



CELLO

From Spoon-Feeding to Artistry: The First Steps of Interpretation, Part 2

by David Carter

This subject interests me because from time to time I encounter cello students at St. Olaf who have no skills to interpret the music they are playing. In some cases they play very well, and audition well because they have been carefully coached by their teachers, but they have not yet learned the techniques of interpretation. I felt the need to develop a somewhat systematic way to teach these techniques.

In the first article (Spring 2006), I discussed the nuts and bolts of how details in the music can inform an interpretation. For example, considering the harmony, articulation and melodic contours of a piece help determine certain aspects of interpretation. These aspects are, to a large extent, fairly straightforward (when a phrase goes up, for example, it almost always makes a crescendo). Now I would like to explore aspects that are highly subjective, and difficult to quantify: aspects of musical character and how we can develop it as string players.

As I began to explore this topic, I consulted two of my colleagues at St. Olaf College — Janice Roberts in the Dance Department and Donna Freeman in the Theater Department. Janice described a teaching tool for students learning how to choreograph a piece of music, which was, I thought, a clear parallel with performing a piece.

Develop a Narrative

This helps the dance students to relate the character of a piece to their personal experience and to help give the choreography a structure. For musicians, a narrative can be a useful tool in understanding form and its progression. For example, in Brahms' *Cello Sonata in E minor* Op. 38, the first movement exposition can be described in a narrative fashion. The brooding, dark character we meet in the opening bars (Theme I) comes into conflict with an evil foe (Theme II) and then encounters a romantic interest (Closing Theme), which results in a striking change of mood. The

character's journey continues through the development and recapitulation, ending as we know with the lyrical mood of the Closing Theme.

Donna Freeman introduced me to some of the basic concepts taught in beginning acting classes, including the Obstacle and the Victory. An obstacle/victory in an acting exercise might be to project a mood through some "contentless" text, such as "one, two, three, four, five... etc." For a musician the obstacle might be the technical challenges of a piece, and the victory would be projecting the character of the piece despite those challenges.

Beginning acting also involves concepts all musicians have to master: relaxation, discipline, openness to criticism, imagination, projection, etc. An interesting topic covered in acting texts involves the fact that acting is never something done in a vacuum; there is always another party present such as an audience or fellow actor. Chamber music players take note: according to the book *Acting One* by Robert Cohen, the more interesting you find your acting partner, the more interesting your own acting will be; the more beauty you find in your acting partner, the more beautiful your own acting will be, etc.

Use Contentless Exercises

Basic introductory exercises for actors can be adapted to develop interpretation skills. Interestingly enough, these exercises often use text that is "contentless," such as the number exercise listed above. The students are to have their acting partners, for example, sit down next to them only using the specified text. Musicians can use similar contentless exercises (an arpeggio, for example) to develop different characters. Have your students play a "heroic" arpeggio, followed by a "resigned" arpeggio, and so on. A scale can be "brilliant," "halting" or "brooding" (as in the Brahms Sonata). Even something with a lot of technical challenge (obstacle) can and should have a definite character (victory) assigned to

it, for example a scale in octaves that is "noble."

Become Fluent with Character Terms

It's a great idea to develop a rich list of character terms (adjectives) and to press your students to use them. Some pieces are relatively easy to characterize; *Allegro Appassionato* is "passionate" while *The Swan* is "serene." Some pieces are much more difficult: Bach *G Major Suite Prelude* for example could be noble, calm, flowing, pastoral, or any such character. I believe it's important to encourage individuality among students so there is really no right or wrong character. Assuming they stay within broad stylistic guidelines, I try to encourage whatever character my students identify.

Develop Character Ideas From the Beginning

Students often want to learn the notes before the character is identified, but I believe the two can be done at the same time. Through singing, studying the score and listening to the piece the character can be analyzed and conceptualized. Of course this is a process; the character a student identifies after 1 week could be much different than after 1 semester, but start right away. It will become easier for students as they gain confidence with the process.

Some students will take these examples and run with them; others will need lots of encouragement. We all have to deal with our own personality and comfort level expressing ourselves. I have seen even shy cellists make interpretative strides following these examples; I hope they will help your students as well.

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