



CELLO

Forever Young

by David Holmes

On Thursday, October 18, at Mounds View High School, the string teachers of MNSOTA were treated to a three-hour workshop featuring one of America's most celebrated string pedagogues, Phyllis Young. Ms. Young—who exudes more energy in her early 80s than I do in my 40s after a triple shot of espresso—was creative, insightful, engaging, and just plain fun as she led a packed room on an inspiring and unique string teaching journey.

Phyllis Young has contributed enormously to the art of cello teaching and to string instruction in general. She recently retired as the Parker C. Fielder Regents Professor at the University of Texas, where she also headed the highly praised University of Texas String Project for thirty-five years. She has presented workshops and master classes in 43 states, and in 30 countries on 6 continents. She is a past president of ASTA and received its distinguished service award in 1984. Further, she was awarded the “Grande Dame du Violoncelle” from Indiana University in 2000, and received the Paul Rolland Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. Her two books, *Playing the String Game* and *The String Play*, have become inspirational resources for a generation of string teachers.

For someone of her impressive pedagogical stature, it is interesting to note that early in her career, Ms. Young came to cello teaching more out of necessity than by an inner compulsion. She had always envisioned herself playing in a professional orchestra, but because of her husband's career she ended up in Austin, Texas. One of Ms. Young's pivotal insights as a teacher came after much frustration with her studio teaching. She had the epiphany that the physical act of cello playing should not be divorced from how we use our bodies in daily life and that music making is best taught via a vivid imagination. She realized that there is an enormous well of stored experiences in our minds that we share commonly and that tapping into this limitless resource is the key to connecting with

string students. This could compare perhaps with Suzuki's insight that all children learn to speak their native language fluently. Both Young's and Suzuki's revelations led to bursts of creativity that had an enormous influence on their fields.

Ms. Young brought with her a number of large duffle bags full of all kinds of teaching accessories, which are a love of hers in her teaching. She puts a note in the bags for airport security that says she uses all the contents (sponges, rubbery creatures, ribbons, dusters, bracelets, tennis balls, dowel sticks and goodness knows what else!!) for teaching purposes. Occasionally she would toss out one or more of these props to unsuspecting participants, causing an initial surprise followed by laughter.

Here are some of the ideas she covered in her workshop.

Bow Arm:

- Every motion in our daily lives is prepared ahead (e.g. door knocking, bell ringing). Playing the cello should be the same.
- For a balanced bow arm, “salt” (with an imaginary shaker) a long sub sandwich from frog to tip to get the jiggle in the upper arm that signifies alignment between the upper and lower arm.
- If a student needs more focus in the sound, or has alignment issues, imagine “pouring” some liquid toward the ground. If the hand and arm are too flat and need to be slightly more pronated, pretend there is a drop of water on top of the bow hand, then just tilt slightly so the drop falls off the left side of the hand.
- The down bow and up bow should both feel like a “pulling” motion. The pull is the secret to a singing sound.
- Think a vowel sound like “oh” to conceptualize tone.
- Pull the bow through a milkshake, through peanut butter, through water or air. Notice the different sounds and

feelings of each.

- The “feel” zone of the fingers is not at the tip (imagine how one touches cloth to feel its texture). We feel with the top joints of our fingers in combination with the thumb. That is where the bow stick should be felt as well.
- Instead of raising arm weight up from *below* to string level, it is better to drop the arm weight down from *above* on to the string.
- For feeling the thumb and second finger relationship, imagine picking a strawberry or a mint off a tray.
- The bow arm resembles a road with a bump in it at the frog and resembles a road on an incline at the tip.
- For more finger connection to the bow, imagine a sticky substance like honey on the fingers.
- For more roundness and softness in the hands, imagine taking a hamburger off a plate.
- For enhancing bow hold flexibility, hold the bow upside down at the balance point and wave goodbye.
- Sautille can be improved by dropping the arm level to the neighboring lower string.
- Martele starts with an accent and ends with a “throw” of the bow.

Vibrato:

- Vibrato is “the world's greatest balancing act” and is the heartbeat and the fingerprint of a cello player, adding color, intensity, energy, and beauty to one's playing.
- During vibrato, the arm moves in an “eraser” motion.
- The upper arm should jiggle when vibrating, which is especially true in first position.
- Rotating the thumb to its side on the neck can sometimes help with a balanced vibrato.
- Flexibility in each joint of the left hand is important for vibrato.

- For added softness of hand, imagine holding a baby bird in the palm.
- Put a sponge on the right arm and sink into it with the left hand fingers.
- A match box with BB's or other rattling item strapped to the back of the left hand will help give the feel and rhythm of vibrato.
- Use a rubbery toy on top of the fingerboard to sink strong but flexible fingers into.
- Vibrato on martele notes carries the sound through.

What a marvelous and unique mind Phyl-

lis Young has. She is truly an unassuming creative genius. Every time I open one of her books I can't help but be inspired and I can't help but smile. It's a precious gift that she has given to our musical world: that of endless imagination and energy with an uninhibited joy in the process. As she said during her workshop: discovery turns frustration into fascination. She has certainly lived that phrase and we string teachers who are fortunate enough to have come in contact with her are all better off for it.

David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program

and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. †