

MICHAEL KLOTZ

The viola and violin pedagogue and string quartet violist highlights the importance of historical and theoretical studies for performance

What's your teaching background?

I'm primarily a violist, but I studied viola and violin at Juilliard and have an equal number of violin and viola students, both in college and privately. The instruments are not so different. There are some adjustments that need to be made: with the viola, I tend to ask students to play lower in the bow, with a little more weight in the bow hold. I pay even more attention to articulation on the viola – it doesn't speak as readily as the violin.

What is your students' most common problem?

Students often lack knowledge of the score of the piece they are playing. Yesterday, I had a student play Mozart's A major Violin Concerto. She had no idea about what she was doing relative to the orchestra, so we spent the majority of the lesson discussing the score. Many students also lack knowledge about the composers and their significant works. Schubert's 'Arpeggione' Sonata, for example, is a really great piece for violists – but there are other pieces by Schubert that are more significant: the G major Quartet, or the C major Quintet, or the 'Unfinished' Symphony. I encourage students to learn about the composer and the date of the piece they are playing – even if it's just from Wikipedia. It helps them think about how to approach the music.

How do you work on rhythm?

Many students who have little theoretical background have a problem with rhythm. I spend a lot of time working on this. Often if students play a piece that's well known, for example Bruch's First Violin Concerto, in rhythmic terms they play an amalgamation of the recordings they've heard – so when they're first learning a piece I ask them not to listen to a recording but to learn the piece as best they can from the score.

There are very intricate and sophisticated rhythms in the Rode caprices that I find really helpful for students to practise. I don't want my students to play metronomically, but sometimes I have to tell them to take the expression out of what they're doing in their practice and really just work on the mechanics. If there's a particular rhythm that they don't grasp, I'll speak it with them using 'ca ca ca' sounds, then get them to play it. It's incredibly natural for a student to speak a rhythm – often they will do it correctly almost inadvertently.

In what other ways can speech help playing?

Sometimes, when I'm working on intonation, I ask a student to sing a passage or interval. Almost always they play it in tune after that. When we speak the rhythm or sing the interval, I think that we internalise it, and then we can transfer that to our playing. There's an inexplicable connection between the human voice and the instrument.

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How else do you work on intonation?

I get students to isolate and break apart difficult areas, and to look at them from a theoretical standpoint. We think about the music harmonically, listening and relating the non-chordal notes to the chordal notes, talking about the intervals and adding double-stops to help them hear those intervals properly. We then identify some of the modulations in the piece, and play some scales in those keys. We also work on how tight we want the intervals to be: in certain keys you might want the



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leading note a little higher, to colour the sound. When we analyse the music and think about it from a theoretical standpoint, it helps them to listen better and to play much more in tune. Being able to identify the key you are playing in really helps with intonation. I see a big difference between students who have had theory as a grounding and those who haven't.

What exercises can you recommend to help students play in tune?

A lot of students play out of tune because they don't listen to themselves. The Carl Flesch scale book is invaluable – especially the three-octave scales and arpeggios. I get students to really listen, and occasionally to play around: to play a C sharp a little out of tune, for instance, and listen to what happens. There is a physical and emotional response when we play in tune: we feel more satisfied, and the instrument feels better – it opens up a little more. If someone has a real issue with intonation, we will also work on Ševčík op.8 exercises: they are very helpful for shifting and thinking in terms of intervals. ■

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING