

Clinic: Opinions of a String Teacher

presented by Peter Howard

reported by Annette Caruthers

“Teaching is its own reward ... and a privilege.” “We are helping the student grow and change, and must teach the whole child ... even go to their events that are non-musical.” Peter Howard is more than happy to change his teaching schedule to accommodate sports, ballet or other activities because he believes students must not be forced to choose between music and other activities.

Real practice — goal-directed effort to learn — is to be done at home. Students should not be playing a concert at home. “Ask yourself, is the lesson the only real practice this student engages in? Does the student understand what to do and how to do it?”

Students have dreams ... do we?

Many students come to Peter for the first lesson attempting to perform a piece that he believes is beyond their capabilities. Pieces must be chosen to be at a level at which the student can do a beautiful job ... then, from that moment on, they must always play that beautifully. He begins by working on a beautiful tone. What is the student's favorite note? They almost always have one! Start with that note, and make it beautiful. Then work on string crossings — individual strings at first, then two at a time. String crossings are based on double stops — try blurring the sound of the string crossing with a double stop. We need continuous arm motion for crossings — not terraced. Cross all open strings on one slur, then vary the speed of the bow stroke. Peter does lots of bow work with open strings, changing the pattern of open string notes, working for the most beautiful sound possible, and trying to find all the “barbs” on the bow. Then bow work with scales.

To work on scales, Peter Howard teaches his students one fingering that can be used for all scales. Using the tempo of 88 for a quarter note, he recommends playing two half-notes per bow, repeating each note so that the shifts and string crossings all come on slurs — you can hear better what is happening this way. The bow is to be at a right angle to the string on scales.

He teaches his students to be analytical when practicing. Shifts involve decisions: shift on the same finger? New finger? Old finger? If the shift involves a string crossing, will the shifting motion be on the old string or the new? On which bow stroke? Old or

new? Once decisions are made, they can be practiced effectively.

Peter also teaches his students five steps for practicing: 1) Identify problem, 2) Isolate problem, 3) Analyze it, 4) Find an effective way to practice, and 5) Practice! Practicing is to be planned for the next day just before bed each night. When and what to do must be planned out, as this leads to more effective use of time. Also, if the student becomes frustrated during practice, he tells them to work on something only so long; then work on something else. The available time should not be used up in a state of frustration when it could be used to accomplish something else that also needs



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to be done.

More bowing exercises: Collé at the tip makes the third finger work. Collé is to be just a bite, release, and is done by the fingers and hand. Down bow at the frog, up bow at the tip on a scale; the release makes the sound; the bow bends the string a bit, then releases it. Try this with 8 down bow notes all on one bow, then 8 ups ... 16 down bow notes on one bow, 16 up. The bow hair is ideally an extension of the fingers. Try to play the “world's shortest note.” Work on collé also on open string patterns as down, up, up, up; down, down, down, up; or down, up, down, up.

Piqué — “bowed pizzicato” — is done by the forearm. Concerto spiccato fills the room. Imagine playing in a concert hall where a large sound is needed. Try many notes on a down bow, bouncing; then one note on up bow. Reverse the pattern; the possibilities are unlimited. Peter brought a student with him who demonstrated many

of his ideas and techniques, and who was able to tell him what his systems were. He clearly does practice what he preaches.

For shifting work, students of Peter Howard spend 5–6 years working from Sevcik, Op. 8, *Changing the Positions*. These are practiced with a big beautiful sound, played expressively, as a singer would perform them. The thumb is the measuring device for upper positions; the player learns the feel of the distance from the thumb to the note wanted.

The left hand must release after each finger hits down; fingertips stay alive, with a slight relaxation of the arm. Fingers stay flexible, even in very high positions.

As time ran out for his portion of the presentation, Peter gave us many very brief “bits” of helpful information:

The ear must be trained first; students must hear what they are trying to do. He tells them, “Use your ears, not mine.”

“You can be your own teacher — use the mirror. And when you're doing that, also watch the expression on your face.”

Dynamics — “go up to the wall forte ... then subito piano.”

We work with horizontal and vertical pitch. Horizontal is a melody moving stepwise; vertical is the harmony.

Bow strokes are arm or hand, drawn or thrown.

Standards — “There is no in-between. Something is either good or not.”

Students should take their instruments with them when visiting colleges and play for someone. He told a story of a student who did this and impressed an orchestra director enough that she was admitted to a school that she might not have entered purely on the basis of academics.

Peter also had a bag of “tricks” with him...useful items for working with students:

A tube for catching the end of the bow and helping it to move on a straighter path.

For vibrato, a film canister with rice in it — you can hear the movement and whether or not it is even.

A spring or slinky to show the vibrato's self-perpetuating motion.

Double-sided tape to apply to the frog so a student can feel the third finger staying on the bow. He also applies it to the stick of

the bow at the frog and has a student put their fingers on the bow while he moves it a bit to show them the slight tug of the string on the bow, and what the bow change and finger reaction need to feel like. Students need to feel these things in order to do them well.

This was a fabulous presentation; very entertaining, informative, and inspirational! I wish we had had more time. I know his students enjoy their work with him and really benefit at the same time. Thank you so much, Peter Howard.

Annette Caruthers teaches viola and violin at her private studio in Minneapolis and St. Louis Park. She is a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and currently serves as principal violist with many organizations including the Minnesota Opera Orchestra and the Plymouth Music Series. ♪