



VIOLA

Roberto Diaz Master Class

by Annette Caruthers

I attended the master class presented by the Minnesota Viola Society and the Artaria Quartet at Hamline University, featuring Roberto Diaz, on January 13, 2006. Roberto Diaz is currently the Principal Violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the President/Director Designate of the Curtis Institute of Music. He has extensive orchestral, solo, and chamber music experience, is a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra, and was a featured performer at the International Viola Congress held in the Twin Cities in 2004.

Five students played during the two-hour class, which did not give Roberto much time to really dig deeply with each one, but he did draw noticeable change and improvement from each player. His comments were centered on bowing, tone color, and giving structure to each piece.

One student was asked, "Other than intonation and vibrato, what does the left hand have to do?" Nothing. We need to work to put our focus on bowing, because that is where the sound, rhythm (often), and expression come from. Roberto stressed effortless bowing that catches the string and makes it vibrate; not an airy flautando stroke. The natural weight of the bow arm is enough to cause the needed resistance between bow and string, and he demonstrated this many times. No extra motion should be used, as that will interfere with the simplicity of the bowing and musicality. For a really vibrant, deep sound, he stressed feeling for the resistance mentioned above, and placing the bow on the side of the string. For a down bow, place the bow on the left side of the string and pull it; for up bow, place the bow to the right side of the

string and push. (You may want to get your instrument out and look at the bridge for this to make sense.)

Roberto Diaz plays with a very flat bow hand – flat from the second knuckle back to the arm- and demonstrated for students and audience alike how he gets such a big, smooth tone from his instrument. He also emphasized that there is a limit to the volume of sound you can get from a viola, and that we need to work more with making certain passages and notes sound more important rather than louder. Giving a clean start to a note and making it just slightly longer can do more to bring out the structure of a phrase than sheer volume.

One very interesting point was made when he asked the audience how many of us had ever heard the Penderecki Concerto played. A few hands went up. Diaz pointed out that this was an audience of violists and/or people who care about viola music or violists, yet most of us had not heard the piece. His point was: "Most of the time when we perform, we're giving the audience their world premiere of the piece!" Therefore, we have to work to make the structure of the music easy for them to follow. "Show them how you get to each phrase, where you're going. Highlight what ties the work together, and work for a clean sound on all notes, even in chords, so we can follow the movement of each line."

Roberto also pointed out that a soloist's rhythm needs to be predictable for the con-

ductor to be able to keep the orchestra with the performer. Again, it is the violist's job to show where they're going, and how they're getting there. "If we follow the composer's idea logically and simply, it's easier to play and makes more sense for the audience."

For very fast passage work, Roberto stressed the importance of not letting the bow rush the left hand. Keeping the bow on the string during changes of direction helps with this, and keeping a deeper, more vibrant sound helps; the resonance of the instrument helps hide the bow change and allows the left hand

more time to react. The deeper tone also allows for more contrast when spiccato or ricochet arrives.

During spiccato, Roberto stressed the need to think about the time the bow is *on* the string, practicing in slow motion: the bow lands, then is pulled, then taken off, and it must land the same for an up bow as for a down bow. Listen to the tone on the tiny pull for the best spiccato ever.

This class was over before anyone wanted it to end. I hope Roberto Diaz will be in town again soon!

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 violist with many organizations including the Minnesota Opera Orchestra and VocalEssence. ‡

