Photo: Kent Harrison

Remembering Mr Heifetz

Sherry Kloss, Heifetz's assistant at the University of Southern California, and the recipient of his Tononi violin, shares some memories of her teacher and mentor

My association with the Master began in 1974 in Palm Springs, California, where I had just been chosen a winner of a major competition. The Dean of the University of Southern California asked me if I would be 'interested in meeting Jascha Heifetz'. With great excitement, I answered 'Yes!'. One week later I arrived in Los Angeles, and was driven to the beach home of Mr Heifetz for an audition for the Heifetz Master Class.

For five years as a member of the Heifetz Class, I was able to observe and absorb the workings of a truly devoted teacher, whose own personal values became the required repertoire of the class. Commitment, respect,

integrity, honesty, discipline, wit and hard work were but a few ingredients that made up the priorities of this man.

There was a formality to the class. Mr Heifetz sat at his desk and greeted each one of us individually as we entered the room. 'Good morning Mr Heifetz.' Mr Heifetz looked deeply into our eyes and responded, 'Good morning'. At this point he knew what to expect from each one of us for that day. His uncanny intuitive knowledge of his students kept us honest and constantly striving. We would place our violins on a special table, and settle into our seats, anxiously awaiting the next words: 'Who is ready?' Not an easy question to respond to in the presence of Jascha Heifetz. 'Ready' to Mr Heifetz was a level of understanding of the music, a style, a lilt, a message, a mood, but not necessarily perfect playing. It was to this end that he devoted himself tirelessly, and yes, sometimes abruptly, as when 'not ready' was heard after a few notes.

It was his musical greatness and personal sincerity that inspired us. Special moments in the class occurred when verbal instructions did not produce the result he hoped for. Mr Heifetz rose from behind the desk and walked regally to the piano, upon which his violin rested. There was a charged energy in the room as we waited to hear the sounds and suggestions of our teacher. Only to demonstrate a point or style would he play, never to command us as an audience. He wanted us to discover for ourselves the essence of our own individuality. With energy and understanding, he would jump into the middle of the passage being presented. He was totally aware of what each individual student needed to be shown. I sometimes lost my breath while experiencing these interactions. Musical sounds, rather than words, were the means of communication.

At any time we were responsible for major and minor scales in all combinations of thirds, sixths, octaves, fingered octaves, tenths, beginning from any part of the scale, along with arpeggios in staccato. In addition to the repertoire we had prepared, we had to be ready at all times to play the Bach Solo Sonatas and Partitas and chosen Paganini Caprices from memory. Each of us had to study the piano and occasionally we were asked to accompany another student at the keyboard without preparation. Chamber music was a regular activity, and only cellists were invited to join the class: we were expected to play the viola and we had a resident pianist.

Although the classes were charged mentally and emotionally, there were occasional lighter moments when we would discover the quiet, subtle humour of our teacher. One St Patrick's Day, class began as usual. But as Mr Heifetz walked across the room to his violin we noticed that his socks were embroidered with a little insignia of the Irish shamrock in the most garish shade of green imaginable! A matching handkerchief completed the colourful outfit. We all enjoyed the mutual recognition of this fun without words.

On another occasion, the class wanted to surprise Mr Heifetz with a 2 February birthday celebration. As we never met on this date, it was a surprise for him on the last day of the class before his birthday to be greeted by a class of students playing the most unexpected instruments. Most of us had ☛

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no idea how to operate our chosen vehicles of sound, but the spirit was there in our rendition of a Brazilian Tango! I can still remember the twinkle in his eye as we *segued* into our original interpretation of *Happy Birthday to You*. He truly appreciated our silly but well intentioned gesture. However, once the teaching began, the intensity of the class was undiminished.

In 1980, while I was artist in residence at the College of Arts and Education in Adelaide, Australia, I received a telephone call requesting that I return to the USA to take up the position of assistant to Mr Heifetz at the University of Southern California. In this new role, my situation changed from 'member of the class' to 'assistant professor', and a higher standard of performance was now expected of me in every area.

My duties included screening all potential candidates for the class. If I thought Mr Heifetz would be interested in a student, an audition with him would be arranged. And if the student was accepted, it was my responsibility to prepare them for the class. A professional relationship was always maintained. The students' work must be prepared in the right way, and all the personal requirements I knew so well had to be observed. Punctuality, good grooming, respectful attitudes and seriousness of purpose were a must for 'survival' in the class.

I remained Mr Heifetz's teaching assistant until the Heifetz Class formally ended some five years later. During this time I came to appreciate more fully the commitment and responsibility he assumed as a teacher. It was important to him that his students had the right environment to accomplish their work. If needed, he would find ways to 'quietly' help, whether it be rent money, a new case, a bow, a violin, a 'scholarship', an invitation to dinner at his home, or thanksgiving day at the beach for the class. No-one was alone.

The Heifetz Class was an elite collection of a chosen few. Jascha Heifetz, the violinist renowned as the greatest of them all, recognised his responsibility to pass on his legacy to the next generations. He was teaching for all of the right reasons, and his devotion to this end was his gift to us all.

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Shortly before his death, I had occasion to be in Los Angeles, and had a short reunion with Mr Heifetz. I was grateful for the opportunity to see him alone and to share my feelings about the impact of his association on my life. I said, 'You know Mr Heifetz, every time I take out my violin, and every time I teach a lesson, I realise just how much you have given to me. Thank you.' There was a long, long silence as he considered my words. He looked deeply into my eyes and said knowingly, "Good".'

Before his death, Mr Heifetz made a gift to me of a J.B. Vuillaume, tortoiseshell and gold mounted 'picture' bow. I discovered that I had been willed his 1736 Carlo Tononi violin and 'one of [his] four good bows' in a *Los Angeles Times* article (I chose the François Tourte). His desire that I be heir to these treasures was never discussed with me in his lifetime.

August 1974, when I joined the Heifetz Class, was the beginning of a life experience that has enriched not only my own life, but the lives of hundreds of students and audiences who have shared with me the power of his legacy. ❑

Sherry Kloss is active as a soloist, recitalist and teacher. She is founder of the 'Institute for the Development of Personal Style', in memory of Jascha Heifetz. Her recordings include 'Forgotten Gems from the Heifetz Legacy' (Protone PRCD 1104). Her forthcoming CD of late Romantic sonatas with pianist Mark Westcott (also on the Protone label) will represent the first recorded sounds of the 1736 Carlo Tononi since the early recordings of Jascha Heifetz.