

Right Brain Stories

The status of music as a right brain function is well known. There is an abundance of left brain functions involved in the performance of music—details like fingering, subtle rhythmic figures, fine pitch discrimination, etc.—but the big picture of music is always perceived and evaluated by the right brain. This knowledge allows the music student the opportunity of consciously balancing the hemispheres of his/her brain. This is important, especially today, in a computer dominated society, where prolonged high-level linear thinking is necessary for survival; all day long our children sit in class learning all sorts of left brain stuff, and we sit in offices adding columns of numbers, pushing all the right buttons, filling in all the right boxes—and we need something to get us in touch with our right brains; with our intuitive self, with our larger self. It is my opinion that the left brain defines the petty ego of the subject, the right brain defines the collective ego, and thereby leads to an experience of the subject's spiritual identity. Therefore, the importance of the right brain experience cannot be overestimated. The following three stories illustrate my point.

La Traviata:

I was concert-mastering of semi-pro opera orchestra in Silicon Valley one summer, and I had an interesting experience. It was not that great of a gig—the pay wasn't that good, the conductor was lame, it was too crowded in the pit, it was hot, and there was a mixture of both professionals and amateurs in the group which did not make for a particularly happy combination. Consequently there was a lot of negativity in their ranks, a lot of complaining, a lot of backstabbing. At this time I was going through one of my many psychic transformations, and was picking up on all this psychic pollution (with my newly refined inner radar) in a big way. This was especially annoying to me because I was enthralled with *La Traviata*, (the catchy little rhythms, all those touching solos), and I really wanted to play my best—all this negativity was coming between me and the music.

I decided to perform a kind of ritual act of turning my body away from the orchestra focusing my right ear (left brain) on the audience, and

only my left ear (right brain) on the orchestra. The results were remarkable—I found that I could zone out all the little bitchy vibrations in the air, and reach into the heart of the music. I was able to penetrate to the collective essence, getting around the bad vibes of the players. I might add, that many people remarked on this as the best playing they had ever heard me do in public, and I earned a lot of respect from my performance at this event.

Dave Kliger:

I had a student, Dave Kliger, who was an internationally known chemist, but a pretty lousy piano player. Obviously, he was a very smart guy, very, very left brain. He constantly stuttered when he played, no matter what I told him to do, no matter how slow we practiced. Whenever he made a mistake, he would react, stop and start—he never played more than half a measure fluently.

One day I got the idea to have him try the right brain trick I had used in *La Traviata*. I had him turn his head pointing his left ear (right brain) toward the piano, and his right ear (left brain) away from the piano. His playing instantly improved, and I was so stuck that I asked him why he wasn't stuttering anymore. He said, "I can still hear the mistakes, but they don't bother me as much. "

Gralen:

One of my dearest students was a high school girl named Gralen, whom I brought up to a professional level on the viola. Like Dave, she was a pretty brainy kid—she was valedictorian of her high-school class, winner of math competitions, etc. Like Dave, she had a problem with stuttering; when she played a scale up the string, she would always be fussing with her fingers, searching for the exact right note, and making this kind of obnoxious mumbling sound.

I did the same thing with her that I did with Dave: I turned her left ear (right brain) into the viola's f-hole (which is bad posture, but, oh well), and her right ear (left brain) away from the viola, and she instantly began playing not only with more confidence, but also with more pitch security.

It may seem to you that teaching yourself to hear with one ear would be kind of difficult, but it is not as hard as it sounds. A good exercise is to call up a friend of yours, and have him/her repeat a phrase into the phone such as, "God bless America, " or " I love my music teacher." As you listen, switch ears: you'll be able to tell a distinct difference in the way you hear and interpret words spoken into one hemisphere of the brain, opposed to the other. Once you know what to look for, you can apply this technique to your music practice. You don't want to do this all the time, because you need that left brain to keep you focussed on the details of your performance; but whenever you want to get at the big picture, whenever you're feeling you are not playing musically, turn off your left brain and listen, so to speak, with your heart.

I always say:

The eye is the doorway to the intellect.

The ear is the doorway to the heart.

Perhaps it is just the left ear.