

## **MD/DC ASTA**

### **T'ai Chi Workshop for String Instruments**

(Originally titled, "Applying the Five Basic Principles of T'ai Chi to Improve your Cello Bowing Technique")

Presented by Douglas Wolters

November 9, 2016; 2:00-5:00 pm

Location: John Kendall Recital Hall, Potter's Violins

Report by Alison Bazala Kim

Douglas Wolters has many years of orchestral and chamber music experience and is currently co-principal cellist of the Gettysburg Chamber Orchestra. He also taught strings for over three decades in the Fairfax County Public Schools.

Mr. Wolters gave an insightful workshop on integrating essential principles of the martial art known as T'ai Chi to the art of string playing. This East meets West approach was inspired by Mr. Wolter's personal T'ai Chi studies with Michael Ward.

The workshop was well attended by cello students, amateur string players and string teachers. Participants brought their instruments. The workshop began with us standing without our instruments. Mr. Wolters asked us to lift up one arm and notice the tension that occurred. He then instructed us on how to get our bodies in a neutral position. From this balanced position, we then learned how to shift our weight, without leaning or distorting our bodies, from one side of our body to the other. Then we lifted one arm up again, this time counterbalancing our body weight on the opposite side of our body from our lifted arm. We observed how this method of integrating our body into lifting the arm made the weight of the arm seem much lighter. Another exercise involved opening and relaxing our wrists. Mr. Wolters had us compare the tension of a strongly bent wrist to a relaxed wrist that was integrated with our bodies.

Next, these principles were applied as we were sitting in our chairs. Using our "sit-bones" as the points of balance, we learned how to shift our weight, again without leaning, to either side. Then we attempted this while bowing our instruments. The process begins before the bow is set to the string. First, the player must begin in a neutral position. For playing with a down bow stroke, the player should shift weight to the right leg while simultaneously lifting the bow and placing it on the desired string. As the weight is shifted back to the left "sit-bone", one plays a down bow to the right. The opposite approach is used in playing an up-bow stroke.

Some helpful tips given by Mr. Wolters were: to imagine your head being attached to a string that gently pulls your body into a tall posture; the idea of weight being "poured" from side to side; the concept of "letting go" as the way to begin a movement, rather than using muscle tension to initiate the action.

Each step was carefully and thoroughly explained. We were welcome to ask questions during the session. Each step was demonstrated by Mr. Wolters and then we practiced each concept together several times before going forward to the next idea. The session ended with the group applying the T'ai Chi principles to excerpts from pieces with a slow tempo, such as "Arioso" by J.S. Bach.

Handouts were provided to workshop participants. More detailed information about the application of T'ai Chi in string playing can be found in Mr. Wolter's article, titled "The T'ai Chi of Cello", in the Stringendo 2016-2017 MD/DC ASTA Handbook.

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