

## Natasha Brofsky & Roger Tapping: On Learning New Repertoire and Getting to Know a Composer's Unique Language

### Description

Have you ever thought about your process for learning a new piece, and wondered if there might be a more optimal way to do this? To not only learn faster perhaps, but also minimize bad habits that have to be unlearned later?

Like, should you listen to a recording first, to create an auditory model of some kind? Or maybe look at the score and try to create a model of it in your head in this way? Or simply play through it to get a feel for it?

Is it ok to emphasize technical details more in the early stages, and prioritize musical details later? Or is it important to do enough research about the piece in the early going, that the musical details can be baked into your practice even from the very start?

Surveys of musicians do suggest that there are some commonalities in how they approach learning new music. A series of interviews published in 1950 ([Wicinski](#)) with ten well-known Russian pianists found, for instance, that the majority went through three distinct stages of learning. An initial phase where they developed an artistic image of the piece, a middle phase where they focused on solving technical issues, and a final phase where they tried to focus more on the bigger whole, and emphasized performance practice.

But there does seem to be a good bit of individual variation, and no one-size-fits all approach that's exactly the same or "best" for all musicians. Although there do seem to be some important key principles that are probably a good idea to follow.

And what might these principles be?

To learn more about this, I thought it might be fun to reach out to two terrific musicians and teachers, and ask them this question at the same time, to see how similar or different their answers might be...

### Meet Natasha Brofsky & Roger Tapping

Cellist Natasha Brofsky has had a distinguished performing career, as cellist of the Naumburg Award-winning Peabody Trio, principal cellist of the Norwegian Radio Orchestra and Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, and guest artist with many ensembles such as the Takács, Jupiter, Ying, and Borromeo quartets. She has also been on the faculty at Yellow Barn, NEC, and Juilliard.

Violist Roger Tapping has also enjoyed an enviable performing and teaching career, having been a member of the Takács Quartet for many years, and since 2013, a member of the Juilliard String Quartet.

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He too has been active as an educator, having taught at the Aspen Music Festival, Taos, Yellow Barn, NEC, and Juilliard.

In this episode, we'll explore...

- Is it better to learn music by going to the score first? Or recording first? (3:02)
- The different ways in which composers use notation, and why it's important to remember that this is just an *approximation* of what they heard in their heads. (7:32)
- How does one learn the unique language of a composer? (11:14)
- Why Natasha finds it helpful to read historical accounts of composers. (13:09)
- One of the keys to preparation that Natasha finds helpful in being less fearful and nervous on stage. (16:35)
- Roger tells a story about Glenn Gould that relates to choking under pressure, and how not to psych yourself out before a tricky section and mess it up. (19:29)
- Roger describes the potential dangers or downsides to listening to too much music. (21:43)
- Natasha's "why" question, and how to get into the composer's head. (25:22)
- Roger talks about the importance (and fun) of looking for a composer's quirks and idiosyncrasies in the score. (29:43)
- The challenge of performing – especially in front of one's students! And the mindset shift that made a big difference for Natasha. (31:27)
- How did Natasha and Roger navigate music lessons with their own children? (37:03)
- The importance of choice, and at some point, making an *intentional* choice about one's path in music. And how long Natasha and Roger tried to get their daughters to play string instruments before they found their own path. (39:03)
- I ask Natasha and Roger what their own experiences with practicing were when growing up? Like, did they ever struggle with motivation? (43:16)
- A couple thoughts on effective practice, and why it's important to be patient with gauging progress. (46:18)
- Natasha explains how the way we practice can sometimes reinforce fear on stage. (49:20)

## Notes

- I allude to a Facebook video where Roger, and cellists Astrid Schween and Jamie Clark chat about how different composers have different languages (11:27): [Hangout with Astrid Schween and Roger Tapping](#)
- Roger references Ed Klorman's book on the *social* aspect of chamber music – "where the music-making and the socializing are very deeply intertwined."
- (17:39) [Mozart's Music of Friends: Social Interplay in the Chamber Works, by Edward Klorman](#)
- The CelloBello blog post, where Natasha describes the self-consciousness or paralysis that can sometimes occur when worrying too much about what students might think of one's performance
- (31:27): [Practicing What You Preach: Some Thoughts on Balancing Performing and Teaching](#)

## More Natasha, Roger, and family

Natasha and Roger both do a ton of performing and teaching, so I thought I'd include a small sample of each domain to explore:

### Natasha

- Here's Natasha's recordings of Beethoven's op.102 cello sonatas: [Beethoven: Opus 102 Sonatas for Cello and Piano \(Natasha Brofsky & Seth Knopp\)](#)
- And a masterclass where she works with a student on the first movement of the Brahms F Major Cello Sonata: [Natasha Brofsky Master Class: Brahms F Major Sonata, Mvt. 1](#)

### Roger

- Here's a link to a movement from Roger and the JSQ's recent recording of Beethoven's "Rasumovsky" Quartet, Bartok #3, and Dvořák "American": [Beethoven String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 59, No. 2: IV. Finale. Presto](#) | And, a link to the [complete album](#)
- And here's Roger coaching a quartet playing Bartók #6, with JSQ colleague Areta Zhulla: [Bartók's String Quartet No. 6 | Juilliard Areta Zhulla & Roger Tapping Music Master Class](#)

### ...and family

I asked Natasha and Roger a couple questions related to parenting in this episode, so I thought it might be fun to include their daughters in this post in some way too. =) So if you were wondering who shot the photo of Natasha and Roger at the top of the page, that would be courtesy of their daughter Ellie. And, here's a link to some of their daughter Cordelia's recent projects: [Cordelia Tapping](#)

### Date Created

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