



Viola

Indiana University Teachers Workshop

by Annette Caruthers

I spent two weeks this summer at Indiana University for their “Retreat for Professional Violinists and Violists”, which is actually called by the I.U. faculty, “The Teachers Workshop.” It was an amazing mixture of private lessons, group lessons (mini master classes, actually), master classes, daily pedagogy sessions, readings of new music, observations of lessons given by I.U. faculty, and concerts and recitals. Almost every aspect of music-making got addressed there, and everyone left feeling much more positive and more energized.

I came away with many pages of notes, new ways of practicing, new ideas for my students and how to help them with difficulties, a new enthusiasm for teaching *and* playing, repertoire I would love to perform and teach, and a sense of how limited we can become if we do not continue to learn and grow. I was reminded again of what the standards in the musical world are, the importance of listening to great playing, and how quickly students can learn with the right mix of good teaching, parental support, and good concentration during practice.

The best teachers continue to learn from anyone and everyone. I saw masterful teachers like Mimi Zweig ask others about their experiences, or how they teach something, with a genuine curiosity and intention of learning from what they heard or saw. This indicates the respect they have for everyone they come into contact with. I.U. has an atmosphere of caring, respect, and cohesiveness among the faculty, students, and parents that I have rarely seen anywhere else, but which we all need in order to do our best.

The best teachers also have a sense of humor, and do what Richard Aaron calls “a sales job” with their students—showing them how and why to do anything they ask them to do, in a very encouraging way, and showing them the results they will get. Cyrus Forough tells students to practice, meaning “go spend creative, artistic, scientific time with your instrument.” When you watch him teach you

see him asking many questions, leading students to think things through, or to analyze what they have just played. This is looking for long-term learning, not just momentary results. If students learn to think things through accurately, they can apply it in the future in new situations.

All of the teachers were very careful in showing students how to practice, and doing it with them, making sure they could do it again on their own. Points were made with understanding, often humor, but no one tolerated laziness on the student’s part. I saw teachers end lessons with comments like, “Try to figure this out on your own,” said in a positive encouraging tone of voice, and a few days later saw the same student return with great improvement, which was immediately complimented. It was clear the teacher knew that the student had learned enough to do it on his own, and would gain confidence and understanding from the work. This is great teaching!

So, how can I, or anyone, put any of this to use? First, I see the need to maintain a high level in my playing, and to keep performing. It would be easy to become isolated in my studio and not be aware of what professional standards are, and how much work it takes to maintain the highest level of playing—but that high level is where the personal rewards are, that keep me wanting to share the music with my students! To maintain my enthusiasm, so the students feel it from me, I absolutely must practice a good 2 hours per day, and keep performing. The enthusiasm must be part of my life!

I will attempt to integrate elements of what I saw in Indiana into my teaching. Working on bowing can be part of tonalization, or warm-ups, at the beginning of every lesson. It is easy to be distracted by the need to prepare for an audition, or some other goal, and not take the time for this. But in the end, the tone quality of everything the student plays will suffer. We all need to take the time, check the child’s bow hold, especially at the frog, see that bowings like *martele* are done

with the weight from the arm released so the sound rings, try several different bowings on even one scale—and *then* get into playing the etudes and pieces we are working on. The difference this makes was very obvious in my observations.

Everyone gets a bit tired of the same pieces and books we have always used—even if they are wonderful. For new music, violists could look at Mary Cohen’s *Technique Takes Off* and Edward Huws Jones’ *Got those Position Blues?* (both from Faber Music), *New Tunes for Strings* by Stanley Fletcher (Boosey and Hawkes), and *Six very easy Pieces in the First Position Op. 22* by Edward Elgar (Bosworth). I have been really enjoying Beethoven’s *Romance Op. 50*, transcribed by Vieland, which everyone agreed is a first-class transcription. These are just a few that can be worked in here and there, to make things a bit more interesting for us and our students.

I am practicing more with my students than I did before I went to this workshop. I do think it makes the student more confident that they know what to do when the teacher is not there to help, and establishes any corrections made during the lesson as the easily-recalled correct way to play something. This is often done at I.U. in a very patient, careful way; working through every phrase if needed.

I could probably write for weeks here about what I learned! I would like to do at least one article on ideas for teaching various aspects of technique. I would love to hear from any of you who have something you’d like to share. E-mail me at: acaruthers@state.net.

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