

The Most Valuable Lesson I Learned From Isaac Stern

Description

One summer, I flew off to Israel with my piano trio to attend a 3-week chamber music bootcamp (no, it wasn't really called that, but that's what it was – in a good way). The faculty was a dream team of musical legends and performers (Isaac Stern, David Finckel, Leon Fleisher, Natalia Gutman, Joseph Kalichstein, Henry Meyer, Steven Tenenbom, and others) who coached us every day.

It was the most memorable and impactful few weeks of my musical life – but easily the most stressful, intense, and eye-opening few weeks as well.

I still find myself thinking about what I learned there on a weekly (if not daily) basis, but there is one thing that stands out as the most enduring lesson I learned from Isaac Stern that summer...

What are you trying to say?

I used to “proof-read” papers for a friend of mine back in college (she used to “proof-read” my theory assignments, so ethics aside, it was a pretty good arrangement). Anyhow, her papers were always truly mystifying, because even though the words were spelled correctly, and the grammar was fine, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what she was trying to say.

It was like reading this paragraph (courtesy of the awesome [Corporate Gibberish Generator](#)):

Bulletproof Musician has permanently altered the idea of power shifts. Think open-source. What does the jargon-based industry jargon “revolutionary” really mean? If you scale mega-iteratively, you may have to harness transparently. Do you have a cross-media strategy for coping with emerging e-tailers? We will extend our capability to leverage without diminishing our power to syndicate. If you synthesize strategically, you may have to incentivize nano-macro-extensibly. If you architect interactively, you may have to actualize globally. The TQM factor can be summed up in one word: clicks-and-mortar.

So while we do need *some* degree of command over language and grammar in order to make a convincing point, my friend's papers were proof that it is also possible to construct a perfectly written sentence that says nothing.

What does this have to do with music, and Isaac Stern?

Worrying about the wrong things

In the weeks leading up to the workshop, my colleagues and I spent most of our time focused on

ensemble, intonation, beautiful tone, and making everything sound as polished as possible. As you can imagine, we wanted to impress these great artists with our awesomeness.

Turns out we needn't have worried. Not once did we talk about ensemble. Not once were we criticized for intonation, sound, or wrong notes.

Instead, Mr. Stern abruptly walked out on us, grumbling "I don't have time for this" loudly enough for us to hear.

Why?

We didn't have anything to say.

Mr. Stern and his colleagues bombarded us with question after question about the music, the score, and our intentions. What character are we trying to portray? Why are there dashes in the score instead of dots? What does it mean that there is a crescendo written in one place, but not in another similar place? Why did we choose the tempo we did? Is that really the best bowing/fingering to bring out the character, or just the most convenient?

We responded with uncomfortable silence and the vaguest of responses. It was obvious we hadn't thought deeply enough about any of this.

It was mortifying, and in those moments where I fought valiantly to hold back tears, I learned what it means to be an artist.

Art and fear

Specifically, that if we want to be taken seriously as an artist, we must look at the score with our own eyes and our own ears and take a stand. Rather than copying others' ideas or waiting for others to endorse or support our ideas, we must make our own conclusions about what we see in the music and bring our ideas to life boldly, courageously, and without question or apology.

That even if we don't know what is "right" or "wrong", we simply must make *some* decision and commit to it until we come up with a better idea. That abstaining from making a decision is not an option. Nor is delaying our inquiry into the bigger questions while we obsess about intonation and hide behind technique.

What do we think are the most important features of the phrase? Why is it written like it is, and not some other way? What do we think is cool or beautiful? What do we want people to feel, and how can we make that happen?

Will we always get it right? Nope. Will people always agree or like our take on the score? Of course not.

Is it scary? Heck, yeah.

But you know what's worse? Putting out bland/cautious/tentative/safe ideas (or none at all), and feeling the derision, apathy, frustration, or disappointment of a genuine artist who took the time to form an opinion, and had the courage to put themselves out on a ledge they believed in.

Take action

I suspect some of this is a habit. Our early training is naturally so focused on the mechanics of playing our instrument that the big picture and self-expression often get pushed to the back burner. But I think many would argue that this needn't become so ingrained a habit.

How can we change things so that young musicians don't have to wait until their 20's to learn this lesson?

Sport psychology doesn't really have the best answers to this question, but I really like [Dr. Robert Duke's](#) approach to this. Check out his [Habits of Musicianship](#) and his [Center for Music Learning](#), and see what you think.

The one-sentence summary

"An artist is not paid for his labor but for his vision." ~James Whistler

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