



A violin case filled with stories and song

PHOTO COURTESY EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

REMEMBERING VIOLINIST AND EDUCATOR ZVI ZEITLIN, 1922–2012

A fresh-faced student ponders his mentor and how he came to Room 309

By Greg Perrin

This portrait is a 2008 essay I wrote as a freshman at the Eastman School of Music while studying in Zvi Zeitlin's violin instruction studio. Zeitlin died on May 2, at age 90.

Room 309, Eastman School of Music, is alive with creative fire. The eyes of Heifetz, Stravinsky, Copland, Bernstein, Menuhin, Ysaÿe, Kreisler, and other violin greats gaze from ancient photos. Along the walls, imposing file cabinets burst with scores and handwritten letters from legendary composers and musicians. Near a towering shelf of LPs and tapes, a poster announces a concert long ago: Raphael Kubelic conducts the devilishly difficult Schoenberg violin concerto, performed by Zvi Zeitlin.

Today, seated in his antique cushioned chair, in his dark blue sweater vest, Zeitlin, now 87, regards a fresh-faced student through gold-rimmed glasses.

"What do you have for me?"

The young man hangs on Zeitlin's every word, carefully thought through and expressed, as if notes in a symphony. He has seen Zeitlin walking slowly through the halls, smiling and acknowledging all who catch his gaze. But now, during the lesson, the freshman knows to expect the most bluntly honest and demanding teacher, possibly in the world.

Time feels suspended during a lesson, which routinely lasts two hours or more. Zeitlin gives as many lessons each week as each student needs, whether one or seven. This lesson takes place on a Saturday afternoon.

The young man tightens his bow, tunes his instrument, and begins the Allemande from the Second Solo Violin Partita of J.S. Bach. Zeitlin listens actively to the entire movement, and says in his Israeli accent, "Bravo." He pauses. Then, as he elaborates, his voice gradually becomes agitated and harsh. "But you play as if you have no conception of the piece. Do you care what Bach intended?"

The student says nothing.

Zeitlin rises from his chair and picks up a seasoned violin from an open case behind him. "Bach melodies are the product of harmonies," says Zeitlin. "You must understand and see the relationship of voices and always have a sense of the harmonic direction."

He sings the first few bars of the Allemande, and then plays them, emphasizing the harmonic changes within the melody.

"Now play!" Zeitlin demands.

Later, Zeitlin shares some details of what has brought him to Room 309, and to this point in his life. A native-born Russian, Zeitlin emigrated with his parents to Israel at two, and to the United States to study at the Juilliard School at 12. Zeitlin's "mother languages" are Hebrew and English, but he states firmly that there's a lot of Russian culture within him. "My teacher Sacha Jacobsen was Russian," he says. "He spoke Russian and taught at Juilliard and in St. Petersburg."

He pauses, squints, points to a picture of Jacobsen, and adds, "He was my first profound musical influence, with William Kroll, at Juilliard. Kroll was a pupil of [Henri] Marteau, a famous violinist who taught at the Geneva Conservatory, who succeeded Joachim, at the conservatory in Germany."

He then gently reminisces about Marteau playing in Israel.

After studying with the famous pedagogue Ivan Galamian at Juilliard, Zeitlin made his debut in New York City in 1951, followed by years of touring with almost every major orchestra. Just before his appointment

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I am on your side. But I am
preparing you for the people
who aren't.'**

—Zvi Zeitlin

in 1967 as professor of music at Eastman, Zeitlin had substituted for Donny Guillet of the esteemed Beaux Arts Trio at the Jacobs School of Music in Indiana.

"Guillet wanted me in the trio," Zeitlin says matter-of-factly, "but I already had a fairly advanced concert career and it was hard for me to make the change."

Suddenly, Zeitlin points to a picture reminiscent of the lesson I had just observed: a young man with a violin stands next to an elderly man leaning precariously over a score. "This is the picture of me and Stravinsky when I performed his concerto with the

Israel Philharmonic," he says, and then he describes his first meeting with Stravinsky.

"A well-known composer, Ingolf Dahl, arranged for me to be introduced to Stravinsky," he says. "So Stravinsky invited me to visit him. I came to his door, rang the bell, and it was Stravinsky who opened the door! His first words were, 'Ah, Mr. Zeitlin, I am not a violinist. I cannot give you technical advice.'"

Zeitlin smiles and continues, "I said, 'No, I didn't come for technical advice. I came for the privilege of meeting you, inspiration, and having a personal contact.'"

Zeitlin rises from his chair. "I must show you something," he says, searching through endless folders of decaying scores in one of his massive file cabinets, eventually finding the note that Stravinsky wrote him after a concert. He skips over the note to the end, in which Stravinsky addresses Zeitlin as his "very pleasant, personal contact."

The dominoes of his memories begin to fall as this story reminds him of how he became interested in the Schoenberg violin concerto, performing it 67 times with almost every

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'Whether you're playing a C major scale or Beethoven violin concert, every note should sound as if it emerged from a soprano's throat!'

major orchestra. Stravinsky had urged him to perform the concerto, Zeitlin says. "While I was touring, I gave three concerts with Stravinsky and the Israel Philharmonic," he recalls. "We stopped to have dinner in a restaurant by the Sea of Galilee and Stravinsky raised his glass and said, 'Thank you very much for playing my concerto, but I would like to urge you to play the Schoenberg violin concerto.' I mentioned that I had started to study the Alban Berg concerto, but he said, 'Berg is charming, simple. Schoenberg is frightening!'"

Visibly nervous, I again play the first bars of the Allemande. Laughing, Zeitlin interrupts: "You speak the language, but you have no idea what you are saying!" He then demonstrates on his violin and tells me to play again. I imitate his playing. Zeitlin shouts, "No! Don't just copy me. But that is better. Use your imagination and phrase according to the harmony and what the composer wrote."

Apparently this man, a living musical institution, simply does not tolerate imperfection, by his own well-considered definition, which is that each musician must find his or her own standard of perfection. Playing without "conception," as Zeitlin calls it, earns a stern reprimand, demonstrated frequently during the lesson. He is clearly determined to make an artist of this young man. "Whether you're playing a C major scale or the Beethoven violin concerto," he says, "every note should sound as if it emerged from a soprano's throat!"

Zeitlin's manner is a function of his deep devotion to music and the world from which

it emerged—much of which he knows through direct experience. Any observer is likely to sense a profound love that Zeitlin has for his students—a *ferocious* love. All his criticisms, painful as they may be for students to hear, reflect his many decades of performing, teaching, and observing. Today, all is focused on requiring this student to rise to the highest standards and realize whatever promise he may show.

To conclude two hours of brisk instruction and unvarnished criticism, Zeitlin says calmly, "I want you to succeed. I am on your side. But I am preparing you for the people who aren't."

In all the world, no teacher proved more critical and, at the same time, more caring and loving to his students than Zvi Zeitlin.

Greg Perrin is a recent graduate of the Eastman School, working as an intern at the Eastman Community Music School. He is a second-place winner in the college students and professional musicians category of the 2012 American Protégé Piano and Strings Competition.

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