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NEWS OF THE CENTER STAGE STRINGS MUSIC FESTIVAL SERIES

A day in the life of CSS

Music camp tunes up for year two

by Bill Haxton

Twenty already superb young violin, cello, and viola students will converge on Three Rivers on Sunday, June 12, for two weeks of intensive instruction and practice at the second annual Center Stage Strings Music Camp.

There is tangible excitement in the air to be sure, but these aspiring performers know full well that music camp is no walk in the park. While it's not as rigorous as military boot camp, it's closer than one might think.

Founder and director Danielle Belen describes it as "Practice, lesson, chamber music, practice. Eat. Practice, practice, practice. Eat. Attend concert, sleep, get up, practice..."

This goes on almost without a break for two full weeks.

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During camp, the official day begins with breakfast at Harrison Hall on the grounds of the Community Presbyterian Church. Unofficially, many students have already been up for awhile by then and have spent time in their rooms warming up with scales, filling the homes of their host families with music.

At 8 a.m., the shuttle arrives. Students this year are spread out in host family homes from Cherokee Oaks to Mineral King Road; the shuttle picks them up and drops them off at the church.

In the dining room, conversation is animated at some tables, muted at others. Not all of the talk is about music. After all, these jaw-dropping talents are also teenagers and pre-teens.

After breakfast, the 20 students head for their practice rooms, which are located all over the church grounds: in small offices, in printer rooms, in storage rooms, in any space big enough to play the instrument without hitting a side wall with the bow.

Practice sessions are long and demanding. Surprisingly, they require extraordinary athletic ability and a high tolerance for pain.

Fingering and bowing techniques are unimaginably complex and refined, and repeating them over and over for hours on end produces cramps, blisters, bruises, and pinched nerves.

The purpose for all this repetition has its analog in sport. The golf swing, the backhand in tennis, the sinking splitter in baseball do not come naturally. They are the product of years of repetitive practice until the part of the brain that governs those actions has rewired itself so completely that the motions become second nature.

Before violin techniques are hard-wired, however, the process can be terribly frustrating. It's not easy to replace a bad habit with a good one.

The bad habit keeps asserting itself even though every fiber of your being says, "Don't do it!" Sometimes, it's all a young musician can do to keep from throwing the instrument against the wall.

The farther a student progresses, the more demanding it becomes. This is why private lessons with inspired teachers are the heart and soul of a music camp.

At last year's camp, an advanced student was having trouble bowing close to the bridge. It's here that the violin puts out its fullest sound, but it's also the most difficult place on the strings to play.

Slightly too much bow pressure, which Danielle calls "weight," and slightly slow bow speed make a scratchy unpleasant sound; slightly too little bow weight, slightly too fast produces a skidding sound. Neither sound could be called music.

The idea is not to squeeze the sound out of the strings but to draw it out, keeping the elbow low, not raised, letting the natural weight of the arm determine bow pressure.

When everything is in perfect balance — bow weight, bow speed, and string location — the sound is magical. Then all the musician has to worry about is rhythm, intonation, fingerings, shifting, dynamics, tempo, memorization, interpretation...

From the audience, it all looks so easy.

For more information about the Center Stage Strings Music Camp and Festival, visit www.centerstagestrings.com. Tickets for performances are now available online and at Chump's DVDs.