

Teaching Philosophy

As a post-secondary studio teacher of violists, my ultimate goal is to help them move seamlessly into successful graduate studies, performing careers, and teaching careers. While I keep these goals in mind in my day-to-day teaching, I am confident that students learn best when I help them adhere to three main tenets in their playing: playing their instrument should be a source of joy, physically comfortable, and a medium through which one expresses a singular creative voice . When I guide students to commit to these ideas, they increase their learning capacity in two ways: they gain a manageable and clear focus, and they expand their concept of what will make them great violists and musicians.

The sentiment that “playing should bring them joy” does not assume that every moment a student spends with her instrument is enjoyable; rather, I encourage the student to find the aspect of playing that is most joyful for herself, and seek to imbue every aspect of music-making with that joy. For myself, the act of performing always brings some thrill. When I approach demonstrating in a lesson with the same excitement I would bring to a performance, my point is clearer and more convincing to a student. I also make an active effort in my practicing to achieve some of the exhilaration and spirit of a live performance. Conversely, students who love practicing but fear performing need encouragement to approach a performance with a one-step-at-a-time mentality: the recital is but a single measure in the process of learning a piece. I strive to help students develop practice methods that are self-aware and positive, rather than solely relying on negative personal feedback and rote drilling of passagework.

In my first lessons with a student, I aim to learn more about his background, gain a preliminary sense of trust, and assess his practice habits. Most classical musicians started playing their instruments almost as early as the age of their first memories, and these early years lay the foundation for later attitudes about music and practicing. With varying degrees of personal and parental motivation, practicing becomes a central part of young students' lives: whether he practices hours each day or only opens his case on a lesson day, the *idea* of

practicing is never far from his mind. As someone whose parents were supportive but not to the point of forced practicing, I was an inconsistent practicer at best. I am grateful for the encouragement to explore many possible roads, but I later realized it took many years to develop the basic desire to practice daily. It then took many more years for me to make the connection between intelligent practice habits and successful performances; now, when I practice, the image of an exhilarating recital is a helpful enticement. By guiding students to find and focus on their strengths, and to discover how preparation and practicing can utilize and highlight these strengths, I can help them find their own joy in playing viola.

I believe that excellent viola playing is built upon a foundation of physical comfort and awareness. When a student is mindful of her own body and the way movement affects her sound and technique, the process offers the potential for greater enjoyment and fulfillment. In an effort to offer greater physical comfort than allowed by many violas of the 16th and 17th centuries, the modern viola has been reduced to a size much smaller than can produce the sound its players are often expected to have. Some instrument makers have attempted with varying degrees of success to correct the sonic and physical problems of the instrument with unconventional and ingenious instrument shapes, but I believe a simpler solution is to find physical balance with the body (and instrument) one has. Many violists resort to tight muscles and bearing down on the instrument to make a large tone, but this only results in physical pain and a strained sound. I believe that the biggest sound is a result of using the biggest muscles in one's body. By gaining a sense of one's feet being securely but flexibly planted in the ground, a belief that sound originates mainly from one's core, and a feeling that one's body is aligned from head to toe, I help students create the deepest, warmest sound they are capable of making.

More specifically, we achieve physical comfort through the use of ergonomically intelligent hand positions and exercises to find one's physical center of gravity. We explore various muscle groups as they apply to students' sound production, and I encourage students to become acutely familiar with these applications. Since violists are more often chamber musicians and orchestral players than soloists, I also

emphasize the importance of finding the same physiological balance when they are sitting, and to practice seated when working on relevant pieces. If violists are taught total physical awareness when their instrument is in their hands, and if they are reminded that amount of physical input is not always reflected in parallel sonic output, playing their instrument will become easier and more gratifying.

I seek to help each student use the viola as a medium for seeking and communicating a unique musical voice. Unquestionably, a player needs a solid technical foundation and familiarity with her instrument to convey an interpretation of notes on a page. The physical aspects are, however, means to an end: a player should approach a new piece of repertoire with the primary goal of communicating the combined message of composer and performer.

Since the viola was not widely-used as a solo instrument until the 1800s, our standard repertoire is mainly limited to Romantic and early-20th century works, from Schubert to Stravinsky. We also perform a wide range of transcriptions, from Bach's solo violin and cello works to Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet. Much of the great music for the instrument, though, has yet to be written. By assigning students large-scale contemporary works—Ligeti's solo sonata, concertos by Schnittke and Penderecki, and Berio's *Sequenza*— alongside a Brahms sonata and Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante*, I encourage them to see musical eras on a spectrum rather than as absolutes. I help them find ways to connect pieces from different eras and countries, and I also advise them to research the composers, non-musical historical context, and composers' other works from the same period. These methods serve to emphasize the importance of extramusical interpretation, and ultimately students express this to audiences. Their playing gains greater dimension when their minds are also exercised.