

Getting Better Unaware/The Puppy

When I was in college, I played the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. In the middle of the first movement there is an extended double-stop passage which is very difficult.

The first time I played it for my teacher, he said, "This is so badly out of tune I can't even hear the tune!" Well, you can imagine how an arrogant stubborn little undergraduate violinist would take offense at such a remark; I walked out of there with my back completely up, determined to show this jerk what I was made of.

I practiced more that week than at any other time in my whole four years of college. And yet, it seemed to me that the more I practiced the worse the passage got. I slaved and struggled to make it better, but at the end of each session it still sounded horrible to me. The next week I slouched into my lesson with my tail between my legs, and whined about how I practiced and practiced and practiced and practiced and practiced and I still couldn't get it any better. So my teacher says, "Well, get out your violin and then let's hear it," at which point I struggled one more time through the passage. At the end, he looked at me with a grin on his face and said "It's almost perfect!"

I'm sure my jaw dropped. I couldn't believe how this trained professional could mistake that baloney I just played for "almost perfect!" Only later I came to understand.

Suppose you have a new puppy. You live with the puppy every day and as time passes the puppy gets bigger. The thing is, you never notice the puppy getting bigger because the puppy gets bigger so slowly that your sense of proportion doesn't detect a an appreciable change; however if a friend of yours came over and saw the puppy on Monday, and then came over again two weeks later on Friday, the difference in the size of the puppy would seem dramatic, because the puppy has really grown quite a bit since two weeks ago Monday.

This is how our our envisioned goal of excellence, coordinates with our actual accomplishments. The idea you have in your head of how good you want to sound is always better than you actually can do—good players

are hardly ever satisfied with a performance because they can always see so many ways it could have been better. This is the curse of perfectionism: you keep getting better, but you can't cherish it, you can't affirm it in yourself, because you can't even perceive that you are improving. This is what the teacher is for—to help you assess your progress objectively.

This is also what a tape recorder is for. I always suggest that students make a cassette tape diary—record themselves for a minute or two, on no particular practice day, and then a week later record the same piece onto the same piece of tape, and then a week later do it again, and so on, and so on. If you do this, after six months you will have an accurate and, usually, very rewarding record of your musical growth right there in black and white. In particular, I recommend this technique for right before a performance: I have recorded many rough drafts of concerts, and have always benefited enormously from listening to the rehearsals over and over again, in my car for instance—making mental notes about problems that needed to be worked out, and getting confidence about what was already sounding pretty good.

It is always so easy for the ego to intrude into the process of music-making. Insofar as ego motivates us to achieve and to compete, it is a good thing; but when it causes us to experience self-doubt, and takes the joy out of playing, ego needs to be dumped in the trash. What counts is the music. The sense of rightness, the sense of belonging, feelings of love—these are the positive benefits of playing music that ego considerations can so easily compromise; therefore, whenever we can, we need to be rational, and reasonable, (and forgetful) about where our niche is located in the Great and Glorious Hall of Fame.