

Feb 12, 2004

Dear Curt,

I have been giving a lot of thought to the prospect of really attempting to gain some competence with the violin and in this vein, it occurred to me that a letter like this might be a good idea and an aid to both of us. First, because it will give you some idea of just where I am and also a little background.

~~that~~
I am basically self taught although as a child I did have lessons in Elementary school, where my first bad habits were established. At that same time I took some private lessons from a competent teacher who tried to undo those bad habits, and had I been a good student this might have happened. There were, however, too many other interests competing for my time. So my lack of progress and my frustration produced the mindset that I simply had no talent for the instrument in spite of an abiding love for it and for music in general. All of this occurred between the ages of 8-11. I quit, but six years later I came back to it and at that time had begun as a painter and with some of my first profits from this work bought my Ceruti fiddle and searched for another teacher. I found one who unfortunately had a severe drinking problem, but whose sense of art was so rich and beautiful that I couldn't pull away. She was a fine Violinist and a more than competent pianist. She had a son, a couple of years older than me, who was a serious student of the Cello and just being around them did wonders for me art wise.

They also had a circle of friends, a kind of salon where serious art along with ribald humor made for some wonderful and insightful experiences. Those were more cultivated times but the results for me as a fiddle player were negligible. I chose the music - Mozart's sonatas and she did little more than accompany on the piano. By the way, I chose number one in the book, thinking that it must surely be the easiest, being number one and all (in A major, no less, a key I had never even approached) So the upshot of it all was that she staggered through an incredibly difficult piano part playing away with alcoholic abandon while I stood by sawing away and learning nothing.

That lasted about a year when I went off to college at Tulane and then a year after that to art school at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In my second year there I saw a notice on their bulletin board seeking violinists for an amateur group which styled itself the Promethian Baroque String Orchestra. I had morechutzpah in those days, called them up and then went out one evening to West Philadelphia to check them out, to see if by some weird chance I might fit in. I carefully left my violin at home. What greeted me there besides a disparate bunch of very bright, passionate and like minded souls - was chaos, punctuated with moments of real music making.

I was home! I joined and was with them for three years in which time the chaos became a much more disciplined orchestra.

I played menial parts, quite happy to be there and to be part of it. At home however I began to try to correct my bad habits and in this effort made spotty but real progress.

But in this I was playing music - the orchestral parts given me, rather than trying to establish the correct foundation for good playing by the practices of keys, scales, bowings and passages.

~~When~~

My improvements allowed me to play better parts in the orchestra, more complex ones, so that the whole three year experience was a continuous joy for me.

When I left the Academy to pursue a career as a painter, I put up my violin and those days for the next thirty eight years, barely touching it.

Then, three years ago, when I was at one of my Dallas patron's homes, Harlan Crow's, I saw a Stradivarius in a glass case and asked if I could examine it. Harlan is an avid collector and strangely enough had never expressed to me the slightest interest or even a knowledge of music. As it turned out he had collected it simply for its fame as a collector's piece, but wisely, with the intention of loaning it out to performers.

He was generous in allowing me to do as I pleased and I played it for a while, even sight reading music from a small sheet of manuscript by Franz Joseph Haydn!

It was then that the old fires started to heat up again. My playing on a Strad was dramatic as an example, a perfect one, of casting pearls before swine. But it was enough.

At home I took out my fiddles, cleaned them up, restrung them and began to play again. I began trying to establish better and more correct ways of playing, setting aside one to two hours a day (usually at night) and sticking to it, which has been consistent for the last two and three quarters years.

I didn't seek a teacher because I didn't know if my new-found dedication would be a lasting one. I know now that it is.

Curt, I consider that bumping into you has been the first really good thing that has happened for me and my fiddle in all those years because it coincides with a genuine desire to be a good student.

What I've written about my background has been meant to give you an idea of where I am.

It must follow that I ask myself just what I hope to achieve ^{with this} effort. Also how to respect your time in a meaningful way.

Now I am still struggling with the very first difficulties any student encounters with this instrument, that of holding it correctly and the bow as well. I have none of the necessary foundation work absolutely vital for any kind of competence. There are huge gaps which I have tried to fill in the most awkward ways

Questions and Notes for Curt Thompson

- ① What does the little zero mean?
- ② \$cut time?
- ③ After the diagnosis look for works I can do thoroughly in all the right ways, holding the fiddle, reading from score, correct bowing posture - every thing.

examples of works that would comprise the other books.

One of these would be a survey of costume, especially as they relate to my favorite composers. Our collection has become extensive as well as the works I have done from them many of which are real exercises in what I can do with graphite drawing. I know you'd get a big kick out of these.

As for the composers many of whom I'm wearing costumes from our collection or ones like them, they have been painted in the form of portrait miniatures and were extensively researched. I'm sending you a fair attempt to reproduce one of these - Frederic Chopin - so you see, it may have taken some time, but I did come around. Boy, could we talk a lot now!

So far I've done about twenty of these portraits and many paintings of costume and accessories and I think I've done so without the slightest twinge of nostalgia.

That is never my aim, but rather, to show something of my fascination with the presence of the past in the present - the now, and the strange relationships these create, something almost Faulknerian, but without his kind of intense emotionalism.