

# *The Business of Teaching Music*

A GUIDE FOR THE INDEPENDENT  
MUSIC TEACHER

**Second Edition**

**Sandi Siemens**





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# FOREWORD

*I*n a world of Microsofts and Amazons, I find it reassuring to remember that small businesses are the real backbone of the modern economy. Likewise, in a world of great symphony orchestras and The Weeknd, the real backbone of the performing arts is the private, independent teaching studio. One could even argue that the orchestras and the marquee performers might not exist without the skill and dedication of piano, guitar, voice, and other teachers sharing the gift of music with young learners in home studios and storefront music schools everywhere.

Sandi Siemens has built a decades-long successful teaching career from a home studio in the suburbs, and the long and short of what works and what does not work as a private music teacher is compiled in this book. The novice music teacher can choose the time-honored method of building a successful business by learning from their mistakes, or they can save themselves time, money, and frustration by buying this book and taking a shortcut to business and studio practices that bring the best kind of job satisfaction: the confidence that yours is a reliable and predictable source of income in the vocation you love.

Sandi's book will answer your questions. Sandi's book will answer questions you have no idea need an answer because she had to answer those question for herself 40 years ago. Put this book on the shelf near your piano; you will want to keep it handy. As Sandi's friend and colleague for 35 years, I'm grateful that she has taken the time and effort to put all that accumulated wisdom here, where I or any music teacher can get at it.

So . . . Get at it!

—Geordie Roberts





# PREFACE

The purpose in writing the revised, updated, and expanded version of *The Business of Teaching Music* was to provide independent music teachers of all instruments new and improved ways in which to operate their music teaching businesses more efficiently, resulting in greater success.

Topics such as making an impression at auditions, working with professional musicians, the importance of the code of ethics, the issue of copyright, and teaching online music lessons are just a few of the new additions to the book.

For the novice music teacher to be successful, I needed to provide them with the information necessary to set up and run a successful music teaching business and do it without the usual stress that comes with the job. To ensure their success, I devote a chapter to the novice music teacher.

My goal for the experienced music teacher is to provide them with a plan, tools, and guidance to eliminate the frustrations, discouragements, and upset of not having a stable income. By following the strategies found within the covers of this book, teachers will experience success.

Sharing our passion for music with others brings incredible joy. But, sadly, the problems that plague today's music teachers can take their toll and result in wonderful musicians losing their passion for their craft, taking them from teaching music to jobs unrelated to it. My desire is that *The Business of Teaching Music* will reignite the passion in those for whom it has dimmed and present all music teachers with a studio they only dreamed of having.

Life is to be enjoyed, and this book will give the independent music teacher that and much more as it relates to their music teaching business.



# INTRODUCTION

*“Studio Makeover—Proven Strategies—Resounding Results”*

As musicians, we turn to teaching music because of the passion we have for our craft and the pleasure that comes from working with people. Questions that first come to mind are (a) Can I be sure that my private music teaching business will be successful? and (b) Can I do it in a relaxed, confident, and professional manner? To discover the secrets to running a music studio you only dreamed of, read on and you will find the answers to these questions and much more.

After reading *The Business of Teaching Music*, those of you who are just starting will no longer fear stepping into the incredible world of the independent music teacher. No longer will the independent music teacher need to struggle with the frustrations that come from missed lessons, late cancellations, or the upset that occurs when a parent or student attempts to control the teacher’s music teaching business. No longer will you question the *whats* and *hows* when wanting to showcase your students, be it in a recital, master class, or show/concert setting. No longer will you feel unsure when dealing with the professional musician. No longer will you fear tax time. And last, but not least, no longer will you fear the possibility of an unstable income.

My book is based on 50 years of teaching music in a private studio setting. The information found within the chapters of this book will provide you not only with information and advice, but also a step-by-step survival guide needed to run a successful independent music teaching business—a business that will run more smoothly and provide you with a new peace of mind because of the steady, reliable income it provides.

Whether you are a professional musician just starting out (or not) who wants to augment your performance income, or one who is nearing the end of a performance career or music teaching career in an academic setting, teaching music privately provides the opportunity to stay involved in your professional craft.

Running a successful music studio, however, can be daunting, hard work, can require long hours and can, at times, be discouraging. We know that a well-run studio creates a positive learning environment for students—with obvious advantages for both the teacher and student—but the question is, how does one do that?

If we, as music teachers, are proficient at and passionate about our craft and run our studio business in a professional manner, great things will happen. When our music studio is run professionally and produces quality performers, the teacher's reputation will grow in tandem with the financial rewards to produce an excellent income.

There are many books on the market today that deal with the subject of teaching music privately. While they provide sound advice, they do not include topics paramount to the music teaching business. Many are lengthy and can leave the teacher overwhelmed. *The Business of Teaching Music* covers all essential topics required for successful music teaching business in a concise, clear, and easy-to-read manner.

Some books focus on making money. While making money is important, if making a fortune becomes our focus, we will miss the joy and satisfaction that comes from helping students grow to be successful. In addition, our reputation as passionate and caring teachers will be seriously compromised.

There are books on the market that discuss the independent music teacher and their music studios and include ideas on running the studio and methodology for a given instrument, for example, piano, voice, or guitar. While these books offer good advice, they are more general in content. *The Business of Teaching Music* differs because it focuses specifically on the business side of the private music teaching studio, no matter the instrument.

An important topic not addressed in current music teaching books is the issue of showcasing our students. My book provides the music teacher with detailed advice on how to achieve this goal in an expedient, organized, and money-saving manner. If the guidelines provided are followed, both you and your students will shine.

Hiring professional musicians and accompanists is seldom, if ever, addressed in any of the music studio business books on

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the market today. Knowing what to do and how to deal with a professional musician, be it a collaborative artist or pianist for a recital or concert or as a special feature in a concert/show, is key to having a good relationship with the hired musician. If the person you hired is excellent at their job and you treat them well, they will stay with you for a very long time. In addition, your reputation as a great teacher to work with will spread.

*The Business of Teaching Music* provides the independent teacher with tried and proven strategies needed to run their music studio professionally—a music studio that will provide the teacher with not only the peace of mind that comes from having a stable and reliable income but also time and space to focus on all aspects of their craft.

My book was written with music teachers of all instruments in mind. Questions related to all aspects of teaching music privately are answered. Timelines and advice on how and what to do to achieve your goals are provided, along with what to expect and watch out for and how to deal with parents and students in general, and especially those who are difficult. Success is paramount, and this book provides the independent teacher with the necessary tools to achieve success.

Found within the pages of *The Business of Teaching Music* are secrets that will not only guide the novice teacher on how to set up and run a professional private music studio but will also provide the seasoned teacher with the tools to run their studio more efficiently and in a way that will result in less stress while providing a stable and reliable income and peace of mind.

The following is a sneak peek at seven of the basic secrets found within my book.

*Finding students.* It may seem daunting to build a private teaching business from the ground up, but it need not be so. *The Business of Teaching Music* provides the reader with proven strategies for attracting students, thus making the task an easy one.

*Teaching as a business.* Just like any successful business, teaching music privately requires detailed record keeping and a manageable business plan. First and foremost,

however, you must view yourself as a working professional. With the plan found within this book, attention to detail, and the right attitude, the business of teaching music can be exciting and rewarding.

*Staying on track is critical.* As a professional, you need to understand and maintain control of your teaching business. To do this, you will need workable policies to address issues such as the timely payment of fees, loaning out books (and getting them back), and dealing with missed lessons. *The Business of Teaching Music* addresses these issues, and many others, clearly and concisely.

*Achieving financial stability.* Many musicians find it difficult to put the necessary mechanisms in place that allow them to run a studio efficiently and count on earning a living. My principle, with regards to fees, differs dramatically from that of other private music teachers, but is the reason I have been able to create a stable, reliable income for 45 years.

*Solving the typical problems and frustrations.* These everyday challenges can be a significant cause of aggravation and dissatisfaction for the private studio teacher. For example, because the lessons are taught out of a private home, many students and parents view the teacher's business differently than they do a commercial business. My book includes tips for day-to-day operations and solutions to the common problems and frustrations that plague studio teachers.

*Organization of studio performance events.* Studio performances can be time consuming and costly for the private teacher but can have great benefits. This book presents a detailed road map on all aspects of holding a recital, master class, and concert. The reader is guided, step by step, from conception to completion of each event and receives practical cost-saving advice.

*The right tools.* Forms are helpful in keeping records and communicating with parents and students, but they can

be time consuming to design and set up. Examples are provided where applicable.

Unlike schoolteachers who receive additional teacher training at university, musicians graduate from music school with proficiency in their instrument and in-depth knowledge of music. Sadly, very few leave with the knowledge and skills required for teaching in a private studio setting and the understanding of what is required to run a successful private music studio business. *The Business of Teaching Music* was written to help fill that void. It is a survival guide for music teachers of all instruments and especially for the novice music teacher.

It is my hope that, through the implementation of some or all of the strategies included in *The Business of Teaching Music*, your life as a music teacher will become more rewarding, your business will run more smoothly, and you will experience a new peace of mind because you will have a steady, reliable income.

—Sandi Siemens





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To Michael Bubl , my love and deep gratitude.

To my students, a special thank you.

And to you, the reader, thank you. May your music teaching be made more enjoyable because of the strategies found within this book.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Canadian mezzo-soprano and author Sandi Siemens has devoted much of her life to sharing her deep passion for music with students, peers and audiences. Based in Port Moody, British Columbia, Sandi has gained a reputation over the past 50 years as an accomplished and enthusiastic vocal coach and teacher (in both private and college settings), clinician, choral consultant and adjudicator. An active member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing and recognized by Cambridge Who's Who, Sandi operates a successful private studio where she has nurtured hundreds of talented voices over the years. Many of her students now enjoy active professional careers in opera, musical theatre, jazz and pop—most notably recording artist and multi Juno and Grammy winner Michael Bublé.

Over the years, Sandi has performed on stages in North America and internationally and has served as an adjudicator for numerous vocal competitions and talent searches such as Filipino Idol, Japanese Talent Search and the Pacific National Exhibition Talent Search. She has held executive positions with the

Burnaby Lyric Opera Company, Triad Concert Society, Vancouver Cantata Singers, National Association of Teachers of Singing, KPU International Music Festival and was founder and artistic director of the highly successful All Saints Gala and Songs from the Heart fundraisers in British Columbia, Canada.

Her passion for music and desire to teach led Sandi to open her own voice studio and to write *The Business of Teaching Music* and create the Maestro Joli Clef teaching tools. One of her greatest pleasures in life is to help others fulfill their potential and to experience the joy of music.

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*In memory of my dear friend, teacher,  
and mentor Roberta Manion.*





# 1

## THE NOVICE MUSIC TEACHER

Many people, upon graduating from university, are amazing musicians and passionate about their craft. Making a living from performing alone, especially in the beginning, is difficult; musicians often have to turn to teaching music to augment their income. Unfortunately, very few musicians leave university knowing how to get started, what is expected of the private music teacher, or what is required to run a successful private music teaching business. “We weren’t taught about the ins and outs of a private studio business, finances, what is needed, or what is involved in the running of a private music studio” is a commonly heard statement from those wishing to teach after graduating from university.

Teaching can be one of the most rewarding professions a person can have in life, but it can also be one of the most frustrating and stressful. It need not be so. *The Business of Teaching Music* is a guide that provides music teachers in general, and the novice teacher in particular, with the information needed not only to augment or establish a stable income but also to experience the incredible joy and peace of mind that comes from a smoothly run and successful music studio.

If you are a first-time music teacher who is proficient in your instrument or voice, are passionate about your craft and teaching, but are unsure of what is entailed in setting up and running

a music studio, look no further. Keep reading, and you will learn the hows, whats and whys of what is needed to get you started and on the road to a successful music teaching business.

People young and old study music for different reasons. For some, the goal is to become a professional musician or singer while others long to sing in a choir or play in a band; for many, it is for personal enjoyment. Whatever their reason for learning an instrument or voice, there is a need, and we must be there to help them. All this is to say that your studio will consist of all ages, levels, and desires, and the results of some students may surprise you.

**Example 1**

Many years ago, a 19-year-old woman approached me regarding voice lessons. The horrendous experiences of her teenage years left her feeling quite downtrodden and it showed in her voice. I suggested she seek professional counseling to deal with her painful teenage experiences and that, if she did so, I would be happy to take her on as a voice student. She did and, after 18 months, she auditioned for and was accepted into a university voice major program. She is now a successful voice teacher and loving the fact that she can help change the lives of others through teaching music.

**Example 2**

A young and timid woman longed to do more than backstage work for local musical theater productions. Performing on stage was her goal, but she lacked the confidence to do what was needed. She decided to call me. After some time, she found herself singing in the chorus and shortly thereafter was taking on small roles. Then one day, instead of a lesson, this wonderful singer requested her lesson time be spent discussing her dream of becoming a chartered accountant. She asked if I thought she could be as successful at achieving this goal as she was in her singing. My response was twofold. While I posed questions for consideration, I added that she could achieve anything she put

her mind to and that the journey would be amazing. This lady not only became a CGA but also now owns a large and very successful accounting firm.

Sometimes, music lessons are an integral part of a journey that goes in a direction that we don't expect.

### **Example 3**

A reserved 68-year-old man aimed to improve his choral singing by learning how to sing correctly. At age 70, he decided to compete in a festival. The success experienced there gave him the confidence to audition for solo parts in his choir. And again, he found success.

As I see it, the music teacher's work is not only to produce quality musicians but also to help our students achieve their goals through learning music.

Teaching music is much more than just an occupation. It is a vehicle by which we:

- share our passion and knowledge with others;
- inspire others, especially young people, to follow their dreams;
- instill the pursuit of excellence in our craft, which can then result in our students either pursuing a career in music or developing a deep love and appreciation for music in general; and, last but not least,
- fill the void where public-school music programs have been cut back or eliminated.

## **Welcome to the World of the Private Music Teacher**

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I would like to begin by addressing the initial concerns and important questions asked by instrumentalists and singers just starting a private music teaching business. Many of the topics