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One

What I've Learned from Teaching



I recently heard myself referred to as a “long-time cello teacher.” Well, that gave me pause. I didn’t think it was fully descriptive, for one thing. But on reflection I realized the statement is true, so far as it goes. I’ve been teaching for more than fifty years. Beyond those developments in the string world that we’re all aware of—the rapid increase in the number of fine players and their extraordinary technical proficiency, the appearance of masters (and master classes) to accommodate them, the growth of repertoire and other manifestations of string *stretto*—what can I point to that isn’t already obvious? (The fact that I could publish an article in 1958 titled “The Shortage of String Players” is indicative of how much things have changed.)

The String Renaissance is cause for rejoicing, though it has brought new problems—or more accurately, an intensification of problems that were there all along. Competition among aspiring professionals has engendered a frenetic pace that often approaches desperation. There are many beautifully prepared candidates for any position that becomes available in a university or major symphony orchestra. Tendonitis and other ills are widespread, and medical treatment for performing musicians has become a flourishing specialty.

Such pressures are not new. “Getting the breaks” has always been problematic for young artists; there have never been any guarantees. But not until now have so many splendidly equipped players sought active professional careers. Ironically, today’s crowded circumstances militate against those very qualities that I believe are most lacking in contemporary music-making: namely, poise and tranquility . . . time to *sing*.

Setting Goals

Many years ago, an eminent professor of Greek and Latin, having just retired, came to me for lessons. She was seventy, and eager to realize her life-long dream of playing the cello. "I don't plan to be a concert cellist," she informed me at her first lesson. I nodded gravely and replied, "That's not necessary." She went on to say that she intended to give all her time to the instrument. She was a bright lady who made considerable progress despite her late start, and after two years, she occupied a chair in a community orchestra. She played as much of the music as she could, with great enjoyment, and never made a false entrance. Her proudest achievement, for an audience of friends, was a sedate performance of *The Swan*.

But most of my students *did* look forward to full-time vocations as cellists. Many have enjoyed active careers in teaching, chamber ensembles, and orchestral playing, or typically a combination of these. Quite a few are enterprising recitalists as well, and it is one of the happy aspects of college and university teaching that versatility is likely to be encouraged and rewarded. This makes for a varied and stimulating musical life, with maximum freedom for exploration and adventurous programming.

I learned, early on, not to make limiting predictions, never to say, "You can only go so far." Such evaluations are often self-fulfilling. Neither have I made extravagant promises or held out false hopes. Yet I have been surprised many times by students who far exceeded my expectations, just as I have been disappointed on occasion by gifted persons who failed to realize my secret hopes for them. The most productive motivator, in my opinion, is not primarily the lure of specific goals (though definite and attainable ones are important for very young pupils), but the urge for self-expression through music, the desire to play beautifully. With teenagers, the most exciting development occurs when the student "catches fire." Everything accelerates after that, and a glorious period of learning and making music for the joy of it ensues.

Rapport and Resistance

In our concern for motivating pupils, we pay too little attention to the role of the teacher. Private lessons, if effective, involve a special relationship between the participants. I find it no less mysterious today than I did when I first began to teach. *Rapport* is of the essence, and it usually takes time to develop. That is why the first weeks of study with a new teacher, or a new pupil, are crucial. Not much of significance can occur unless the relationship is one of mutual trust and confidence.

Resistance, when it occurs, can be subtle and hard to account for. A talented girl of fifteen, recommended by a former student, came to me for lessons. She was intelligent and carried out her assignments doggedly, but with no show of interest or pleasure. She seldom spoke, and I couldn't get her to look