

THE NATURAL, FRIENDLY BASS PLAYER

Edgar Meyer encourages students along their musical paths

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

'I actually would like to stimulate them ... to be resourceful and come up with their own pieces, and/or their own transcriptions, and all kinds of things in between.'

Simple isn't easy.

Just ask the Curtis double bass students. In lessons and the department-wide bass class, faculty member Edgar Meyer encourages them to sound natural—which is harder than it would seem.

"You need to make adjustments when things don't go according to plan," he tells Paul Kowert about playing chamber music. "A spontaneous element is almost required. You'll have to react to how it's going, like doing your own kind of improvising."

Later Mr. Meyer suggests to Joseph Campagna that in shaping a phrase, he consider which notes are freer and which should be more precise. How to achieve a natural phrasing? That can be a matter of the speed of the bow and getting the left hand in place in time (which means considering multiple fingerings). Or, as he instructs Derek Zadinsky, vary the amount of bow being used in order to increase expression and to shape a passage. And, as Mr. Meyer advises all the students, make a change during repetition, rather than robotically create identical sounds in a pattern, for instance, of sixteenth notes.

At one point Mr. Meyer likens moving to the next note in a phrase to a composer deciding where the music is going. That link between thinking like a composer and performing is evident in Mr. Meyer's own music-making, as well as his teaching.

"A central idea to me is for the music to sound and feel very natural. Actually achieving it can be complicated," he said during an interview soon after a busy day of teaching this past fall. "But, ironically, the result will sound very simple."

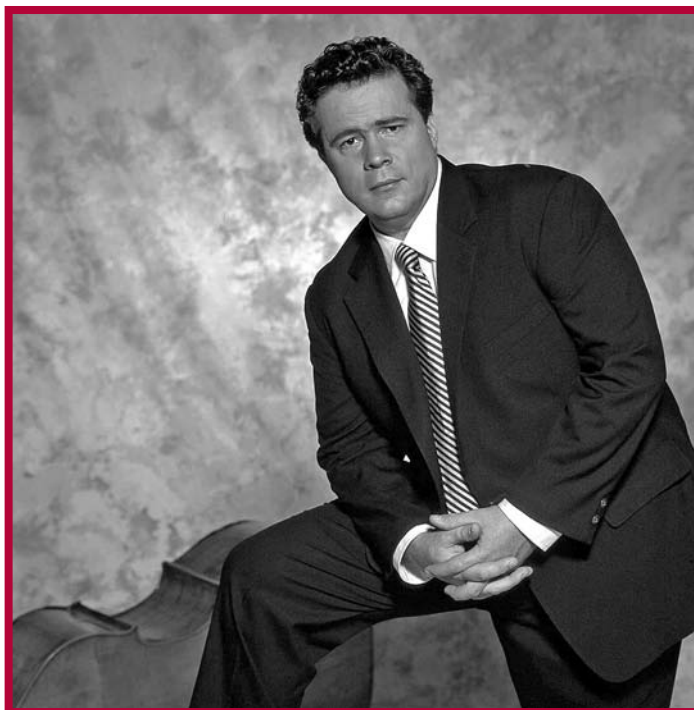
To hear natural playing, listen to Mr. Meyer's recordings that spring from fruitful collaborations with classical and bluegrass musicians alike, such as his duets with banjo player Béla Fleck; the quartets with Joshua Bell on violin, Sam Bush on mandolin, and Mike Marshall on guitar; the trios with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and violinist Mark O'Connor; or the violin concerto he wrote for Curtis alumna Hilary Hahn. (A full discography and listening samples are posted on his website, www.edgarmeyer.com.)

This fall Mr. Meyer was in "writing mode," as he told the students. He was composing a piece to play with Emanuel Ax (including performances at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center in April) and working on music for a tour recording with Chris Thile, a young mandolin player.

Such collaborations are a rewarding part of Mr. Meyer's career. "There's a tremendous amount of pleasure and satisfaction from being a member of the overall musical community," he said. "I learned the most and am inspired the most by working with very interesting people." He extends his list of "very interesting people" to include Beethoven and other deceased composers whose music he plays.

When asked about collaborations, he grabbed the most recent copy of Charles Rosen's *Classical Style* (which he considers "way too good a book to be used only as a textbook") and read the acknowledgment from the first edition (1970):

Edgar Meyer ~ PHOTO: JIMMY IENNER JR.



It would be impossible to acknowledge the contribution of ideas that have come from so many conversations with friends, each one in turn bringing forward a new example to illustrate the other's observation. Many of the ideas in this book are the common currency of musical thought, derived from the experience of all musicians who have played and listened to the music involved. In most instances I could no longer distinguish, even if I wanted to, which ideas are my own and which I have read, or learned from my teachers, or simply heard in discussion.

"Most of what you do in music really is a very big body of shared knowledge," Mr. Meyer paraphrased.

He shares some of his musical knowledge with Curtis students six times a year in classes and lessons. These sessions supplement the students' weekly lessons and classes with Harold Hall Robinson, principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Curtis's bass instructor since Roger Scott retired in 1995.

Mr. Robinson remembers when Mr. Meyer initiated a conversation about teaching at Curtis. "It was a fantastic opportunity being presented to me—like being handed a magic wand," he said. Even outside bass circles, Mr. Meyer is widely recognized and admired.

"We work very well together. We're sharing ideas, and the students are able to take the next step and take ownership, to make decisions for themselves," Mr. Robinson said. "Edgar is a tremendous teacher, and his performance specialty is studio work and concertizing. Orchestra is my specialty. We want the students to be as worldly, creative, and eclectic as possible, as well as being accomplished orchestral musicians, because it will enrich their playing."

Since the unique arrangement began in 2003, the two teachers have conferred often. "We compare notes all the time—that we're happy with what any one individual is doing, and what might be right for him or not right for him," Mr. Meyer said. "The only reason I'm actually able to do this at all is really because of Hal, because he sets a very high bar, in terms of the energy that he puts into the class. He puts it upon himself to make



Edgar Meyer and Fora Baltacigil in bass class, spring 2006 ~ PHOTO: NED WHARTON

sure these people reach their potential."

Mr. Meyer's interest in teaching is to encourage the students on their personal paths—not to spread his own compositions and transcriptions. Some students are interested in the pieces, which he considers to be "effective performance vehicles" that broaden the limited solo and chamber music repertoire original to the double bass. "I actually would like to stimulate them in one way or another to be resourceful and come up with their own pieces, and/or their own transcriptions, and all kinds of things in between," he said.

In his lesson in November, Mr. Kowert asked Mr. Meyer about selecting material for duets with mandolin. The advice he heard was to look for outstanding pieces that people are unfamiliar with, rather than over-exposed material. Later Mr. Meyer elaborated that discovering potential transcriptions ("something of exceptional inspiration or quality") requires solid musical resources, both to assess the musical value of the piece as written and to determine whether they maintain their essence when transferred to bass. "The more that you know about music, the better you can make those decisions," he said.

With experience, he has learned what will fit the instrument and what might be too awkward. "In a nutshell, the bass has a very hard time with rapid arpeggiation," he said. "Ironically, the bass can move very fast. It really can play just as quickly as the violin, on a purely scalar passage or a linear passage. But the notes will be less clear. ... If it's fast the notes themselves actually have to be simpler in some way. ... Because of the less clear sound, if the information is too complex,

it will not quite work as well on bass, even if you execute it perfectly."

Bach's cello suites are his all-time favorite to play on bass. He learned them at age ten or eleven, when he had the music but had never heard them; he had already played other Bach pieces on the piano. "I immediately felt very connected with it, too," he said of the cello suites. "There's no music for a solo bass-clef instrument that's as beautiful as that music. I actually wanted to be learning it in such a way that my own way of playing the instrument was significantly based on the pieces themselves. ... It was certainly the center of my universe at that point."

He likes the students to work on the Bach suites—"I think it brings a lot of musical and technical issues right up front." Primarily, though, he wants the students to have well-balanced repertoire choices, including very challenging and easier compositions, a range of styles, lyric works, and more technical pieces. "Ideally I'd love to see people think about these things themselves and develop a point of view on it," he said.

What else does an aspiring professional musician need to embark on a career?

"Hard work and talent go a long way. A little bit of ability to work well with others goes a long way. And a certain scrappiness or resourcefulness. Ability to turn something bad into something good.

"I'd say if you could put those four together, you're probably gonna be fine."

Sounds simple. ☺