

The Monterey Symphony Story

My violin teacher, Paul Rolland, was an internationally known teacher, and teacher-of-teachers. He had lots and lots of students, but, like me, he was a pig for talent, and whenever he stumbled across a gifted kid, he wanted to add him/her to his list. He picked me out of a crowd at the University of Illinois' Summer Youth Music Camp, and offered to teach me. This was one of the most significant events in the history of my life.

Remember, this was the 60's; everybody was experimenting with everything, flocks of sacred cows were being put out to pasture, and new ideas were flooding every arena of civilized human activity. In this spirit of investigation and experimentation, Rolland was re-figuring the essentials of violin technique; and he freely used his students, including me, as the subjects of his laboratory experiments. He would try one technique with one student, and then try a different technique on a different student to see which one did better. Consequently, when my violin technique reached a finished form, there were features of it which were very different from most of the other violin students that I knew and played with.

This never bothered me, because I always thrived on being different; as I graduated into the ranks of the professionals, in Los Angeles, I continued to notice differences between my basic position and that of other pro players. As I got deeper into my 20s, and started teaching for a living, my students started coming to me with insecurity feelings about how different their technique was from their peers. The only defense I could make was that violin technique, like so many things, has continued to evolve over time, and that it is a law of nature that old ways of doing things are gradually replaced by new ways of doing things based on the new information and new insight. Paul Rolland was the first violin teacher, to my knowledge, to go deeply into the actual physiognomy of violin playing; and many of his technical innovations were based on original research in this area. The technique was working for me, so I needed no justification to tell my students other than to trust their teacher, as I had trusted mine. I told them that it was a good thing, a remarkable thing, that my teacher was ahead of his time.

It was a clever argument, and I passionately believe it, mostly on faith; then something very interesting happened that confirmed my theory, and it vindicated my teacher.

When I was about 35, closer to 40, the Monterey Symphony performed a conductor search; the old senile German guy who had been conducting the orchestra for many years, was finally retiring, and everybody associated with the orchestra was anxious for an infusion of young blood—remember that line, "young blood".

For those of you who don't know this, when a Metropolitan Orchestra of seeks a new conductor, there is, typically, a year of auditions (that's usually about seven programs). Each of the conductors on the committee's short list comes and conducts a concert set (usually five rehearsals and two concerts). At the end of the year, by some pseudo-democratic process, the new permanent conductor is chosen from among the seven.

One of the candidates in this round of auditions was a man named Kovalenko, a Russian. He came with a long list of distinguished credits, including previous conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony, a major professional orchestra. He was a very accomplished old pro, a master violinist, and he had a very lovely, though intense, working style. The orchestra members all voted overwhelmingly in favor of Kovalenko—there was only one problem: the head of the symphony board, was a retired U.S. admiral, and he was going to be gosh darned if he was going to let some darned Russian conduct his American orchestra! Mr. Admiral insisted on choosing a different man as permanent conductor, a younger musician from Arizona, named Clark Suttle.

When the orchestra members heard this decision, they were enraged and rose up in revolt; they all quit the orchestra except one clarinet player, an oboe player, a violinist, a violist, and a cellist. The rebels formed their own orchestra under Kovalenko, and attempted to compete with the Monterey Symphony establishment. Of course, this project was doomed to failure because the Monterey Symphony organization had all the power: it had the rehearsal hall, it had the support group, it had the timpani, it had an established following, and it had a U.S. admiral manning the forecastle. So,

instead of bowing to the orchestra's wishes, the symphony board simply chose to hire a whole new orchestra.

It was the best thing that ever happened to them, because, in one fell swoop, they cleansed the orchestra of a generation's worth of dead wood—old folks who had been in the orchestra for years and years, but who really weren't very good. The new crew consisted of some few old established pros from the area, like me, who for one reason or another had not previously played with the symphony, but it was preponderantly comprised of younger musicians, some out of San Jose, some out of Oakland, some out of the San Francisco Conservatory.

It was an interesting change for me, to now be one of the old pros among a group of younger kids just starting out, but the big shocker came when I noticed that the best of the younger players were all playing with the same technique that I had been using for years. I saw the same bow hold (fingers held at a right angle to the stick instead of leaning), I saw the same violin-thumb position, (straight and well back behind 1st finger), and I even heard the same kind of scale warm-ups, using the Kreisler shift, that I have always used to introduce students to position work.

The conclusion from this is obvious: the technique that I learned from my innovative teacher, (which was either invented by him personally, or was a distillation of current (60's) cutting-edge thinking), had taken about a generation to become common practice. There were still plenty of people in the orchestra who played with the old-fashioned Heifetz technique, but there was definitely a discernible trend toward the American Isaac Stern technique.

One of the biggest problems I see in the violin playing of young people, in my town, stems from an almost identical historical phenomenon: it is simply that the technique taught in the Suzuki books is totally old school. Most of the Suzuki teachers I have known play with the older European position, which promotes numerous technical problems including:

- 1.) difficulty negotiating position work,
- 2.) ugly, inflexible vibrato,
- 3.) but tight non-projecting sound,
- 4.) and open the door to many horrible violin diseases, like tendinitis, headaches, back pain, and chinrest zits.

This story just goes to show that very often the road less-traveled becomes the road most-traveled over time, especially if it's a good road.