



CELLO

An Ode to my Teachers

by Mina Fisher

We owe such debt to our teachers! When I started teaching my mouth blurted out verbatim the words and concepts and images I had heard decades before at the conservatory. When I wrote my play about the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger I included along with her quotations many of the exact words I heard from my own master teachers Janos Starker, Andre Navarra and Fritz Magg. (A very dutiful student of Nadia's, Donald Campbell, had taken extensive notes in her class, and he posted 100 of Boulanger's teaching quotes online.)

"Without joy, zero!" was one of those quotes, and I nearly named my play about Boulanger "Without Joy—Zero!" I truly believe that Boulanger received as much joy and energy from teaching her students as they got knowledge and inspiration from her. And, the joy she got from teaching transformed and energized her life. But joy at 4 PM? That's a low energy point for anybody's day, but that's when I start getting goosebumps while teaching, maybe surprised by a perfectly poised shift from a student who previously slid forward with ambulance sounds galore.



Janos Starker

My shifting technique ideas I credit to Janos Starker, principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony and long time professor at Indiana University. He said take one third of the value of the previous note for the arm release and glide to the next position. We practice "1...2... 'Breathe, Release and glide' on beat 3. Arrive beat 4." We do lots of long one-octave glides, with tape on the fingerboard to show the end point. Starker taught arm circles for shifting, but I just show the kids that if they release the pressure and glide on top of the string forward, it takes

away the nasty shift sounds. Kids love it when I say the shifting pressure is the same as the tiniest tickle on the skin. (More goosebumps from trying that out!)



Andre Navarra

Andre Navarra, soloist across Europe and Asia, professor at the Paris Conservatoire, Vienna Hochschule, and Detmold Hochschule, had the most sinuous bow arm in the business, with imperceptible bow changes he achieved by total flexibility of the finger joints (Duport #7, every day, every way).

As a senior in college, he refused to allow me to play music until I had practiced an hour of scales (1 note per bow, 4 per bow, an octave per bow, then 2 octaves/3 octaves/4 octaves per bow—with arpeggios as reward! And two more hours for Duport and Popper. Now I use scales as a Road to Enlightenment for the kids, raising the bar when they can do 2 octaves per bow to 3. Or, when they can do 4 octaves per bow, then they're "allowed" to do fast spiccato scales up and down, or arpeggios in spiccato. If they can shift and play scales, they can get around the instrument—scales and shifting and Sevcik are just tools so they can make music.

Navarra taught the value of "honest" practicing—practicing passage work slowly, each note clear and with good sound. So I like to ask whether, now that they know the notes, they've "honestly" practiced to get good quality sound on each one.

Fritz Magg, principal cellist of the Vienna Symphony and cello professor at Indiana University (simultaneously cellist with the Berkshire Quartet), smiled on me. I have to say I didn't learn cello technique from him—his technique book glorified the use of the pinkie in thumb position, and my pinkie is too short; his 1 4 fingerings never worked for me, and I learned to shift instead of stretch. But I learned from him

to be extremely sensitive to each student's physique, and to try to give them fingerings that work for them, or explore options that might work with them. But Fritz Magg smiled on me, and his enjoyment of my musicality gave me confidence but more, gave me a weekly blessing on my work. So when my students do something right, I smile a lot, and applaud a lot, and laugh with joy at what they've figured out to do!



Fritz Magg

Fritz also sang more than he played for me, and I learned to work out all my phrasing by singing. Kids don't feel comfortable singing anymore. So to make them comfortable singing phrases, I just sing louder than they do and we giggle when our voices break. If they can't hear a phrase in their brain, if they can't manipulate sound with their voices, then teaching them to phrase is like carpentry. ("Pull $\frac{2}{3}$ of the bow on the first note, save your bow on the next 3 notes, then slowly push and drop your weight to the frog for the loudest note on a down bow.") Tedious. It's easier to ask them to use their bow to match their intention.

I love to teach. Enjoying what my students figure out, smiling on their progress, sharing the tools and shortcuts to success my teachers gave me, these things all nourish and energize me. And as Nadia said, without joy, we have nothing.

Mina Fisher, currently the happy teacher of brilliant, focused and energetic cellists aged 7 to 71, performed for many years in the Minnesota Orchestra and in chamber ensembles Ensemble Capriccio and The Bakken Trio. She received the 2022 MNSOTA Master Teacher: Studio award. †