

# The Music We Share

AVERY HOM



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Culture, as a word and concept, is difficult to pin down. It embodies traditions, beliefs, and practices that many people share, but its specificity often precludes it from extending across the globe. As UC Davis Professor of History David Biale once proposed, culture is "the way we do things around here." But how does a writer approach something so nuanced and complex? How do we strengthen our bonds with cultural members while also inviting others? These questions have always challenged me in writing. So when Dr. Foss introduced the multicultural essay, I was a little intimidated. I felt that a large part of my identity, my affinity for classical music, might not resonate automatically. I worried that I could not share years of practicing and rehearsals in under 1,500 words. After all, musicians live unconventional lives—to say the least. But when my peers agreed to approach culture as it related to storytelling, a chord echoed between us. I acknowledged that we witness each other's worlds through stories. This is mine.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Avery and his classmates in UWP 101 collaboratively crafted the specific prompt for our third paper, the Multicultural Writing Project. As we thought about culture as a class, one theme stood out and had the room talking: storytelling. Students approached storytelling as a vehicle for culture in diverse ways; Avery's piece offers a personal account of the teacher-student transmission of culture, ideas, learning, and so much more. From refreshingly honest discussion to specialized terminology, Avery's writing choices create an intimate dialogue with readers in the world of music, while at the*

*same time inviting a broader audience to share in his journey. “The Music We Share” reminds readers that a conflict need not be completely resolved in order for us to share it, write about it, and inspire.*

—Emily Foss, University Writing Program

In my junior year of high school, my violin teacher told me a story. He once doubted his future as a musician, and he found little use in many years of practicing. College had left its mark: burning exhaustion and an empty wallet. A once-clear path muddied—and every non-musician seemed successful by comparison. A doctor could buy a car, but a musician takes the bus. This, he explained, was his mirror’s vision.

But I saw no mud on his porch that day. Instead, I found a step to climb as my open ears took everything in. I heard through his music a guide for young listeners, a mind for budding thinkers, and an anchor for fast talkers. And through his story, I heard a question.

During that difficult time, a friend asked him, “Which side of the stage do you want to be on?” At first, I felt this was a simple question, but my teacher’s silence told me that there was more. So I waited, crunching my toes and ruffling carpet. I waited for him to answer, but he remained quiet. He had already answered with the life around him—his family, his career, his passion. This was a question for me: which side of the stage do I want to be on?

Perhaps like my teacher many years ago, I thought my answer was clear—I wanted the performer’s side. I wanted to dazzle audiences with my virtuosity and tender melodies. I thought it was another way of asking if I wanted to pursue music professionally. I thought it was asking if I would practice more than four hours a day, seek out performance opportunities as if they were lost children, and study music in college. But as simple as I thought it was, the question lingered.

Days became weeks. Competitions and performances rolled by, and I continued to recount the story. I kept asking myself: “Which side?”

Soon after, my earlier success in music crumbled. Community college classes, playing in a string quartet, running a student club, and looking for new ways to put off practicing—all of this devoured my time. Even when I practiced as I should have, virtuosity escaped my fingers, and I arrived at competitions and performances fatigued and ashamed.

Months passed since my teacher told his story, but I retold it daily. I held onto it, especially when I was embarrassed—and there were many embarrassing moments.

I had stretched myself between music and school. I wrote essays with ease, but practicing became a chore. I hobbled rather than danced between violin lessons. I could not keep up with the life I thought I wanted. Pursuing a career in music, it turned out, led to more stress than joy and more exhaustion than reward.

I heard the story, and the questions resonated louder. I felt it as if they became my violin and bow, glowing with sound and reverberating through my chest.

“Which side?”

The listener’s side.

I felt a wave of relief, and clarity rushed through my life. Yet problems remained. I still needed to practice, and calendars do not forgive promises.

What I thought was a simple yet life-altering decision turned out to be less powerful in the short term than I had imagined. *Which side?* With each challenge, I continued to ask the question. With each disappointment and gut-wrenching moment of shame, I continued to recount my teacher’s story.

Perhaps I have retold that story so many times that it is forever changed. Perhaps as I have recounted it each day, it has become my story. And perhaps I have become the teacher, guiding the person in the mirror.

Even though the question was more important, I understood why my teacher told his story. He did not ask, “Are you sure?”—as many others had before him. His narrative was a gift: a tool, a compass for my path, and it guides me to this day.

This is the power of a teacher’s story. It freezes wisdom in memory; it binds people. Especially in an orchestra, where dozens of musicians unite under their conductor, stories foster camaraderie and encourage students to discover themselves. In telling stories, teachers inspire students to narrate with their instruments and guide with their hearts.

Stories also lead students beyond music’s many varieties of tedium. In the five centuries since the violin’s appearance, many have drawn sound from the its strings. All have had one thing common: a need to show off. Mozart, for instance, was a skilled violinist, and he supposedly wrote his third violin concerto solely to showcase his talent. Pablo de Sarasate, the

fiery virtuoso from Spain, shows off from the grave, having left behind some of the violin's most technically demanding pieces.

Of their many mandates, these composers require nuances in articulation: *legato*, *spiccato*, *staccato*—to name a few. The left hand must dazzle with scales and arpeggios, chords and double stops, *glissandi* and *vibrato*. A violinist must choose to follow each composer's instructions and dynamics—whether to play *piano* or *pianissimo*, *forte* or *fortissimo*. Mozart and Sarasate's instructions often flood the five staff lines so much that students must study for years before they can fully identify a piece's components.

So, what is a teacher to do but tell a story?

One of the greatest violinists of our time, Maxim Vengerov, is known for telling stories with music. Pieces that lack any program or story often find a narrative in Vengerov. In a recorded master class from the early 90s, Vengerov helps students break away from the lines and dots. For one student, Vengerov refashions the third movement of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 as an opera. He encourages the student to think of a *libretto*, or set of lyrics, for Mozart's many characters. Vengerov's story transforms the student's *spiccato*, or bouncing bow strokes, into chattering courtiers. A waltz theme introduces a queen's ballroom, and the student fashions an aria out of *legato*, sustained, bow strokes. The violin voices the queen as *piano* or *pianissimo*—soft or very soft—and chords imagine an organ as *fortissimo* (very strong) rather than *forte* (strong).

In the same master class, Vengerov brings spirit and laughter to Sarasate's *Caprice Basque*. He relates to the student the familiar feeling of joyless practicing. *Caprice Basque*, he explains, is sad and depressing at first, and it reminds him of his mother shouting, "Practice!" But as the piece develops, so does the student's capability. A simple melody explodes into technical fireworks, just as practicing evolves into joy. The student's *glissandi* transform from sliding up or down the fingerboard to form a light, teasing dance. Vengerov's story cements itself in living memory, guiding students beyond the composer's instructions.

In a similar recorded master class, the famous Itzhak Perlman broadens violinists' community with stories and inspires students to resist otherworldly technical demands. He narrates to ease a violinist's fear of the single-bowed *staccato*. For, while some pieces require *staccato* notes detached with separate bow strokes, composers sometimes demand a separated sound between several notes, using a single, long bow stroke.

This involves the violinist either tightening the right arm (the bow arm) or using the forearm to jolt a relaxed wrist up or down. In either case, the single-bowed *staccato* asks a lot.

But Perlman helps students sleep easier by relating another violinist's experience. He tells how Josef Gingold, a violinist-giant of the twentieth century, once played a concert attended by Eugène Ysaÿe, a Sarasate-like figure from Belgium. After the concert, Ysaÿe asked Gingold "where" his *staccato* was. Gingold responds, "I don't have a *staccato*." So Ysaÿe quickly devised a solution, instructing Gingold, "Put the violin under your chin. Now put the bow on the string—GO!"

The story's moral? Gingold never "lost" his *staccato* again.

In the end, teachers share their greatest gift—inspiration—through stories. A teacher's job is not to require passion but to *inspire* it.

In his memoir *Violin Dreams*, Arnold Steinhardt reflects on his quest for a perfect teacher. He chases down the biggest names in music, and he sometimes lands with gifted unknowns. And his quest begins with his first teacher's advice to his parents: "Your son needs to have someone light a fire under him" (Steinhardt 59). Inspiration, Steinhardt proves, defines music as a culture, just as it defines each student's relationship to his or her teacher.

I left my teacher's house some time ago, and I occasionally wander away from practicing. Yet I know that I will always return, because I tell myself a story and ask myself a question.

I once believed there were two answers, but now I know the truth. I see that the answer is whichever lights a fire in my soul and whichever brings light to my eyes.

We listen to be inspired, and we make music so that we inspire. The two do not live alone—they dance together each day and night, inside us all.

## Works Cited

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“Perlman on how to do staccato (subtitulado).” YouTube, uploaded by Erick Ramos, 21 May 2014.

Steinhardt, Arnold. *Violin Dreams*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.