



CELLO

Cello Travels: Ten Thoughts on Teaching at Summer Music Camps

by David Holmes

For about fifteen years I have been fortunate enough to be on the Suzuki summer institute circuit, which means I have taught at about fifty music camps and have traveled widely in the United States. This has opened many doors and has helped me establish lasting relationships with students and colleagues from faraway regions. This summer I attended three institutes in a row: the National Cello Institute (in Los Angeles), the Oregon Suzuki Institute, and the Chicago Suzuki Institute. Later, for the thirteenth year in a row, I taught at the Black Hills String Retreat in Rapid City, South Dakota. Although I am away for a month in the summer, I do my best to get in 6 lessons with my home students. Here are my music camp contemplations that I hope will be useful to you!

1. Music camps are by their very nature immersion experiences, which is their appeal and their purpose. The intensity of daily interactions with students and colleagues (at lessons, meals, or just walking around) is satisfying, exciting, and by the end of the week, exhausting. The unique mix of teachers, students, and parents is one thing that makes a camp so exciting.
2. Student recitals can be very inspiring. Performers on recitals at camps are often chosen by audition, so the best and most motivated students are frequently showcased. When several of these fine students come from one teacher, I am impressed by the excellence this teacher has achieved. It may seem obvious, but perhaps it is good to remind myself of an important truth yet again: how a teacher teaches really matters in student outcomes. Some teachers have a long record of excellence in students. This is not an accident.
3. The great majority of students have a fantastic, inspirational time at music camps, which can positively carry over into the fall and beyond.
4. I love conversing with and learning from my colleagues during meals and other social moments during institutes. It is interesting and inspirational to be around other string teachers who are passionate about their work. Perhaps we should do more of this type of collegiality amongst our awesome cello teachers in the Twin Cities, even though the schedule obstacles and time constraints are difficult to overcome.
5. Teaching at institutes is a bit more high pressure than at the home studio and requires a change of approach. Some hour-long lesson classes have 4 book 1 students, so each kid gets about 13 minutes of lesson time each day. I am very careful to use a timer so that all students get exactly the same amount of lesson time and I take notes on what I've assigned each day. Because of the time constraints, I try to be quick to decide on a teaching point to narrow my focus. If I am successful, I may keep to one point with a student for a whole week, including as much variety into that point as I can. However, if the student does not respond well to my suggestions about, say, the bow hold, I have no qualms about switching to a topic that we can both be on board with. Teaching is an art and a craft, and I fail plenty of times. I seem to learn more from my failures than my successes, so if I fail more, I'll learn more. Wait—there is something wrong with that reasoning...
6. I try not to whine about things—to stay positive. Sometimes, exhaustion, a difficult schedule, and squirrely kids can lead to irritability. At one institute I had three group classes in a row: an advanced technique class, followed by a book two and book three repertory class. I love teaching group class. It is one of my favorite things, but most institutes give one or two groups in five or six hours of daily teaching. I think it was a compliment that I was given those three group classes. Perhaps...or maybe they want to drive me away...
7. I enjoy being a bit of a celebrity for a week. As a guest clinician, you are perhaps a bit more revered than you might be back at your home studio. A lot of this is the newness of the situation: people don't know you well, so everyone is on their best behavior. Relationship comfort and habituation doesn't have time to set in.
8. The more institutes I do the more I feel there should be an emphasis on getting kids to move more during classes. This is especially true for cellists in camps who are sitting literally for hours a day. There is nothing better for settling a kid or kids into a learning frame of mind than a few minutes of yoga, stretches, or other activities. Students always welcome opportunities to move. Movement can be an excellent antidote to a number of focusing issues for all ages!
9. I perform at camps where I teach, which is exhilarating and scary, since many string teachers and students attend faculty recitals. I played two movements of the sixth Bach suite three times this summer, which caused me both pleasure and pain. The performances went well, but I experienced a lot of pre-performance anxiety each time with accompanying thoughts like "Why am I doing this to myself?" At two of the camps I performed on borrowed cellos, which adds to the excitement (I do bring my bow with me). Related aside: there is a new book about stage fright by Sara Solovitch, titled *Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright* (Bloomsbury). There is a fine review of this book by Joan Acocella in the August 3, 2015, *New Yorker*. The article states that everyone has stage fright, and while there are helpful psychological and drug aids, there is no cure. Sadly, stage fright doesn't necessarily

decrease with age. It was heartening to read that even some of the greatest actors in the world (Daniel Day Lewis and Laurence Olivier to name just two) have suffered from severe stage fright.

10. Some music camps have skit nights. This year in Oregon, I dressed in, well, a dress, and sang *O mio babbino caro* in a high falsetto voice. It was so much

fun. The kids and parents get such a kick out of their teachers behaving outrageously.

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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 and is an artist member of Thursday Musical. He teaches out of his home in St. Louis Park. †