



## CELLO

### Hearing is Believing Reflections of a Blind String Teacher

by David Carter

A recent article in the ASTA journal dealt with teaching blind students. I was particularly interested in the article and a statement by the author that teaching is primarily a visual activity. I can imagine many situations in the life of a teacher when teaching, or specifically diagnosing problems, is not a visual activity at all. Consider listening to audition tapes, judging behind a screen at competitions, etc. Practicing with the lights out is also a great exercise. In these situations we all use our ears to diagnose problems. My friend David Folland tells me that there is a phrase among violin makers, "You hear what you see." In this case if you see an antiqued instrument you will hear an older sound. The eyes supply a sound that may not be totally accurate.

The relationship between the visual and aural in string playing is of particular interest to me because I am a blind person who teaches string players. I have an eye disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa, a degenerative retinal disease in which vision is lost slowly, at first peripherally, and then finally in the central area. Most people with my type of RP retain some useful central vision into their 60's. At this stage of my life I have a fair amount of useful central vision. With the knowledge that this is a progressive disease, I have used the past spring term sabbatical from St. Olaf to enter a training program for blind people. I have had the good fortune to receive training at BLIND, Incorporated (the name is short for Blindness Learning in New Dimensions) in Minneapolis.

Before I received this training I was at a loss when I considered my future. I wondered how would I continue to teach effectively as I lost more and more sight? I have good memory skills, and at the time I had learned some Braille (both for reading, writing and the Braille notation for music), and though I was by no means fluent I was fairly confident I could become so with perseverance. The nagging question remained: how would I actually diagnose and help students solve their string-playing problems?

The answer began to emerge during my training. BLIND, Inc., offers a comprehensive program with training in Braille, travel, computer skills, home management skills, life skills and industrial arts. The industrial arts curriculum is designed to familiarize students with a variety of hand and power tools, and to complete several woodworking projects according to a student's interests. For example, I made an endpin for a cello of mine that had the old-fashioned removable type, and an adjustable stool for cello playing. Other student projects I saw were beds, coffee tables, entertainment centers, etc. The great part of this training is that we wear sleepshades (a.k.a. blindfolds) during all classes. The rationale behind this is that if you have some residual vision (which many blind people do), you will be tempted to use that as your primary means of navigating your way through life. By taking the vision away, one is forced to develop the other senses to a higher level. Those new skills are then added to whatever residual vision is there. The goal is for a person to move seamlessly from a sighted technique to an "alternative technique" to solve a problem, using whatever is most efficient.

So here I was in industrial arts, working on the table saw. The teacher, Dick Davis, knew my profession, and took the same safety precautions he takes with all students. For example, you align all the materials with the power off, you put at least a hand's width between your hand and the saw blade, you secure the wood using clamps and other techniques, and you measure carefully. Still, I was very apprehensive the first time I actually cut wood on the table saw. What Dick did was calmly put his hand on top of mine, and together we guided the wood safely through the saw. With that teaching technique I had the first ideas about how cello teaching would work, and I discussed them later with Dick. He helped me by relating how blind shop teachers (of which there are many) convey ideas, and gave me some other suggestions about teaching in general.

This summer, after completing my work

at BLIND, Inc. (the center has regular "graduation" ceremonies), I did a pilot project to try out sleepshade teaching. I recruited some students, described my idea, and if they were interested gave them lessons (free of charge) while wearing the sleepshades. Everyone I contacted was interested, and I even taught one person whom I had not taught before. Here is what I discovered:

#### **Details of tone are very apparent.**

Soundpoint, bow speed and pressure can be accurately assessed, as can bow direction in some cases. It is also easy to tell if a bowing is not working, and to suggest alternatives.

#### **Details of articulation stand out.**

Whether one is on or off the string is usually assessed aurally, and using the sleepshades also pointed out even finer details such as when bow weight is released in a passage (such as before a shift), and when to reapply that weight.

#### **Certain left hand functions can be easily evaluated.**

Shifting problems stand out, as well as vibrato concerns and of course poor intonation. It is also possible to detect excessive left-hand action (fingers raised too high) by several means: you can hear the fingers pinging down on the fingerboard, and this type of problem usually results in coordination issues between right and left hands.

#### **Some intangibles were also noticed.**

For example, I believe physical motion that is contrary to the musical line can be detected. I have a relaxation exercise in which students practice shifting body weight either with the bow's motion (to the right for a down bow) or in opposition. I was able to tell in which direction a student was moving because the two produce different sounds.

This is only the first stage in my work on this topic. I expect to continue to teach under sleepshades periodically to work out more "alternative techniques" that help my

teaching. In the meantime I will use both visual and aural cues while teaching (as we all do to some extent), knowing now that the aural cues I experienced under sleepshades are very accurate and helpful. In

my second article on this topic I'll describe some ways I teach differently under sleepshades.

*David Carter is Associate Professor of Music*

*at St. Olaf College in Northfield. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Indiana University, and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. †*