

## Go Tell It on a Magic Mountain

HEATHER KURZBAUER VISITS BURTON KAPLAN'S NEW YORK-BASED MAGIC MOUNTAIN MUSIC FARM

Since the dawn of performance history, young musicians the world over have internalised the adage, 'Practice makes perfect'. Unlike fellow performers in the dance world or sports arena, mastery of any given instrument is primarily a lonely endeavour. Traditionally, instrumental training consists of a weekly lesson followed by solitary confinement in the practise room. Although music students apprentice themselves to experts, they spend comparatively little time with their masters. Aside from prodigies who exhibit uncanny natural skills and problem-solving abilities, most musicians pay for their success with high levels of frustration on and off-stage. Often, they are engulfed in anxiety because they never learn how to turn practice into performance. Is there a better way, or is suffering without silence the musician's lot?



Enter Burton Kaplan, an insightful, mild-mannered, Manhattan-based violin

pedagogue and conductor who believes, "Better is perfect, perfect is irrelevant". For almost a decade, practise marathon retreats at his Magic Mountain Music Farm in upstate New York have attracted students, performers and teachers interested in exploring the outer limits of practising; an introspective, self-confrontational road to success. Intrigued by the notion of devoting quality time to practising in an environment void of distractions, I signed up for a recent two-week session.

Kaplan eschews the commonly held notion that we fail at self-appointed tasks because we simply aren't good enough. Practising what he preaches, marathoners learn to replace negative behaviour with a positivism built on solid foundations. Results at past marathon sessions show that the majority of participants who set out to achieve specific goals won auditions or reached higher levels of performance. Along with super-focused marathoners, a considerable number of 'generalists' come to the farm with improvement or reshaping attitudes toward the instrument as their goals. Participants at the second summer session 1993 ranged from principal players from international orchestras, a department head from a well-known New York State University, several conservatory students, two Suzuki instructors with orchestral backgrounds and a mathematics professor drawn to music as a second career. In the real world, individuals in competitive fields either close themselves off from others or compete voraciously. A moderator with a considerable amount of information to impart, Kaplan fosters a remarkably supportive, non-competitive

environment at the Magic Mountain Music Farm. His tried-and-true philosophy is based on a firm commitment to communal endeavour. Its practical application is a daily schedule in which participants attend master classes and prepare meals together. Encouraged to interact, marathoners benefit greatly from their peers. As performer/pedagogue Janet Brady noted, 'Even though we worked on our own goals, we kept one another honest by sharing information and expressing opinions freely.'

During one of the session's first master classes, Frank Forster, principal viola with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, made a comment that summed up our collective goals: 'If I were a student, I would give myself a better lesson than I do while I practise.' Kaplan's regimen of two master classes per day, three private lessons each week, plus daily oracle (ask the master) sessions and six hours practice per day, provided a structure for participants to analyse practise habits and enhance performance power.

While each of us was encouraged to delineate personal goals, the set of equations presented at one of the first master classes pointed to more general objectives. As musicians, we are artists; as instrumentalists, we are coaches. Our challenge is to integrate the two, training the coach to train the artist. An example? Each day, the musician takes out the instrument and goes through some type of warm-up exercises. No matter what instrument we play, we have been trained that scales and arpeggios are a must. However, if we realize that warming up solves the problem of connecting the spirit to the craft of playing the instrument, the activity takes on new meaning.

Taking cues from such far-reaching subjects such as biophysics, cognitive psychology and actor's training; Kaplan has distilled a variety of practical solutions to complex problems. Fact: performers set unrealistic expectations in their practise sessions. Solution: learn to revise and re-evaluate practise experience in a pragmatic manner. Kaplan's "Technique of Success at any Cost" takes a refreshing look at ways to re-evaluate expectations. Tools including a timer, a 'Daily Practise Organiser' and 'Musician's Practise Log' helped diagnose practical problems and led us to focus on our personal strengths and weaknesses while setting realistic goals. By setting limits, each of us learned how much time a specific task should take and how to plan for tomorrow.

Visualisation, a buzz-word for super achievers in the sports and business worlds, was given a musical meaning as participants learned to 'visualise' sounds and phrases using the metronome as a framing device. The technique of 'imaging' also provided new insights into the nerve-racking audition experience. In Kaplan's words, 'when we are in situations which involve stress, we frequently run out of physical things to focus on. This potential source of panic can turn into a positive experience if we begin to rely on one of our most powerful tools - the imagination.'

The dreaded hours when one does not feel like practicing were also treated in a direct ('the coach talks to the artist') manner. Marathoners were encouraged to take walks, read, listen to the greats perform, refocus attention to their practise strategies and ask friends for advice to rechannel 'practice block' frustrations. With incremental progress as a goal, Kaplan's 'Technique of First Try' helped build confidence while placing the concert/audition situation within

a daily regimen. The 'Technique of Success at any Cost' put the psychological construct, 'the longer you take to achieve your goal, the better you feel when you achieve it' into a workable framework.

After a few days of marathon schedules, participants at the farm experienced a sense of timelessness. Although grappling with new material and new solutions to old problems, many of us felt frustrated by the difficulties of facing personal limitations combined with the lack of external distractions in the immediate surroundings. Kaplan affirms the positive value in feeling 'that bridge between what I call finite time, our life expectancy and practise time each day, and infinite time, the rhythm inherent in music making, an ageless, timeless art.'

In the years before the practise marathon retreats, Kaplan experimented with isolation and creativity. 'Each summer, I'd leave the city, setting aside a hectic schedule for a tranquil environment. In various houses in isolated spots, I took the time to read poetry and practise. I found that within an environment of timelessness, there was a natural rhythm within my system that made me sleep at certain times and be creative at certain times. Within the limits of this new frontier, I created my own boundaries and learned that by setting up these boundaries, I could play more beautifully.'

Personal retreats led to weekend marathons for scores of Kaplan's students throughout the 1970s. Experiments with marathon formats culminated in the present two-week system. Although each marathon took on the characteristics of its participants, similarities in terms of the learning process were constantly reinforced. 'The great thing for me to discover and rediscover was that there always is a direct physical parallel for a

musical goal. Music might go in one ear and out the other, but all the while, it remains in the body in a profound yet definable way. If we can be taught to practise in a meaningful manner that gives both pleasure and pain in a way that can be manipulated to one's best advantage, one will master the art. If you walk out on stage to perform in a way that echoes your practising, you will invariably succeed.'

Kaplan's violinistic background and forays into other fields helped form his pedagogical philosophy. First-hand experience with Ivan Galamian's analytical approach at the age of 16, satisfied a problem-solving nature. 'From early childhood on, I showed a fascination with helping others understand how physical tasks have a logic of their own. If I watched someone perform an action they were having difficulty with, like opening a window, I would find another way for the person to relate to the object and solve the problem. As a child, I loved making music so much that I knew I would always be involved with it. Yet, it was a total emotional release for me until Galamian nurtured my scientific passions.'

A member of several major American orchestras early on in his career, Kaplan chose to leave the profession. A strong inner desire to help others, compounded by natural curiosity and an analytical ability to find solutions, led to a career in teaching. Kaplan homed in on the educational powers of video long before 'camcorder' became a household word. Puzzled by the gap between teachers' words and students' understanding, he filmed hours of student lessons and developed the 'Student Teacher Communication Notebook'. Kaplan continued his quest by sifting through vast amounts of method-related literature, discovering that, 'all the performing arts and

many sports activities are closely-related. There is a rhythmic activity in the body that creates an image or sound that eventually is picked up by the audience and reacted to.'

Taking motivation as a point of departure, Kaplan affirms, 'the teacher has to foster self-healing. The challenge is to get the student to believe in himself and in his learning process.' An application of this approach to the specific problem of intonation provides an illuminating example. 'Elusive' could be the best term for describing intonation in string-playing. Teachers often assume that bad or approximate intonation is caused by lack of talent or laziness and pass this counter-productive attitude on to their students. Kaplan's inquiry into the intonation challenge probes a deeper set of pedagogical issues. 'People play out of tune because they don't understand their systems. Human beings are so incredibly complex that you can say to a person, "twiddle your right toe", and suddenly they will play in tune. Emotion is the glue that welds all the pieces together. If you find an appropriate emotional relation to the phrasing, so that there is a connection, music becomes a vehicle that carries the person and causes the co-ordination to work properly. Teach understanding of the music and the student will go further.'

Tuesday morning's master class gave real impetus to these eloquent points. As to be expected, a technical problem was put into a musical framework. A marathoner who had trouble playing the 'music' in repetitive semi-quaver passages in Prokofiev's Violin Concerto no. 2 learned how to change the 'I

want to play it better but can't' attitude by setting a specific goal for the passage. As she experimented with playing it evenly and coldly, then progressively adding colour, different bow-lengths to alter phrasing, even playing with different percentage levels of emotion, we got the message that craft at the most trivial level can become art at its highest.

'I would like my students to say that they study music with me, not "how to play the violin". The violin and the body are vehicles that connect us to an amazing structure written out in musical notation, a structure that has the ability to carry us and our audiences to another world.'

At the Magic Mountain Music Farm, participants are presented with the tools for empowerment, tools that make musicians out of craftspeople. As the participants prepared for re-entry into the real world, their final performances of 'first-try' selections were videotaped. Pictures were worth the proverbial thousand words. Carol Minor delivered a confident and moving performance of the first movement of Prokofiev's Violin Concerto no. 1, Leslie Van Becker played Ries' *Moto Perpetuo* with admirable virtuosity and Hyeon-Ju Kim proved that an orchestral excerpt can be much more than music minus 100. Real learning hinges on retention; two months after my marathon experience, I am happy to report that focused practise sessions provide much greater satisfaction than wishful thinking.