

1st Version

Music and The Violin

Lessons with Scott Gentling

First Violin Lesson with Scott Gentling

This is all about learning to relax and eliminate tension and to use the mechanics of one's anatomy in the most efficient ways possible... There were practical reasons for everything we did.—SGG from a journal entry referring to his lessons with Curt Thompson pp.19, 20.

If I can rid myself of this tension, it will open up a world of fluid movement and a feeling of naturalness and manual efficiency, unforced, and with a natural expenditure of energy, using only enough of it to get the job done cleanly.—SGG p. 33.

1/20/06

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, I picked up my fiddle again after thinking that I would never be able to give it, or myself, the time it needs. This will be a journal of my efforts to learn to play it consciously through daily study and application. By doing so, my hope is that I will master what I can.

Part of my motivation has grown out of spending time with my friend and mentor/teacher, Scott Gentling, who has as deep a gift for music as he has for drawing and painting. Our time together is now being divided into two parts—painting and the violin (including teaching me, at long last, how to read music). Just as graciously as he has been teaching me drybrush watercolor and a multitude of other things about art, he has agreed to teach me what he knows of the violin. When I asked him about his surprising willingness, he pointed to three particulars: 1) what he has already observed of what he calls my “natural musicality and ability to hear and feel the music,” 2) my passion to become a serious student in whatever area I am applying myself, and 3) his own study with professor Curt Thompson of TCU, which Dr. Thompson is providing freely to Scott. It should come as no surprise to me, I suppose, that my inner agreement mirrors Scott's; we each have written and spoken about our desire to match the gifts we are being given by our teachers and to be diligent and energetic students.

Scott has openly shared his violin journal with me [which I have placed at the back of this volume, but is not to be reproduced. They are his hand-written notes about his sessions with Curt and his practice and discoveries between sessions. As I read through them, I am moved by the depth of his commitment to his own study, by the force of his genius, and by his ability to clearly communicate his thoughts on paper. It is something of a relief to me to read some of the ways in which he has struggled, and continues to struggle, as he works through his frustrations and slowly but steadily reaches his own goals.

As I have mentioned, I will also be learning to read music. I hope, in time, to be able to write it. What a joy it will be to write the music I can hear in my head, and to be able to read and understand the works of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven. Or for that matter, Scott's violin

sonatas or the quartets he is working on now, or my mother's *Blue Smoke*. I will finally be able to talk with my sister, Christy, in a language that has become natural to her as she has continued to study voice and piano. It has long been one of my dreams for us to fully write out Mother's music as a legacy that can be loved and enjoyed by people beyond our family. Now, perhaps, I can be part of realizing that dream.

In this journal, I will make my best effort to be organized and to chronicle what I am learning. Here is what I remember of what Scott covered with me in our first lesson:

General Notes: *Relax Relax Relax!!!!*

Most of my life, I have moved forward or succeeded by dint of sheer force, pushing, shoving, moving the immovable by applying enough force. Scott assures me that the violin cannot be learned that way. It cannot be played effectively with any tension at all in the fingers, hands, arms, or in the rest of the body, for that matter. This is important for me to practice consciously. I am learning that the right position for playing involves gently balancing many things. As Scott says, "*It is like juggling many balls at one time.*"

Positions of the hands, fingers, and thumbs, angle of the forearm, pronation of the left wrist, keeping the neck of the instrument parallel to the floor, pressure (more precisely, lack of it) on the bow, stance, breath, relaxation of the shoulders, maintaining a perpendicular angle of the bow to the strings, evenness of the speed and pressure of the bow, roundness of the right hand as the thumb opposes and meets the middle finger at each side of the bow, and on and on and on. It seems like too much to manage, but all of it, Scott assures me, is designed to eventually allow one to play in the most natural way. He points out that the balance of these many variables allows an ease of playing, setting up the right position to touch the strings with the least strain or pressure and to produce a sweet and warm sound. "*The instrument was designed and built to be played this way,*" he says.

He calls this juggling act "the setup," and continues to be kind with me in his rather constant adjustments, frequently reminding me when I am not in the right position, but more importantly, pointing out what I am doing right at the moment I am doing it.

I am applying myself to what he shows me and playing a couple of hours a day in fragments. As I do, my playing is gradually [think gradual as in plate tectonics here] getting a bit easier and the sound, slightly [emphasize "slightly"] more pleasant.

A note about that: Scott has encouraged me, as Curt has encouraged him in the beginning, not to "make music," which he says will only serve to get in the way of building a good foundation. He reminds me instead to "*focus on achieving a clear sound with the right hand, and accuracy of the notes with the left one.*" This is hard to resist since I know the kinds of music I want to be playing eventually—*Ashoken Farewell*, Scottish pieces, some bluegrass and Texas Swing, classical pieces of all kinds, jazz in the style of Stephane Grapelli or Stuff Smith. Such music makes me laugh out loud and lifts my heart.

I know myself to be of rather an impatient nature, and it is hard to wait. But I know his the guidance is right. As Scott and I have discussed more than once, it is much like the year I spent drawing in graphite before I could begin to apply myself to painting in watercolor. All those drawings, which got steadily better, opened the way, laid the strong foundation, for painting freely and beautifully and in my own voice. This initial practice and the exercises Scott is showing me will lay the equivalent musical foundation. So I satisfy myself with trusting that the rest will come in time.

Following Note:

From time to time throughout this journal, I will, as I have done in my introduction, refer to- or quote from Scott's journal at points strongly relevant to my own practice. I will indicate that inclusion by indentation and italics, and by ending quotations with his initials, *SGG*, in the following way:

First out, he [Curt Thompson] corrected my left hand from my incorrect ways and I am determined to establish this once and for all. The fiddle is held between the thumb and base of the index finger [of the left hand]. The wrist is conformed in such a way that the side of the hand, looking at my little finger, is practically facing me. I must watch my tendency to swing my hand outward and away from me. Keeping the wrist 'torqued' and the side of my hand facing me, forces the hand and its forearm into the correct straight line.—SGG p. 2.

This position of the left hand continues to be challenging to me—to keep the line of the hand and forearm straight, but relaxed. I am making conscious effort to correct it, setting up a better position for the fingers to touch the strings.

Enough for now. I am eager to play and am off to practice. Scott, you might have warned me how addictive this could become.

1/21/06 Saturday Morning

Yesterday, I practiced for about an hour and a half, across from the Log Cabin Village on University Drive. I took frequent breaks. It was hard to resist playing *Ashoken Farewell*, the playing of which I will use as something of a benchmark, listening to my progress. In an effort to be a good student, though, I spent most of my time on "the setup" and on producing a clear and accurate tone. I cannot explain it, but playing, practicing, gave me such a sense of joy and accomplishment. I can sense my growth from one day to the next. In a while, I will meet with Scott again and we will review and practice the violin/guitar duet that we are working on. I am looking forward to it.

A word about that. I am preparing for a one man showing in November of this year of my drawings, paintings, field notes, and poetry about the Brazos River. I call it *Brazos River Country*. One Saturday morning, Scott was going over one of my paintings with me and he said, rather off-handedly, "You know, I could write a piece of music for your opening." He has recently finished seven sonatas for the violin, and I said, just as off-handedly, "That would be lovely." I had no idea of his seriousness until a couple of weeks later when he came to the lesson with his fiddle, saying, "I want you to hear something." He then played a piece that was warm and sweet and is every bit the movement of the river and is the countryside through which it passes. I was, and am, amazed. As I listened, I could hear a guitar accompaniment, which I suggested. In the weeks that followed, we would interrupt our painting lessons with violin and guitar, making slow but steady progress as I plied my way through the guitar part. I have to admit that what we have accomplished to date is good. The piece sounds like something old and familiar. We have joked about sending it with lyrics to Willie Nelson or Emmylou Harris. Perhaps we will at some point.

As I played yesterday, I remembered something from Scott's journal about touch and recognized that the tips of the fingers of my left hand are touching the strings too close to the fingernails.

The fingers when they hit the strings should cover them with a bit more of the fingertip, a bit more of the flesh.—SGG p. 2.

And then, about the distance of the fingertips from the strings, I am aware that there is no economy of motion in my left hand. In fact, noticing that my fingers are often what I would call "up in the air," I am aware that they have to travel farther to contact the strings. Scott wrote in a couple of entries in his journal:

The fingers are lined up just a small distance above the strings ready for immediate employment. They feel more anatomically advantaged. The "drum taps" Curt gave me to do is an excellent exercise for getting used to the fingers directly above and in line with the string. They fall naturally, and for the most part, in tune.—SGG p. 8.

He [Curt Thompson] showed me an exercise in which the fingers in quick, drumbeat fashion fall naturally on the string—with ease and without intentionally making specific notes, but just letting the fingers rise and fall in succession.—SGG p. 3.

I will concentrate more on these things as I practice and do the "drum taps" until my body gets it more deeply than my mind does. It is also my intention to ask Scott this morning about pronation of the right hand and wrist, and how to begin to develop the right position of the right forearm. He talked about holding it parallel to the floor while playing on one of the strings as a check for correct position, but I cannot remember which string. He has also mentioned "dislocating" the hand from the forearm and playing with the hand, using the wrist only as a support. This is such a juggling act. I am hoping to have all of this come together in a natural way at some point by practicing on correct principles now.

As I refer to Scott's notes, I find the following entry about holding the bow and moving the right arm:

He [Curt Thompson] showed me how the back of his wrist remained level throughout the movement of the bow. He mentioned as the bow approaches the frog in its movements, that the upper arm comes into play. He said that the whole arm should feel as if being pushed from the back as the frog is approached. Being pushed at the back of the elbow. He showed me some of the complexities of movement of the right hand and I saw clearly that it will be some time before I grasp it.—SGG

Amen to that! The concept of the back of the wrist being kept level added to the other complexities of bowing are new and awkward as I practice, but I will stay with it until I get it.

1/29/06 Sunday Morning

Scott and I have been getting together twice a week. He has been *very* gracious with his time. We remain mostly focused on mechanics—the physical positions of "the setup." This, I am sure, will continue to be a large part of our concentration. Yesterday we began to formalize my very rudimentary instruction in learning how to read music. It was helpful to actually see where the notes on the page fall on the neck and strings of the instrument. I have begun a loose-leaf notebook and will add them to this journal. My hope is to begin to write out simple melodies before long. It *will* happen as I continue to apply myself.

Yesterday, I expressed my gratitude to Scott for the gift he is giving me. He remarked that it is his joy to do it and likened us to *"the blind leading the blind."* He is hardly that, and I hope that before too long, I will begin to at least perceive some light if not make out some of the shape in front of me.

We also continue to focus on helping me let go my right hand, or should I say the tension in it and in my forearm. It is slow process as I work to overcome a lifetime of bad habits. An exercise that his helpful it so bow A – E – A – E – A – over and over again while consciously releasing tension and allowing my wrist to rotate more freely.

Here are some of Scott's notes about left and right hands that I find to be useful reminders for everyday practice. He stated his intention to write about each of these subjects separately. His original notes are accompanied by drawings which I will not try to reproduce here.

Left Hand:

- 1) *The eleven o'clock angle of the fingers [as they touch the strings]*
- 2) *Thumb back, nearer first finger [emphasis SGG]*
- 3) *Not too much crimping here [drawing of crease between thumb and palm]*
- 4) *More flesh of fingers on strings*
- 5) *The putting down of both second and third fingers simultaneously (the F and G on D string) when playing "G"*
- 6) *Movement of the elbow to the (my) left when moving from D string to A string*
- 7) *Crisp lifting of the fingers*

Right Hand:

- 1) *The climbing up the stick exercise [which Scott has shown me]*
- 2) *Importance of the little finger on top of stick's octagonal shape*
- 3) *Forefinger in producing consistency of tone*
- 4) *The thumb, its curve*
- 5) *Keeping the top of the hand level*
- 6) *Preventing excessive, eccentric movements of the wrist at the end of an up bow, which changes the sound of the note. Curt's advice is always directed toward the elimination of anything extraneous or needless. Keeping the bow angle consistent and the avoidance of physical tensions, big or small. Ease and directness and simplicity.*
- 7) *Watching my tendency to lift my elbow and the end of the up bow, near the frog.*
- 8) *In fact, his discussions of the proper use of the whole arm, the path in space in which it must move as part of a complex, but singularly unified natural movement. (I'll simply try to practice recapturing remembered sensations when he said I was doing it right.)*
- 9) *As bow moves from tip to frog, the functions of forefinger, then at end of move movement, the little finger to counter.*
- 10) *The holding of the bow by itself, upside down, experimenting with balances*

The top of the hand is turned toward me. "Pronation," he [Curt] calls it. It is kept throughout the movement. Pronation when the bow's tip is on the strings.

Notes: Much of this is in the rightness of feeling it as it is done. So I'll remember it all tomorrow as I go through the motions. When the bow is near the frog, the upper [emphasis SGG] arm comes into play, not rising or falling, but moving forward in the same plane. Near the frog or before it there is a feeling of the whole

arm coming together in what I call a crunch or bunching up. Is natural, not cramped, but a distinct sensation.—SGG pp. 11-13.

2/2/06 Thursday

I have been practicing every day, often two or three times a day in short periods. My concentration has been on two things—staying conscious of “the setup” as Scott has shown me, and listening and feeling for clarity in each note I am producing. It encourages me that I am beginning to feel my right wrist beginning to let go some, and that I can feel myself (and can see as I watch myself in the mirror) holding the bow more lightly. I continue to have to remind myself about the position of my fingers, keeping them together, thumb curved, little finger resting lightly atop the bow and with a slight curve.

I have discovered that if I have a bit more of the flesh of my middle two fingers against the frog, I have more control and my little finger is more naturally bent as it sits on the top of the adjusting nut of the bow. Also, my right index finger more naturally, and lightly, lays across or graces the top of the bow. I am finding it easier to pronate my wrist as I strive to keep my fingers pointed toward the floor or the ground. Ross Holmes, a great fiddler, suggested that I bend my wrist at the top of the stroke *“like you are trying to scratch the tip of your nose with the back of your wrist”* and at the bottom of the stroke *“like you are reaching down to pet your dog.”* I shared this idea with Scott and it made sense to him, too.

I have adjusted the bridge of my instrument. My hope was to give me a lighter touch, placing the strings a bit closer to the fingerboard, but I still feel that I am fighting to get the sound and feel I want. Scott has played my instrument, and it sounds better than when I am playing, of course, but is obviously a “student grade instrument” with no real richness or heart.

2/3/06 Friday

Yesterday, I made a commitment to myself and a huge leap forward. I agreed to purchase a professional level instrument. I went out to visit Mike Sheriff, a luthier in Arlington. He showed me and allowed me to play a number of instruments, one of which, incidentally, he made. I selected a sweet sounding violin which he reworked. He told me that he could tell that it was a good instrument, but needed a little help to produce its real voice. To accomplish that, he removed the top and re-carved the inside, thinning and adjusting to allow the wood to resonate more freely. In terms of physics or mechanics, the top of a violin is moving in every direction, not unlike the movement of the ocean, while it is being played. To accomplish that movement in the most beautiful ways, the thickness of the wood must differ in places to accommodate curvature and graining. That being said, it is obvious that Mike has liberated this fiddle. Its voice comes driving out of the soundbox warmly, brightly, and sweetly. It is just the sound that I have been looking for. As there is no label or mark inside the instrument, we cannot tell who made it or when. It looks German and old, and Mike says that he thinks *“it could be played on any stage in the world.”*

When Scott and I practice tomorrow, he should be able to hear a remarkable difference in the instruments, and I hope, a considerable difference in me, partly because the new instrument is so much easier to play.

2/4/06 Saturday Morning

I am getting ready for another session with Scott. I have been practicing with the new fiddle, and have been re-reading his journal entries. There are times, and this is one of them, that I wish we had five hours instead of two. It is not that I am ungrateful for the huge gift he is offering so freely, just that there is so much I want to explore and learn from him.

This morning as I read through his handwritten notes again, I find that he writes of his experience in many of the same ways that I have been thinking. He writes of his need to relax his hands and take away tension and resistance, of his desire to be a fine and diligent student, of his once thinking that what he is learning to do was impossible, of his gratitude to his teacher, of his constant focus on "the setup," on the necessity of building music practice on a solid foundation, of the joy he is finding in his practice and his playing. As I write and consider these things, I feel myself to be in league or concert with a line of musicians going back beyond Mozart and forward toward who knows what. I feel part of something good and rare and fine. This is exciting stuff.

During this past week, especially with the new instrument, I have done all I can to practice by focusing consciously on position, accuracy, and letting go of tension. Ironically, the more I look for tension in efforts to release, the more I find that I am holding in my body. Yet, my progress is coming in small and incremental steps. I am encouraged.

2/4/06 Saturday Afternoon

I had a good session with Scott this morning—two hours including playing and listening to the sound in the new grand salon that he and Stuart are having built at their "gallery." We each played from each end of the room on the upper level while the other listened to the tones and overtones. The overall effect, even though the space is unfinished, is quite rich. One can easily imagine a string quartet playing while guests have conversation on the lower floor.

Today, we focused again on "the setup" more than on anything else. Scott kindly said that he could hear and see progress. Part of the reason is the new instrument. Most of it, though, is the product of having been conscious about my practice.

We concentrated on 1) bowing smoothly and creating an even tone through the entire length of the bow (Scott emphasized again and again the importance of keeping my fingers together on the side of the bow.) and 2) taking away almost all of the pressure from my left hand as my fingertips touch the strings. "*The pressure should be a three out of a possible ten,*" he reminded me again. He then showed me by having me place my finger under his index finger as he properly approached and touched one of the stings. It was remarkably relaxed compared to the pressure I have been using! I keep thinking that part of the difference is having focused for nearly half a century on using my left hand to forcefully play the guitar. Now, I work diligently to let go of that and learn something new and liberating. This is something I have to remember and practice every day. It is a good tool for discovering the residue of tension that I carry without thinking about it. As I consider professional performers, it is clear that they could not possibly play strongly over long periods with tension in their hands or bodies. They would become exhausted and their hands would cramp. Also, the sound they produced would be horrible. Remembering this, I would like to learn how to fairly float through my practice.

We also recorded his Brazos River piece with my laptop. I have already transferred it to CD's for each of us to use in our individual practice times. He will use it to further develop the other voices, harmonies, etc., and I will use it to continue developing my guitar accompaniment

and solo, which falls in the middle of the piece. While recording, he stopped playing and I counted aloud the eighteen measures where my solo falls.

We have been neglecting painting a bit, but will meet again on Wednesday of next week to resume. I suppose it is somewhat natural to be so excited about the music as I dive into something I have secretly wanted for so long, but told myself was impossible in this lifetime. So much for that old notion.

We also talked a bit about vibrato—isolating the hand and forearm, *"as if the hand is rocking back and forth loosely on top two bones of the forearm as you wave good-bye to yourself."* He pointed out how unnatural it feels at first and how uncoordinated he felt beginning to learn it. He has already advised me what Curt has advised him about not trying to make music. Today he added another: *"Don't play with any embellishment until you have learned the fundamentals. Embellishment, or personal style, will develop on your own as you go along."*

He reinforced the importance of practicing Curt's "drum taps" as an aid to accurate placement of the fingers and a kind of relaxed quickness. He said to practice them slowly at first, then more and more quickly as my hand and fingers become more adept and as muscle memory is developed. When we meet on Wednesday, I will ask him to show me precisely how to do them so that I may include this exercise in every practice session, at least for now.

Scott talked about the benefit of practicing wrist isolations while away from the instrument—driving, walking, sitting at my desk. Here again, the point is dislocation and building a kind of natural and easy muscle memory.