

The violinist and chamber music coach encourages his students to take an improvisatory approach



*What is your main philosophy when you coach chamber ensembles?*

I try to help the students positively, not to look for mistakes. It can be dangerous when a teacher says, 'It's out of tune; it's not together.' Instead, you look behind the notes. If they are not together, I always say to them something like, 'It's not together because you are not

breathing the phrase together.’ Playing together should not be a goal: it should be the result. When there are improvements to make, I make those points in the spirit of helping them to do even better, not criticising them.

*Who were your main teachers and influences?*

At the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest I studied with the composer György Kurtág, the fantastic pianist Ferenc Rádós, and the composer and conductor András Mihály, who was a great chamber music teacher. They told us that the goal of music making is not to avoid mistakes, but to play the music itself. Béla Bartók wrote in a letter that all the great artists play like folk musicians: they do not show what they have been practising, but allow the moment to inspire them.

*How do you encourage students to go beyond the notes?*

I try to show my students that we are not just playing the notes – we are playing the whole phrase. If I say, ‘Now I will meet my friends to have lunch,’ my brain is not in the words, but in the thought. Static, boring concerts happen when the players are concentrating on the actual notes. But when you listen to a note, it is already an upbeat to the next. I tell them that, as Furtwängler said, music is a river, a never-ending flow. Imagine you see an eagle flying beautifully. Nobody is counting ‘one, two, three’; you simply enjoy the arc of its flight.

*What is your approach to the interaction of musicians in the group?*

I like to encourage students always to listen to the others and inspire each other – not only reacting but participating, not only hearing but listening. You have to be a performer, but also a listener. And you can make the others better players. All of you must love the piece and love what you’re doing, because with love, everything is easier. The best thing is if you fall in love with the music. If you really go into the piece and work with it, suddenly you realise the fantastic beauty in it and you fall in love with it. If this happens with all the players together, you help each other like crazy.

*You often suggest images to convey ideas – why?*

I feel that images are more powerful than words. A psychiatrist friend told me that in the first two years of our life we follow not words but images, and this is a deep part of our minds. So, if I say to a young violinist, ‘Please play more legato and singing,’ it’s nonsense – but if I say, ‘Imagine you are ice-skating and while you are skating you’re singing,’ then suddenly the student knows! Today a group I was coaching played the Dvořák E flat major Piano Quartet op.87. In the slow movement a great, passionate outburst is followed by a quietening. I wanted their playing to convey even more stillness, so I suggested this: imagine you have just made an amazing, eloquent declaration of love – now you are alone, thinking ‘Oh my God, what did I say?’

*How do you encourage students to come closer to the composer’s thoughts?*

I want to show them that it is a search that never ends – we are like detectives! We can never be so arrogant as to say, ‘This is the only way to play that piece.’ I also feel more and more that young musicians should read the letters of composers and read about their lives; if you try to get closer to Beethoven’s mind, you play differently. I met Simon Rattle in May, working with a young orchestra, and he told us, ‘Once a young musician went to Brahms and asked him, “How can I be a better musician?” And Brahms told him, “Practise less and read more!”’

*What is the biggest problem you encounter with young groups?*

Music education has become very materialistic; I often find that students do not dare to make mistakes. An improvisatory approach in which the musicians inspire each other on stage can bring some small mistakes, and this generation won't take the risk – it is too dangerous for competitions or auditions. But if musicians would risk this while reaching for spiritual values, then everybody would be more courageous, performances would be at a higher level – and if they would really dare to play out their hearts with spontaneity, I am sure there would be three times as many classical music lovers in the world.

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA DUCHEN