

UCLA Audition

One of the best violin lessons I ever got was from my piano teacher. As you have doubtless learned from other of my music stories, it was my piano teacher who taught me the 19th century European method of music practice, which involved very, very slow but perfect self-programing of small bits, then building them into bigger bits. I found his approach revolutionary; in spite of the fact that it was so old, I had never heard of it. I found it to be enormously effective, and it made me a much better pianist overnight. Whatever small success I have enjoyed as a professional pianist, I owe to Richard Bunger. However, I was somewhat reticent to apply the same practice principles to the violin, until this happened:

I was getting ready to do an audition for a scholarship to graduate school at UCLA; I was going to play the last movement of the Bartok Unaccompanied Sonata, which is a really brilliant, devilishly difficult work. I went to Bunger's house to play the piece for him, and he made the same types of comments he made at my piano lessons—I was practicing it too fast, it sounded kind of out of rhythm, it was out of tune. "Richard, why don't you just play it slower, in better rhythm, and cleanup those out-of-tune notes?"

Well, I argued with him. I explained how you really couldn't practice slow on a violin because when you move the bow slow you get a different tone quality, and you can practice with that sound, blah, blah, blah. I was so completely stupid. However, having made a fool of myself in front of my teacher, he graciously allowing it, I went straight home and practiced the Bartok his way. In a single day I cleaned it up an enormously—it was one of the best auditions I ever played—and I got the scholarship. That audition paid my tuition for my first year of graduate school, during which I played in the orchestra under Sam Krachmalnik, the greatest conductor that I've ever played for. I learned from him, and imitated him, and became his kind of conductor.

I think there are several morals to this story. One of them is that, if you do good work, good things happen to you. But the main one is that the musical consciousness that allows us to achieve mastery on one instrument

is the same consciousness which allows us to transfer our skill from one instrument to another.

Most of my students study more than one instrument with me; because there are so many ways that music can be fun, I like to hit all the bases. Even though I've seen it happen many times, I'm always surprised when I start a violin student on the piano, or a piano student on the violin, and see progress vastly more accelerated than when I start a student from scratch. It is an almost completely effortless transition and just goes to show that the musicianship part of my course, the part that cultivates the higher musical consciousness, not just the note-scratching-out consciousness, is at least as important as the hands-on work.