

Mark Rudoff • Teaching Statement

- It is my job to prepare young musicians to succeed and find satisfaction in their lives as musicians. I do my best work in this regard when I create conditions that balance artistic, technical and personal growth.
- The crucial value that I seek to instill in any young musician is the habit of relentless listening. Everything else — expression, beautiful tone, accurate rhythm, technical mastery, musical insight, and the patience to practice — flows from this.
- The discipline of listening can be stultifying – it can crush a musician – if it is not balanced by the mental discipline of critical distance. I use the maxim, “Analyze, don’t criticize,” by which I mean: seek to understand what you hear and look for solutions to problems, but avoid the useless habit of judging your musicianship, your work and your self.¹ I try to train this habit with my own attitude in the studio, aiming to model a patient, businesslike approach to solving problems.
- Technique and music are eggs in a cake. After the cake is baked, you cannot go back and find an egg to eat; likewise, it is impossible to define a cellist’s playing in exclusively technical or musical terms. Understand that every musical choice has technical consequences, and technical limitations impose musical limitations. It can be deadening to learn “just the notes”; conversely, it is enriching and technically challenging to be conscious of rhythm, expression and tone when we practice études, scales and passagework. The point of technical mastery — which is *essential* — is to gain the ability to give the most most complete, intelligent, expressive performance.
- That said, every cellist must cultivate a reliable technical foundation and a logical system for solving technical problems. Every student owes it to herself, her audience and the music to perform all the work necessary to give a well-prepared performance. I live by a superstition that those who honour this obligation are rewarded with the gift of inspiration.
- The cello starts and ends with tone. American cello pedagogue Phyllis Young is correct when she says that the single most precious gift a string teacher can give a student is the concept of a beautiful tone.
- This is also to say that everything starts and ends with the bow. Young players have a habit of defining technique in terms of the left hand only. A mature player wants to master bow control and management in order to own a rich vocabulary of bow strokes and tonal shadings. The bow arm is also where most of our music lives; rhythm, phrasing, dynamics and articulation all depend on bow control.
- I challenge all students to develop a coherent, personal approach to musical understanding. I believe that any young musician is capable of artistic eloquence if given tools to apply critical thinking to problems of style, interpretation and communication.

¹ An example: working in the practice room, a student hears notes out of tune. She can do productive work identifying the problem notes, analyzing the cause of the errors (“*Do I hear the notes correctly? Is my hand set up efficiently? What about the pace of my shift?*”), and designing a practice strategy towards learning a beautiful intonation for the passage. It is easy for her to skip past this step and criticize (“*My intonation sucks. How can I call myself a musician if I never play in tune?*”), an attack that (a) makes practising frightening and painful, and (b) doesn’t help solve the intonation problem.

- My students hear me say I am not yet a great player, but I am a great practicer. We work together on detailed analysis of practice habits, techniques and attitudes. This works toward my larger goal of giving each student the tools to become his own teacher.
- I never expect a student to do anything unless I can, first, explain it and, second, demonstrate what I have explained.
- My most important role is coach: for my students to grow, I must inspire, encourage, challenge, support, captivate, occasionally kick butt, and – most important – listen to what they are telling me. Nothing that I know and try to teach about mastering the skills of cello playing matters if a student lacks the confidence and spirit to communicate on stage.
- Bottom line: it is more important to love playing the cello than to do it well.