

All-State: From Poof to Portato

presented by Brenda Brenner — reported by Anastasia Verdoljak

Brenda Brenner held a workshop regarding the many facets of bowing. To highlight the numerous aspects, she labeled it *From Poof to Portato*, giving the idea of some kind of a bowing spectrum, or what I imagine could be even a rather comprehensive wheel or globe.

In Brenner's written outline she covered the broad categories of bow hold, bow strokes and rhythms, and sequences of bow strokes, some including martelé (or her name for it: "poof," one of the namesakes of the session title), preparing for slurs, and of course portato.

In her programmed time for bowhold, she covered the essentials that we in some way had been exposed to in her *Setting up for Success* sessions, including preparation for holding the bow, where the placement of the tapes on the bow would be, of course how to hold the bow as well as motions prior to bowing to become more ready for that bowing gesture.

Her bow strokes and rhythms rudiments found in the packet as well include: speaking the rhythm, air bowing, saying or better still, singing the rhythm, bowing the rhythm on an open string, playing a scale while bowing the rhythm, and finally applying this rhythm in the actual piece.

The sequence of bow strokes is an extensive listing, and after martelé, the hammer stroke, comes détaché, demonstrated by her recommended piece *Simple Square Dance* by Dorothy Straub. Besides bow expansion exercises with Klaus' *Loch Lomond*, bow circles can be demonstrated quite imaginatively by the piece the *March of the Metro Gnome*. Next comes preparation for slurs, then slurred string crossings, hooked bowings, and spiccato, of which I plan to use *Orpheus in the Underworld* as suggested for practicing beginning spiccato. And finally, there are also the rest of the French-inspired and named bowings of collé, ricochet and portato.

Ricochet reminds me of a technique Brenner shared that she's used with her students that could be a visceral reminder to some about starting the bow. With the

exception of ricochet bowing, they "must always start their bowing from the string," or something in that vein. Brenner says to some of her students that she has a tattoo all across her stomach with the quotation written, it's so important. Whether or not they believe or somewhat believe it or not can depend on the age, but it seems to still has the same effect—they are so enthralled with the idea that she's talking about a big tattoo or that she might actually have one that they will be much more likely to remember that rule in performing situations especially.

One of the main ways that I will most definitely be able to bring her conveyed ideas and exercises to my own students is by simply remembering to use the process she so effectively did, that is, breaking the procedure down into smaller steps, as in any educational setting. For example, achieving a slurred bowing can be practiced by first breaking each differently-fingered note into smaller hooked bows.

Indeed, what is indicative of the way that Brenner taught while she was with us, the teachers: the mystery of how to get from point A (starting a piece) to point Z (mastering a piece) can be slowly uncovered by unearthing just a few of the letters at first; in this case, by simplifying the bowing! Being a seasoned teacher might mean that this metaphorical "alphabet" is already filled in much more, so I would be curious to know what they actually were able to add to themselves as teachers. Compared to the several ideas that I found new and exciting, I wonder how much those master teachers were able to add into their own teaching method toolbox as brand new pieces and how much of it was simply refinement of ideas, or sharpening the tools already in the box.

Brenner covered aspects of her bowing workshop in the scale clinic for the students and teachers as well as the teacher sessions *Setting up for Success* and *Theory is Awesome*. This not only gives a fuller picture in general for how bowings affect the many aspects of playing but also serves as a reminder that all musical aspects are connected. No matter

how we try to separate them out and categorize them—and for good reason efficiency and technique-wise—there are still blurry lines and even swirls connecting the many characteristics to its musical core.

Conveying the material to her audience, which consisted of many of us who are teachers and who will be going off to teach our own students was as important as the content. The way that we will or will not remember her important points and recognize the specific aspects that we can bring to our teaching with strength could be brought out in the presentation.

Her title started with something catchy and memorable, "Poof to Portato" and directly incorporated two of the specific bowing techniques, one of which she named herself. Then, in the hard copy of her outlined material, she included most subjects and brief details that in an ideal situation she would like to have time to cover and that we could ask her about on our own time later. Next, she had us up and moving with our instruments, trying some of the bowing techniques even in other sessions with our own bodies, which will have enduring effects on remembering this action. Lastly, she showed video demonstrations of repertoire that was proved successful at teaching and practicing certain bow strokes in a class setting with her own string pedagogy students at Indiana.

Overall I learned more from Brenner's session on bowing than I can probably even apply in this whole coming year without some serious trial and error. I'm glad for the "situation" I'm finding myself in—an overabundance of ideas shared and information given!

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