

SURVIVING YOUTUBE

by Don Mitchell

It can be downright depressing. Long hours you have labored over the violin, diligently and patiently searching for that elusive bright tone, that clearer articulation, that smooth legato. You have made progress, have had some rewarding performances, have heard some kind remarks from your teacher and perhaps from judges. You have reason to think you are on the right path.

Then, in an idle moment at your computer, you dabble in the violin performances on YouTube. Perlman, Hahn, Bell, Chang. Not even wanting to go there, you click on other options: five- and six-year old kids playing music you thought was enormously difficult. Perhaps it is illusory—can this be real? Surely they are faking this...

It can be a little overwhelming. You are reminded of the notorious Fritz Kreisler remark following his hearing Heifetz for the first time: “We may as well go home and break our fiddles over our knees.”

People say that high school athletics are competitive. Indeed they are—there can be only one quarterback on the football field at a time. I would argue that music is comparably competitive, with similar levels of intensity, if not glamour. You don't get to be the concertmaster without expending some effort. If it is relatively “easy” to be the leader at your local high school, think about the level of play at GTCYS. When you opt to go on beyond that, the path gets steeper still. Even the cocky quarterback, who has beaten all comers for the prime position on the football team, would probably get a little queasy walking behind a screen to perform for sober judges, with nothing but

a fiddle and a prayer.

If you are going to play the violin for any length of time, you need to develop a thick skin. No matter how far you go, how high you aspire and what rank you attain, no matter how hard you work, eventually you will encounter someone much younger, sexier, flashier—and here is the hardest part—much *better* than you are.

Here is my advice: Recognize it, absorb it, accept it, and acknowledge it. Then get ready to move on. This is a moment when I would like to take my discouraged high-school student along with me, as an observer, into a first lesson with an 8- or 9-year old.

What we need to do, as serious musicians, is to remember why we play the violin, why we got into this in the first place. Very few of us start out with serious resolve to be the best violinist in the world (there may be six or seven individuals, in any world-wide generation, who *should* have this goal and would benefit from having this goal, and they should probably be sent directly to Curtis, Indiana, Julliard, etc.). For the rest of us, if we have this thought, we should be disabused of it by a few minutes of YouTube. We more sensibly start out with three simpler ideas: 1) We are fascinated by the variety of beautiful expressions that are possible on the violin. 2) We want to participate at some level, as performers of some of the world's great repository of musical expression. 3) We seek to give voice to our own artistic personality through performance on the violin.

We can accept the genius and superiority of others, if we are mindful of the

second and third motivating ideas above. It is entirely possible to participate in the performance of truly great music, without having to attain the rank of a virtuoso soloist. Indeed, the equally challenging role of the orchestral professional requires a similar level of excellence, with skills of cooperation, blending, and contributing to a collective voice. Even well short of these highest levels of attainment in the violin world, there are myriad opportunities for great success. The uniqueness of personality assures us that, however well others may play, *every* serious student of the violin will in time develop, with determination and mindful practice, a personal musical voice worth hearing.

Where do you want to go with your music? Are you interested in the classical repertoire? Great composers provided a wealth of material that is fully accessible to serious amateur players. Do you like jazz? Bluegrass? Electronic music? Rock and roll? Composition? We live in a time and culture offering more musical opportunity than has ever existed before. In moments of discouragement, we do well to go back to the starting point, to that first fascination with the sound of a vibrating string. We do well to remember that we are engaged in work that is meaningful and valuable in itself, that we are progressing toward reasonable and attainable goals, and that at the end of the day, musical art has room for all of us.

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