

Pearls of the Master: Words of Advice from Marcel Moyse

From notes at masterclass in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA, in May 1977

by Jerrold Pritchard

The famous French flutist and former Professor of Flute at the Paris Conservatory, Marcel Moyse was a masterful flute teacher and player. He could be very precise and effective in his instructions, but his energy, his enthusiasm, his devotion to perfection, and his way of describing how to approach a melody or a special phrase were what made him exceptional. At times he would seem to get the very best from a student in his master classes just by the look on his face, the sparkle in his eyes, the gesture of his hands.

In May of 1977, I was fortunate to attend one of his annual flute seminars near his home in Brattleboro, VT. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life; and today I can still hear his voice in my mind, recall the setting, the mood, the students, and Moyse's way of getting you to play with absolute accuracy and attention to the composers intentions as well as the mood and emotion of each phrase. Although by this time late in his life he did not perform for the class much, he was able to convey his ideas and ideals very well in words.

Fortunately, I took copious notes about individual pieces that were played, and on the scores of his etudes and exercises to preserve, as best I could, how Moyse described a piece, his advice on tone, technique, phrasing and interpretation, his stories of his career as player and teacher, and the way he was able to come up with just the right image expressing something or describing what he wanted to you do. His English was still strongly accented with a musical French inflection which sometimes made it difficult to hear or apprehend what he said. At times, I was fortunate to sit next to a pupil who spoke French who could translate when Moyse used a French word or phrase I did not know. I suspect that everyone at the class came away with their own impression and version of what he said; the wording is probably not exact, but here is what I heard and captured on paper:

On Tone:

- You must try all possibilities for finding the proper center and focus of the tone. Like an Ant moving a heavy object from his path: Determined and Patient.
- Lips unfocused? Experiment! They must be soft like a cushion on a chair, comfortable, pleasurable.
- The flute tone escapes like a fish In your hand-----Don't have a "Fish Tone"!
- Climate influences mood, style, air, and lips. Put the Sun in your tone: Red, rich, colourful.
- Place the Tone—don't put it. Place it carefully like a fine piece of crystal on a table. [French -

“Posé”.]

- Don't play loud; Play generously. Power is not in the character of the flute, only expansiveness. Like a piggish person on a train making more room for themselves, make room for each tone, comfortable and relaxed.
- Scoop out the tone in the low register like mayonnaise from the bottom of the jar.
- Your vowel quality must be beautiful. You would never say “I love you” with an ugly, nasal voice.

On Technique

- Like a baby learning to walk, he can do better with the aid of a chair. Walk before you run. Try several times.
- Teaching is important too—not all will be virtuoso!
- Not everyone is obliged to play the flute!
- Prepare the lips and tongue for the attack.
- If you bicycle too fast, you break your neck. Miss a note you still live!
- Don't sit the flute hard on the lips and teeth for too long—the lips will go on strike!
- Conductor Arturo Toscanini said: “We live like dogs”. [*come un Chien.*] We are here to work on this earth. Practice—God will help you.
- Dance cheerfully: There is more energy in his feet than in a flutist's brain...sometimes.
- In pianissimo entrances, use the trill keys like an octave key on a saxophone to make the middle Eb, E, and F response softly and quickly.
- Flick the grace notes.
- Success? You can get famous playing bad notes, too!

A very young student in the class asked: “What do you think of Rampal's playing”? After berating the impetuous youth a good while for at his low level of proficiency even being concerned about such matters and presuming to criticize a famous flutist, he said with an impish twinkle in his eye: “Rampal plays so fast, I don't know if he is good or if he is bad!”

On Phrasing and Expression:

- You must find the form and shape before you can play a melody expressively. In Bach, the fundamental melody notes must sing with color. Find the hidden chord tones and the movement of the line toward the resolution of the dissonance.
- Pickups and connecting notes of a phrase are like articles and prepositions.
- Atmosphere: Feel the mood.
- Be still inside so Emotion can come to you.
- There is value in simplicity and the closeness of the familiar. “My mother is not President, but I prefer her.”
- Reichert is not Mozart, but should be played melodically with expression.
- The style of rhythms changes from piece to piece. A dotted eighth and sixteenth in the opening of the “Marseilles” is different from that in Massenet’s “Elegie.”
- Like singers and violinists, we must stress and bring out the important notes of a phrase, or pattern, or figure.
- A story of a reading session and a conversation about Chopin with two famous composers: Ravel demanded strict rhythmic interpretation; Arthur Rubinstein was free, but he landed on his feet smoothly. It is difficult was to decide who is right—I will ask Chopin when I get to heaven!
- Some rules can be inferred: 1) look for the line direction 2) Develop the line to the high point and savor the climax.
- Play with a walking style. Place the feet on the beat to emphasize the natural pulse.
- Phrasing is movement. Life comes from the direction of the line.
- Debussy said: look for the expression between the notes.

On Individual Works:

Doppler’s “*Fantasie Pastorale Hongroise*”: He learned this work from listening to the Gypsy players in the Bois de Boulogne. His uncle helped him work on the piece for seven hours, but finally told him he was hopeless and would never get the correct Gypsy feeling, and he would never be a musician—but he played it for his teacher at the Paris Conservatory, Paul Taffanel, who said it was ‘perfect’, and had nothing to comment. Play the rhythms strictly; be honest to the composer’s intentions. If you take too much freedom, you lose the Music, like a chicken loses life.

Debussy's "*Syrinx*": Play the rhythms exact, especially in the beginning. "The composer does not wish to collaborate with the performer." The Spirit is in the Notes—Play correctly! (Not too much vibrato or it will be "like sugar on salami.")

Moyse played many important premieres during his days in Paris of works by now famous composers, such as Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel. Debussy brought Erik Satie to a performance of "La Mere". He asked Satie, "What did you think of the piece?" Satie replied: "It was good at twenty past ten o'clock."

On music and living:

He told a story of traveling and coming to a small village, quiet, silent. Everyone was in the fields pulling weeds and lettuce. He tried the inn...an old man was asleep in a chair. He roused him for a beer. The window shutters let in a small crack of sunlight. Dust particles danced. The only sound was the pendulum clock—blump, blump.....God, that is the Life!



In conversation with Jerrold Pritchard who provided the quotes after a summer masterclass with Moyses in 1977, I asked whether I was interpreting the quotes correctly. My commentary and Jerrold Pritchard's are both below. August 4th, 2010.

Jennifer Cluff's comments on the Moyses quotes

On Technique

Like a baby learning to walk, he can do better with the aid of a chair. Walk before you run. Try several times.

Simplify a challenging technique into tiny steps that can be performed easily. Sometimes you actually have to go right back to basics for a few minutes. Something about your breathing/posture/head-position/lip position may indeed be getting in the way of mastering a new technique. Master the technique with several attempts at simpler and simpler small groups of notes. It's better to layer up the skills rather than get frustrated by trying to do too many things at once. Even one or two notes is not too few. Gradually expand the new skill or technique back into the chunk/phrase/piece of music. Don't try and do too much all at once. It's human nature, but it wastes time.

Teaching is important too—not all will be virtuoso!

Many of the young performers in a masterclass dream of being virtuoso soloists and orchestral players. But with so few chosen, the rest will become teachers, possibly. So listen carefully when following the master's instructions. You may end up using them for teaching, rather than becoming a world-class soloist. Go for it. You can always teach as an adjunct to performing. Most performers do.

Not everyone is obliged to play the flute!

Flute playing at the highest levels is not for everyone. Perhaps you have set your goals so high that you can't even get half-way there. Take your time and really learn the techniques. If you think you already know them, look at them again to make sure.

Prepare the lips and tongue for the attack.

If you only think to add the embouchure and tongue AFTER you've already played, it's too late. Explosive air speed can cause the lips to splay, distorting the tone. Set the lips in a containing position in preparation for the increased airspeed and volume of air that is used in tonguing.

If you bicycle too fast, you break your neck. Miss a note you still live!

Don't worry about the odd missed note. You can still practice a fast run-through just to observe where things stand with your preparation. Even if you miss a note or two, you'll learn a lot about the lightness of fast playing by attempting it from time to time within your practice. Fast playing often takes a different hand sensation, finger sensation, flute balancing, and general embouchure chosen to play many notes in a row. Don't stay at slow tempi so long that you don't find out the feel of small groups of fast notes. Use "chunks" to attempt fast tempi just to discover these sensation changes.

Don't sit the flute hard on the lips and teeth for too long—the lips will go on strike!

If you use excessive pressure, pushing the flute into the lip and teeth, your lip will eventually become numb and less active. Lighten the pressure against the chin to play flute for longer and longer without fatigue. Make a point of lightening the pressure. High register is much easier with light chin pressure.

Comments from Jerrold Pritchard on the Moyses quotes:

Conductor Arturo Toscanini said: “We live like dogs”. [*come un chien.*] We are here to work on this earth. Practice—God will help you.

This is clear exaggeration for effect on the student audience. Moyses wishes the students to realize that improvement and proficiency will not come without concerted effort and diligent practice. Personally, I think practicing more than four hours very often leads to fatigue and bad habits, especially if there is not sufficient rest between each practice session. After all, we are using only a few muscles around the lips. The key, of course, is finding the efficient way to practice and to practice those things which build skill and take us directly on the path to success. [He also allows for inspiration and assistance from the deity.]

Dance cheerfully: there is more energy in his feet than in a flutist’s brain...sometimes.

I believe the issue here is to play with a sense of rhythm and to use your innate ability to move in time to help you find the essence of the piece and the heart and pulse of the music. Movement and dancing helps us find where the big accents beats are and to differentiate between the lightness of when the foot is in the air and the weight of your foot coming down on the beat. Sometimes you have not think too much and to let the natural flow of things guide you. [I LOVE the sly comment at the end about how not everyone has good movement or a dull brain.]

In pianissimo entrances, use the trill keys like an octave key on a saxophone to make the middle eb, e, and f response softly and quickly.

This is a nice trick that you obviously don't want to use too much or unnecessarily, but, if you are in a situation where you can't keep the pitch up when playing pianissimo, or your lips are tired an inflexible, just cracking open the trill key (the first key works best for me) a tiny bit will make the octave jump. You then may be able to let the trill key close again once the note has stabilized. There definitely is a change in tone color when you use the trill keys and in some situation this won't fit the music, but having a harmonic sound is better than cracking the note, being out of tune, or not having the upper note respond.

Flick the grace notes.

The issue here is to impart lightness and quickness by starting the grace note with the finger above the key that produces in the quick *acciatura*. Particularly in a spot when the grace note uses a key with a spring to bring it back down or up (AB-F; EB-D; B-C, etc, you can let the spring push your finger back up. Starting with the finger on the key of the grace note means you have to physically lift the finger with muscle action going up and down. In a quick E-F grace note before the beat, you can let the downward action of the finger rebound up with the spring doing much of the work. This technique requires very good timing and coordination of the tongue and release of the breath, but is worth the effort and imparts a kind of lightness to the figure.

Success? You can get famous playing bad notes, too!

Or, if you play too many wrong notes, you become "infamous" ! Actually a great performance by a virtuoso is a bit of an illusion at times, because what may be needed is an effect not a perfect note or leap.

A very young student in the class asked: “what do you think of Rampal’s playing”? After berating the impetuous youth a good while for, at his low level of proficiency, even being concerned about such matters and presuming to criticize a famous flutist, he said with an impish twinkle in his eye: “Rampal plays so fast, I don’t know if he is good or if he is bad!”

This remark about the speed was one of Moyses's pet peeves. He would have much preferred a student to play more slowly and beautifully with singing tone that was at a speed you could savor and enjoy. He really chides a couple of students who came with some big piece with flying finger in an attempt to impress him. I recall one very pushy individual [who it turned out was not a paying member of the class and who disappeared after the first class session] who played first in the class and started out with a very difficult piece with many, many 32nd note passages at a rapid tempo. He got about half way through and realized that Moyses was not impressed by speed and brilliant playing—especially if not done perfectly--and was looking at him with amazement and disapproval. The fellow began to falter, to make mistakes, and even shook in lips, tone and fingers from nervousness...he finally ground to a halt. And after a moment of tense silence Moyses smiled and said: "Now we begin." And proceeded to work on some basic issues of tone control and development of a singing style.

On phrasing and expression:

You must find the form and shape before you can play a melody expressively. In Bach, the fundamental melody notes must sing with color. Find the hidden chord tones and the movement of the line toward the resolution of the dissonance.

As you have noted, this is critical and so difficult to explain and work on with younger students who have no sense of the harmonies, the balance of consonance and dissonance, the difference in feeling and impact of an upbeat and a downbeat, or the subtleties of type of accentuation (a legato dash with a vibrato vs. a biting, dry short staccato vs. a sudden loud booming accent vs. a bell stroke with sudden release of the air and a quick diminuendo).

The whole issue of the foreground vs. the background; the skeleton vs. the body, and the shadow vs. the substance is a very complicated business to explain. With less advanced students it often is best to just ask them to play the fundamental melody notes and the important connecting passing notes as a means of simplifying the texture and the technical problems and letting the "*grund*" and the "*ursatz*" differentiate themselves naturally by building up the layers of complexity bit by bit.

Pickups and connecting notes of a phrase are like articles and prepositions.

This is a reference to the logical structure of most musical phrases in the common practice period of Western music from 1600-1900. What is "Classic " about Classical music is its universality, the commonality of a unifying language. The rhetoric of a music phrase or structure is something like our native tongue, which we have absorbed automatically by constant hearing and practice in listening , if not in speaking/playing it.

On a larger scale even most listeners with little or no knowledge of harmony or musical form can easily determine just by the " feeling" whether a section of a symphony or a sonata is 1) the statement of an idea/motive 2) a repetition or minor variation of an idea 3) a transition section that is moving to another key or musical idea 4) a waiting section that is prolonging the end of the section or resolving to a major cadence, 5) a closing section that is propelling the section to an end. Hearing and understanding what is going on in a developmental section is a bit trickier but most student i have had in my music appreciation/intro to music classes have fairly quickly learned to intuitive feel when a section is unstable, changing, and fragmenting musical elements that have come before or overlap, answer or echo as in a fugal section.

I suspect Moyses really meant, or should have said, here "conjunction" and "preposition" and perhaps adverb", because they usually don't exist by themselves; they are dependent on the context and the nouns and verbs which they direct attention to. [An eighth note "pick up gesture is rather like saying: "And (prep) Then (adverb) We (subject) Ate (verb) The (article) Apple (noun object).] The big building blocks that convey most of the meaning of a sentence are, of course the nouns and verbs--the subject-verb(action)-object (We-Ate-Apple) give much of the meaning of the sentence. (This is the dominant grammatical structure in the large majority of language world -wide, though in some languages the sequence of these elements doesn't have this order or consistency.)

Of course, musical language is not identical with speech, but has many of the same organizational principles--at least in the western tradition of folk music and instrumental music.

Atmosphere: feel the mood.

This is the most elusive concept, the most personal and most interpretive element. Learning to correctly (or logically) and/or compellingly intuit the emotional content of a phrase or piece of music is the most open to individuality--and the most essential in establishing a convincing performance, especially of romantic music with either obvious or hidden extra-musical elements.

Be still inside so emotion can come to you.

This one of the most difficult things in "Life", not just in Music. Taking time to reflect, to breathe, to relax the body and open the mind is something we all need to do more. Trying to superimpose an artificial sentiment is equally dysfunctional in expressing yourself to another person in words or in music. It also is essential that you have found your true feelings and not just portraying what is expected socially or in the situation.

There is value in simplicity and the closeness of the familiar. “my mother is not president, but i prefer her.”

Again, exaggeration for effect. Also this is placing a value on playing what you know instinctually, have absorbed over time, or have enough experience with to make an accurate judgment about.

Reichert is not Mozart, but should be played melodically with expression.

Reichert was not as fine or profound a composer as Mozart, but his music still needs to be treated with respect and played as accurately and musically as you can. Playing Reichert's little technical studies and daily routines with attention to musicality, phrasing and expression will yield the best results in improvement of your flute playing.

Moyse really did not want you to "add" expression to the music. He believed very strongly that you, as a performer, had to find the treasure buried there on the page by the composer, to be true to the composer's intentions, to feel the music inside you based on what was written, and have the understanding and control to bring out those latent characteristics and make the musical gestures come back to life. (Rather like the concept that the figure is already within the block of marble and the sculptor must find the way to reveal it in its best form and with clarity.)

The last section of Moyse' tone study book, "De la Sonorite", contains a number of passages from the works of great composers. Some of these seem rather austere and difficult to make come to life and sing. His method is to play each of these selections six times:

- Twice with no change in tempo, dynamics, or nuance of color or vibrato, with focus on good pitch, correct rhythms, and focus of tone. Just establishing the "bones" of the music.
- Twice with dynamics added where the composer indicates or following basic musical principles of phrasing and direction of the musical line. Giving the music flesh and muscle.
- Twice more with judicious use of vibrato and tone color change to bring out the inherent mood of the piece. Providing clothing to make it less naked.

By the end of these repetitions, you invariably have more control and a much deeper, richer understanding of the potential musicality found there in each passage. You have given your mind the opportunity and the leisure to find the kernel of music in each phrase and the luxury of knowing that any interpretive element you have used is done after consideration and with good judgment.

The style of rhythms changes from piece to piece. A dotted eighth and sixteenth in the opening of the “Marseilles” is different from that in Massenet’s “Elegie.”

This again deals with the context and style and intent of a piece. The composer gives many clues with descriptive language they add to the music. Still, it takes a good deal of listening, playing and experiencing various style of music and the common gestures of each to make a good solid and appropriate interpretation of how to play a dotted eighth and sixteenth note--and even then we may be fooled as often (as in Handel and 18th century French music) this may be played with the 16th very close to the next downbeat as "double-dotted".

Like singers and violinists, we must stress and bring out the important notes of a phrase, or pattern, or figure.

A fairly self-evident statement, but one often overlooked by less advanced and experienced performers. It takes a good deal of knowledge of style periods, composer, forms, and the rhetoric of music to be able to do the careful analysis to determine just what is most "important" in a passage.

A story of a reading session and a conversation about Chopin with two famous composers: Ravel demanded strict rhythmic interpretation; Arthur Rubinstein was free, but he landed on his feet smoothly. It is difficult was to decide who is right—I will ask Chopin when I get to heaven!

This is very interesting to me, because Moyse usually had very clear notions of what "he" wanted to emphasize or bring out in a piece. He usually tried to get you to play just what was written and believed the composer's notation was his words on the subject.

Another amusing story he told in the class was of an "dream" he had in which he got to heaven and Debussy or Poulenc or important composer said : "Moyse, Vey you let zeez students play my music like zeez? (--incorrectly, that is.) He didn't want to have to face those kind of questions when he reached the pearly gates.

Some rules can be inferred:

- 1) **look for the line direction**
- 2) **develop the line to the high point and**
- 3) **savor the climax.**

Another focus on the rhetoric and logical organization of most music. He points us to the more obvious clues. What has the most meaning to me is the word "savor" and the advice to enjoy the most poignant/beautiful/intense and/or most impressive or important point in the phrase. [Rather like working hard to pedal your bicycle to the top of the long, steep hill; you don't want to quickly roar down the other side without stopping to observe and enjoy the view.]

Play with a walking style. Place the feet on the beat to emphasize the natural pulse.

Like the above comment on "dancing", Moyse wanted the natural and instinctual aspects of life to be used. We all have a regular rhythmic guide in the beating of our heart. Until the metronome was invented much music relied on the heartbeat to determine the pace of the music, or multiples or proportions a beat. If our heart beats 60-72 beats per minute when at rest, a calm mood is established in the music with this flow of the pulses. As we get more agitated the heart speeds up, and so should the music. (Of course, we have do this when the music dictates the change in speed—not from nervousness, or personal agitation and panic.)

Phrasing is movement. Life comes from the direction of the line.

Essentially he is saying, "Don't let the music be static and all with same in emphasis or dynamic." Variety, change and movement is what makes Life (and Music) interesting. You have to "follow your bliss" and go where life takes you--and control it with reason (and emotion)... if you can.

Debussy said: look for the expression between the notes. '

It is how we connect two notes that gives a good deal of the stylistic information to the listener. As flutists, we need to play equal attention to the space between notes and the manner in which they are connected with sound, color, emphasis, smoothness or disjunct-ness. We often need to imitate the quality of the human voice, which is very supple and elegant in the way a singer does a wide leap with "portamento" or even a kind of glissando effect. (The Latin root of the word is "*portare*" or "to carry" the sound. In French it is "*port de voix*" from "*porteur*". [A person at a train station who carries your bags or the person who opens a door for you to make the transition from inside to outside also is called a "*porter*."])

