



VIOLA

What I Did on Vacation.... Sort Of

by Annette Caruthers

I had lots of free time this past year because I had shoulder surgery and could not play. Physical therapy took up some of that time, but I wanted to stay connected to my performing and teaching. I continued to teach, but did not take new students because I knew it would take two hands to work with them. I tried having my own website, and posting information about aspects of music-making that interest me, but that quickly became overwhelming. Maybe I didn't have the best service provider or software; in any case I dropped that effort after two months.

Reading has always been a positive use of free time for me, and I had bought Burton Kaplan's book *Practicing for Artistic Success* some years back and never studied it. I found it fascinating. He uses insights from recent research into how we learn, from psychology, and from experimenting with his own students, to outline some very useful techniques for making practice more effective and at the same time more artistically rewarding. I highly recommend it. (Available widely, through Shar Music, Amazon, and directly from www.magicmountainmusic.org.)

The August 2006 issue of *Scientific American* includes an article on *Secrets of the Expert Mind* that focuses on research done with chess champions, but also applies to musicians and athletes, etc. It emphasizes the type of effort over time that helps our brains to organize and store information about the subject of our study so that we can access it instantly with very little effort — a huge requirement of advanced musical performance.

I am presently taking a course called *Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction* that is offered in several locations in the state. Originally developed for University of Massachusetts Medical Center to help patients, this course has widely been used by people in all disciplines.

Developing the ability to focus the mind, especially on the body, also has huge implications for performing and teaching. How often have you noticed that a student doesn't really know what they've done or how they did it? Often just asking them to play a particular passage and notice what happens with one aspect of their playing or one spot in the music brings about a real revelation and/or instant improvement. This type of focused attention is also a big aspect of Suzuki's approach to teaching. For Minnesota courses check: abbottnorthwestern.com, csh.umn.edu, oceandharma.org, seedsofmindfulness.com, smdc.org, and the Veterans Administration Hospital.

Information from these resources is beginning to coalesce in my mind in a way that I know will change the way I teach.

I also bought, unseen, new music for viola groups. I found Corda Music on the internet and ordered a number of pieces from them. Another set of pieces I ordered from Michael Kimber, and some from Fountain Park Music, again online. A few viola-playing friends are coming over this weekend to read some of these with me so I can decide how I might use them, (or put in the round file, possibly). I am hoping to do more work with groups of students this coming year.

I am also planning to get back to my performing, which will make things much busier. My hope is that my research will contribute to a more organized and effective effort that will really pay off!

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. †