

STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY: JAMES LYON

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.” This famous quote attributed to Albert Einstein summarizes the kind of environment in which learning best takes place. Good teaching is always about more than merely imparting knowledge; mere facts can be transmitted without the intermediary of a teacher. Socrates realized asking questions led students to develop their own opinions on the subject being examined. Jesus knew this by teaching through parables instead of lecturing his listeners, and thus leading them to draw their own conclusions rather than be told what to think. Good teaching fosters and nurtures students’ desire to learn by creating an environment in which questioning and creativity are valued and in which students both support and challenge one another’s ideas.

In learning to play the violin there is first the obvious physical challenge of acquiring the skill necessary to make pleasing sounds on the instrument. Our methods of acquiring technical mastery of the instrument are derived through observation of the great violinists who have graced our concert halls through the centuries. It is important that we realize that each of these artists had idiosyncrasies to their playing that were personal and interesting, but not necessarily cornerstones of their art that others should try to emulate. For instance, Brahms’ great contemporary and friend, Joseph Joachim, had the unusual approach of keeping his bowing arm so close to his body that he could hold a book under it. Yet one of Joachim’s pupils, Leopold Auer, went on to found the so-called Russian School of bowing that is diametrically opposed to Joachim’s approach: the elbow is generally well above the wrist with quite strong pronation onto the index finger. The beauty of this example is that Joachim did not make a requisite of his peculiar bowing technique and instead he allowed Auer to develop his own personal approach to playing based on his own physiology and anatomy. Comfort and efficiency are really the only absolutes in the proper set-up of a violinist and it is essential that the teacher help students with these issues in every lesson. If we follow these axioms, we will probably find most violinists playing with somewhat similar approaches, but they will not look like clones of one another.

The other important job of a violin teacher is the cultivation of an awareness of music as a language, with different “dialects” appropriate for different style periods. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to expose my students to myriad approaches to the same repertoire, give them solid musical footing on which to base their own ideas through treatises of the period and other scholarly writings, and encourage them to develop their own interpretations based on what they have observed and learned. One student will go “all the way” and play Bach on a Baroque violin with a period bow, another will simply apply the precepts learned from their research to the modern instrument. Some students will inevitably rely more on instinct than intellect, while for others the reverse will be true. My job as teacher is to expose them to the various possibilities, guide them through the process of developing their own interpretation, and ultimately to help each student find his/her own unique voice.

Perhaps my strongest statement as a teacher can be made through my own playing, for leading by example has a compelling ability to inspire others to do the same. This season I have already performed early music on Baroque violin, music by living composers at the Ear Taxi Festival in Chicago, and given a world premiere in Arizona. For I, too, am still exploring the possibilities and searching for different facets of my own true voice. As an ideal, my perfect musical interpretation will always remain just out of reach, but the journey is as important as the destination and it is this approach that I hope informs every lesson that I teach and every performance that I give.