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The Influence of Atar Arad: Studying with an Unconventional Master

By Melia Watras

As a beginning Master's student at Indiana University in the '90's, my future in music was yet to be determined. I had completed my Bachelor's degree, also at IU, but was embarking on a new educational experience as I prepared to begin lessons with Indiana's new viola professor, Atar Arad. I was at that pivotal point in a young musical career where each step is seemingly magnified and fraught with consequence.

As I somewhat timidly began a new relationship with my new professor, I did not know (though I hoped) that in time, this would blossom into one of the most important and meaningful relationships of my life. Atar would first become my trusted mentor, and then as our relationship progressed, he would become a very dear friend and colleague. As I look back on my musical education, I cannot imagine where I would be now without Atar.

When Atar Arad arrived at the Indiana University School of Music in 1992, he breathed much needed fresh air into the music scene in Bloomington. Not only was he an accomplished solo violist, but his chamber music acumen and experience (7 years in the Cleveland Quartet, among other notable accomplishments) was most welcome at Indiana.

Atar made an immediate impact on my playing. I made many technical advances as his student (most noticeably in my bow arm and sound production). When it comes to technical studies, Atar eschews traditional scales. Practicing scales, he figures, helps you play those specific scales, not music. As a daily exercise, Atar asked me to select specific scalar passages from repertoire I was learning, and to use them as my scales.

He demanded nothing less than perfection from me and my fellow classmates. But more than making me a better violist, Atar made me a better musician, and I like to think, a better person. I was constantly encouraged to search for something more in the music, to discover sounds that were unordinary, and to find unexpected ways of looking at things. This way of musical thought has served me well not only in my career, but also in life in general.

As his teaching assistant for many years at Indiana, I observed Atar's way of teaching, both in private lessons and in master classes. Perhaps the greatest attribute of Atar's teaching is his ability to approach every student as an individual, rather than just another student to plug into a system. Atar has a way of finding what works for a particular student; to discover what type of teaching each student responds best to. He taught me how to give a master class, stressing that teaching a class is not simply teaching a lesson in front of an audience. He showed me that a class has to be just as much for the audience as for the student being taught. The audience must be addressed and acknowledged. Very specific issues that can be resolved within the timeframe of the class are the best things to stick to.

When it came to chamber music, my string quartet, the Corigliano Quartet desperately sought out Atar's expertise. Atar was generous with his time, ideas, and inspiration. Our weekly coachings were a haven, where, for one hour each Thursday, the only world that existed consisted of two violins, a viola, and a cello, and, of course, our mentor. Atar shared with us many secrets of "quartet mechanics", as he referred to them, as well as innumerable insights into interpretation. Atar's way is never to simply demand something to be played a certain way. There is always an explanation behind each suggestion, and every suggestion is born of his particular musical genius and ample experience.

Under Atar's guidance, the Corigliano Quartet became the first chamber group from IU to win the Grand Prize at the Fischhoff Competition. Atar opened a door for us that would eventually lead to the quartet residency at Juilliard, where we were fortunate to study with and assist the famed Juilliard String Quartet.

The latest development in Atar's career is one that was, perhaps, inevitable. You can now add "composer" to his many titles. I find it fitting that Atar, who for all his life exuded the very essence of creativity and musicianship in his performing, would turn to composing as an expressive outlet. I have been fortunate to work with the composer Arad on two of his works: the

Sonata for Viola Solo, and the String Quartet, both in performance and in recording.

Atar's compositions are heartfelt, meaningful and sincere. These are also the words I would use to describe his playing, his teaching, and his friendship. I have been lucky to experience all of these things. Whether I'm rehearsing with the Corigliano Quartet, preparing a viola recital, or teaching one of my wonderful students at the University of Washington, I find that his influence on me is still strong and extremely positive. As a former student of his, I can't help but feel like one of his musical descendants. A short time ago, I asked Atar if it would be okay if I gave some of his fingerings and bowings to the Bach Suites to my students. He replied, "Of course. After all, they are my grandchildren."

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