

IN CONCERT: Method man: Could Eli Epstein be the Stanislavski of classical music instruction?

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To bring a character to life on stage, actors dive into emotional memory. A jazz or rock musician will not solo well unless he or she “feels” it. Painters and sculptors pour out emotion into their work.

Yet according to Eli Epstein, conductor and French Horn instructor, the traditional teaching methods of the classical musical fields still operate in a binary world. Either you play the notes correctly or you don't.

Epstein has been trying to fix that problem by returning to the emotion hidden underneath the treble and bass staves. He will hold a series of French horn masterclasses this week at Music Academy of the West, culminating in a recital by the students later in the week to demonstrate their progress. For those who manage to see the entire process, it will serve as testament to Epstein's brand of teaching.

“I had a high school [music] teacher who was good,” Epstein explains. “But I never had a teacher who taught expression. Most horn teachers will just say things like ‘Play it louder’ or ‘Play it more velvet-y.’”

Epstein's style grew organically, as a horn player who made his way quickly out of college through various orchestras until arriving at the Cleveland Orchestra, which was like “jumping on board a moving train. I had to figure out how to be consistent in my playing, especially as there was money at stake. So I came up with ideas that helped me out, and when I began teaching masterclasses I realized these ideas universally helped people. I wanted to free people up technically, after mastering the notes, so that they could then use the right side of the brain and be artists.”

Epstein's method leads students back to the birth of the music itself, often bringing in biographical details of the composer and then trying

to find shared ground within the musician's own life.

From Epstein's own experience, he recalls a horn solo he had to play during the overture to Beethoven's "Fidelio" opera. The story of a man released from a dungeon after a year to be reunited with his lover got him thinking. "What would it be like to finally see the light of day? And not only that joy but to then see my girlfriend right after? It would be a joy like that when my son was born." From that emotion he went on to perform the solo, he says, wowing the audience.

Though this may sound basic to actors and artists, the result has been revolutionary among his students. Instead of just improving technique, Epstein's students (and, by extension, the orchestras that have come under his baton) jump from proficient to moving.

"All music comes from two kinds of energy," he explains, trying to be as succinct as possible. "There's fire energy, which is excitement, or exaltation, or power, everything from Beethoven's Seventh to John Williams' Darth Vader theme. And then there's water energy, which is tender, and encompasses love and sadness. And from those we can break down further into emotions and work from there."

So far, the results have been dramatic and, apparently, emotional. "I tell the students, this is a perfection-free zone," he says. "Music is and always should be a two-way conversation."