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Pedagogue, performer, and composer Mark O'Connor has strong opinions about the state of string teaching.

# IT'S TIME TO REINVENT STRING PEDAGOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

How traditional string education is letting down students and stifling creativity

By Mark O'Connor

During the last 50 years, surprisingly few classical violinists have become skilled composers, arrangers, improvisers, or bandleaders. Once, they thrived in all these capacities—now, violinists play second fiddle in those roles to guitarists, percussionists, pianists, wind players, and brass players.

I have discussed this development with Nigel Kennedy, Maxim Vengerov, and Eugene Fodor, three iconic violinists with larger-than-life personalities—the three primary successors, one might say, to Itzhak Perlman, the greatest classical violinist since the 1960s. In my collaborations and conversations with them, I learned that each wished he could improvise (jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli and rock-guitar legend Jimi Hendrix are two improvisers they held in particularly high regard). They have asked me how I was able to improvise, to play unwritten, spontaneous material so easily. They shared with me that, despite considerable efforts (as adult musicians), they could not coordinate their brain, arms, hands, and fingers to

improvise and “fiddle” at the level to which they aspired.

This aspect of playing was absent from their training as young students.

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It’s interesting to see what has become of these friends and colleagues of mine:

At the peak of his career, Nigel—with whom I filmed a national PBS television special in the 1980s—almost never performs in the United States anymore. Despite accomplishing what no other violinist had done before or since—he sold a million albums of

a violin concerto (Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*)—his touring and recording career has, for the most part, disappeared. (Ironically, his last tour in the United States included a tribute to Hendrix, but it did not quite connect with audiences or critics.)

Maxim, who is in his mid-30s, is widely regarded as the leading classical violinist of this generation. He is a fan of my “Appalachia Waltz” project and the improvisational nature of my performances. Astonishingly, his violin career recently came to an abrupt halt when he announced that he would be taking a hiatus from performing. It is said that Maxim was suffering from a shoulder injury, and it is true that he has devoted considerable time during his hiatus to conducting. Nonetheless, shortly before he stopped playing, he also quit taking lessons from prominent jazz violinist Didier Lockwood, with whom he had spent many months trying to develop a command of jazz and improvisation. Didier told me that both of them were wholly unsatisfied with

the progress they had made. Even Maxim, a brilliant classical virtuoso, found it difficult to get far in jazz improvisation as an adult. He has recently reappeared after four years away from the limelight to play a handful of concerts.

Eugene, who, among other things, won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1974 and appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson 15 times, died in early 2011 from the effects of long-term substance abuse. His willpower had been festering since the late 1980s, which, I believe, was largely due to the fact that, try as he might, he was never able to immerse himself in the rich musical environment of this country that he wished for. On a few different occasions, I was directly involved in his endeavor to do this. In 1976, Eugene volunteered to judge the Grand Master Fiddling Championship (in which I was a 14-year-old contestant) in order to gain exposure to the best American fiddling. Later, in the mid-1980s, he asked me to write a caprice for him, which I did (Caprice No. 3). A few years after that, he came to Nashville to watch one of my country-music recording sessions. Ever he seemed to be searching for something that he could not find. He aspired to improvise, to play bluegrass. He wanted to incorporate the American idiom into his own performance career. But he never could do it to his or anybody's satisfaction.

Each of these wonderful musicians confided in me that they, too, wanted to be able to play, with complete freedom, music that was not written on a page. Unfortunately, their fascination with the musical world of which I had always been a part developed too late.

I believe there's a correlation between the classical training my colleagues received and the frustration they developed later in their careers. The training that worked for Heifetz, Menuhin, and their contemporaries may not have been as appropriate for my three colleagues. The musical landscape in the first half of the 20th century was vastly different than it is now.

Standards and tastes have changed.

Today, musical leadership requires a deeper and more diverse skill set. Unsurprisingly, far too many violinists who have undergone conservative classical training in the last half-century regret their own lack of creativity.

Recently, I brought a 24-year-old classical violinist friend (with a graduate degree in performance from Juilliard) to a bluegrass jam in Greenwich Village in New York City. For the last year and a half, she told me, she had been learning bluegrass tunes and working on improvisation and had regularly participated in a number of bluegrass jams to hone her skills.

**'The problem is not the teachers or orchestra directors; the problem is the nature of classical string pedagogy.'**

She was learning the ropes, it seemed.

I was eager to hear what kind of progress she had made. But the list of things I had to point out during the jam should allow you to gauge her progress:

- Play in duples—don't dwell too long on dotted notes.
- Think in phrases, but aim to transition seamlessly from one phrase to the next.
- Play in different registers from the soloist/singer you are accompanying.
- Play "fills" between lyric phrases from the singer.
- Play soft, complementary lines when someone else is soloing.
- Play with less/no vibrato in almost all cases.

This friend can play fire out of Ysaÿe and Paganini, but she has trouble accomplishing these techniques, the basic elements of bluegrass performance!

Many subscribe to the notion that a classical technical foundation can lead to proficiency in any style of music later on. But this notion is false, and it's especially problematic for violinists, who, on average, start learning at a younger age (often three or four) than students of almost every other instrument. For years, all that these young students hear is their own playing. Even when they participate in group classes, these young string musicians usually only hear others playing the same parts they play. As a result, they do not develop an understanding of harmony

and counterpoint. They do not develop the capacity to listen to, and comprehend, other musical parts that complement their own. It's no wonder then that so few classically trained violinists become expert composers, arrangers, improvisers, and bandleaders.

After the bluegrass jam in Greenwich Village, my friend wrote me the following message:

*"Please do tell your friends about my efforts in immersing myself into this unknown and mysteriously exciting territory. I am excited, uncertain, and beyond enthusiastic about this venture and addition to my life. It's amazing, really, after eight years of college and four different acclaimed institutions, I might say I have been trained so much to have been 'over-trained.' I'm astonished at the complexity of 'getting outside of myself' and embracing fiddle music. I have also had a strong ear—subconsciously mimicking all the sounds around me. For a while, I assumed if I listened enough to the music, my ear would simply guide me through the sounds of bluegrass. That is not so. Has my classical training helped me to absorb this new style? If so, how? The past year and a half of being out of school has been most illuminating—more so than a year in grad school. Hysterical.*

*"I hope that whatever I discover, I can help share it with others in my position. I can see how the many layers, dimensions, and subtle elements to bluegrass might discourage some 'classical' violinists when learning to fiddle. There are so many layers, so many dimensions. I aim to keep trucking—to cultivate this part of musical life. I truly love it and feel connected to humanity and the earth when I'm surrounded by it.*

*"The ability to listen and absorb has always been a strength. The hyper-listening [as you describe it], on the other hand, is another game altogether. Listening so that the 'adjustment' time is super quick. Classical musicians need this so much. I wonder what kind of musician I would be if I were taught to hyper-listen to my surroundings before listening to myself and solidifying the act of playing the instrument myself. At times, I feel held back by my own technique, trapped and tightly set in a system."*

It is illuminating—and disappointing—that my new friend feels "held back" by her own advanced technique, acquired through 21 years of studies from top-notch studios and conservatories. With enough repetition and memorization, a student can be trained out of being creative. The problem

is not the teachers or orchestra directors; the problem is the nature of classical string pedagogy. After 20 years of teaching more than 5,000 students (many of whom were classically trained) at my summer string camps, I've become acutely aware of this problem. I notice a distinct difference between young violin (and viola and cello) students and students of most other instruments—violin students often begin extremely young. On the other hand, wind, percussion, brass, and guitar students often do not start until at least age eight or nine.

**'Kids are naturally creative, so we must not suppress their creative faculties in musical training.'**

I have observed that, paradoxically, the latter students enjoy a creative advantage over the former by not playing anything at all between ages three and eight or so. Pretty much all young children are frequently exposed to music, but those without musical training process and internalize the sounds differently. Both groups of students engage in numerous creative activities—drawing, playing board games, making paper airplanes, building forts, and so on—but only in the latter group does each student apply a childhood's worth of creative activities to music at the outset of musical training.

And I have observed no difference in technical proficiency and/or potential between college-age string students who started strict classical training at age three or four and those who started at age eight or nine. In fact, those who start later are frequently much more capable of learning how to improvise and create their own music. It's as though those who start younger in the current classical regimen become wired to think about music as a purely technical, rather than a creative, achievement.

Let's put it this way: kids draw whatever pictures they like with the materials and colors they want. They build structures with building blocks of their choice. They write stories about worlds and characters they create. Kids are naturally creative, so we must not suppress their creative faculties in

musical training. Rather, we must allow their creative faculties to grow and flourish as they develop a technical foundation. I have met an incredible number of highly trained classical string players, including many who graduated from esteemed conservatories, like the Juilliard School, who simply cannot do such basic things as improvise, accompany singers, play rhythm with a good feel, play complementarily to other instruments, and react to what other musicians play.

This is evidence that our established string education practices are outdated and backward. It's time to eschew the all-too-common focus on endless repetition of the same notes, scales, and exercises. The more we promote creativity, the more likely we are to break our fixation with the past. We cannot rely on Copland and Gershwin to feed us all of the American string solos, string quartets, and string orchestra works we require. We have many miles of undeveloped musical lands to explore. Nigel, Eugene, and Maxim—three of the most brilliant classical violinists of the last half century—were musically unfulfilled.

We need our greatest violinists to be fulfilled. We need to usher string pedagogy into the 21st century. We need to create a foundation for young boys and girls to become 21st-century Mozarts, Bachs, Beethovens, Mendelssohns, and Dvoraks—string virtuosi who have the capability to compose great works that breathe new life into our beloved stringed instruments.

We need to train what I like to call the "21st-century string player," who is an expert technician, a keen listener, and a willing creator. One way to do this is to introduce American music that encourages students to investigate the melodies they learn as well as to improvise around them. This can provide them the skill set they need to become equally adept at performing a Paganini caprice, a Grappelli-like jazz solo, a Thomasson fiddle tune, and playing in the symphony orchestra. It encourages them to be creative, which is imperative for the future of music.

I hope you will join me in the endeavor to develop a true American school for string playing!

*Violinist, composer, and educator Mark O'Connor is the author of The O'Connor Method, which uses American music to teach technique, theory, and improvisation.*

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