Viola

When One's Teacher Dies

by J. David Arnott

As I was preparing to write this piece and searching for an appropriate, timely, and interesting topic, it occurred to me that there have been several notable deaths recently in my viola world and it made me think back on one earlier death as well. What do you do when your teacher dies? How do you properly grieve? What do you try to remember about your lessons and your practicing and what you were taught? How do you intend to carry on the legacy? What do you hope your students remember about you?

On June 23rd of this year, Joseph de Pasquale died, and so the viola world lost one of its greatest proponents. In reading half a dozen or so obituaries, the memories of my time with him came flooding back as I can only assume it did for all of his students. He was a great personality and was truly larger than life. As I write this, I can almost smell the cigars he smoked during lessons (all of them—except when he smoked the occasional cigarette. By the time I had him at Curtis there were few faculty who smoked in the building—and even fewer who could easily get away with it.)

Joseph de Pasquale attended Curtis from 1938-1942 and, after serving in the Marine Band, he served as the principal violist of the Boston Symphony from 1947-1964, a fine length for a career in such a position. He married Maestro Koussevitzky's daughter (a descendent of Napoleon's wife, Josephine, as well as Tsar Nicholas). He then left the Boston Symphony at Eugene Ormandy's request and served as principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1964-1996, and reunited the de Pasquale Quartet in the process. He premiered several masterpieces of what are now standard viola repertoire, most notably the Walter Piston *Concerto*. His recording of *Harold in Italy* remains one of my favorite records of all time.

His teaching career at Curtis spanned more than 50 years. Mr. de Pasquale (as we all called him in person, "Joe" when he was not present) was not just a teacher, he was more like a father to me. For the six and a half years I studied with him I was terrified on a weekly basis. I believe I played a 3-octave C major scale (Primrose fingerings of course) for the first year until I got it (almost) right. Mr. de Pasquale kept an open studio at Curtis meaning that anyone in his studio was welcome and encouraged to attend anyone else's lesson. It's one thing to be terrified in front of your teacher; it's a completely different level of terror when there is an audience as well. It was an amazing opportunity to encounter a variety of repertoire simultaneously—and not just pieces I had yet to play. It was enlightening to hear others work on pieces I had already played. New insights, new phrasing, different approaches to fingerings. It was all good and it didn't really occur to me what an amazing gift this was until long after lessons ended. In his half-century career teaching at Curtis, Mr. de Pasquale has spread his viola students to orchestras across the world (there are currently seven in the Philadelphia Orchestra alone and the outstanding principal violist of our very own Minnesota Orchestra, Tom Turner).

In 1986, the year I entered Curtis, Mr. de Pasquale helped me find my viola, a 1971 Sergio Peresson, which was a slightly smaller younger brother to his magnificent 1967 Peresson currently played by another of his students and a classmate, Anibal dos Santos, Principal viola of the Bogata Philharmonic. The instrument belonged to a violist in Colombia (who also played soccer as I recall) and had not been played for several years. It was quite an experience explaining to my parents that the viola that I absolutely had to have, without even playing it once to try it, needed to be paid for by a personal check to a Colombian who would bring the instrument to Philadelphia after the next holiday. Though not quite as popular today as in past years, there were at one time two dozen Peressoni instruments being played in the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In the past I have written about pedagogical family trees—our own musical version of apostolic succession. As I look at my branch of the tree I see that my teacher, Mr. de Pasquale, studied with William Primrose, Max Aronoff, and Louis Bailly. In moving up the branches Primrose studied with Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe; Ysaÿe studied with Henri François Joseph Vieuxtemps and Henryk Wieniawski; Vieuxtemps studied with Auguste de Bériot… Max Aronoff studied with Carl Flesch; Flesch etc. Because my teacher studied with Primrose, I teach all my viola students to play the Primrose scale book fingerings (the topic of a previous column). Because my teacher studied with Aronoff, I make all my students (viola and violin) play Sevcik *Op. 1* and *Op. 8* (and especially *Op. 3*). It's my way of honoring his teaching and his legacy. In addition to pedagogy, he taught me almost everything I know about Italian food.

What will my students think when I am gone? Will I have left them even a sliver of the legacy left to me by Mr. de Pasquale? There is still time…better pull out the Sevcik.

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