Cello

Hearing is Believing, Part 2

Reflections by a Blind String Teacher

by David Carter

In my first article on this subject, I described the "adjustment-to-blindness" training I received while on sabbatical last spring. I also described a research project I conducted last summer to find out what it would be like to teach lessons while wearing sleepshades. The result of that project was a series of discoveries and some new techniques that I can actually use now. Here is how my teaching differs while under sleepshades:

I am definitely more of a "hands-on" teacher. The need to manipulate arms and hands to demonstrate concepts, and to investigate how tense a student is, falls on the sense of touch with the ears to guide it. When you loosen up a student's playing and they can hear the difference in sound it certainly is a great feeling. I have also discovered that even if a student looks relaxed they may not be; that it takes a certain amount of concentration to separate the visual from the true feedback that the sound provides.

I need to be very (overly?) prepared in terms of the details of the music. Since Braille music is generally learned and memorized before it is performed on the instrument, sight reading is not an option. Luckily I have a good memory and frequently perform without music. While I teach much of the standard repertory from memory, I will need to increase the size of that repertory.

Information is gathered in different ways. Fingerings, for example, are usually identifiable due to the shifts, which are generally audible. However, I was not able to tell exactly which fingers are being used. So I would just ask. Solving bowing problems is also possible, both on a large scale (a passage sounds awkward) and a small scale (a note's articulation is not musically effective). Of course, a good string player should be able to execute a down or up bow with the same sound, but often they do sound different. If I was not sure about bow direction, I would ask the student.

I found myself being more objective. This is usually a good thing, as it allowed me to focus more closely on the cellistic aspects of teaching. For example, I would not notice if a student looked haggard after staying up all night to finish a paper. (I might hear it in their voice, though.) I think it encouraged me to have higher expectations. On the other hand, as we know teaching is often more than the mere diagnosis of instrumental problems. Considering the whole person is a vital part of teaching them how to play! But I know that my basic nature is such that I would be a little more on the lenient side, and more gentle with those students who are not adequately prepared for a given lesson. The objectivity I discovered in the sleepshade teaching would help each student reach their full potential.

One mantra that I learned at BLIND, Inc., was that a blind person should navigate through life with decorum and respect for others around them. Unwanted physical contact is not excusable, and certain techniques are used to ensure that does not take place. For example, while waiting in line you can slide your cane along the floor in front of you until it touches the shoe sole of the person in front of you. One also develops a sixth sense to judge proximity. Since I knew sleepshade teaching would involve moving a student's arms and shoulders, I needed a plan to be able to find those body parts easily. Here is what worked: I would ask the student to hold out their right hand and snap their fingers. (I would have already pinpointed their location relative to where I was sitting.) Then I would get up and, guided by the sound, take their hand. Use of the cane would help avoid the cello, and from the right hand I could easily move to the desired location.

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