

How to Play, How to Live

JOSEPH DE PASQUALE HAS SHARED HIS WISDOM ON MUSIC AND LIFE WITH GENERATIONS OF VIOLISTS.

BY REN MARTIN-DOIKE

“No, no, no, *La cam-pa-NELL-a!*”

The man gesticulating energetically from his chair is Joseph de Pasquale. Both performer and pedagogue come together in this extraordinary man, and no detail will escape the notice of his discriminating ears—not even my Italian pronunciation!

In his 95 years Mr. de Pasquale has experienced much. Starting violin lessons with his father Oreste, he auditioned and was accepted to Curtis as a violinist, but switched to the viola at the suggestion of Jascha Brodsky and Max Aronoff, who would become Mr. de Pasquale’s teacher. The rest of his life is legend to violists like me. He served as principal viola of the Boston Symphony, and then the Philadelphia Orchestra; worked closely with composers such as Walter Piston and Paul Hindemith; and performed chamber music with the greats of his time. Mr. de Pasquale is the product, and the purveyor, of viola playing at Curtis. To this day he continues to pass on lessons he learned from his Curtis teachers: Max Aronoff, Louis Bailly, and William Primrose.

“Play me a scale.” In my first lesson with Mr. de Pasquale, he surprised me with this request. After playing my scale, I waited for the master to speak.

“Is that from the Carl Flesch Method?” I nodded. “Those are good,” he said—adding that he had studied the same method with Louis Bailly—“but I have something even better.” He reached down and pulled an old, tattered manuscript out of his bag, and handed it to me. “Read the introduction,” he instructed.

That moment was the beginning of a revolution in the way I approached the viola. The yellowed sheet music turned out to be *The Art and Practice of Scale Playing on the Viola* by William Primrose, the legendary Scottish violist who served on the Curtis faculty from 1942 to 1951. This book would accompany me to every lesson, along with caprices by Fiorillo and Campagnoli.

One of Mr. de Pasquale’s favorite stories of his student years at Curtis involves the Fiorillo Caprice No. 27, which starts off innocently enough and then breaks into a cascade of tenths—a hand-distorting interval violists seldom play. One day he walked into his lesson with Max Aronoff in the Zimbalist Room to find the entire Curtis viola section waiting for him.

“What are they doing here?” he demanded of Mr. Aronoff, unable to hide his agitation.

“I want you to show them how you play it,” his teacher calmly replied.

Adrenaline pumping, the young violist whizzed through the caprice even faster than his usual tempo, cleanly executing the second page of octaves and tenths. Although he is quick to note how intimidated he felt playing for a room full of his peers, there’s no doubt it was a very satisfying moment for him, too.

PRINCIPAL CONCERNS

In my first year studying with Mr. de Pasquale, I also served as principal viola in the Curtis Symphony Orchestra. That responsibility lent another layer of resonance to our lessons, as this 32-year veteran of the principal’s chair at the Philadelphia Orchestra addressed countless questions of musical leadership: how to encourage cohesion in the section, how to communicate with the conductor and my fellow principals, how to approach solo lines.

My favorite lessons with Mr. de Pasquale are the ones at his house. After my viola is put away, I sit opposite him as he picks an album from his stack of “records” (actually CDs) and slides it into his boom box. He guides me through the music, conducting along, relishing the moments of rubato, all the while weaving stories.

As we listened to his recording of the Françaix trio with Jascha Heifetz and Gregor Piatagorsky, he shared the tale of how the collaboration came to be. It started when the violinist’s manager called and told him that Mr. Heifetz would be calling the next day.



Above from top:

Mr. de Pasquale greets three of his students—Ren Martin-Doike, Sung Jin Lee, and En-Chi Cheng—during a tea honoring his 50 years of teaching at Curtis. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Mr. de Pasquale during his years as principal viola of the Philadelphia Orchestra PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

Mr. de Pasquale with his former student, fellow faculty member, and successor as principal viola of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Roberto Díaz PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Joseph de Pasquale and Ren Martin-Doike in a lesson PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



Mr. De Pasquale in a 1998 lesson PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

“I had butterflies in my stomach waiting by the phone,” he recalls, with something of the giddiness he’d felt decades before. “It was the greatest thrill and the highlight of my career.”

Another highlight was his premiere of a viola sonata by Curtis alumnus George Rochberg in 1979. The work had been commissioned by the American Viola Society for the 75th birthday of Mr. Primrose—and the intent had been for the honoree to premiere it himself. In declining health, he asked his former student to take on the challenging new work as a special favor (“Joe, you must do it for me”). Already busy teaching at Curtis and leading the viola section of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Mr. de Pasquale was initially hesitant—but “how could I refuse?” he recalls. It amounted to a kind of symbolic passing of the bow from Primrose to de Pasquale.

To study with Joseph de Pasquale is to become part of a rich musical tapestry. In his 50 years of teaching at Curtis he has passed on his direct connections with master performers and composers to generations of viola students. When I began studying with him, I felt as if I was adopted into a big family, with his innumerable former students now my viola brothers and sisters. We are all beneficiaries of his vitality and his musical fervor.

Mr. de Pasquale speaks as he plays: expressively and directly. In lessons, his advice on how to play often serves equally well as advice on how to live. And nobody is more qualified to dole out wisdom on both topics than he—a man who, at 95 years of age, is still full of energy, joy, and enthusiasm for music and all of life. ♦

Viola student Ren Martin-Doike studies with Joseph de Pasquale and Michael Tree. She holds the Mitchell Family Annual Fellowship.



HEIRS TO A LEGACY

Curtis alumni and students benefit from an extraordinary lineage. Joseph de Pasquale connects several of today’s major orchestra principals to the traditions handed down from William Primrose, Max Aronoff, and Louis Bailly.

