

Teaching Philosophy and Lineage

Summary

My teaching is Galamian-based since most of my teachers had direct contact with this master pedagogue. I emphasize slow scale practise as a form of yoga for the day: a chance to undo the tensions that get built up from the desire to succeed. I also teach a number of dexterity and muscle building exercises largely attributed to D.C. Dounis. My students are assigned a smattering of the etudes of Kreutzer, Dont, Rode as needed to address certain challenges. But mostly students will cover a great deal of standard repertoire in the undergraduate years. Every year a student should absorb at least two concertos, two sonatas, a solo Bach sonata or partita, Paganini caprices when ready. I also encourage my students to learn standard orchestra excerpts as soon as possible. I am integrally involved in goal-setting with my students, but I expect my students to find their own inner sense of discipline. I am a fairly even-tempered person when teaching and rehearsing and I strongly believe this is important for longevity in a career on stage that comes with all kinds of stresses and surprises.

Lineage

The following paragraphs are for those who are interested to know a bit about my pedagogical lineage. I am indebted to this inheritance and try to honour it (and challenge it) as I pass on the knowledge I've gained to my undergraduate students at Laurier University. So here below is a brief history of my own pedigree and how it has shaped my teaching.

My first teachers were Suzuki teachers in Ottawa. When my family moved north to Sudbury, we were most fortunate that two accomplished violinists, Metro Kozak and his wife Mary, had a rigorous string program going full tilt.

Metro Kozak was my teacher for the 8 years we lived in Sudbury. Metro had studied with Ivan Galamian, Broadus Earle, and Sydney Harth at Yale and Michigan University. Metro's teaching emphasized practice drills, ways of learning notes fast, and stimulating coordination and reflexes. There was also a great deal of muscle development through strengthening exercises that I am very grateful for – working with weights and elastic bands. I continue to employ many of the exercises I learned from Metro in my teaching today. Metro's passion for the physics of violin playing is well-known in Canada and beyond. Metro also catapulted me into big violin repertoire from the get-go. He gave me Zino Francescatti's recording of the Paganini Violin Concerto and told me to go and learn it! I was enthralled by this recording and hooked on the extreme challenges. Equally, Metro's involvement as conductor of the youth orchestra, and group class got me fired up about playing with people. I value this sense of community highly and wish this for all my students in their endeavours. Music is most fun when it transcends the self - when it is about what we can do together!

My family moved to Toronto area when I was in grade 11. At the time the violinist David Zafer was conducting the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra. I asked David for a lesson and found the intensity of his artistry infectious. It seemed often he had no idea what time it was or how long he had spent working on a problem in a lesson. David's bow-arm was spectacular. His big influences were Galamian and Oskar Shumsky. If you get a chance, listen to Shumsky's Strauss Sonata with Glenn Gould at the piano on youtube - so poetic! Well, David's lessons were relentless in terms of finding colour, nuance detail, and bow control. We did lots of left-hand stuff too like Dounis, Yost, and Sevcik. David was incredibly generous with his time and lessons at his house would last often the entire day, ending with watching videos of his violin heroes and firing up the barbeque.

The beauty of the Toronto Youth Orchestra was that it was aligned with the Toronto Symphony, so this was a rich time when we got to attend masterclasses with whoever was the weekly TSO soloist, such as Pinchas Zuckerman, Nadja Solerno-Sonnenberg, Schlomo Mintz, or Cho-Liang Lin. And David Zafer's close friend Jose' Luis-Garcia (then the concertmaster of the English Chamber Orchestra) came to Toronto three times a year to teach at the Conservatory. He gave us FREE lessons during his visits! They were fabulous lessons. With a golden juicy tone on his Stradivarius, Garcia was a glamorous and dimensional performer. I found him utterly convincing on stage, and he was very helpful in lessons to show the practical side of things. He was able to get right to the heart of the matter. I value this quality highly and try to 'get to the point' with clarity in the lessons I give - not always easy!

I mentioned Zafer assigning Dounis studies in lessons. Metro Kozak did as well. So the mystique of the physician D.C. Dounis had been lingering for a while in my youth. This was reinforced further upon meeting violinist John Lowry during the summers of 1988-90 at the Courtney Summer Festival on Vancouver Island. John is associate concertmaster in Calgary and he had studied with Zafer perhaps 8 years before my time. John had also studied at length with Dounis-disciple George Neikrug and my many lessons with John at Courtney got me intrigued to learn from Neikrug too. Neikrug studied with Dounis for 15 years and is considered the leading proponent of Dounis's teaching. Neikrug is actually a cellist and taught many years at Boston University. I had 25 private lessons at his home outside of Boston where Neikrug would play my violin backwards (as though a cello) by standing facing me with the violin supported under my neck. I brought Wieniawski's Scherzo-Tarantella to a lesson and he played it on my violin this way - astonishing!! The lessons with Neikrug were so completely different than anything I had experienced. It was like having a medical exam at times. But the epiphanies I experienced in terms of finger dexterity and muscle awareness/efficiency improved my playing by a whole new chapter. I do the dexterity exercises I learned from Neikrug almost every day. There is a great deal of patience involved with these exercises and it takes about three months to make the first big leap in finger independence - particularly since the idea is to relax and use the least amount of muscle contraction needed to accomplish the exercise. Neikrug was obsessed with Fritz Kreisler's sound and everything we did had to have that shimmering vibrato. Neikrug also insisted I develop the Leningrad bow-arm attributed to Leopold Auer. This pushing the bow on the down-bow rather than pulling is the anti-thesis of the Galamian Franco-Belgium aesthetic. I loved employing this Russian bow hold for that period but ultimately dropped the style when I returned to Toronto and needed to blend-in with the Galamian-like broad sound that is more the professional norm nowadays.

By 1993 I was ready for grad school. I had played for countless teachers by this point (mostly string quartet players since I was especially keen to pursue a quartet career). My friend Steven Sitariski, a brilliant Toronto violinist had just won a position as co-concertmaster in Winnipeg and suggested I study with Joyce Robbins at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. I took a lesson with her in New York City at her lovely apartment on 72nd Street on the Upper-East Side (I happened to be in NYC on tour with the Canadian Opera at the time. We were performing Bartok's Blue Beard's Castle at the Brooklyn Academy. Fun times, I miss so much!).

Joyce had me figured out in about 10 mins. She was eerily empathetic and was able to transport herself into other people and figure out their bow arms!. Joyce came from a family of musicians. Her brother Channing Robbins was a cellist and sister Rena (who married the famous Harvey Shapiro) was a violinist too. All three of them were at the Juilliard School after WWII. Joyce became an assistant to Ivan Galamian at the Juilliard and also one of the only women in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at the time. Joyce schooled me in the finer points of Galamian's bow concepts. I refined my bow arm extensively in my three years with Joyce at Stony Brook, finding finesse in legato, open-sound, and spiccato/brush stroke control. We also worked diligently on my shifting and scale work (she made me record my scales - ugggh!). Joyce was eloquent and very personal in her approach to talking about music and its emotions. She was nurturing in a way that made me feel like it mattered on every level what I did with my music and my life, and she was really there to hear me out! Her generosity was boundless. There were several practise weekends at her summer home in Connecticut where she would teach us for free for three days at a time. I remember her often eavesdropping on my morning scale practise - knocking on my door and asking me to make my F# a bit higher. Joyce knows exactly what to say and how to say it when it needs to be said and her holistic approach was especially welcome at that time in my life. She spoke to my intellect, soul, and physical awareness (and improved my manners!) in ways that were transformative for me. And she knew where to draw the line - knew when it was time to disengage as pseudo-psychologist. She made the impression clear that she expected her students to become refined human beings as much as accomplished violinists. When I feel selfish, insecure, or dark, I try to think of Joyce and of her inner glow and ability to dance the dance of life with grace.

Nowadays, my colleagues in the Penderecki Quartet are my teachers. They challenge me daily to find more musical and tonal clarity in all I do with them. Thanks guys! And my family of course enters into my teaching in ways that would be endless to describe. There are a lot of hard-working determined people in my family and frankly, good ol' fashion elbow-grease works well in a music career. Amen to that! Though I've learned hard work for violinists is most effective when we are keenly alert in the practise room. This is nicely described as 'deliberate practise' in Geoffrey Colvin's recent book Talent is Overrated. I think a person needs to be balanced and emotionally centred to do their best work in the practise room and especially on stage. Most of us feel that our best work is still yet to come, that there is yet another level of enlightenment we can attain. For me, this is what is so uplifting about a career in music on a personal level. Our work is never done and yet what a privilege it is to be a part of such an incredible canon of performers and composers. As Joyce Robbins says, "you have to earn your place on that stage!" And so when you've put your hard deliberate work in, then so be it. You've earned it, enjoy it!!