



Cello

Eight Master Classes with Janos Starker, Part 3

The Musical Experience

by David Carter

Playing in master classes is generally a nerve-wracking proposition; you are before a very knowledgeable public audience, an audience filled with teachers and other performers of your instrument. You imagine everyone scrutinizing your every move, every phrase, not to mention the “master” who may be only a few yards away. Somehow, if this master is Janos Starker, that anxiety mounts. Maybe it is his intense personality, his reputation for being ruthless, or his well-known ability to play (from memory) virtually any part of the standard repertory.

With these feelings as a backdrop, I went back to Indiana University last summer to play for Mr. Starker. Luckily I had played in many master classes over the years, for Starker and others, so I knew what to expect; still I had not actually played for Mr. Starker for 15 years, so I was apprehensive. Also I was of course gainfully employed, and didn’t want to appear as if I had given up that habit of practicing now that I had a job! Luckily I was the first performer on the first day; Starker was kind, and I could sit back and watch the rest of the classes until it was my next opportunity to play.

Janos Starker is definitely intense; it has shown for almost 70 years in his music-making. With all the dazzling technique acknowledged, and his insight into student’s technical difficulties appreciated, it was very rewarding to hear him bring out the strengths of each performer. In the shy student this inevitably led to expressing their hidden emotions. To one woman he said, “Don’t you want to go out into the woods and scream?” To another shy student he said, “You seem to be playing each phrase as if it were an opportunity for disaster. Live a little!”

I also remember some quotes from my student days; to me and many others, “Don’t be so nice!” To a young cellist, playing the Lalo *Concerto*, “The problem is that you are too nice. Pretend that you are a son-of-a-gun.” (I have changed the adjective to protect the innocent! That young cellist is now in the Toronto Symphony...)

Besides the general “opening-up” of performer’s styles, Mr. Starker worked with aspects of sound. There is the full sound, characterized by peanut butter bowing (as if you are spreading peanut butter on the string with your bow). He said, “The trouble is that though I like the sound, I don’t like the peanut butter!” With the full sound, however, the notes still have shape, which he describes as “feeling the curve in the sound.” There is also the “negative sound,” described by Starker as “if you were humming.” It is used in passages such as the Boccherini-Grutzmacher *Concerto* slow movement cadenza, or frequently with turns or similar ornamental passages. Mr. Starker is great at showing how articulation creates different styles, such as the nonchalance of the Milhaud *Concerto*, the serene quality of the Ravel *Duo*, or the electric excitement of Paganini’s *Moses Variations*. Attention to articulation is the difference, in Starker’s eyes, between an aggressive sound and a powerful sound.

Not surprisingly, Starker speaks often about the connection between technical motions and their musical effects. For example, a delayed shift (after a bow change) has a more direct and forceful feeling than an anticipated shift (before the bow change). Too much shifting around, with no attempt to hide the shift-

ing sound, might lead to the admonition “Don’t play trombone!” Abrupt technical motions result in nervous musical sounds. By contrast, using the body efficiently yields a beautiful and varied sound.

Rhythm is mentioned as a musical factor in terms of how the pulse is felt. Feeling an eight-note pulse, for example, yields a weighty feeling to the music, while feeling half notes can create freedom. These different feelings can be used to organize rubato, for as Starker says, “Rubato is not anarchy.” One should feel the smaller beats while broadening, and the larger ones while accelerating, for example. In virtuoso pieces, fast notes generally sound more fluent when grouped together in as large numbers as possible (you should feel the large beats). Starker again says, “Don’t play fast, just play lots of notes,” which sounds strikingly similar to what basketball coach Chuck Daly says: “Be quick but don’t hurry.” Another classic musical concept of Starker’s is the head goes up for upbeats, down for downbeats.

Of course, one can’t absorb the wisdom of almost 70 years in eight master classes, and there is far more to Janos Starker’s teaching than can ever be conveyed in any book or article. These classes were, however, a great chance to see his warmth, humor and insight, and to be reminded why it is we play the cello — for musical expression.

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