



VIOLIN

Beyond Preparatory Study — Finding the Right Teacher

by Sally O'Reilly

Many of us who teach at the preparatory level invest enormous time and energy in our students, developing their playing ability in a way that gives them the option to be professional musicians. Of course, most of them will go off to college to pursue other careers and will enjoy their instrumental music-making as an avocation. But for the small number of students who can't imagine *not* being musicians (the *only* possible justification for choosing this rigorous profession!), finding the right teacher is the most crucial step we, as their teachers, need to help them take.

As professional musicians, we know that music students need to go to teachers, not to schools. However, our students don't necessarily know this. Even the most prestigious conservatories, Juilliard and Curtis, have and always have had lesser lights on their faculties. Taking potluck with teachers is akin to Russian roulette, so it is essential that we guide our students to the best teachers we can in the schools being considered.

When I applied to Curtis back in the Stone Age, I wanted to study only with Ivan Galamian. My mother is a savvy musician who arranged a meeting for me with Mr. Galamian in New York City. I played for him and was essentially accepted by him before going to Philadelphia to play for the faculty. It was a wise move because I learned later that in the audition Efreim Zimbalist, who was the director of Curtis and *very* deaf, tried to take me into his class. Mr. Galamian was able to say, "I've already accepted her." That was the end of a power play by

someone used to having first choice.

Help your student identify teachers he might want to study with first, taking into consideration the student's maturity, discipline, and personality. These qualities must be matched with a teacher's patience, structure, enthusiasm, and requirements. Try to learn as much as you can about each teacher's success in areas including graduation rate, students' acceptance in strong graduate programs, and where their students ultimately work.

There are students who will be happy in conservatory settings and students who thrive on the intellectual stimulation a university can provide. I was one of the latter. While I enjoyed the comradeship of first-rate players at Curtis, I desperately missed a serious academic outlet. When I went to Indiana University as a graduate student, I felt like a starving woman at a banquet. If you know your student needs the inspiration of outside sources — literature, art, languages, et al — it's a good idea to suggest schools that will meet those needs.

We have to encourage our students to begin the search process at least a year before applications are due. I urge my students to choose summer study programs that will allow them to work with teachers they're interested in. If the relationship "clicks," this early contact can be a great help during the first weeks of the freshman year, easing the student from the comforts of home to the rigors of campus life.

The extra effort a student makes in establishing the validity of his work ethic

and cooperative attitude in the eyes of a teacher can make the crucial difference in acceptance in a class or rejection. Remember that most good teachers are over-subscribed, so making an early and appealing bid for a spot in their classes is very important. I frequently pave the way for my student with phone calls to teachers to express our interest and my support for the student. In this way, the student doesn't just show up "cold" for the audition and hope for the best.

A student needs to know the audition requirements of each school at least a year in advance so that he can learn and perform the repertoire many months before playing for a faculty jury. Undergraduate auditions typically last only ten minutes, so the student has to make a strong impression immediately. It is important not to saddle a student with repertoire that is beyond the possibility of mastery. A movement of a Mozart concerto played with a beautiful sound, bull's-eye intonation, and elegant style will always trump a struggling Tchaikovsky Concerto that leaves the jury wondering about the student's real level of ability.

The greatest joy a preparatory teacher can have is to hear a student playing even better when he comes home from college. Shepherding our students into the right situations can guarantee that joy for years to come.

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