

Learning to Play Soft

I already told you how I learned to play loud by playing "through the bus". I also need to tell you how I learned to play soft.

I had just finished taking classes for my master's degree at UCLA, and Louise, in an exchange program with UC Santa Cruz, was going to go to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, for a semester. I was invited to go along. So, in the fall of 1978, we found ourselves cohabiting a dorm room and on one of the most prestigious Ivy League campuses in the world.

I got a chance to see New York first, hated it, and returned to New Hampshire, looking forward to a bleak winter. I got a job bagging groceries at the local store, and settled in. Very soon after, I made contact with the University Orchestra conductor; I came to play a rehearsal that same night, and by the end of the evening I was hired to play in four orchestras.

Now, we have to backtrack a little bit and review one of my most embarrassing, infantile, unprofessional bad habits—when I was in my 20s, playing in pickup orchestras in Los Angeles, I used to play louder than everybody else, including the concertmaster, just out of arrogance, just because I could do it. I was so full of myself back then, so insecure, so blind, I reveled in my individuality, and flaunted it, like a kid showing off his cut finger on the playground. I know that this behavior cost me many jobs, but I was so convicted by my own self-righteous attitude, the idea that I knew better than everybody else, that I refused to notice, and refused to change.

This all came to a halt when I started playing with these East Coast musicians. I have heard previously, and came to understand from experience, that the east coast musicians are obsessed with sound quality. They think about sound much more than any of the musicians I ever played with in California.

One of my teachers in acquiring this more refined sound consciousness was the Concord String Quartet, a famous, touring, much recorded string quartet, which was in residence at Dartmouth. These four guys were responsible for a lot of the chamber music leadership and

teaching in the area, and I came in contact with several of them fairly often. In fact, I eavesdropped on more than one violin lesson, in the music building, and began to get the idea—a sound concept that was based on a smoother, rounder sound, which was still capable of penetrating distance.

The thing I liked about my sound was that it was pure, and strong, and clear; I hated playing soft to because the sound got fuzzy. By listening to these lessons, and in responding to other input I got from stand partners, etc., I began to learn to make a soft, unfocussed sound which easily blended with other players, but which still had a fine high harmonic resolution; by moving the bow faster, over the fingerboard, with lots of bow-finger movement, it is possible to get a really soft sound with a grain to it, yes, but no ugly, complaining, gritty whine.

My tenure with the Vermont Symphony was the high point of my orchestral playing experience—most of the strings weren't that hot, but, in that orchestra, I heard some of the finest wind playing I've ever heard in my life, and some of the string players possessed an approach to sound which I envied and sought to emulate. The big issue was that I learned to put my inflated ego on a leash, to fit in, and to serve the music first.