



## VIOLA

### “Making A Musical Life. The Practice, The Profession, The Joy”

by Tom Heimberg

Book review by Annette Caruthers

(Published in 2007 by String Letter Publishing, Inc. ISBN 978-1-890490-59-1)

I bought this book some time ago, but did not sit down to read it until this summer, and I cannot put it down. Looking at the Library of Congress information for cataloging purposes, I see that it is listed first under the subject headings: 1. Music—Instruction and Study. 2. Stringed Instruments—Instruction and Study. 3. Music—Vocational guidance. 4. Heimberg, Tom, 1927-2006. And it really does turn out to be a book teachers will love! How often do we get a book on the viola specifically? Written by a performer who also teaches?

A quick tour of the Table of Contents gives an idea of what the book contains. *Part I: Practice* contains 14 subject areas, some of which are: *The Mind in Practice* (for 25 years he taught a course called “The Art of Practice” at the San Francisco Conservatory); *To Preserve, Protect, and Defend Practice Time*; *Personal Practice Planning*; *Tools for Better Technique*; and *Bow Explorations*. *Part II: Counsel & Guidance* has only five subject areas, including *Be Prepared*; *Heimberg’s Handy Hints*, and *Lessening Audition Agonies*. Part III is broken into eleven areas with titles like *Letter from the Pit*; *Letter from Backstage*, and *Puccini’s Viola of Love*.

Tom Heimberg had studied with Harry Rumpel when he was already playing with the Oakland Symphony. On page 1 he quotes Harry as telling him, “Young man, if you do not know what you are trying to do

before you try to do it, how will you know when you have finished trying, whether you’ve done it or not? Put down that viola and count!” How many times have you tried to get this idea across to a student?

The following is my paraphrase of part of Chapter I. Two uses of the mind are essential for quality practice: calm self-observation and precise, intentional action. Calm self-observation is caring attention given to our actions and movements, as we make them. But to get something done we must act. In practicing we must anticipate what’s coming. After this, we act and observe ourselves during that action. Then we compare and contrast the actual experience with what we imagined. Little by little we bring the mental image and the physical experience closer together. This four-step sequence—imagine, act, observe, adjust—is the living heart of good practice.

As a teacher I find I am always trying to explain how students need to work at home to be effective. If they miss any of these steps, the results are disappointing, and they may not know why they feel discouraged. Of course, it does take time to learn how to observe the results of one’s attempts at practicing without frustration, and it takes time to learn how to evaluate whether or not our attempts come close to what we imagined when we looked at the page of music; but having the process described so beautifully

really clarifies my job as a teacher.

Tom wrote he thought of practice as a series of opportunities for success. Opening the case is a success. Tuning is a success. Getting from one note to the next is a success. Small successes encourage our practice and nourish our learning. We all need our successes to keep ourselves going, and we need new ways of looking and observing what we are doing. I think teaching could be described very similarly to his description of practicing!

If any of you read this book and have comments, I’d love to hear from you; we could even have a “book club” discussion time, and share ideas and inspirations, understandings gleaned from his writing.

Those who are still performing will also love his tales of other players, and relationships between players and management, how to cope with the holiday rush, etc. It’s a great book. Enjoy!

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