

Movement Stories

Movement is one of the cornerstones of my teaching. Both my great violin teacher, Paul Rolland, and my great piano teacher, Richard Bunger, taught me characteristic ways of engaging the whole body in music performance. The quality of my sound, and the density of my interpretive nuances, come from my ability to relax my muscles, and lets them respond intuitively to the flow of subtle energies of higher spiritual reality through my body.

When I can't move I feel trapped, constrained, muted. Consequently, when people watch me play, my performance energy appears higher than the usual run of sideman string players sitting around me. The fact is that most players are not normally as uninhibited in their movements as I am; and yet people want to move, they want to let the music into their bodies and let it dance around—they only have to be given permission.

I have played in many pickup orchestras (groups assembled by a contractor for a single cultural event, for instance a Messiah, or some other community orchestra performance) with people whom I have never met or played with before. Normally in these situations, the players are somewhat cool to each other at first, because they're strangers, and because they need time to get used to each other. When I rehearse, I don't waste any time—I jump right in and start rocking out. I have played with stand partners who were totally offended by my extroversion, but most of the time my energy proves to be contagious, first infecting my stand partner with increased energy, pretty soon the whole section, and pretty soon the whole orchestra—everybody throwing themselves into it with physical abandon, and joy, just because I had the guts to be the first one.

When I was a street musician I spent many hours listening to music at the Hollywood Bowl; my partner and I would arrive two hours before the show and play for the people going in (the in-pitch), go to the concert, and then play for the buffalo herds of people stampeding down the hill for the out-pitch. We did this for a period of around two years, at the time when Zubin Mehta was the primary conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Not to digress into a criticism of a conductor whom 98% of the New York

Philharmonic already found to be musically incompetent, it must be said that Mehta is a showman, and loves to have all the attention on himself. Now, the concertmaster of the orchestra, Sydney Harth, a great, great player, is a madman—he moves at least as much as I do—and he certainly wasn't going to take any playing direction from Zubin Mehta; however, I got the distinct impression that all the other string players had been told to sit still. Many conductors give their players this instruction—after all they don't want anybody mistaking this for a rock concert.

My theory was confirmed when Mehta left Los Angeles for New York, and Carl Maria Guilini, a great conductor, took over. The change in the orchestra's string sound was dramatic, as all the players began really moving and dancing with the music. They looked better, they sounded better, and they just simply channeled more energy.

Now, the problem of inhibition is not a trivial one. I have taught many junior high and high-school kids who are at that age when they're very self-conscious about their changing bodies, and find uninhibited physical movement very embarrassing. I had one beautiful blonde girl whose fingers could blaze away at the piano faster than any student I ever remember teaching, but she could not use her weight to play chords because she could not move on the bench if anybody was watching. I used to go behind a screen, and she would play chords—sometimes with arm weight movement, sometimes without—to see if I could tell the difference; I could always tell.

One of the features of my summer classes is a video review of many important musical performances and performers. I emphasize performances in which movement is a component, and this is not very difficult because most of the great players create a large, centered playing space for themselves, and then project the spiritual energy outward from that center, through physical movement.