Cello

Eight Master Classes with Janos Starker

by David Carter

The distinguished cellist Janos Starker recently celebrated his 75th birthday. As you read this, a public celebration will have taken place on September 12, with master classes given by Mstislav Rostropovich, Maria Kliegel and Gary Hoffman, and a concert featuring Mr. Starker and William Preucil performing the Brahms *Double Concerto* under the baton of Rostropovich.

Mr. Starker has been giving a series of classes at Indiana University-Bloomington for the last several years, as he has over the years at Banff, Orford and other locations around the world. The classes typically draw cellists from a wide range of age and experience. This summer's class was no exception; cellists from as far away as Taiwan and as near as Indianapolis, from grade school to the golden years and from college professors to professional orchestra members were in attendance. There were 5 cellists from Minnesota: myself and Jonathan Kuipers (from Rochester) as performers; and Professor Eugenia Slezak from Concordia College-Moorhead, Professor Yali You from Hamline University and Joseph Kuipers as auditors. The pieces ranged from solo Bach to the Milhaud *Concerto #2* and the Kodaly *Solo Sonata*.

The classes were an opportunity to hear the principles that Mr. Starker has been espousing for the last 40+ years. Since it was the first time some cellists had played for him, he was able to articulate some ideas completely, in contrast to a single class with longtime students. A small article such as this one cannot do justice to these topics; I hope to expand on these in future articles. An overview should suffice for now. These principles inevitably involve using the body in an efficient and balanced manner. This begins with basic balance and weight distribution (both front-to-back and side-to-side), chair selection, positioning the cello and placement of feet.

Considerable time was spent on the bow-arm: the legato rule (whatever the bow stroke, the part of the arm used is the same part used in the legato stroke); feeling a "curve" to the sound; using weight in the lower half and leverage in the upper half; allowing the back muscles to produce the sound; not squeezing the bow with the thumb; and (gasp) spiccato.

Left hand issues included: the release of tension from non-playing fingers; the connection each playing finger feels with the left thumb (changing this connection as the playing finger changes reminds me of changing transmission gears—imagine the drain of power if your car ran in 4th and 5th gear simultaneously! In the same way you change the connection with the thumb–1 and thumb–2, etc.); vibrato that is arm-based and consistent from finger to finger (as opposed to the turning the doorknob style) and how the thumb aids that vibrato; how left hand position can aid shifting; exercises for coordination and velocity in the left hand.

Quite apart from the technical discussion of cello playing, it is quite an experience to play for Starker. His reputation precedes him, of course. He likes to tell the following story on himself: three cellists approach the pearly gates of Heaven, and are asked in turn by St. Peter, "With whom did you study?" The first cellist answers, "Leonard Rose," and is promptly sent down to Hell. The second answers, "Rostropovich," with the same result. The third cellist replies, "Janos Starker," to which St. Peter says, "Come on in, you've already been through Hell!" Over the years, Starker has mellowed significantly, and he peppers his teaching with humor. Honesty is still the watchword, which can be painful at times, but Mr. Starker's concern for the student and for the music shines through. His teaching is also punctuated by demonstrations of an astonishingly wide repertory (by memory), and by a musicality both civil and remarkably nostalgic. Starker approaches each student at their own level, tailors the "basic principles" to that level, and relates the principles to the music played. To one (quite advanced) student, he said, "Your left hand functions at a high level, but it is like a computer. What comes out are not musical sounds." To a young student at the Juilliard pre-college division, "You are obviously very talented, and now you are able to play as you do [physically tight] because of that talent. However as the years pass this will become more difficult; you must learn to use your body efficiently." To a college student, "You seem to be playing as if each coming phrase is an opportunity for disaster. Live a little!" And to another rather shy cellist, "Do you ever want to go out in the forest and scream, to feel that intensity of emotion?" His powers of concentration and communication are truly amazing. Through cajoling, prodding, joking and analyzing, Mr. Starker made his points, helped his students, and furthered the cause of cello playing—"carried the flag," as he is fond of saying.

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Originally published in MNSOTA's ***String Notes*** — Fall 1999 (Vol. 2, No. 1)