

When musicians get together to talk, one of the things they like to do is swap stories about their experiences with the important artists they have heard or met or known. Recently, a friend of mine was reminiscing about the time he played with the late Joseph Schuster in New York, many years ago. He mentioned that he was impressed not only with Schuster's artistry, technique and musicality, but with his manner: My friend found him withdrawn, unapproachable and gruff. In response, I told him my own Joseph Schuster story:

I first encountered Joseph Schuster in July of 1962. That summer, we were both at Kneisel Hall, in Blue Hill, Maine, for the first time, he as a member of the artist faculty and I as a scholarship student.

On the first day of classes, Marianne Kneisel assembled all of the cello students in the main hall to play for our new teacher. We ranged in age from about 14 to 21, and in ability from modest to advanced. None of us had met Schuster before; we knew him only from his recordings and concerts and from his former position as Principal Cellist of the New York Philharmonic. (Other members of the class included Diane Mather, later of the Cleveland Orchestra, and Jose Bergher, of Caracas. )

One by one, we each played something representative of our individual abilities and recent studies. Our colleagues, and a few casual listeners, sat out in the audience. Meanwhile, Schuster had positioned himself alone, off to the

side, almost behind the players, as if he were more a spectator of the entire event than the most important auditor there.

I don't recall our program, that day. But I do remember watching Schuster as each of my classmates performed. Then, as I played, I sneaked a glance at him, over my left shoulder, to see how he was reacting to my own performance. To my horror, he sat there crouching on a folding chair, scowling at all he saw and heard! My best sounds and my best moves were met with an expression that reminded me of a pouting bulldog. I played on, thinking, "Oh-oh! Schuster must really be disappointed in all of us! He must really be wondering how he got himself into this mess. Here he's come all the way up into the Maine woods from his big house in Beverly Hills, and all he gets is . . . us! Now we're all in for it! Poor Schuster! Poor us!"

As the days passed, however, I found out how wrong I had been, for Joseph Schuster quickly proved to be one of the warmest, kindest teachers I have ever met. His initial demeanor mirrored not so much his opinion of us, but only his own shyness in a new situation among unknown people. Once he was comfortable around us, he opened up his art, his mind and his humanity to all of us. He was enthusiastic in his attention to his students, sharing his knowledge with us generously. He and his charming wife, Katherine, entertained the entire class at dinners in their rustic cabin in the woods and at the local lobster pound. (In Beverly Hills, live Maine lobster is a delicacy. In Blue Hill, it's a way of life.)

And then there were his own stories: he would become transformed as, with irrepressible animation and in his charming accent, he regaled us with

anecdotes from his own student days and tales of his friends Piatigorsky and Barbirolli. (Sample: while he and Piatigorsky were fellow students in Berlin, Piatigorsky found them a job playing in a restaurant, for dinner and dessert. He said, "You will play first, Joseph, and get the dinner. I will play the later set, and get the dessert." Several weeks later, Piatogorsky revised the arrangement: "You play the late set, Joseph. I'm getting tired of dessert!" Another sample: Sir John Barbirolli, a former cellist, called from Manchester, England, to announce that he had found Schuster a cello. He said it had a big, handsome sound. Knowing that Barbirolli liked to play on the C-string, Schuster asked, "Tell me, John, how do the other strings sound?" Schuster bought the cello, sight unseen. When it arrived, he was afraid to open it, but left it in a big crate in front of his piano and nervously paced around it for three days. Finally, he opened the box, and his heart fell: inside was a big, ugly black instrument! Later, a local luthier cleaned the cello, removing years' accumulation of grime that had covered the beautiful red-brown varnish of a cello by Francesco Goffriller!)

During the weeks that followed, he inspired us all with his playing, in solo and chamber music evenings. He had a large repertoire, a big, handsome tone, and the fastest finger trill I had ever seen! (None of that shake-trill stuff for him.) He also possessed a great sense of musical fun: One evening, he picked up a bass fiddle and, accompanied at the piano by Edgar Ortenburg, thumped out a rousing set of Viennese waltzes.

Aside from his charm, kindness and enthusiasm, (all vital characteristics of the Ideal Teacher) Schuster had another very special thing going for him: he had the unique ability to work with us students on a temporary basis and to

help us each make significant progress, without displacing or challenging the basic approaches of our respective full-time, winter teachers. (How many times we hear of a summer encounter in which the teacher "takes over," undermining methodology and years of study and destroying the confidence of the student in his regular teacher and in himself!) Schuster worked with what we each had, molding gently and amplifying upon whatever philosophy of technique our playing reflected.

In my own case, he suggested that on sustained notes I flatten the fingers of the left hand and press the string with a meatier part of the finger, rather than with the fingertip. The result was a richer, fatter sound. (My primary teachers had been trying for years to get me to play with a more relaxed, warmer sound. I simply hadn't been ready to digest and accommodate their good counsel. Schuster contradicted none of their teachings, but something he said must have registered in me. I was finally ready to do what he asked, what famous others had long asked of me: I was ready to produce a full, warm sound. I took his advice for my left hand, and complimented it with an appropriately relaxed, weighted bow stroke.) At last, everything my other teachers had said about sound production made sense and fell into place!

That summer, Joseph Schuster not only taught me works by Tartini, J.C. Bach, De Falla, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Brahms, but more importantly, he "pressed the right button" and unlocked the best sound that I could produce. And, best of all, when next we met, years later in California, he didn't have to look gruff, because we were friends!