



VIOLIN

Letting Go — How and When

by Sally O'Reilly

At the age of sixteen, after eight years of study with the violin professor at SMU, I received a scholarship to Aspen to study with Lynn Harrell's mother, Marjorie Fulton Harrell. Her unflagging insistence on flawless intonation, pure tone, and thoughtfully structured phrasing changed my playing radically in nine weeks and I knew that I needed to continue studying with her. The decision was fraught with emotion and anxiety. My mother was one of the most prominent musicians in Texas and I had a high profile in Dallas' music scene. A change of teachers wouldn't go unnoticed. But my former teacher's graciousness went a long way in saving the situation. He told my mother that if ever I wanted to come back to him, I was welcome. Over time that allowed me to tell him about my lessons with Ivan Galamian when I went to Curtis and to feel comfortable around him in social and musical situations.

After all, I owed him a lot. He gave me confidence and a big sound. His stories of his lessons with Kochanski and Sevcik helped me feel connected with the international string world. And, as a performer who approached every audience with a certain "noblesse oblige," he was the very model of elegant stage presence.

Mrs. Harrell kept me only three years and then pushed me out of the nest insisting that I had been a "mountain in a desert" too long. At Curtis, I missed an academically challenging environment, so after two years I left, quickly completed an academic degree, and went to Indiana University to study with Josef Gingold. Mr.

Galamian never resented my decision and would send me warm messages during my years in Bloomington. How fortunate I was to be able to maintain contact with my former teachers!

I have tried to use this experience, letting it guide my behavior toward my own students. Over many decades as a teacher, I have had hundreds of students come and go from my studio. I continue to have contact with most of them, receiving reports of new jobs, marriages, births, and requests for professional advice and letters of recommendation. These former students are a treasured part of my extended family and I believe that it is my obligation to continue to support them in any way that I can.

The examples that were set for me — magnanimity when a student goes to another studio, long-term vision that recognizes a talented student's needs, and expressions of continued concern and good feeling — always inform my responses to my students. It is a way of giving back what was so generously given to me.

When I feel that a student needs a different perspective, I consider personalities of teachers who have the appropriate knowledge for that student and try to match the energy levels of student and teacher. Sometimes a student needs more or less formality. Frankly, there are a few students who need to have the experience of quaking in their boots. And, occasionally, a student may need much more personal attention than I am able to give. In every case, I call the teacher to discuss availability of space and interest in working with the student. Then

I refer the student to the teacher so that the transfer can be made with acquiescence of all parties.

What we all need to recognize is that every teacher is not right for every student, and the reverse is also true. Also, there are times in students' lives when progress may depend on a change of teacher. We, as teachers, would like to anticipate these moments so that pain and awkwardness could be avoided on all sides. When we aren't able to read signals accurately and we're confronted with the reality that a student wants to go to another teacher, it is in the best interest of everyone to wish the student well and let go gracefully. Janos Starker always tells his students, "Once you're in the class, you're in the class." He is magnanimous in allowing his students to seek out other approaches and ideas, and he welcomes them back when they need his counsel.

In the long-run, releasing the student with genuine good wishes, while in the moment it may be painful, will always repay us with the good will of the student and his family. We can take pride in the student's accomplishments for the duration of his musical life because we know that we've played an essential and positive part in that life. And, after all, that is what we, as teachers, are charged to do.

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