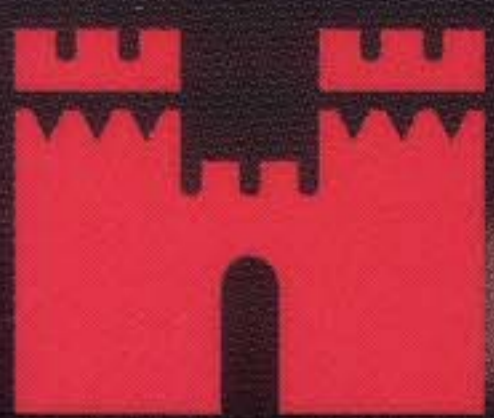


Stringendo

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

**SPECIAL PEDAGOGY ISSUE
JOTTINGS AND MUSINGS FROM ROBERT MASTERS
INTERNATIONAL NEWS
BOOK, CD AND CONCERT REVIEWS**

'Let It Flow!'

Justine Marsden

Have you ever played your instrument and become so completely immersed in its sound that it becomes a purely sensory experience? This is essentially what happens when you are 'practising-in-flow', a skill developed by German violinist/psychologist Andreas Burzik to help musicians both practise and perform. Recently I spent a day with him in Bremen (Germany) learning this technique.

By practising-in-flow you learn to not only 'play' your instrument but to 'feel' it. It is a way of practising based almost entirely on sensory input rather than mental instructions. You learn to trust your body to tell you what it needs. The goal is to 'iron out the creases' in a piece by creating a totally comfortable feel in practice to be replicated in performance.

There are basically three senses involved when playing one's instrument. The first is the 'touch' sense which is 'contact' with the instrument. The second is the sense of hearing the 'sound', the overtones produced when you play. The third is the body feeling, the kinesthetic sense.

For string players, our contact points with the instrument are the fingertips of the left hand and the bow on the string. Mr. Burzik asked me to put my first finger on the D string and find the position where my finger has a feeling of 'well-being'. You then do this with each finger (for the fourth finger, let it 'hang' on the string as though you were shifting back from third to first position). It is important that when your finger signals to you that it is not in its 'optimal' position, you allow yourself to correct it immediately.

Next we discussed the feeling of contact of bow to string. How would you describe it when your sound is rich, warm and projecting? Mr. Burzik came up with some wonderful descriptions: you feel the 'sweet stickiness of pulling a paint brush through paint'; 'chocolate pudding'; 'stroking a cat'; or the 'cream and honey' feeling, which my younger students love! Mr. Burzik had me playing one note over and over again till I 'felt' this beautiful sound which



he likened to finding the 'sweet spot' in tennis or golf.

He emphasized that this feeling organizes what you do with your body so you don't need to think, 'Am I moving the bow too fast or using too much pressure?' I asked him what helps 'switch off' the 'thinking' part of the brain. When we start to focus on our playing we begin to stiffen up, so in order to deactivate the control part of the brain, we need to use body movement. When you move the bow, your body should naturally swing from the hips in the opposite direction. Also unlock your knees and feel the soles of your feet; your connection with the ground is important. As practising-in-flow takes effect, Mr. Burzik describes the sound as beginning to 'fly' (sometimes even giving you a 'high!'). This led to a discussion on overtones, the concept of which is based on the physical fact that in each interval there are at least one, two or three overtones the same. We fit the sound of the second note of the interval into the sound of the first note. Successfully mastering this, you end up with a scale with a pearl-like clear unified sound. To practise this play an open string and then fit the third finger note into the sound of the open string (remembering to swing the body!) till the note is resonating, 'glowing'. Then play several notes in a row, playing each note several times till you have the feeling that the notes 'melt' together. If you're having trouble with the intonation of a note, play the other notes around it till the overtones organize the intonation.

So how does all this fit together working on a piece? The first step is to dislocate yourself from tempo, slurs, phrasing, dynamics, and interpretation. Go note

by note through the piece, looking for a comfortable feeling with fingers, bow and body and a resonating 'glow' on each note. We are essentially laying a sound and touch track through the piece and by putting all the notes into our comfort zone, it will develop naturally with great security. This enables the sound and music to be explored freely. You can even sometimes use other notes to help you understand the written ones. He emphasized that it is important to stay on notes only as long as they interest you, and then move on. As you start to understand the notes, a desire to check slurs and interpretation will come naturally and you will start to play the original passage, getting a little faster or a little louder when needed. Because we have had the freedom to play around with the passages and have explored them in different ways, by the time you get to perform you have a broad possibility of what you will do with it musically, getting rid of the anxiety of anticipating how you will perform that night. Each time you go on stage you will enter a 'playing zone' that will reflect your feelings.

We later discussed specific playing techniques, teaching, performance anxiety....Mr. Burzik is a well of information! Having just toured Europe with the Sydney Symphony, I had expected to feel exhausted at the end of five intensive hours of learning. On the contrary, I ended this day full of energy with batteries recharged, a testimony to 'flow'!

Andreas Burzik is planning to visit Australia mid 2011 and would be most happy to conduct workshops for any institutions that might be interested. His website is: www.flowskills.com