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5 TIPS FOR ADULT BEGINNERS

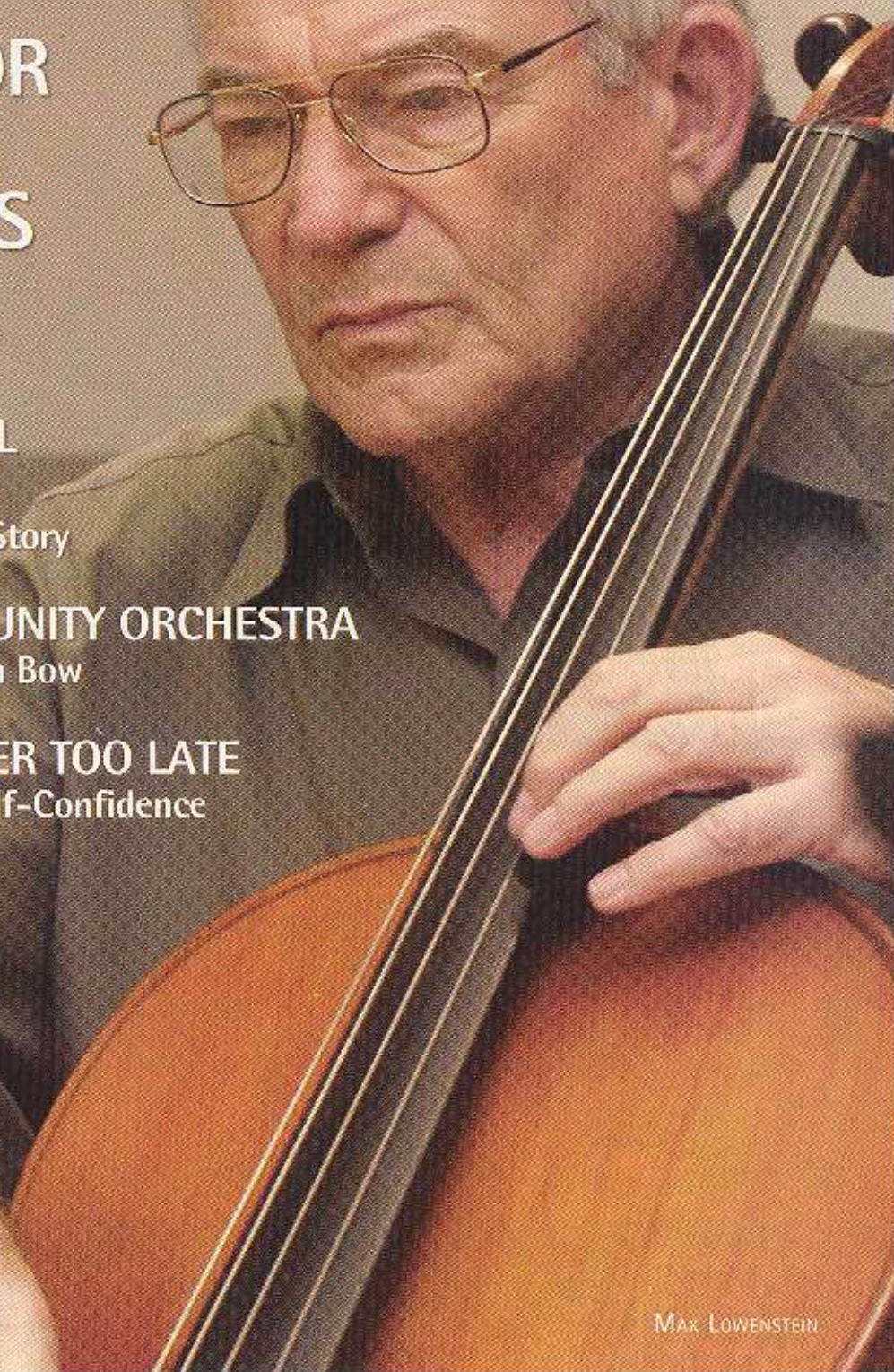
Searching for
the Right Teacher

ON PLAYING WELL
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One Adult Beginner's Story

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Educators offer 5 tips for adult beginners
searching for the right teacher

The trick to finding a good teacher is hiring someone who can make the process fun and effective. Toss into the mix being an adult student—and a beginner—and you've got a tough job ahead of you. To help ease your way into searching for a teacher that's just right, we polled some experienced educators to learn what they think are the most important qualities adult students should seek.

1 ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

Adults need to find teachers who are compatible with their own personality, says Stacey Hoffman, executive director of Rhythmic Concepts, Inc., an organization that produces education and performance programs for teens and adults. "The teacher should not just be a good teacher," she says, "but treat the beginning or intermediate student with respect and listen to what the student's goals are."

'Adult students often
feel even more exposed
or self-conscious
than children.'

—Stacey Hoffman

Adult beginning students may have self-esteem issues around playing and a fear of being judged. "Adult students often feel even more exposed or self-conscious than children," says Hoffman. "They can pressure themselves for not starting earlier, and can feel easily humiliated because they are not as far along as think they should be," she explains.

An ideal teacher will be sensitive to these issues.



THE GUIDING LIGHT: Teacher India Cooke (left).

Janice Tucker Rhoda, teacher and founder of the Carl Fischer learning series *The ABCs of Strings*, agrees. "A teacher must have a positive attitude about teaching adults and not believe one must begin to play a musical instrument as a child, especially the violin. *Au contraire!*"

2 CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Ron Goldman, the creator of the San Diego Chamber Music Workshops, advises adult students to seek out a good communicator, something especially important for a positive adult student-teacher relationship. Finding someone who is both sensitive and able to offer a balanced critique is key. "Look for someone who won't be pedantic. Sometimes when there is a controversy, they can amend their direction and put it in their own framework," he says, adding that students should strive to find teachers with this skill. "They can be a coach."

Adult students are more likely to crave a certain level of control in their educa-

tion, yet they want to feel taken care of, too—a challenging dichotomy for both teacher and student. "As a result, adults often can't assess themselves accurately," says Hoffman, who also produces Jazz Camp West (since 1984). This makes finding a constructive teacher all the more important and valuable.

"Adults are more critical about their ability and need reassurance that it is worthwhile to continue pursuing," agrees Tucker Rhoda.

Goldman concurs. "You have to be more careful with criticizing adults—they are much more fragile receiving criticism. A good teacher will understand this and can't just say what you're doing is wrong. They will say something positive before saying something negative."

3 LEARNING CURVE

Goldman explains the unique learning situation preferred by adults: "Adult students don't want to start over, they are looking to find a teacher who can take

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them for what they are—and not try to change them.”

To best tackle this, seek out a good match to your personal musical preference and passion. “Find someone who is at least as in love with music as you are,” instructs Susan Salm, renowned cellist and founding member of the Raphael Trio, as well as a master-class teacher and chamber-music workshop instructor.

‘Find a teacher you feel comfortable with, but who also inspires, motivates, and challenges you!’

—Stacey Hoffman

Do you have musical goals in mind? You’ll need to outline what you are hoping to accomplish, whether it’s just basic instruction or learning to play well enough for solo opportunities. Salm advises that a prospective teacher should “be aware that although your abilities may not improve at the rate they expect or wish, that the primary issue is the *goal*, not the incremental movements along the way.”

4 FINDING TIME

One of the biggest difficulties an adult beginner faces is finding time to practice and go to lessons. Work, family, and keeping a house clean and running well can crowd an adult’s daily to-do lists.

When looking for a teacher, “find someone that teaches in close proximity,” suggests Hoffman. “Most adults have extremely busy lives—don’t set yourself up for long travel times if you don’t have to. This will keep up a positive outlook and allow you to spend your time learning, not traveling.”

5 BODY LANGUAGE

Many adult students have physical restrictions that need to be considered seriously by their teacher. These students must learn to take care of themselves and understand their personal limitations, regardless of what a teacher might think. “I’ve had to deal with these issues,” Salm says. “A determined student and a teacher who is sensitive to the problems as they affect a player both physically and mentally can cope with nearly anything that comes up.”

Tucker Rhoda is especially sensitive to

physically challenged players and understands that a teacher working with adults must offer support for working through these challenges.

“Years ago I had a wonderful student who began violin in her 40s,” she says. “Before she played the violin she had a stiff neck, which led her to have traction at the doctor’s office. She loved the violin and really wanted to play, but was leery due to her neck problem history.”

Tucker Rhoda says that she set up her student with chin and shoulder rests that were comfortable and made sure she was *not* tilting her head to the left or right. “She said her neck stiffness completely disappeared and playing her violin felt better than traction!”

Today she enjoys playing in a community orchestra, Tucker Rhoda reports.

The key to the entire process of looking for a teacher is to “trust your intuition,” says Hoffman. “If you don’t like a teacher, find someone else. Find a teacher you feel comfortable with, but who also inspires, motivates, and challenges you,” she adds. “Be careful to stay true to what you want to learn and what you are paying for.”

—Heather K. Scott

HOW TO FIND A TEACHER

“Don’t choose a teacher because he or she is a great player. Playing and teaching are two different things. Many amazing teachers don’t perform themselves; many amazing performers don’t know how to teach,” cautions Hoffman.

Goldman agrees. “All teachers are not equal,” he says. “You want to find one that is familiar with your particular focus.”

He suggests that students first get started in whatever they’re interested in and then seek out a teacher. “If you’re interested in Irish music, go to a bar and get familiar with the music and the musicians first,” he says. “Ask them for lessons. If you’re interested in chamber music, you can still go and visit a couple of sessions that other people are having so you can join in, and come prepared to join in. Then you can get recommendations from fellow players.”

He adds that a great place to ask about music teachers is at performances.

“Ask audience members at performances for advice and teacher recommendations,” he suggests.

—H.K.S.