

The Arts

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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The students, led here by Itzhak Perlman, have always been the focus of the Perlman Music Program, but they are not the only beneficiaries.

What Itzhak Perlman Learned at Camp

While Helping Students, His Wife Says, He Reinvented Himself

By **LOIS B. MORRIS**
and **ROBERT LIPSYTE**

SHELTER ISLAND, N.Y., Aug. 7 — Seven years ago when Itzhak Perlman first led an orchestra of teenagers at his wife's summer music camp, then in East Hampton, N.Y., he guided them with a pencil. A pencil signified teacher, which was as much as he was ready to commit to, and even then only occasionally. A baton, he recently confided, would have made him a conductor, and he simply wasn't ready.

His humility was not misplaced. By several accounts, his early conducting of the campers had nowhere near the virtuosity of his violin playing. But

this summer on Shelter Island he teased out color, nuance, passion, subtlety and personality from the youngsters with a baton that seemed as familiar as his bow, befitting a guest conductor this year with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the London and Berlin Philharmonics.

NOTES FROM MUSIC CAMP

Growing Into a Role

Although the Perlman Music Program is the dream of his wife, Toby, to provide a humane music education to shape future musicians 11 through 18, it has also reshaped Mr. Perlman, who turns 57 on Aug. 31. "He has completely reinvented himself," Mrs. Perlman said.

Mr. Perlman agrees. "My wife eased me into this," he said in his teaching studio next to his wife's office in one of the white bungalows at this 28-acre former resort. "The idea was not to build a camp around me. This is still not the case. I am just a nice addition."

This humility may be misplaced. Most here see the camp, which was founded by Mrs. Perlman and Suki Sandler, as a Mom and Pop Perlman production. This summer, besides conducting chamber ensembles, he taught all the violinists. Some of them are his own students at the Juilliard School, where since 1999 he has committed all his nonperforming time to teaching. At camp, both Perlmans sing in the

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What Itzhak Perlman Learned at Summer Camp as He Reinvented Himself

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chorus. (Mr. Perlman has a big, booming baritone voice but readily takes direction to tone it down, said the chorus master, Patrick Romano.)

Mr. Perlman seems as interested in what's cooking as who's playing. One of the wheelchair-accessible wooden walkways that crisscross the campus leads to the kitchen's back door.

On the first day of the inaugural season at Shelter Island three years ago, Mr. Perlman, rolling past a pan of steamed asparagus on the motorized cart he uses instead of a wheelchair, cocked a bushy eyebrow and growled, "No!" Since then, it is told, asparagus is always grilled with sea salt and olive oil.

That energy and enthusiasm has helped him connect with young musicians, who respond to his gift of channeling and enhancing the emotion of music and to his almost boyish delight in groaner jokes ("So the lady said, What are Brahms?") and puns ("Are you Rachmaninoff for this piece?").

Though famously private, for his students he will sometimes peel down to the 13-year-old Itzhak who became an instant celebrity when he appeared on television on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1958.

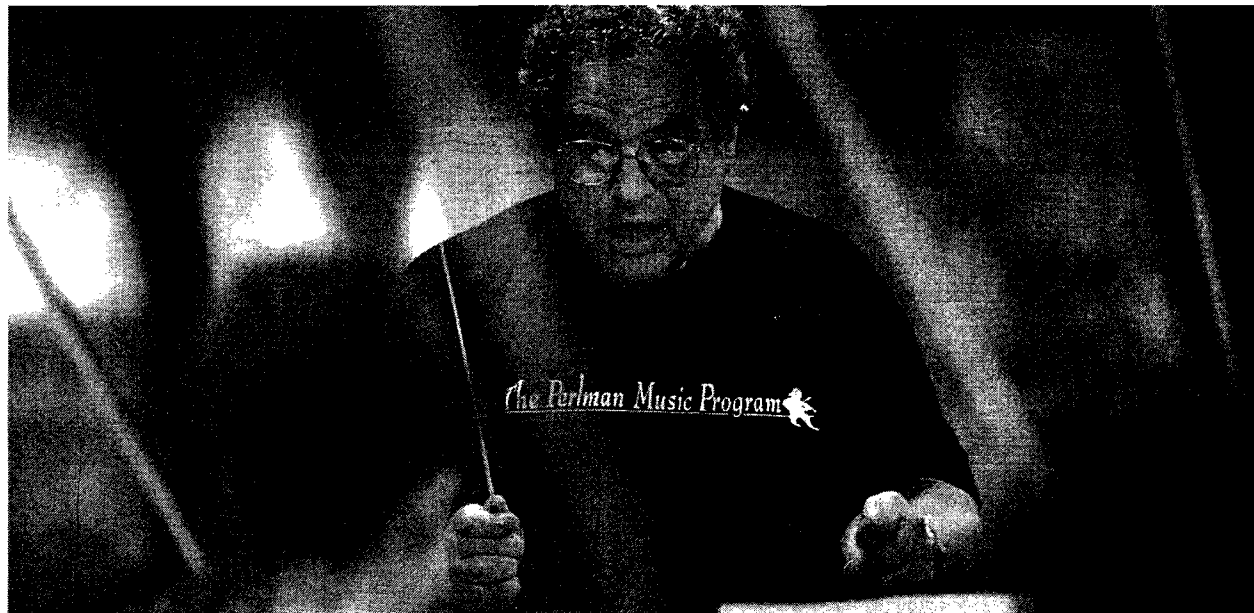
Maya Shankar, a 16-year-old recovering from a hand injury received while playing the violin at camp last year, remembers a session with Mr. Perlman in which he revealed his own feelings of terror and competitiveness.

"When we got to ask him questions about his childhood, he said that for many years he was jealous," Ms. Shankar recalled. "He'd worry: 'Oh, this person has learned many concertos so much faster than I have, and this person is playing concerts and I'm not performing. There's no way I'm going to get anywhere in music.' From someone who turned out the way he did, that was so comforting for me to hear.

"Then he told us that we have our own inner clock, and it ticks at a certain rate, and you're going to get to certain places at times different than everyone else is, but that doesn't make you any less of a musician."

What he doesn't tell his students is how to play.

"For me one of the great things about teaching is not so much what to say but to know what not to say,"



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Itzhak Perlman doesn't tell students how to play. He asks them to judge their own playing as a critic would.

Notes From Music Camp

Articles in this series, which began June 27, follow the experience of gifted students at a summer camp. The previous articles:

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Mr. Perlman said. "If somebody is talented, they contain a certain kind of magic, and that magic is very precious, because it is on very precarious ground. It's like a very fine leaf that if you shake it too much, it breaks. You have to let the branch grow until it becomes strong enough that if you shake it, it's won't break."

He asks students to judge their playing as if they were a music critic. ("A good one," he adds slyly.) "Ninety-five percent of the time they're right on the money." For the other 5 percent, he questions them until they come up with their own answer.

Most important to him, he says, is not to stifle individuality, which he says is often missing from performances today.

"I don't want to have just generically wonderful playing," he said, adding that he would indulge a 13-year-old's playing of Mozart with excessive gusto and emotional slides rather than risk smothering the child's spontaneity by making her fear being wrong.

Colleagues invariably describe Mr. Perlman's talent as natural. "I'm sure he never practiced six or seven hours a day," Patinka Kopec said, and she's right. "He just didn't need to. The hands are so beautifully and naturally coordinated."

Ms. Kopec, known as Patty, is the camp's founding violin teacher and a friend of both Perlman's since all three met as teenagers at Meadowmount Music Camp in upstate New York.

This summer Ms. Kopec shared the teaching with Mr. Perlman for the last half of the five-week camp season. Earlier she had shared similar duties at the Young Artists Program of the National Arts Center in Ottawa with Pinchas Zukerman, its music director, with whom she

works at the Manhattan School of Music during the school year.

She says the broadest difference between the two men as teachers is that "Itzhak's responses are always of an emotional nature, and Pinchas's are always of an intellectual nature."

The program's founding piano teacher, Miyoko Lotto, said that Mr. Perlman had become one of her two favorite conductors. (The other is James Levine.) "Music is an emotion without a name, and they know how to express that. There's not an academic approach."

In search of that emotion Mr. Perlman holds Goose Bump Class in which students talk about music that thrills and chills them. They have classes in which they talk about color.

"That's what I try to tell my kids," Mr. Perlman said. "Go for the color, go for the nuance."

He encourages students to talk about their feelings about the music they are playing. "It helps me teach them," he said. When they play a passage, he may ask what images the music brings to mind. The same passage can evoke a landscape, two people talking, somebody begging,

but the image must come from the student, not the teacher. I want them to own it."

He prefers not to demonstrate, and he never brings his violin to class. "If I want to show something, I will take the students' violin," he said. He doesn't want them intimidated by the sound of his Stradivarius.

At camp when he is conducting — "that's a form of teaching, I suppose," he said — he is gentle and amusing, always trying to coax out each individual in the group.

"Don't play like a section," he exhorted the string players at a rehearsal for a benefit concert. "You are individuals playing together."

He tells them not to hide in the music but to express their own vibrancy and intensity. He evokes the image of the Blue Angels, planes flying in formation yet each flying boldly.

Sometimes he will shout, "That is exactly right!" And sometimes he will cajole, "Do you know the word me-an-der-ing?" Often he cannot resist ending a rehearsal with, "And on that note..."

In the Mom and Pop version of a rehearsal, Mrs. Perlman sometimes sits in, acting as an advocate for the

students. She will ask him, "What kind of stroke are you using?"

"Top of the bow," he replies.

She persists. "What kind of pressure?"

"My own pressure." As the young musicians giggle and Mrs. Perlman throws up her hands, he comically growls, "My pressure is to play well."

Mr. Perlman says he believes that listening to his students and orchestra players has changed his point of view about music and enhanced his ability to listen to himself. Sometimes he teaches a piece in the afternoon that he will play in performance that night. During the lesson he will urge the student to vary an interpretation. Later onstage he'll find himself thinking: "Why am I doing it this way? Just because I did it last week?"

He is not alone in thinking that teaching and conducting have improved his playing. "His ears are opening," said Rohan De Silva, whose challenge, as Mr. Perlman's piano collaborator, is to keep up with him. "He never plays the same way twice. What great music-making."

Mr. Perlman is jolly yet guarded about his plans. He is principal guest conductor with the Detroit Symphony, and he has just been named music adviser to the St. Louis Symphony through the 2003-4 season.

"Being a guest conductor is like being a grandparent," he said. "When you are through, you can give them back to their parents. But as music director..."

He was reminded that a sports-writer in St. Louis, commenting on the baseball team there, said the Cardinals could use a "No. 1 starter" like Itzhak. A passionate Mets fan, Mr. Perlman liked the comparison to a top pitcher but was too cool to be drawn into speculation about his big-league plans.

For now, with the summer camp at an end and the Perlman program moving to China today to set up shop at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music for three weeks, he seemed content to be Pop Perlman a while longer.

At the final weekly student recital here, Mrs. Perlman took the stage to tell the restless crowd why the performance had not yet started.

"He," she said pointing at Mr. Perlman at the tent entrance, "had to have dessert."

The crowd roared and applauded.