

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Cellist Karine Georgian
on the work it takes to
produce transcendent
musical moments—and
the need to keep track of
her students' thumbs



While there are myriad aspects to teaching another person to play a musical instrument to a high level of accomplishment, they generally fall into one of two distinct, but inter-related, categories. The first: identifying and addressing technical and purely musical challenges. The second: the need to understand the student. When I think back on the students who have passed through my hands since I began teaching over 35 years ago—in all their variety of aptitude, proficiency, and personality—the recall button in my memory always seems first of all to be pressed by my sense of them as individuals.

Usually I start to gain this sense quite quickly, but as in all relationships, full rapport and trust take time to develop. Initially, therefore, teaching will concentrate on addressing specific lacunae in the technical and musical equipment, correcting ingrained “bad habits” in posture, bow holds, bow-arm control, breathing, tension, developing left-hand freedom, and, a personal favorite, the critically important use of the thumb. (One of the cries most frequently heard issuing from my studio—it will probably be written on my grave—is: “Where is your thumb?!” The correct use of the thumb, both in thumb position and in the first positions, is vital.)

It is crucial to explain and correct such problems as quickly as possible. However, until the person who lives behind the arms and fingers begins to be understood, and a rapport of empathy and trust develops between teacher and student, the work will remain fragmentary and stubbornly resist being integrated into the whole that growth into a true musician requires.

For me, the most important aim of teaching is for the student to recognize that work on a piece should not begin by looking at black dots on a white page and wondering how on earth to play them, but rather by forming a complete idea in the mind of what the piece is about: its structure, shape, argument, climactic points, and emotional message. This mental work underpins all preparation, until it becomes possible to hear the complete work in the imagination, away from the instrument, and in so doing to grow the concept from the embryonic to the complete (so far as this is ever possible). When returning to previously

learned repertoire, it can be amazing to see how one’s ideas have changed with time and the continuing creative process.

Many instrumental difficulties stem from the challenges of balancing the weight of the bow arm and the pressure of the fingers on the fingerboard—oh yes, and that thumb behind the fingerboard! It all starts from posture, which must allow the body’s weight to be firmly grounded and evenly distributed, the center of the body to be sensed, and the movements of the arms to be pursued without undue strain. It’s the classic imaginary mountain familiar to practitioners of meditation, rooted in the ground but reaching also into the upper air. As an image, it works pretty well for cellists, too!

Hence the importance of keeping the spine straight, but not rigid.

And no lasting improvement can be expected until the student learns continual awareness of every part of the body, especially in the conscious relaxation of tension. Maintaining awareness is also essential to avoid the terrible trap of repetitive, “automatic” practicing of problematic passages without knowing quite why one is doing it. Instead of addressing and dissolving the problem, such automaticity can serve only to embed it permanently in the subconscious. Mentally practicing passages away from the instrument can yield unexpected benefits.

For any musician, to achieve a beautiful quality of sound is paramount, since it is the sound that conveys the essence of the music. Good sound depends on a natural approach to the bow arm, in

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which the unforced weight of the arm is transferred to the string, and the fingers of the left hand are supported by the opposing thumb (see my *cri de coeur*). A similar need for balance applies equally to the thumb and the playing fingers in the thumb position.

My experience is that too often this ideal state of affairs is distorted because insufficient contact between bow and string causes tension in the left hand, which in turn leads to loss of control and affects the sound quality. The balance I am speaking of should be the same in cantilena and virtuoso passages, because the principle is exactly the same. The student who is truly listening to the sound produced by the instrument will hear when it “works,” and note his or her bodily configuration.

And speaking of the power of imagination, I encourage students to imagine listening to themselves in different acoustic environments. This can have a dramatic effect on sound projection.

Leitmotifs of my teaching stress the importance of releasing inner tensions and their physical manifestations, of keeping the attention focused—to the exclusion of all else—on what is being played at any given time, of listening so as to match the sound coming out of the instrument to the sound imagined in the inner ear. I suggest ways whereby the student can continue working outside the practice room, building a deeper understanding of style, of the composer’s intentions, of the structure of the work, of the emotional contours of harmony and that central key to expressivity, phrasing, of ensemble collaboration in orchestral and chamber music, and of the hidden universe that lies behind those black dots on the white page.

They can never happen often enough, those moments when there is a sudden flash of insight into just how that long-imagined sound and phrasing can be produced. But when they do, it’s like the joy of coming home after a long and difficult journey.

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