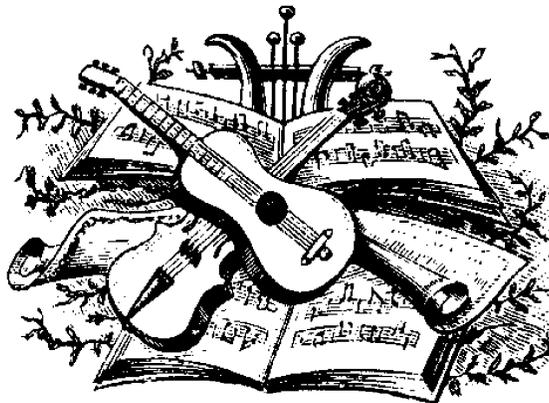


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# Message from the President

I am very excited about this issue of *Stringendo*. We have lots of information about local competitions written from all angles—teachers, performers, and judges. I know it will be a wonderful resource for teachers and students.

I would like to thank the membership for providing me the opportunity to attend the ASTA Conference in Kansas City in March 2011. I learned so much about string teaching and playing, saw old friends, met many new ones, and strengthened professional relationships. I invite everyone to consider attending the conference next year in Atlanta, March 21–24, 2012.

My big news is that Kurt Sassmannshaus, esteemed pedagogue from College Conservatory of Music University of Cincinnati, will be presenting a Teacher Certification Workshop for The Sassmannshaus Tradition Violin Method, this coming September in Maryland. (See the announcement below.) Professor

Sassmannshaus is offering this teacher training seminar to show how the unique aspects of this method can be taught. The method is groundbreaking in its approach for very young children. It features large print and teaches note reading from the first lesson. It focuses on early position playing and introduces advanced left hand and bow technique with familiar musical material. You can become a certified teacher by attending this intensive weekend workshop. Information will be on our web site and in our weekly emails. The workshop will be limited to 30 participants. Information will also be available on [www.violinmasterclass.com](http://www.violinmasterclass.com).

I have seen Professor Sassmannshaus teach in a variety of situations, and I highly recommend attending this workshop. Hope to see you all there!

*Cathy Stewart*



## Think Ahead!

**Plan to attend the  
Teacher Certification Workshop  
The Sassmannshaus Tradition Violin Method  
with**

**Kurt Sassmannshaus  
College Conservatory of Music University of Cincinnati**

**September 10–11, 2011  
The Lutheran Church of St. Andrew  
15300 New Hampshire Ave.  
Silver Spring, MD 20905**

**Tuition: \$225 for ASTA members, \$250 for non-members  
Workshop is limited to 30 participants.**

**Keep checking our website for details!  
[www.asta.net](http://www.asta.net)**

# ASTA MD/DC Chapter Annual Membership Meeting and Dinner for all MD/DC members and their guests!

Sunday, May 15, 2011

**Featuring:** Daniel Heifetz, violinist and director of the Heifetz Institute  
**Location:** Bonaparte Breads  
903 South Ann Street  
Baltimore, MD 21231  
**Time:** Meeting on the patio at 6:00 p.m.  
Dinner inside at 6:30 p.m.  
**Parking:** Street parking is available  
**Dinner:** Quiche, side salad, dessert, and drink  
**Cost:** \$21 per person



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name(s) of your guest(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Please select one:**             Ham and Swiss Quiche            How many? \_\_\_\_\_  
    Spinach and Feta Quiche (vegetarian)            How many? \_\_\_\_\_

**Total cost for dinner(s):** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

*Make your check payable to: ASTA MD/DC Chapter*  
*Send to: Jean Provine, Treasurer*  
*4611 Beechwood Rd.*  
*College Park, MD 20740*

**Deadline for reservations: May 7, 2011**

*Please check our website*  
*www.asta.net*  
*for more information!*

# 2011 ASTACAP Exams

The second ASTACAP exam of the year will be held on **Saturday, May 21, 2011**, at the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music, Catholic University, Washington, D.C. This issue of *Stringendo* will arrive after the application deadline April 21, 2011, but please consider entering your students in next year's exams!

Teachers, students, and parents who have participated in previous ASTACAP exams can attest to their value in preparing students for a performance/audition situation. The comments from the examiners are extremely helpful to all, and the level attained by taking the exam is important in assessing a student's level for orchestra auditions, etc. Students can also describe their ASTACAP achievements on their college applications.

The following information about the exams is also on our website:

**[www.asta.net/certificateprogram](http://www.asta.net/certificateprogram)**

The ASTA Certificate Advancement Program (ASTACAP) provides students with an incremental means of achieving playing goals, motivating them to persevere and excel in their instrument studies.

- There are eleven levels of graded curricula for violin, viola, cello, bass, and harp. (Guitar requirements to come later.)
- ASTACAP provides definite goals and awards for all students, from beginner to advanced levels, through non-competitive examinations.
- Students are judged on technical and musical preparedness at specific levels—Foundation Level through Level 10—by an examiner of musical and pedagogical stature.
- Each level is defined by a set of technical and musical goals (for instance: starting vibrato, third position, sense of style), along with corresponding study material.
- Completion of each level is demonstrated at a performance exam. The student plays one or more pieces, an etude, scales, and arpeggios. The student is also asked to sight read.

- The student's success is recognized by ASTA with the awarding of a Certificate of Achievement for each level successfully completed.

Teachers of all traditions find that ASTACAP complements and strengthens their programs. As a result of its great success in several ASTA state chapters, it was adopted as a national program in 2004. Benefits to ASTACAP teachers and students include, but are not limited to:

- Uniformity of expectations between states.
- Continual feedback through an examiner's comments on student progress.
- Documentation of achievements that can be used when applying to youth orchestras, summer music camps, and college admission.
- Professionally designed and printed certificates for students.
- Member access to the ASTACAP Handbook online.



# Considering Competitions for Pre-College Teachers

by Rebecca Henry, Peabody Institute

One of the many challenges we have as pre-college teachers is planning our students' solo performance opportunities in an educationally and musically sound way so that they are sharing their gifts with joy and confidence. For some students, performing a couple of times a year fits the bill, while others enjoy performing more often. Entering students in competitions is one option that may be of value for some students at certain points in their development. Teachers should consider each student individually in making recommendations and must prepare for the overall experience of entering any student in a competition.

It takes thoughtful communication with the student and family before and after a competition in order for the experience to be a positive tool for growth and development. Everyone involved needs to agree to accept the results with grace, regardless of the outcome, recognizing that judging musicians has subjective elements. Fully embracing this may take some experience, education, and support over time, and all parties can grow from this journey.

When considering what is best for a given student, entering a competition might be a good choice if the student

- practices and loves to perform;
- is motivated by performance goals and would enjoy preparing;
- needs more performance opportunities;
- could benefit from feedback from a jury;
- could benefit from the opportunities provided (ie. performance with an orchestra, scholarship to summer camp);
- is ready to perform outside the comfort of class recitals;
- is considering majoring in music in college;
- may grow from this experience.

There are times when it might be best to pass on a competition experience, such as if the student

- recently changed teachers;
- is focusing on technical changes;

- has done a lot of performing recently and taking time to assimilate skills and learn new music would be of more value in the long run;
- has conflicts with the date, school, or other events, making it hard to dedicate to the preparation involved;
- finds competitions stressful and does not enjoy them;
- has performed in competitions recently but has not placed, in which case it is important to assess the potential for the experience to be demoralizing. Even if you feel the student is making wonderful progress and is playing his best, it can be tough being repeatedly compared to others in competitions. Look for opportunities to build confidence and rekindle the joy of performing *sans* evaluations.

Once the teacher feels that a competition experience might be of value, it is time to look for an appropriate event. Here are some questions to consider:

- Do the age and repertoire requirements match the student?
- Does the student play at the general level of most students in the competition? If you are not sure, ask colleagues for advice;
- Is the timing in support of your educational and musical goals?
- Does the repertoire you are working on line up with the competition requirements? If so, it might be a good match. If not, changing plans to fit the competition might not be best in the long run;
- Are there times when you might want to select repertoire with the competition in mind? This may be helpful for competitions that require three contrasting pieces, a contemporary piece, and/or a concerto movement that the winner will play with orchestra.

After considering all of the above, it is time to invite the student, in consultation with the parent(s), to participate in a competition. Discuss the options with the student (competitions, repertoire, timing,

goals). Explain that there is value in preparation, performance practice, and feedback regardless of the outcome. Be very clear that you do not expect any particular outcome (i.e., *winning*). There is no way a performer can “try and win” a competition. In a foot race, one can be motivated to beat the competitor who is running next to him, but in music we can only strive to play our best in service of the music. Make a plan for practice and performances. Help identify a pianist who can give both musical and emotional support on competition day and require adequate rehearsals so they are comfortable as a unit.

Prepare the student as best you can, and as the competition approaches, offer specific instructions to the student and parent for competition day.

Once the competition is over, help the student and parent process the experience, the results, and the feedback in a supportive and educational way. Students who win or place receive a vote of confidence from the judges that can be very motivating. Congratulate them without overplaying the importance of the accomplishment. Often it is prudent to devalue specific hierarchical standings by reminding them that all the winners are playing at a very high level, and the exact order could change in a day with different performances or a different jury. Those who did not place usually understand that they did not play their best, or that the winners played at a higher level of refinement. Remind them that it is an honor to have participated, and focus on the aspects of the experience that will help them grow. Make sure the parents hear your responses, especially if you fear they are disappointed or even angry with their child.

Teachers must also maintain confidence in what they are doing with and for their students, regardless of

competition outcomes. While the jury hears your student objectively on a given day and will offer feedback, you know what it took to get to this point and where your student is on his journey towards artistry.

In talking through the feedback, highlight comments that reinforce things you are working on, and congratulate them on compliments to their strengths or show they have improved. I am always especially grateful for fresh insights on my students. Occasionally, a comment will be unkind or unhelpful, and damage control is necessary.

One of the best lessons I see that students take from putting themselves out there time and again is that they learn that no one performance or experience is the be-all or end-all with regards to their own self-worth or relationship to their instrument. They grow in the maturity with which they self-assess their performances and develop tremendous self-knowledge and confidence through the ups and downs of participating in competitions throughout their pre-college years.

Many developing artists in our area have had the opportunity to receive comments from outstanding musicians, get to know colleagues, play in world-class music halls, rehearse with conductors, and perform with orchestras. I am grateful to the organizations that offer these opportunities to the young artists of our area and encourage teachers to encourage their students to avail themselves of these opportunities where appropriate. Remember, though, that competitions are not necessary and are not for everyone, so take care in finding the most positive performing environment for each of your students.



# Competition Guidelines for Students and Parents

*by Rebecca Henry, Peabody Institute*

## Competition Guidelines For Students

### Preparation

- It is an honor to be invited to play in a competition; thank your teacher for this opportunity.
- Agree to enter after thinking carefully about whether you will have time to prepare.
- Agree to enter if you feel you can accept the decisions of the jury with grace even if you do not agree with the outcome.
- Make a plan for consistent practice over time. Do not cram practice.
- Prepare your music to the best of your ability.
- Practice performing in classes and concerts, and for family.
- Rehearse with your pianist until you are comfortable as a unit.
- Select your clothes and shoes two weeks ahead. Dress for a performance in age-appropriate clothes. If there is a question (or argument) about clothing, ask your teacher to advise.
- Ladies: Dressy blouse/skirt or dress below the knee; flats or low heels (*no* high heels or platform shoes); hair clipped so the audience can see your face. Dressy black slacks are fine for less formal events. Wear a gown if playing with an orchestra, or if the event is formal.
- Gentlemen: Dress shirt/slacks; black shoes and socks; necktie. Wear a jacket or tux if playing with an orchestra, or if the event is formal.
- Practice in your competition attire to make sure you have adequate movement in the shoulders/arms/neck and that you are comfortable and feel great.
- Have your clothes set out the night before the competition.
- Clean your instrument and pack extra strings, your piano part (even if the pianist has a copy), and any extra copies of your music that are required.
- No parties or sleepovers prior to competition day. Get lots of sleep.

### Competition Day

- Eat a good breakfast, but don't overeat soon before playing.
- Pack some healthy snacks (no sugar or caffeine) and a banana to eat an hour before performance, and plenty of water.
- Get to the site early so your instrument has time to adjust to the temperature of the building. Take an iPod for listening in the car if this calms you down.
- Consider wearing comfortable clothes to the site and changing there.
- Check in with the competition director as soon as you get there.
- Remember that the best that you can do is prepare well and perform your best. The results are out of your hands.
- Warm up slowly and carefully (no showing off).
- If possible, practice openings and transitions with your pianist to set tempi.
- Be kind to other entrants; wish them luck; don't be intimidated by what others are playing.
- Try and get an "A" from the piano and do a preliminary tuning before you go on stage.
- Walk on stage with confidence and bow before and after you play (bow slightly even if there is no applause).
- Tune softly, carefully, and quickly (if possible, but if in doubt, take the time to get your instrument in tune); don't turn your back to the judges.
- Have a preferred order in mind if there are multiple pieces, but be prepared for their choice.
- Play your heart out. Focus on the music itself. Smile! :-)
- Don't be surprised if they stop you during pieces, but be prepared to play everything, especially the cadenza.
- Be proud of yourself for preparing and performing!

- Thank the organizer/director/conductor, your teacher, your accompanist, and your parent(s) for the opportunity and for their support.
- Hang out with other participants and share stories. Support each other.
- Remember that you agreed to accept the outcome and respect the jury's decision with grace.
- If you win or place, be gracious with the other entrants. Show humility; do not brag. If you do not win or place, congratulate those who did.
- When people congratulate you, say "thank you;" *no* self-deprecating comments.
- Accept your parents' compliments, and share your feelings about the day if you feel comfortable doing so.
- Call or email your teacher to let him know briefly how the experience went for you. He will be happy to hear some feedback if he wasn't there.
- If you win or place, let your teacher know. She would love to hear the news from you.
- Get your family to take you out for a good meal!

### **Afterwards**

- Talk through your experience with your teacher, including the ups and downs of the experience and your performance.
- Share the jury's comments with your teacher so she can help put them into perspective and see how some of the suggestions might be applied to your practice in the coming months.
- All musicians play closer to their personal best in some performances and not in others. Share your observations and learn from this experience.
- It is perfectly natural to feel a let down after a big performance; there was a lot of energy building towards that moment and it is a relief to have it behind you. Take a couple of days to relax and reflect and then get back to practicing and work on some new music.

## **Competition Guidelines For Parents**

### **Preparation**

- Leave the invitation to participate in a competition to the teacher, then communicate

with him or her with regards to schedules, deadlines and fees.

- If you are aware of an opportunity that the teacher has not mentioned, mention it, and the teacher will consider whether it fits into the overall plan for your child.
- Check the calendar to be sure the date is clear of major exams or other stressors; be sure the student can play in the "Winner's Concert" if applicable.
- Agree to let your child enter only if you feel you can accept the decisions of the jury with grace even if you do not agree with the outcome.
- Help your child manage time and stress leading up to the competition. Contact the teacher with any insights that may be of value to share.
- Secure an accompanist with advice from the teacher.
- Schedule rehearsals with the accompanist so your child is fully prepared and comfortable. Be prepared to pay the accompanist professional rates. A good pianist who offers both musical and emotional support is well worth the price.
- If you videotape the performance, have fresh tapes and a charged battery.
- Help prepare the competition clothes. Select clothes prior to the event and ask the teacher to resolve any conflicts. (See specifics under student guidelines).
- Support everything listed on the STUDENT GUIDELINES as needed.

### **Competition**

- Prepare healthy snacks (banana, protein bar, fruit) and water for competition day.
- Have directions and get there early. It is very stressful to be late prior to a performance.
- Limit your conversation and directives on competition day. Give your child mental space to relax, focus, and take ownership of his performance.
- Afterwards, congratulate other students and their parents, creating an environment of respect and support to model for your child.
- Look to other parents for support, not rivalry.
- Compliment your child, but don't be surprised

if she (especially teens) is dismissive of your remarks and highlights the weak parts of her performance. Let her talk about the experience when she is comfortable doing so, which might be in a day or two.

- Don't be surprised if your child shows extremes of emotion after the event—from bragging to crying to shutting down. Be respectful of the fact that he just expended a lot of mental and emotional energy and may need time to recoup before talking about the experience with any mature perspective.
- Take your child out for a good meal to celebrate participation in the event.
- Call or email the teacher to let him know how the experience went for your child unless he is old enough to do this himself. Express any concerns to the teacher so he can help your child process the results in a healthy way.
- If your child wins or places, remind your child to let the teacher know. She would rather hear it from your child than anyone else.

#### **Afterwards**

- Remember that you agreed to accept the outcome and respect the jury's decision with grace. Set a good example for your child. Ask the teacher privately if you have questions or concerns about the outcome.
- This is just one of many performances your child will give over the years and may be a high point or a low point. Help your child celebrate achievements and offer support through insecure times, but don't over react to the outcome.
- Videotapes: If you were allowed to tape a performance, let your child decide when he wants to view it and with whom. Respect his wishes if he wants to watch it alone, and family viewings should focus on compliments. Let the teacher give the constructive criticism.
- Let your child have a bit of a break and encourage her to play for fun.
- Thank the teacher and accompanist for their support.
- Remember what you learned from this experience for the next time!



*Rebecca Henry holds the Scott Bendann Chair in Classical Music at The Peabody Institute, where she teaches violin pedagogy and mentors students in the Masters of Performance/Pedagogy degree at the Conservatory. She chairs the Peabody Preparatory String Department where she teaches violin and viola, is co-director of the Peabody Chamber Camp, and directs Peabody's Pre-Conservatory Violin Program, for which she received funding from the Dorothy and Richard Starling Foundation. She is also on the faculty at the Baltimore School for the Arts and the Indiana University Summer String Academy. Her former students are performing and teaching around the world.*

# The Joys and Sorrows of Judging

by Robert Battey

Being a competition/contest judge is no fun. You have lots of help in second-guessing your decisions, and you sometimes end up withholding a prize from someone you really want to encourage. I've had angry parents get in my face, teachers who sent snide e-mails, and contestants who broke down crying. But I keep doing it because, for me, it's "giving back" to a profession that has given me much.

Everyone talks about competitions being a "necessary evil," which I've always found an interesting term—the two words sit next to one another in great tension. But, indeed, is it "necessary" that someone study music at all? If the answer is *yes* (which I hope it is), then the only question is how rigorous a path should we adults compel students to take. And here we have at least four different stakeholders often pulling in different directions: the student, the parent, the teacher, and the various musical institutions and their requirements. In a perfect world everything lines up at a competition: the student is gifted, the teacher ideal, the parents supportive but not pushy, and the competition requirements fit exactly into what the student needs at that point. And this happens sometimes. But mostly not.

It generally *does* happen at a conservatory audition. Rare is the student who prepares an audition and travels to the school but whose heart isn't in it. At that point, everyone expects all the interests to be aligned—same with an upper-level competition like the Washington International Competition. In these sorts of situations, the only thing anyone worries about is *who's the best?* And as for the losers, well, they'll live. Buck up and try again next time.

But things are rarely this straightforward at local and regional pre-college competitions and contests. It is here where these different stakeholders can have differing interests, and harmonizing them can be difficult. My contribution is in representing the institution; I am neither a parent nor a teacher of younger students. But in my official capacity, I am keenly aware of the tension between the stakeholders, and often have to make a close decision about which interest I should be serving at any particular moment. Or whether there's an even greater interest out there.

*The Student.* I believe all of us musicians have a sacred duty to promote and advance the art form. This means, among other things, helping young people to enter our ranks. Thus, whenever and wherever I see a young person with an instrument case, I give them an encouraging smile or sometimes ask them something. I believe a young student should never be belittled or embarrassed by an adult. Such an experience will simply make it more likely that the student will quit—and not only quit but harbor bitter feelings when he or she becomes a potential audience member and consumer in adulthood.

This is not in any way to say that everyone who takes up an instrument should continue it no matter what. Of course, the demands of instrumental study, particularly of string instruments, are not for everyone. While the student should be strongly supported in this pursuit, two things should also be going on. First, the student should be made aware of standards for his or her peer group and the average time commitment necessary to meet them. If there is a continuous gap between what the student is willing and/or able to do and what everyone else is, that is telling. Again, this awareness can be obtained without dressing-down, but it must be a part of the mix. Which brings us to the second point—that parents and teachers need to know, with each child, when pushing crosses the line into harassing and browbeating.

I want to stress that I am unqualified to advise any parent or teacher of young students, but as a contest judge, it is very, very plain to me when a student is up there doing something he or she does not wish to be doing. And at such moments, what is *my* responsibility?

*The Parent.* The music world has been abuzz lately over the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and its harrowing (to some) description of parental force-feeding. I don't wish to wade into that morass (again, because I'm unqualified), but I do want to share a frequent dilemma I have as a judge. I often have to make a choice between a performance that was marred by occasional technical glitches but which was original and moving, and one which was cleaner but duller. And no, the latter are not uniformly from

Asian students. But to the parents out there, I have several things to say:

- 1) I admire, respect, and applaud your support for your child's music training and realize that in many cases it was a challenge and a struggle for you.
- 2) As I've said, the different stakeholders can be pulling in different directions. If your child has a teacher you trust, I would urge you to communicate closely with him or her about what's best for your child, i.e., let there be no hidden agendas. If a child is terrified about an upcoming competition, that needs to be discussed. (If, on the other hand, the child's indifferent, the teacher will realize it quickly enough.)
- 3) If you are not sure that this particular student-teacher match is working well, talk about that, too. I have never known a teacher to insist that he or she is the right one for every student. Give the teacher the respect of honesty and directness. It is in your child's interest.
- 4) Some teachers have large studios and set fairly detailed internal policies. Others have only a few students and operate more loosely, perhaps giving more personalized attention to each student. Neither approach is inherently better; you have to figure out which environment enables your child to thrive and succeed.
- 5) A talented, ambitious child will practice on his or her own. If your child requires constant supervision, the results, at some level, will eventually be unsatisfactory. Just sayin'.

*The Teacher:* To my friends and colleagues out there: I'm all for ambition, all for stretching a talent to see how far it can go. But realize that while you're working these issues out, other kids are showing up at your students' competitions with their repertoire pegged more precisely to their abilities. And I give no points for difficulty of repertoire; if anything I take points off for ill-advised choices, which is not the students' fault, but there it is. Tammy or Tommy may be dying to work on the Tchaikovsky Concerto, and that yearning can yield more practicing than otherwise. But if the piece is a stretch, just realize that someone's going to show up at the competition with a Mozart Concerto and play it strongly, and I'm going to give that kid the prize. Maybe your kid

is better and would have outplayed that one had he done Mozart—but he didn't.

With that out of the way, let me commiserate. I used to teach in a conservatory, and there were few things more aggravating than having to suspend productive technical work so that a student could throw something together for an external competition or audition. We are there to help the student succeed, and nothing succeeds like success. If you don't try, you'll never succeed, etc., etc. But I am well aware that taking part in a particular competition does not always fit into your curricular goals for a student. And you must sometimes weigh the value of letting him or her enter, particularly when you know that he or she has very little chance of winning.

I have no advice for you here; the variables are so individualized that there's no generalization worth making. The main variable is whether it's a contest or competition. In the former, where everyone just gets a grade and comment sheet, the downside to sending a student in unprepared is probably limited. In a competition, more is at stake, for both you and the student. But in either case, if you're going to send the student, do your best to get everyone to be fully invested.

*Competitions.* There are many issues I could talk about, but I'll only mention a couple. Before the competition is even announced, decisions have to be made about requirements. And one problem that defies any solution is that of the "contemporary work." This loaded phrase has led to years (in one case) of disputes between organizers. I would say of the "contemporary work" what Justice Stewart said of pornography: "I may not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it."

Categorizing a piece by date is pointless; my most egregious example of this is when one competition required a piece "written since 1945," and the contestant brought in "Theme from 'Schindler's List.'" Webern's pieces for violin (Op. 7) and cello (Op. 11) fit the bill exactly, but they were written all the way back in 1914! And today, more and more twenty-first century music is in a fully tonal style. The point (it seems to me) is to take the student outside of a "comfort zone," away from the standard notation, styles, tonalities, etc., that he or she encounters in orchestra and other repertoire. To me, the Bartok "Roumanian Folk Dances" doesn't pass,

but the “Second Rhapsody” certainly does. And then there’s Ives...

I trail off because, as I said, this problem is intractable. The only “solution” is an impracticable one: that before beginning work on a questionable piece with a student, the teacher submits the work for clearance from a judge or committee on the competition. Rarely happens.

As for the playing itself, I know that a big part of the experience is in the comment sheets the judges fill out. I take this responsibility very seriously and know that I’m writing for multiple audiences. In a competition setting (as opposed to a contest), my approach is to be especially supportive and encouraging towards students who are unlikely to win anything. I want them to feel that the experience was worthwhile. To those who are going to take home prizes, I feel that they should be able to handle more direct criticism, since it’s offset by their winning.

In my comments I’m trying to be supportive of both teacher and student, while pointing out areas for improvement. Over many years of doing this, I have certainly come to some private conclusions about certain teachers (of course, I’m not told who studies with whom until the competition is over). And if I see what I believe to be a counter-productive pattern, I am on the horns of a dilemma over what to do about it. I’m not there to tell anyone how to do their job; I’m just there to say which student played the best (and next best) on a given day. But when I feel that the purpose of the entire exercise has been misunderstood, I have to walk a tightrope with my comments.

What gets my attention over everything else is musical maturity, ideas that didn’t come from a cookie-cutter, and the sense that the student is in communion with a composer’s inner feelings. This always has and always will be rare. Some things can be taught and some things can’t be. When someone shows up in full possession of both types of things, he or she gets the brass ring. But I worry more about the non-winners, trying to figure out why it happened, and if there’s anything I can do to help them do better the next time. Or, if nothing else, to contribute to their understanding and enjoyment of this pursuit.

Sorting out all the interests of the four stakeholders, as well as the broader responsibility to promote both quantity and quality of the art form can be incredibly

hard. But I do believe in competitions as a general proposition. I would be a poorer cellist today had I not entered some, and I try to make it a positive experience for all concerned.



*Cellist Robert Battey grew up in Montgomery County and now lives in Arlington, Virginia. He is an active teacher, performer, clinician, competition judge, and writer. He has served on the faculties of the State University of New York, the University of Missouri, the Levine School, the Gettysburg Chamber Music Workshop, Cellospeak, and Point CounterPoint. He has judged contests and competitions at all levels for many years, locally including Gretchen Hood, Jack Weaver, Johansen, Washington International, and others.*

# Grateful Memories

by Emil Chudnovsky

I grew up in a musician's family. Please note that I didn't say a "musical family"—a sentence that is encountered so frequently as to have attained the status of cliché. A "musical" family might be defined as one that loves music, or where one or both parents play an instrument for their own pleasure, or where that pleasure imposes music lessons on the speaker in childhood. The usual continuation of the sentence is something along the lines of "I grew up in a musical family. Uncle Ezekiel played the didgeridoo and Aunt Hephezzibah enjoyed her collection of Caruso records so much that Mama and Papa insisted I take tuba lessons from the town bandleader."

But, no, mine was a *musician's* family: my mother is a concert violinist and my late father was an opera conductor. As such, the family histories and legends that are every family's identifying fingerprint were, in my case, composed of musical war stories. I grew up on tales of how mom and dad met playing chamber music after her triumphant debut in the town where he held his first conducting post. I was nurtured on after-dinner anecdotes of what Famed Musician X wittily murmured at Famed Musician Y's pivotal concert. And, of course, as the son of a three-time international competition winner and laureate, I was steeped in a measuring of success and glory through competitive epics. My *Iliad* was the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition, my *Odyssey* was mom's salvation at the hands of Henryk Szeryng at the Enescu Competition. My *Morte d'Arthur*, my *Lord of the Rings*, my *Aeneid*—they all contained the words "International" and "Competition."

It, therefore, seemed inevitable that when the time came to try my own strength, I would also do it through the international competition route. In fact, the only surprise was that I started doing so as late as I did. Whereas most of the people I met on the competition circuit had embarked upon it in their mid-teens, I did my first international competition at age twenty and, in so doing, I learned the first oddity about competitions—namely, that while the official age limit of most international competitions is thirty, and while piano competition winners tend to be in their late twenties, the overwhelming majority of violin competitions are entered and won by people

who are sixteen to twenty-four years old. Various explanations have been floated for this, but science and statistics have yet to come up with an absolutely certain clincher argument. It is also a particular point of pride for me that seven of my nine international prizes were from an age—my late twenties—when most people have already thrown in the towel, an age when juries tend to dismiss one's realistic chances even before one has played the first note.

The second thing I quickly learned about competitions is that, in hearing endless tales about them as a child and an adolescent, one has a very particular, a very specific picture in one's mind of what they're really like. This picture bears no resemblance to reality. Competitions, ultimately, are just people. The cities where they're held don't center their collective lives around the contests, by and large; in fact, many may be utterly ignorant of the fact that there's a Life-and-Death struggle happening. Famed judges are just people, not thunderous demigods whose mere glance renders onlookers mute. The concert halls are just concert halls—not glittering arenas peopled by breathless spectators.

And though the quality of the playing may be stellar, it may also sometimes be underwhelming. In fact, in some ways some smaller, local competitions are more challenging. After all, in local contests all around the country, diverse disciplines are compared and contrasted with one another, frequently from a single short piece. As such, they require that contestant create an overwhelming impression on a comparatively tiny canvas. International competitions, by contrast, compare apples to apples, a pianist to a pianist, a violinist to a violinist—and do so in a way that allows for a judgment not of how you prepared a given piece but of how accomplished an instrumentalist and overall musician you are. Three rounds are fairly standard (while some of the bigger competitions have as many as five), as opposed to local competitions' one or, at most, two. All three rounds require multiple works to be prepared, and those works are never the same from round to round. As such, in competing and winning an international competition, you get a chance to prove to yourself that you not only have an actual repertoire but that

your mastery of the instrument shows itself from work to work. In such a setting, obtaining a favorable judgment is, in many ways, easier and certainly less subjective than a one-off chance to play (and possibly mangle!) a single movement of a concerto.

For me, the competition circuit was also my last and best teacher. I met my peers, heard them play and, once the usual oh-it's-all-politics kvetching had become tiresome to my own ears, I learned how to listen for what made John Smith a finalist while Smith Jones got cut in the preliminary round. I learned from those finalists how to extract from their playing an indicator of how I could expand and improve my own. I met friends and colleagues who remain friends and colleagues—and networking contacts—a decade later. I was forced to continually ask myself “how can I make this better” and then to create practice methods that radically decreased my practice time while still accomplishing that self-imposed goal. Most of all, in putting myself under the extraordinary stress of a competition setting, I learned to listen to my own system—to know what schedule would have me at my most alert, what foods would give me the most energy, what little rituals and daily patterns would keep me calm when nerves threatened to render me an incoherent hysteric.

In a column like this it's not possible to even superficially cover all the different methods of preparing oneself for this kind of ordeal. But a few things can certainly be touched upon. The key thing is to recognize that preparation for *each* contest is preparation for *all* contests. The repertoire does change to some extent, but certain categories hold constant: there's always solo Bach, several Paganini caprices, a major showpiece, a violin-piano sonata, a modern work, a Mozart concerto, a major Romantic concerto and a wild card. For the biggest competitions, like the Queen Elizabeth, there are twelve major works, seven of them in the second round, to prepare and polish to an invulnerable, unshakeable, unassailable level. As such, unless the basic categories are in place from long before (namely, the Bach, Paganini, Mozart, concerto, sonata, showpiece, modern work), unless that repertoire has already withstood the stresses of a previous competition, there is no realistic way to master all the required repertoire for the biggest contests out there.

One practices obsessively, to be sure, but there

is always the need to test-drive the repertoire beforehand in concerts. My mother, as a Soviet contestant, had a tremendous advantage over me in the government support she enjoyed. After all, she wasn't competing for herself only but for national bragging rights in a clash of cultures during the Cold War. As such, she and her peers would be sent to Olympic-style training villages where competitors were removed from any quotidian obligations—no doing the laundry and washing dishes for them—after which each contestant would be sent from city to city, performing the program they were preparing for, say, the Queen Elizabeth or the Paganini competition in concerts with top-notch pianists and top-notch orchestras. In fact, when she was preparing for the Jacques Thibaud competition, my mother was at a disadvantage because of this. Back then, the Thibaud requirement was that each contestant prepare three concerti and, at the competition, one drew the concerto one would perform from out of a lottery-style bag. One of my mother's concerti was the Brahms Violin Concerto in D, which she had not previously performed. Therefore, a concert was scheduled by the government with an orchestra in the town of Gorky. Due to a librarian's error, my mother was given orchestra parts to a Brahms *piano* concerto instead, so the Gorky concert had to have a last-minute program change to a concerto the orchestra had in their own library: the Tchaikovsky. That wasn't the problem; mom certainly had the Tchaikovsky in her fingers and ready to go at an hour's notice. The problem was that, when she got to Paris for the Thibaud, it was the Brahms that she drew out of the hat...

Certainly, by my time, many of the stories were less dramatic, less consequential than were my mother's. I could not boast of Stalin calling me—as he did David Oistrakh when Oistrakh was preparing his own son to go to Brussels for the Queen Elizabeth—to make clear that the Motherland would tolerate nothing other than a First Place finish. I could not boast of Cold War tensions being played out on a concert stage, with myself and my peers as actual Culture Warriors. But I could take pride in being my own trainer and in learning by myself, as a guinea pig, what works and what doesn't, how judges hear and perceive, and what they retain and remember when the playing is over and the deciding has begun. I've always been, and always remain, grateful for

the international competition crucible forging me into the player I became. And even now, it is to the memories of those stresses that I turn when I need either reassurance as to the validity of what I know; it is on the experience of having competed that I rely when I need to recover the levels of professionalism which time and laziness have sometimes threatened to eradicate.



*Winner of top prizes at nine international competitions, Emil Israel Chudnovsky's awards include First Prize from the XI International Curci Violin Competition in Naples, First Prize from the Young Artists Competition of the NFMC, and, most recently, First Prize from the Valsesia-Musica International Violin Competition in Milan. Twice*

*a laureate of the "Premio Paganini" International Competition, Chudnovsky also holds Second Prize from the D'Angelo International Competition as well as prizes from the Rodolfo Lipizer International Competition, the Szeryng International Competition, and the Enescu International Competition—where he also won the Ion Voicu and the Musafia prizes. Chudnovsky has performed in Great Britain, Italy, Israel, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela in recent years, as well as all over the U.S., including a return appearance at Carnegie Recital Hall, and a debut at the Encore Summer Festival in Ohio that gave him the unique distinction of being the only non-CIM student or alumnus invited to appear on the Festival's Blue Ribbon series.*

# A Glimpse Forward: A Voice of the Future On Competing

by Rhea Chung

Contrary to a common belief amongst student musicians, preparation for a competition like the National Symphony Orchestra Young Soloists' Competition, with its coveted prizes, entails much more than trivial methodical practicing. With my previous experiences, I have learned that it is important to perform your piece as much as possible. This way, you're not only more in control of your nerves for the competition but also more comfortable with your interpretation of the piece. Many people make the mistake of focusing solely on the competitive aspect, which ultimately doesn't improve your musicianship and gives you the wrong mentality. Some musicians believe there's a certain "competition" focus that you must have in order to do your best. I always go into a performance or audition thinking, "I want to show off what I can do and play this piece the way I've imagined it in my head in order to show its maximum potential of beauty." In addition, to really master a piece, it's important to receive input from many different sources aside from your teacher. Insights from audience members or judges at other competitions are particularly helpful because they see you perform on stage, unlike teachers who only watch you in the more relaxed and comfortable setting of a lesson.

At the NSO finals, of course, I was incredibly nervous and, especially after knowing what kind of company I was in, I was in awe to even be amongst them. However, because I felt I was already a winner by making it to the finals, I was able to fully enjoy myself onstage at the finals. I gave the best performance of my life that day; I was even surprised at myself, and I couldn't help but just smile and have fun while performing! Backstage, I texted my mom right after my performance, "that was the best performance I've ever given—I don't care if I go home empty-handed because, personally, I'm going home fully-handed."

Winning a competition, especially one as prestigious as the NSO competition, gives you such an exhilarating feeling; I cried onstage at the Kennedy Center when I won the NSO competition! I played

Maurice Ravel's *Tzigane* for this event, and I think that my understanding of the piece greatly helped my performance. My teacher, by encouraging me to play with my own style, has helped me grow as a violinist and certainly helped me to achieve the individuality with which I played the *Tzigane*. Today, my teacher often leaves much of musical interpretation to me and recently told me of my NSO finals performance, "Your performance was great, though you certainly didn't follow all of what I said. In the future, I hope that you can play it in such a way that you convince me that how you're playing is the right way." I think that many student musicians forget that they are allowed to perform their pieces differently from what they've been instructed, so it is this kind of encouragement from my teacher that allows me to become flexible and more versatile in performance.

Another very basic concept, yet many times forgotten, is that nothing is ever won easily or automatically in a competition or audition. My experience with the National Philharmonic Concerto Competition has taught me this lesson well. Though I've won annually, I've learned never to take winning for granted. Each year, more and more talented students compete, and each year, it becomes more difficult and more of an accomplishment for me to win.

One important misconception about competitions is a musician's outlook on losing competitions. It's always discouraging to see other musicians complaining about, for instance, "that one difficult passage I didn't get," and I think that they truly believe little technical mistakes like that are what lost them the competition. It's ironic that so many musicians lose sight of the music and its meaning when performing or competing. Informed audiences don't leave performances thinking, "Wow, I'm so inspired by the amount of notes he or she hit correctly." They leave thinking, "Wow, I'm so inspired by that beautiful performance." The best compliment I've been given by judges or audience members throughout my entire musical career is, "That was simply beautiful. Thank you for playing with such confidence and such interesting, and truly

special musicality.” It is essential to learn some background about your piece and play it the way you’d like to hear it if you were listening to it at a concert! I believe that because every person is different, every musician is different; thus everyone’s individual performance of a piece must be unique and their own.



*Rhea Chung, 16, attends the Holton-Arms School, where she has served as concertmaster of the Upper School Orchestra since 2008. She is co-concertmaster of the Maryland Classic Youth Orchestra Philharmonic for the 2010-2011 season. She was also co-concertmaster of the American Youth Philharmonic from 2008 to 2010, concertmaster of the Maryland All-State Sr. Orchestra, in 2010 and 2011, and Jr. Orchestra in 2009. Recently, she*

*was accepted to the All-Eastern Orchestra in 2011; her seat is yet to be determined. She recently won the National Symphony Orchestra Young Soloists’ Competition in 2011. She has performed at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall as a finalist in the NSO Competition in 2010 and as a guest soloist of the Annual Mayor’s Arts Awards in 2009. Rhea has also performed at Carnegie Hall and at the Strathmore Concert Hall as winner of the 2008, 2009, and 2010 National Philharmonic Concerto Competitions. She has played in master classes with Midori, the Emerson String Quartet, Jaime Laredo, Anne Akiko Meyers, Nurit Bar-Josef, Chee-Yun, and Jonathan Carney. She started the violin at the age of five and has studied with Dr. James Stern since 2008 and Mr. Paul Kantor since 2009. Rhea also plays the piano, sings in her school chorus, and is a licensed sailor.*

# A Glimpse Forward: A Voice of the Future

## Part Two

by Claire Hebeisen

*(Editor's note: This is Claire's second article for Stringendo. Her first article appeared in the Winter 2009–2010 issue. She is 12 years old!)*

Last summer I went to Stewart's Stellar Strings Scale and Sight Reading Camp. In the past, my teacher, Ms. Stewart, presented the camp only to her own students, but this year it included other students and was expanded to all day. With the help of other teachers, including my primary instructor, Mr. Dubé, I had an awesome and educational experience.

Every morning we went through all of the three octave scales and arpeggios. To keep everyone interested, Mr. Dubé told jokes and made fun of all the scale fingerings. One day he had us play four octave C and G Major scales. It was certainly a challenge, but it gave us a sense of accomplishment. The scales we played helped a lot with the sight reading because it enabled us to recognize patterns. The first day, we sight read music that was a little below our level so that we could warm up. Later, we read more difficult things like "Graceful Ghost," by Balcom, and violin quartets. We always read together so no one would stop by accident or slow down. This was really helpful because whenever I try to sight read at home, it is hard not to stop and fix mistakes.

During lunch (which I do admit was a pretty cool part of the day), there was an opportunity to talk to some of the teachers about what it was like to be a professional musician. They told stories about their own experiences playing in orchestras and operas. It was interesting to listen to them and imagine what it would be like to play professionally someday.

One of my favorite parts of camp was rhythmic dictation. Mrs. Stewart would clap a rhythm while we counted out loud. She gave us three tries to write it down. The first time we would write the stems of the notes to remind us how many there were; next we put down the value; and last we checked it. More often than not, this strategy worked.

In the last part of camp, Isiah Johnson taught a movement class. This is a class that combines rhythm with body movement and is really fun! Some of my favorite activities were throwing and catching a ball on the beat, even though I am not very good at it, and clapping and stepping at different sizes to practice keeping a steady tempo while playing different dynamics.

One of the coolest parts of camp was when a violinmaker came in and showed the process of making violins. She had different stages of unfinished violins and bows, and a whole array of tools. I learned a lot about how violins produce sound, as well as how they are made. One day, just for fun, we watched the movie "Pluck." *Pluck* is a trio that performs classical music. However, they do things like move around and dance while they play—in a way that one would not think possible! It was hilarious.

I had a great deal of fun at this camp and learned a lot. Because of the nice kids and amazing teachers, this was a memorable, educational, and entertaining experience.



*Claire Marie K. Hebeisen is twelve years old and is home schooled. At the age of four, she adamantly refused to play the piano and insisted that she wanted a violin. Upon hearing this, Robert Gerle gave Claire a violin and gave her mother some good advice: "Let Claire follow her heart." Along the way, Claire found Cathy Stewart and has been privileged to have her as a teacher. In September 2009, Claire played a recital in Minnesota to benefit the H2O Project in Homo Bay, Kenya. Claire enjoys reading, acting, painting, and writing. She also likes playing American Girl Dolls with her sister Grace; Star Wars with her brother Levi; and peek-a-boo with her baby sister Ella.*

# In Search of French Instruments and Bows Or Why I Keep Going to Paris

by David Basch

In 1975, when I started working for Jack Weaver in downtown D.C., I learned that French-made instruments and bows were the way to go for aspiring music majors and young professionals. Beyond that, the violins of J.B. Vuillaume and Lupot were for those professionals who could not afford a great Italian instrument.

Guess what? Nothing has changed.

For ten years, I have gone to Paris two to four times a year in search of real handmade French instruments, mostly geared towards students in need of an instrument that will project, that has layers of tone color, and that will allow them to grow as musicians. Parents can feel good that for comparable prices to commercially made instruments, they are making an investment in their child's future, and with luck, possibly a profit if and when the time comes to sell the instrument or bow.

While American certificates are all written with the caveat "in my opinion," many French certificates are legally binding documents, usually good in court for twenty-five years.

Bows are just as important as instruments in helping with tonal production and ease of playing, as well as quality of sound. French bows have a magical sparkle to them, and bows must be matched to an instrument.

The area of Paris filled with luthiers and violin shops is the Rue de Rome in the 8th arrondissement. Starting from just above the Gare Saint-Lazare and going up to the Boulevard des Batignolles—this is heaven for the musician. At least ten instrument shops line both sides of the street, one shop just for bows (archets), and shops for piano, guitar, brass, woodwind, and sheet music. Off the Rue de Rome on the Rue du Madrid is the old Conservatoire. Wondrous sounds fill the air on the street as you stroll past.

Walking up and down the Rue de Rome is equivalent to a visit to F.A.O. Schwartz for toys or Zabar's for

food. It stimulates your senses and desires. This is why I like to stay in a small hotel in this area, the New Orient. Mr. and Mrs. Wehrle always make me and my friends and colleagues feel at home in this well priced family-run hotel. Please remember that you are in Paris and, like the hotel rooms, most shops are tiny by American standards, and that appointments are necessary to be shown anything. Appointments can easily be made by e-mail or telephone. Every shop has at least one employee who can speak English with you.

During my travels I will look at as many as one hundred French instruments and select maybe eight, and around four hundred French bows and select no more than five. In Europe, softer and more flexible bows are the standard. In buying for the East Coast of the United States, I need to find bows that are stronger and stiffer than I might personally enjoy, as they play differently over here, in part due to our extremes in humidity. I search for merchandise that has history and is different from what one can find at the typical American shop. The majority of all my business is with instruments and bows in the \$5,000 to \$25,000 price range. While I look at everything, all price ranges, I need to remember that I am looking for certified merchandise that suits my clients.

When I take the Metro in D.C. with my viola case on my back, I stand out. In Paris, you are just one of many musicians of all ages with all kinds of instruments.

Needless to mention, eating in Paris is one of the great extra pleasures that I derive from these trips. In this district are several wonderful eating establishments of varied price ranges. On the modest side is the Le P'tit Canon on the Rue Legendre. Here, eating wonderful bistro food for ten to twenty euros, including tip, is a delight to all the senses, whether you want a tasty salad or a heavier stew—*cassoulet*. Finer upscale eating can be found at one Paris's best seafood restaurants, Luna on the Rue Rocher.

Here, expect to spend 70 to 100 euros per person. You won't have room for dessert, but with coffee you'll be served wafer-thin mints. Eating lobster—be it in their special salad, served with a pistachio vinaigrette, or the casserole—is a must. You will be served a tureen of mashed potatoes. Vegetables often do not come with a main course, unless you are in a bistro. Don't forget to save room for real French bread and butter.

For those Americans missing home, there is a Starbucks at the bottom of the Rue du Rome, opposite the Gare Saint-Lazare. Starbucks is one of the few places in Paris that getting ice in a drink is possible any time of year.

While you are near the Gare Saint-Lazare, consider taking the Metro Line 14 to the Gare Montparnasse to eat dinner at Le Train Bleu. This was a waiting spot for the privileged traveling on the Orient Express and is still a wonder to eat at with a menu for around 50 euros.

I haven't mentioned dessert, but it is a sensory pleasure at my age to dream more about them than to consume them. Favorites include a *tarte tatin*, upside down apple crumble; *fondant au chocolate*, rich chocolate cake; and an inexpensive piece of *Cote D'Or* dark chocolate. In earlier days, no éclair went uneaten.

Please remember that the French appreciate you making a reservation whenever possible, and tipping is more modest than at American eating establishments.

Relax and enjoy your trip—and arrange to ship back by Fed Ex any instrument and bow purchases.



*David Basch, violist and string instrument consultant, resides in Washington, D.C. He is the co-author of One Step Up—A Buyers Guide To Stringed Instruments. He has been Principal Viola of many local orchestras and has taught at the George Washington University.*

# A Report on Daniel Coyle's Book *The Talent Code* Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How.

by Alessandra Schneider

I had the pleasure of hearing Daniel Coyle present his book *The Talent Code* at the National Conference for the Suzuki Association of the Americas last summer. It was a compelling lecture that gave new scientific glimpses into the human brain, talent, and how skills develop. As a violin teacher and performer, I was interested in learning more, so I read the book as soon as I returned home. This book confirmed much of what I believe, so I decided to do this short synopsis. I hope you will find the article and book as interesting as I did.

The premise for this book began when Daniel Coyle, an editor for *Outside* magazine, as well as successful author, was researching “hotbeds” of talent to see how some students learned with such incredible speed and accuracy. Examples of “hotbeds” include the sudden insurgence of baseball players from the Dominican Republic to the major leagues around 1950, the populous amount of brilliant composers in Vienna during the nineteenth century, and the astonishing and considerable amount of art during the Renaissance (1-2). These talent “hotbeds” have been known to form in rather ordinary places throughout history. Coyle wanted to discover how normal people and places can rise to such greatness.

While researching his article, Coyle came across an article about a new brain substance called myelin. Scientists only recently discovered this natural substance in the body and believe it drives our acquisition of skill. He writes that myelin is “... insulation that wraps neural circuits and that grows according to certain signals” (33). Soon his research turned from investigating “hotbeds,” to exploring myelin and how it relates to skill and talent at these sites. His findings led him to write this book.

To understand myelin, you must first know a few of its characteristics. In Chapter Two, Coyle offers a detailed description. He writes that myelin is an organic material that occurs in our body and is in our unconscious just like our immune system. One must actually “do” the activity for it to wrap, and it cannot

unwrap. Myelin does not know right from wrong, which is why, in learning the violin, for example, the student should be very clear about the assignment. People are not prewired for certain skills, and because myelin is not selective, it will strengthen any action that is repeated. Myelin is also strongest when a person is young (it begins to deteriorate after age fifty), which is why it is so much easier for a child to learn an instrument, a second language, or a sport.

Coyle continues by describing myelin's role in our brain. He divides this process into three steps:

- “(1) Every human movement, thought, or feeling is a precisely timed electric signal traveling through a chain of neurons—a circuit of nerve fibers.
- (2) Myelin is the insulation that wraps these nerve fibers and increases signal strength, speed, and accuracy.
- (3) The more we fire a particular circuit, the more myelin optimizes that circuit, and the stronger, faster, and more fluent our movements and thoughts become.” (32)

Thus through repetition, myelin unconsciously helps make certain skills automatic. This allows our body to learn and remember so we can focus on the next task. Although the old saying goes, ‘practice makes perfect,’ Coyle believes, “The truth is, practice makes myelin, and myelin makes perfect” (44).

In his travels, Coyle visited many “hotbeds,” including a tennis court in Moscow, a soccer field in Sao Paulo, Brazil, a vocal studio in Dallas, Texas, and an inner-city school in San Jose, to name a few (11). During his visits, Coyle began to see similarities between “hotbeds.” Although he could not find any consistency in location, pupils, or fields of study, Coyle began to notice three key principles at work. These principles: deep practicing, ignition, and master coaching, seemed to be the connecting links between all “hotbeds,” and allowed talent to blossom in the most ordinary places.

## **Principal One: Deep Practice**

When visiting the “hotbeds,” at first Coyle saw nothing in common except “world class speed, power, grace” (12) followed by moments of “making progress become a matter of small failures, a rhythmic pattern of botches” (13). Then he noticed the students following a simple progression. They would try a new idea, make mistakes, rethink the idea, slow it down, and try it again. Coyle writes that it was as if the students had a blueprint in their mind of the ultimate goal and were breaking down and building up until the desired goal was reached. He found they all shared the principle of “...purposefully operating at the edges of their ability, so they will screw up. And somehow screwing up is making them better” (14). It seems that stumbling allows you to make it your own, and you will be more likely to remember the task. As Robert Bjork, chair of Psychology at UCLA writes, “It (the brain) is a living structure, a scaffold of nearly infinite size. The more we generate impulses, encountering and overcoming difficulties, the more scaffolding we build. The more scaffolding we build, the faster we learn” (19). This way of breaking down and building a small task is what Coyle refers to as Deep Practice (Chapter 3).

One example of a “hotbed” created through deep practice is the Italian Renaissance. At first it may seem like a sudden surge of genius in one area, and many have often wondered what caused this surge of talent. Italy had a guild system of apprenticeship at the time, where students were sent to live and closely study with the great masters. Consider the brilliant artist Michelangelo. At age six he went to live with a stonemason and later became an apprentice to Ghirlandaio. His duties included preparing and copying frescoes onto many churches. From there he studied with the sculptor Bertoldo and then lived with Lorenzo de’ Medici until age seventeen (65). It only makes sense that Michelangelo became a well-known artist after so many years of deep practice with the masters in the field.

## **Principle Two: Ignition**

Coyle writes that while deep practice is an inward process, ignition is an outside awakening or excitement. It is “...the feeling of seeing talent bloom in people who we thought were just like us” (75). An individual will often accomplish something that was considered impossible, and soon many are repeating

the same feat. It is the feeling that it is possible if we try a little harder. In Chapter Five, Coyle writes that primary cues such as safety and belonging often provoke ignition. He gives the example of a poor school where a few violins were donated to start a music program. Instruments were handed out based on a lottery system, and those chosen progressed with incredible speed. Seeing the success, another more affluent school in the area decided to start a similar program. They had parents sign up for instruments. The first school succeeded while the second did not do as well. Coyle writes that the students from the poor school were “ignited by primal cues of scarcity and belonging” (119). This caused their success.

The words we use with children can also help to excite ignition. In a study done by social psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck from Stanford, a test was given to two groups of fifth graders. At the conclusion of the exam one group was told, “you did well, you must be smart,” and the other, “you did well, you must have worked really hard.” When presented with another more challenging test, Dr. Dweck describes the results as, “(The effort group) dug in and grew very involved with the test, trying solutions, testing strategies...the group praised for its intelligence hated the harder test. They took it as proof they weren’t smart” (136). This study supports the value system we have as teachers. Effort and slow progress have better results over “talent” and empty praise. As teachers, we must choose our words carefully. Give praise if it is really deserved, and always applaud hard work and effort.

## **Principle Three: Master Coaching**

As we learned from Michelangelo’s life, talent cannot be learned without a master coach. In Chapter Nine, Coyle discusses the “Four Virtues” people must have in order to be considered master coaches. First, they must be an expert in their field while also having spent years studying how to coach. They should know their topic so well that they can quickly vary an approach or break down an idea into further sections. Second, master coaches are very perceptive and have friendly, interested eyes that seek out information from the student and situation. This allows the pupil to have individual treatment based on what is needed. Another virtue is the ability for a teacher to lead a student through steps with patient, yet quick and direct instructions. A master coach will always alter and adjust the path until the desired result is reached.

Last, a master coach adds drama and character to a lesson in order to teach the child according to his or her needs. Every student is different, and the master coach must be flexible enough to change everything to fit the situation.

From observing many teachers at various “hotbeds,” Coyle realized they all used the same model to teach (as well as the Four Virtues). First, they would demonstrate the desired action correctly, then show it incorrectly, and then model it correctly once more. All instructions were given with short directions. He even found that one coach had a rehearsed libretto (169)! It seems that master coaching, just like playing an instrument, is something that can be taught and learned through frequent myelin repetition. For teachers, there are many opportunities to study at a university or with a teacher trainer. Through careful study and observation, teachers can become a lot more efficient and effective.

From looking at Coyle’s discoveries, one can see that the path to acquiring skill is possible for all. It

is a journey that has no short cuts or detours, and can only be achieved through careful myelin wraps. It follows a simple rule of step, stumble, and get up. I found this to be comforting in my teaching. It reminds the parent and me of the potential that dwells in everyone. With the right amount of deep practice, ignition, and master coaching, every child can accomplish great things.

I really enjoyed this book and found it to be a great addition to the reading list for my studio. It reminds teachers and parents of the importance of thoughtful repetition and diminishes the idea of innate talent. Real progress is only made with real effort! While I tried to cover Coyle’s main points, there are many stories and anecdotes not mentioned. I highly recommend you read this book for yourself.



*Alessandra Schneider is Membership Chair/Suzuki Liaison for ASTA MD/DC Chapter. Read her bio online at: [www.asta.net/officers.php](http://www.asta.net/officers.php)*

# Frederick Community College String Ensemble

by Lynn Fleming, Director

This month, I plug a “beginner’s” orchestra. Many ASTA teachers, including me, have adult beginner students. Here is a place to send them, and this is how we began back in 2008.

The planning of this musical group began years ago, with many minds bringing various needs to the table. According to Dr. Jan Holly, FCC’s department chair for Communications, Humanities and Arts, the String Ensemble is designed to provide an opportunity for players to learn musically challenging repertoire, improve on ensemble playing and to perform.

Says Dr. Holly, “This group is a triple threat. They consume volumes of entertaining music, they work together as a great team and they give the audience a fun show! Its numbers have more than doubled since it was established two years ago. We expect it to continue to grow and grow and grow!”

Many youth orchestras abound for talented and beginning students; in fact, many children who are in school have the opportunity to play in class several times a week—in some schools every day. But consider the poor adult beginner! Typically, this musician, who works full time, has decided to study an instrument as part of FCC’s Continuing Education Music Enrichment Program. Some might be skilled on another instrument and are just looking to have fun with a new instrument. And then there are those who played “way back when,” who might still have their instruments in the attic or somewhere else in the house, and have rediscovered the fun of playing. Few resources are available for the adult beginner to join others and have the gratifying experience of playing in a group. Yes, Frederick Symphony Orchestra is here; and it has taken community-level playing to ever-rising heights! So what does a beginner do?

Well, first off, you can call FCC and register for this non-credit continuing education class! Or if you have questions, contact Lynn Fleming. Email: [vlfleming@frederick.edu](mailto:vlfleming@frederick.edu) or phone: 301-922-0398. Currently, the group meets in the music building on Tuesday evenings from 7:30–9:00 P.M. Our last registration began in December, and the first class was on Tuesday, January 25, 2011.

What about youngsters? Are they welcome? Yes, absolutely! Anyone with a joy for music and a desire to play in a group is welcome to join in. What kind of music do we play? Anything from Bach to Birdland, Brahms, Beethoven, and Beatles. Add some Tchaikovsky and Duke Ellington, and you have an idea of the eclectic selections that the group covers each semester. You can see why this group attracts newcomers of all ages!

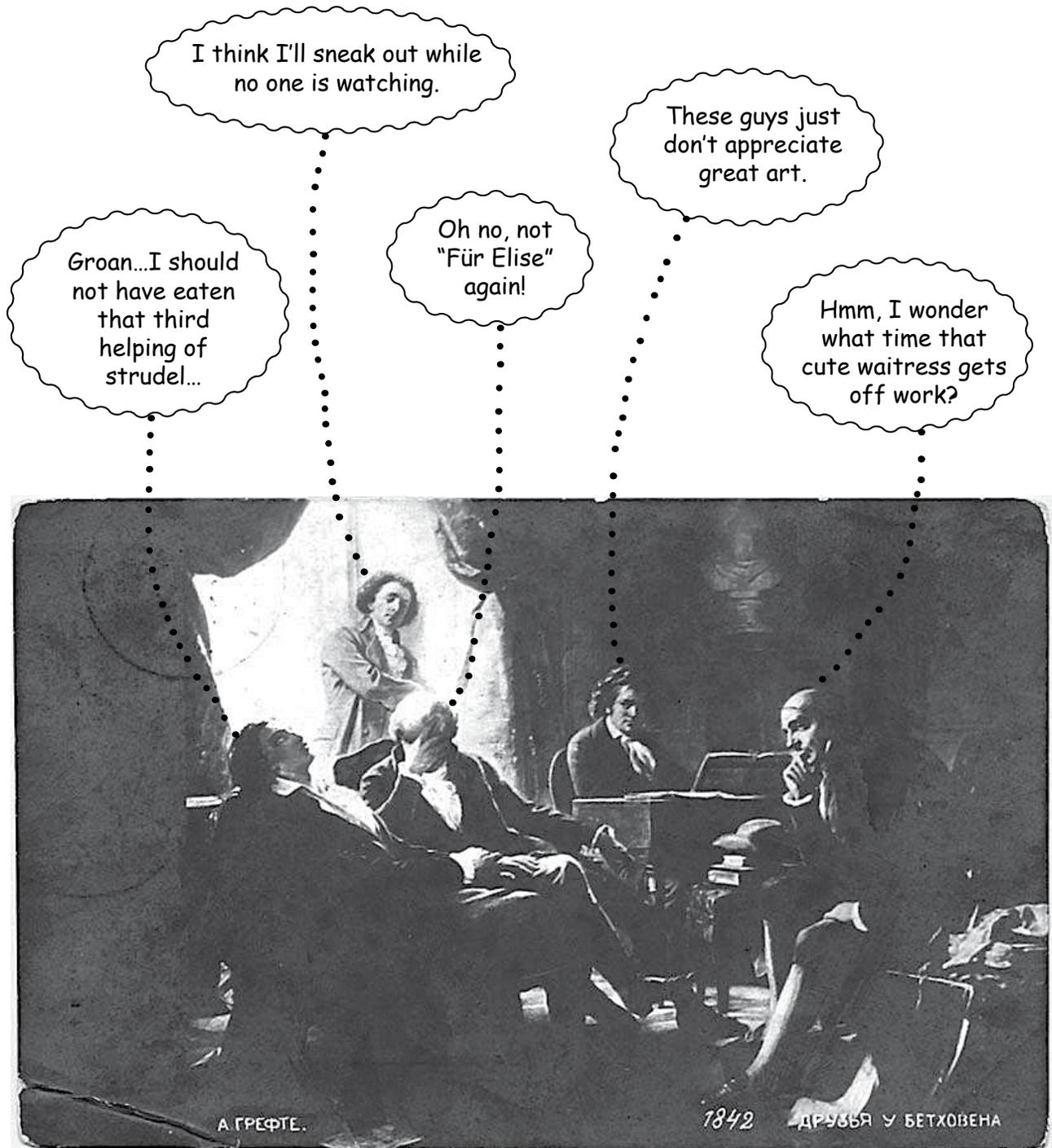
And what do the members say? Well, I can say that after our concert and reception last spring, the members of the group asked for “just one more rehearsal—PLEASE!” And so we did.



*Lynn Fleming is Youth Orchestra Liaison for ASTA MD/DC Chapter. Read her bio online at: [www.asta.net/officers.php](http://www.asta.net/officers.php)*

***Editor’s note: Stringendo went to press after registration for this opportunity closed. If you’re interested in joining the orchestra in the future, please contact Lynn Fleming. Her phone and email are mentioned in the article.***

# Lighter Side



*A picture postcard sent from Russia in 1911.  
The caption at the bottom of this painting says "Friends of Beethoven."  
The artist was someone named A. Grefte, who painted it in 1842.*