

[Slug] Life Lessons

[Header] Kim Kashkashian

[Standfirst] The American violist talks about playing in prisons, letting go and Tai Chi

What has been your most memorable experience?

In the late 1970s I worked with Pro Musicis, an organisation established by Father Eugene Merlet that sent classical musicians into places they wouldn't ordinarily play. Today, we are more likely to be aware of the role a 'citizen artist' can play, but already in the '70's Father Merlet made it his priority. Every time he arranged for one of us to play a 'real' recital in a concert hall, he'd make sure we played in a jail or a drug rehab in the community as well.

To date, my most memorable performing experience was at the Iowa state prison. The room was full of men, guards with machine guns stood in each corner and I felt completely ill equipped to communicate with them. On the spur of the moment, I chose to play some very modern American pieces that had been written for me and their reaction was fantastic: they said that they could see the music in their heads and that they knew the stories being told. I moved straight onto some Bach, which they loved too. When I asked them what the music made them think of, they said they could see a building being built. That's what the most highly trained artists see in Bach too – the architecture. They weren't looking for a language, they weren't looking for a grammar but – lo and behold – they understood the music.

Realising that great music reaches everybody and that you don't have to be experienced to take it into your heart was one factor that pushed me towards establishing Music for Food, a charity that uses classical music to raise money for hungry people throughout the US.

What has been the most difficult thing you have had to learn?

When she took over the class at Peabody, Karen Tuttle taught us that we needed to accept the resonance of our bodies as connected to the resonance of the instrument. That was a hard one to swallow. It took a long time to get used to the idea that you're playing through your body, and even longer to trust it.

As a student at the very start of your career, there's an awful lot of anxiety and tension because you just want to do everything right. Karen told us to let go – to stop controlling and start reacting. Relinquishing control is a huge step, like walking off a cliff.

Now I do the same with my students, I hold up my viola and show them. 'You feel the bridge vibrating,' I say, 'you feel the string vibrating, you feel the bow vibrating, now feel your spine vibrating, make it go down your spine.' They look at me like I'm crazy but, a month or two later, they come back and I can hear the change. The sound has more layers, the palate of colours is more complex; the transmission of the vibration from the instrument and into space has become full of information.

Yet, I would add that Felix Galimir, perhaps the most expressive musician I had the honor to work with, made a sound that was produced straight from the spirit but had to work its way through an incredible amount of physical resistance. This very process of resistance caused a condition of distilled purity that remains unique in my experience.

What would you tell your younger self?

Relax! Relax and actively listen. Karen Tuttle used to keep a notebook of observations on us, her students, and when she shared it with me thirty years later, next to my name I saw she'd written 'Oh that poor child!' – I really was very tense indeed.

I once saw Kurtág teach a masterclass during which he, not unusually, reduced one student to a puddle of tears. His wife Márta, who was sitting in the audience, came up to him and said 'György! György! Stop now!' Only then did he see that the student was upset. 'Why are you crying?' he asked. 'We're working on the music - we're one musical family. Why are you crying? Remove the personal and just concentrate on the music.'

Recently my Tai Chi teacher told me: 'Too much desire and not enough intention.' It opens a lot of doors if you can think about things like that, with intention rather than desire. The strength of your universal intention is no longer inhibited by your personal wishes.