that appears on that line, is now a G. That's it. Pure and simple. That's it. How many people would look at that and say, "Musical symbol." What is the effect of telling you that piece of information? Suddenly it makes the symbology of the subject more interesting. If you go back before that time, you will see that when you see music written, they actually did originally use just a plain old simple capital letter G. And then over the years it just became more and more elaborate.

GS: You know, I'm a writer, but until a few years ago I couldn't type. Finally I just got sick of it and I got a little program called Typing Tutor. It was like the old Space Invaders video game, and in no time at all, I was typing. And I thought at the time, there must be a way to teach playing a piano keyboard the same way.

DL: That's exactly how I do it. Exactly how I do it. It really is making certain that every single concept is locked in place before you move on to the next one. No one ever gets left behind because, before we get to the next stage, I make certain everyone can demonstrate clearly to my satisfaction that they understand before we proceed to the next one. I've also found that learning in a group is actually far more effective than trying to learn as an individual. You gain knowledge from other people's questions and thoughts.

GS: Yes and the sheer energy of it.

DL: The seminar comes with a hundred daily lessons, which means you literally have a ten minute a day schedule that you follow, which is specifically detailed for you. Every single second of that ten minutes is detailed and it is designed in such a way that gradually, you are improving a little each day. But you are improving at the rate of one percent or two

percent, so over the course of a hundred days, you've made a dramatic leap. It's not how much practice you put in that makes a great musician. It's how often you do it.

Duncan Lorien's The Understanding of Music Seminar returns to Chicagoland April 4-6. Hyatt Place Hoffman Estates, 2750 Greenspoint Parkway, Hoffman Estates, IL 60169. For information and to register online, go to www.umschicago.net.

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