

## Beyond the notes: Eli Epstein helps players, audience connect emotionally

Reprinted with permission from the *Santa Barbara News-Press*

August 5, 2005

By Tom Jacobs

*News-Press Staff Writer*

Photos by Rafael Maldonado

*News-Press Photographer*

Eli Epstein calls it “the shame and fear method of teaching.” He experienced the torturous technique as a music student, but he doesn’t employ it as an instructor.

“I’m careful about the words that I use with students, in a private lesson or in front of people,” said the veteran horn player, who recently retired after 18 years with the Cleveland Orchestra. “They’re sort of like young colts. They need to be treated with great respect, and given the direction they need.

“Humiliation is never an effective teaching method,” he added. “I get a lot better results using positive words. I’m OK about raising the bar, but I don’t do that in an abusive way.”

Epstein has brought his positive pedagogical approach to the Music Academy of the West, where he is on the faculty for the final three weeks of this summer’s program. He will teach a master class for his horn students at 1 p.m. Thursday and co-teach a brass quintet master class at today 3:15 p.m.

“I really enjoy doing master classes,” he said. “I like being able to share my creativity and experience. For me, it’s enlivening to be in front of a group, and it’s very helpful to the students. They get not only feedback from me, but from others.



“If I suggest they do something new, musically or technically, I might turn to the audience and say, ‘What do you think? Did that make a difference?’ It’s so important for performers to know how they are perceived by an audience. These students are at a place where they need to be performing a lot and getting realistic feedback.”

To a lot of teachers, however, “realistic” is a code word for “harsh” or “nasty.” Epstein had his share of such instructors in his student days, although he prefers not to name names. But he is determined to do things

differently.

“I think the music profession is fraught with (the notion that) it’s either right or it’s wrong,” he said. “You get that in conservatories, and in major orchestras. You either fit into the teacher’s vision or the conductor’s vision, or you don’t.

“I think that’s a problem. There are ways of putting things that are much more effective than saying, ‘Don’t do it this way. That’s wrong.’ I learned in a workshop that the brain doesn’t respond to negative instruction. So I always try to (phrase my comments) in a positive way: ‘What I suggest is you do more of *this*.’”



Epstein started to develop these ideas six years ago, while serving on the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music. One of his jobs at the “high-powered “conservatory” was conducting student chamber orchestras.

“I’d get in front of these students, and they looked scared and oppressed,” he recalled. “I was scratching my head and thinking, ‘How can I get these kids to have more fun, and play more expressively and freely?’”

One day, “I was conducting Brahms’ Serenade No. 2, and the cellos were having a difficult time with a theme in the last movement,” he recalled. “Instead of saying, ‘You really need to practice this,’ I said, ‘You know, whenever Brahms writes something in a minor key, I always think of the gypsies in Vienna, and how they were looked down upon by the Viennese and never had enough to eat.’

“This oboe player raised his hand and said, ‘I can relate to that. That sounds like music students!’ So I said, ‘The next time you play this, put yourself in the place of those gypsies.’

“We started again, and the cellos’ sound changed completely. It was a beautiful sound; everybody was really into it, and the technical problems disappeared. I find that, when the right side of the brain is employed, that takes care of lots of technical problems. That was a cool discovery to make!

“The more I conducted groups like that and did sectionals, I tried to get the students to tap into the emotional content behind the music, and what experiences in their lives they could relate to when they played it. The students craved this. Music is an incredibly colorful world filled with passion and emotion and beauty. That’s why we got into it in the first place!”

After getting such good results from the students, Epstein thought about applying these techniques to audiences as well. As an experiment, he put together a woodwind quintet, rented a Cleveland church and organized a concert for people who are intimidated by classical music.

“The first piece we did was a Bach fugue,” he recalled. “I said to the audience, ‘All you need to know about a fugue

is it's about building something. What is it, in your own life, you fed most earnest about building? A house? A garden? A career? A relationship?

“We played the theme of the fugue, and I said, ‘Every time you hear this, it’s like a building block.’”

They then played the entire work, and Epstein could sense that the audience was “listening to it on a much deeper level.” Their post-concert comments confirmed his impression.

“When I listen to a fugue that way, it’s almost as if I climb into it,” he noted. “It becomes very personal.

“This approach also gave audience members a way to talk about the concert after it is over. People don’t know what to talk about after a classical music concert. In this case, they could ask each other, ‘What did you build?’”

Epstein has been building a creative, increasingly unorthodox career over his 46 years. Born and raised in Philadelphia, he was the youngest of four children. His father, an amateur violinist, expected each of his kids to play an instrument

For 8-year-old Eli, “It was between the clarinet and the French horn,” he recalled. “I loved both sounds. I thought ‘The French horn only has three keys, so it has to be a lot easier.’”

So he started taking lessons and got good quite quickly, winning a series of student competitions. At age 11, he played one movement of a Mozart horn concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra at a children’s concert.

Unsure of his direction, he spent his freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania, experimenting with a variety of interests. “That year told me that my passion really lies with music,” he said. Now secure on his path, he enrolled in the Curtis Institute [*sic*] and graduated three years later.

His first full-time gig was in the Rochester Philharmonic, where he also served as an artist-in-residence with the local school district. He joined the Cleveland Orchestra in 1987 and retired earlier this year.

Epstein currently lives in Maine, teaching at the Boston Conservatory, and creating new programs to connect students and audiences with the emotional power of music. Not long ago, he traveled to Tennessee to teach a class in “how to listen to music more heartfully.”

“When we listen to the ‘Moonlight’ Sonata, we feel Beethoven’s emotions so strongly, it’s comforting,” he said. “On some level, we feel we’ve been understood. Beethoven has felt this; I have felt this. It’s a way we connect with one another, and ourselves.”