
**Interview with Pinchas Zukerman - Music Director
National Arts Centre Orchestra
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Part 1: About performing

Do you ever play music that you do not like?

I love all good music. There's no such thing as not liking it. There's good music and bad music. There is no in between. There is of course within that range a criterion of greatness of certain pieces as it is with sculptures or paintings or books. Certain writers are just better than others. But they are good. You've got to know that before you can know how good that real piece is and then you can't really make up your mind. At least I can't, between greatness. One day you feel this way but then one day you think "Oh my, that's it." And then the next day, "Oh no! THAT'S it!" And all that is information again. It's all part of being a musician. It's part of being alive and of having music as part of your being. I have music all of the time, it's just there. So, it's not a question of liking it or not. I happen to love it. It just happens to be a passion I have for sound. If it's an ugly sound, there had better be a reason for it and usually the composer wants it. A great composer will make an ugly sound, but boy it can be good. Sometimes. So it's a complicated set of rules we have and yet when it's right that's the totality, it's complete. You don't need anything else. Music is a complete form of being.

How do you prepare for a concert?

I prepare all my life. I prepare today for tomorrow. I prepared yesterday for the day before and on and on. If you have a good experience playing a concert you try to remember that. It's like getting up to bat at baseball and hitting that home run. [Barry] Bonds hit the home runs not only because he is physically able but also because there's something in the memory that makes him hit that ball. We try to achieve that same thing on stage: the best performance of the music that's written down. This takes a lot of time and

thinking. You don't just prepare today for tomorrow. It's an ongoing process of preparation.

I call concerts open rehearsals. Sometimes there are better rehearsals. Sometimes you play a rehearsal without the public and it's great. Sometimes you play a rehearsal with the public and it's great. Sometimes you play a rehearsal and it's not so good so you'd better go back and rehearse without the public so that all of a sudden something happens!

It's an ongoing process. The physical playing of your instrument needs to be done every day, or otherwise you're cheating. You're cheating yourself and then you cheat the music and then the audience and then it's all over. Within a couple of days it's bye bye.

Preparation for conducting is non-stop. I prepare the bowings, the individual parts for the strings and I look at the score. It's an ongoing circle that never stops. You don't necessarily have to stand there and [wave your arms]. Once you have that component of beating time ingrained in your system it's like brushing teeth. You're not all of a sudden one morning going to just start brushing differently. You have to learn that physical aspect of conducting of course, just as you have to learn to play whatever instrument it is that you play. But the ongoing preparation to know the score happens twenty-four hours a day. Literally, I study all of the time. Sometimes ten minutes, sometimes two hours, sometimes I just look at the score while I'm passing by while doing something else. Sometimes I'll be on the phone and reading away and the other person says, "What are you doing?" "Oh, sorry, what did you say?" So it's non-stop: rereading the same sentences, some new sentences, the syntax... Sometimes you think "Oops, I've missed that thing!" I'll have done the piece a million times and I will think, "Oops, how could I have missed that second clarinet? How could I do that?"

It's an ongoing process of acquiring knowledge and it's healthy. It keeps me out of trouble.

What is your favourite part of a concert?

When it's over [laughs]. When a concert, when a performance - it's not really a concert, it could be at home - feels good it's an unbelievable feeling. It's indescribable when all the elements are right. Onstage the elements don't all come together too often. It has to do with lights and air conditioning and god knows what. Maybe the taxi driver was a real S.O.B. and I said "Take me to Carnegie Hall" and he takes me to Lincoln Center. I don't know, I'm making this up but it could be numerous things. I've had occasions though where I've gotten off an airplane and had a twenty four hour time change and had gotten on stage and thought, "Whoa, how did I do that?" You see, when the

elements are right, when the music is flowing properly it's the most amazing think in the world. I can't describe it. I can't do it in words.

Part 2: Information for teachers

Hi, my name is Pinchas Zukerman. I belong to the National Arts Centre Orchestra. They call me the Music Director, I sometimes play the violin and the viola and I just have a great time here.

Pinchas Zukerman discusses passion in music and in teaching.

The goals of teaching are to give a young person the ability to understand what it is to make music. The thing that you can apply most of all in a master class situation on a tour like ours [of Atlantic Canada], since we are only going to meet that person once and maybe twice, is the passion for making music. Passion is everything in music. If you don't have the passion don't do it. Through our actions we show students knowledge of how to conduct or to play the violin or the viola. Teaching is a totality and totality is a human being and a human being is passionate. If I can show that passion to students and I can leave them with five or ten percent of that feeling then I have accomplished something. I am going into their own thinking about their life and their music.

What can be the most damaging thing for young violin students?

Damaging. You know if you don't teach properly you can hear it. You can see it. Students look awkward. The first thing they will say is, "This doesn't feel good." Well, if it doesn't feel good when you go to the doctor they start knocking around. They test your head. If you have a fever it's tangible. You can take an Advil or Aspirin and maybe in 24 hours you'll feel better. If you have nasal congestion maybe they will give you some spray.

We don't have that kind of medicine when we teach the violin. So, you've got to be very careful about how you approach telling someone about a particular aspect of performance or way of performing, or way of playing. If a student tells you he or she is not feeling well you'd better go back to your textbooks and make sure you're not contributing to it. That's a hard one.

To be a teacher is very complicated. There is an entire psychological aspect of teaching. I sometimes spend hours talking to students about whether they're feeling good about themselves. This has nothing to do with the instrument. And usually teenagers have a hard time feeling good about themselves. It beats me, I don't know why. I remember being a teenager and not feeling good about myself, I think it's a chemical thing. It's growing up and all of those things that we hear about. It's a combination.

The question is how do we handle it? How do we help the sixteen to twenty-two year olds or fifteen to twenty three year olds? And girls and boys are

different. No question about that... in their evolution. I know one thing for sure: once it sounds good, they feel better and that's good. So I tell students, "Hey listen. If you work on this sound you'll feel better." And they go, "Really?" and I say, "Yeah, yeah, try it!" So they pick up the fiddle and say "Yeah that feels good!" I say, "Well, keep doing it." And they say, "Yes but at eight o'clock in morning when I have to sit in an orchestra..." I say, "Make yourself feel good! Make a good sound!" They say "Ahhh!"

So, it's a process. It sounds simple but it's very complicated. But, it's a start. Usually with girls I tell them that they are also going to look good. Boys, they don't care. But to girls I say, "You're going to look good. It sounds good. You feel good. You're going to look good." And then you see the evolution in place. It's a slow, ongoing process and you have to be patient.

Patience is a virtue in life but particularly when it comes to teaching, and then you get to know a person better. I'm always very curious to get to know the person's background: where they grew up, who their parents are, did they study music, where their parents come from, bla, bla, bla, bla bla. So they become complete people for me and then I can judge the levels of information that I can actually go to them with. In turn they teach me how to teach them and that is only helpful for the next one. On and on it goes and that is really what it's about. I learn more from my own daughters for example about how to behave with people, and especially them. Just to be able to say, "Yeah that's good." That's hard for parents to sometimes do.

If you keep saying, "Oh sweetheart. That's so wonderful!" Ahhh molasses. It's like eating too much chocolate. You get a little sick. But if you say, "Hey...that's good," once in a while not all the time, that's my approach. But they [my daughters] taught me how to do that because they know when I am faking. And students will too. They'll say, "Are you sure...?" And I may say, "Well, no I guess I'm not." So there is vulnerability here that I think its very important and that's what makes us better people. That's what the art form is about. It's a discipline and a way of thinking and a way of making your life something that is so invaluable that you cannot put a price tag on it or a time table of what it all means in sociological terms: twenty five years from now, thirty-seven years, or even a half an hour from now. And that is why education is so important. It's not just about sitting there with a textbook. That's silly. We know that. It's everything else around us. That is why we [the National Arts Centre Orchestra] go on tour.

When we go on tour we show people that passion of what we are, not what we do. What we are. That comes through a very, very strict set of rules. Sometimes by Bach, sometimes by Beethoven, sometimes by Mozart and Bartok and on it goes. All those aspects evolve and our curiosity levels go up.

You're going to be a better person if you do all of this. No question about it. I guarantee it.

What are the traits of a really good string teacher?

If a teacher can create good posture for the student, give them the ability to play more comfortably, pass on their own knowledge of music, their own sociological connection to thing then what makes a student better.

A teacher is not someone who necessarily plays very well. Mr. Galamian did not necessarily play very well but boy he sure did know how to do it right. When he showed you he demonstrated exactly what he said. Now, would you want to hear that on the stage of Carnegie hall? I don't know. I don't think so but it doesn't matter. He's a teacher.

The devotion and discipline of being a teacher must come from an inner feeling of wanting to help someone else to do it and to do it well. It does not come because I am who I am. That's not why I teach. I don't teach because I play a violin on the stages of the world. I teach because I really feel I know how to do it. And even I'm learning. It's a constant learning process. Every year there will be a new thing. "Ah, that will help that person if I do that!" And it comes out of experimentation; me just doing it. And you find a form, you find a lingo you find syntax. You find a way of making students understand that that is what teachers should do. Don't be ashamed of asking questions! "How do you achieve that? How do we go about doing it better?" The curiosity level has to be there. I always open it up, in master class situations especially. I always open it up to questions because maybe I can learn something from them.

Part 3: Information for students

What are you looking for during master classes?

I look at the totality of the person. What is most obvious usually is the physical ability: the dexterity of both hands, coordination, and how they apply themselves to the instrument and vice versa. That tells you a lot. After many years of seeing people play, not just the teaching part, just generally all over, you have idiosyncrasies of elements that are poignantly wrong or poignantly right. You enhance what is good and try to explain what is not quite right. Usually it's posture. It has to do with just being able to connect. You also hear at that point the musicality that comes out. Usually that's forgotten about because now we're talking about physical things: how the sound should be produced, it mainly comes from the right hand but of course the left hand has a lot to do with it. So you look at all of these things and you see how that person relates to it. You definitely have to tell them that there are no shortcuts. There is no pill yet to over night be able to say "Oh yeah, I can play like Perlman, or Heifetz or Stern." It's not possible. You have to go through many processes of evolution and development.

So, I look at all these things. I give them a bit of information, not too much because in a half hour or an hour if you give them too much information it's sometimes shortcuts.

What motivated you to play and practice the violin when you were a student?

When I was a kid, meaning around seven or so, my dad was really rather adamant about practicing. I didn't want to practice. I wanted to play football and so on.

About two years into my education I was taken out of school and given the chance to practice every morning. I had a routine. I woke up around 9:00 am and played until 12:00 pm— three hours. Then a tutor would come and I would go through all of the schooling stuff. The school was very close to our home. We lived at that time in a city of about 30 000 people, 30 kilometers or so south of Tel Aviv. This city now is about the fifth largest in the country. I could go to exams at the school, I belonged to it but I didn't actually go every day. I had friends at the school though and we were literally a block and a half away. Because the climate in Israel is very conducive to being outdoors anyhow, it lends itself to a lot more interaction between kids and people and so on and so forth.

The motivation really came later on from myself. But I rebelled a lot. And that is a characteristic of mine. But when I realized that the violin and music

would be and is my life, something turned. A light went on and said, "Hey Pinchas, get to that violin everyday, or otherwise you're dead meat." And so I started doing it. I was about fifteen and a half, or sixteen years old in New York. I got out of the pool halls and to the violin, seriously. It doesn't mean I didn't practice before of course, but it's not easy to get a kid to practice.

What advice do you have for violin students as they progress in their playing?

Keep listening. Keep listening. If you're making a good sound and it felt right, remember that. It's like remembering a telephone number or the address of a girlfriend or boyfriend. It's that simple but to get to that point where you can actually remember that feeling sometimes takes quite a bit of time. Don't get frustrated though. This [holding the violin] is a very unnatural way of making music – to put your arm here .. and, I have been doing it since I was six or seven and I still have to do it.; this morning I practiced for twenty minutes just to get my fingers moving. It's a discipline, of course, but listen. Keep listening. Keep listening.

And, acquire as much information as you can at all times. Just keep doing it. Don't wait until someone tells you to go and read a book. Go and read ten pages, big deal, Eight pages! Read from the back to the front. Just get information. As much information as you can because it will make you a better person.

What are the most important elements in achieving a beautiful tone?

There are many aspects of making sure that the bow goes onto the string properly and you have to bend your thumb and curl your fingers. That's the first thing. You have to make sure that your arm is at a ninety-degree angle to the strings. In other words that the bow goes at a ninety-degree angle and it stays parallel to the bridge so it's like train tracks as much as possible. What we want to do is this [Pinchas demonstrates], which is natural. But we want to reverse that natural process. So there are a whole bunch of things that you have to acquire through practice, and with someone watching and eventually the sound will come. This is very hard. It's the hardest thing. Of course the weight of the arm presses down and it chokes. So you start lifting and doing a whole bunch of stuff. Complicated. It's very complicated and it looks easy but you have to take time. Step by step by step. You can't just one day take on the bow and say, "Ok, I'm going to play." It doesn't work. With the piano, yes. You press the keys and it makes a sound. A string instrument is very complicated.

Part 4. Information for parents

What can parents do to help a child progress in playing an instrument?

Parent guidance with a child is a very delicate matter and I am the last person to sit here and expose my own feelings about it because it's their children. Simply said, it's not my child. Now, having said that...parents need to sometimes just step back. When we have a gifted child, it may be in writing, mathematics, chess, music, that's a gift. GIFT-ED. Gift, gift, it's a gift to all of us. Sometimes some parents begin to get some kind of an ultra guilt feeling that "I produced this gift so I have to give it everything I have." Ok. Fine. But somewhere get objective about what it is. That's hard for parents to do, for all of us to do. "I have the greatest dog." Or, "I have the greatest car." "Do you know my daughter, she's going to be Margot Fonteyn! Do you know that she dances? You should just see how she dances! She is seven and a half and she's going to be Margot Fonteyn." Are you kidding me? There's no way they can tell that! Now, that's the parent. Ok, I've had many different situations and experiences and I'm sure I will continue to have. the only thing I have to say about it is just take it slow. And I tell the kids the same thing. I write all over their music: S-L-O-W. all over the place: slow! Because the ability of time, if you elongate time it gives you space. Now space can be referred to in room sense, rooms, clocks, etc. But that's good, If you're doing that you're already helping your children. Just slow down the process and when I do finally, and many times I have sat down with parents of gifted children and I say to them, "Do you know that your child has a huge, long, wonderful journey ahead of them?" And they say, "What?" I say, "Imagine. They are sixteen years old and they are going to play the violin for the next fifty years. That's a long time. Maybe not for you or me but for the child, imagine! Fifty years. They can't think five minutes. Fifty years! That's a long journey. Now, it's our responsibility to make that road very smooth for them. They are going to have some hard knocks along the way. Everybody does. You can't avoid it, but if you have the instrument and you have music, and that's my job, to make it as smooth and easy as possible but you've gotta give me time, which means you've gotta give your child, your offspring time. Slow. That gives you a path to think. And that is generally, overall, without specific cases, not advice really. I try to do that with myself. Slow down and I'm fifty-four. It's hard. I try to do it with my own kids. I think I was pretty successful. My ex-wife was good with that. She brought them up pretty well, Just give them time. My daughters are now, one is going to be 30 and the other is 27 and they are still finding their ways. They still have a long time. My god! They're only thirty and they are going to go forty, fifty years from now. So, a gifted child is a gift to us. Lets help that gift help us in the future and vise versa, they'll help then the next generation.