

SCULPTING MUSICAL ARTISTS: A TRIBUTE TO THE LEGACY OF MISS DOROTHY DELAY

By Dijana Ihas

I saw the angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free.

—Michelangelo, L. B. S. (1475–1564)

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the continuation of Dorothy DeLay's remarkable legacy. As a pedagogue and mentor, she shaped the professional and personal lives of some of the most prominent violin soloists, chamber and orchestral musicians, conductors, and string pedagogues of today. DeLay still serves as a source of endless inspiration to many who did not have the privilege to know her nor study with her, but who nonetheless became influenced and motivated by her unique teaching style and holistic mentoring practices. Data in the remaining part of this article have been collected through analytical reading of available literature, engaging in formal and informal conversations with her former students, and attending workshops and symposia dedicated to her pedagogy.

DeLay's Musical Upbringing

The year 2017 marks the centennial of DeLay's birth on March 31, 1917, in the south Kansas town of Medicine Lodge. She was born into a family of teachers, ministers, and amateur musicians. Her pianist mother and cellist father valued music, and under their guidance, she began studying violin at the age of four. By age five, young Dorothy had her first violin performance at a local church. She attended Neodesha High School in Neodesha, about 200 miles east of Medicine Lodge, where she performed with the school's full symphony consisting of 100 students out of a 400-student body. Later she recalled, "That means that one out of every four children played in the orchestra. Music was important to us." (DeLay, in Tsung 1993, 4).

By the time DeLay reached sixteen years old, she entered Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio to study the violin with Raymond Cerf, a former student of Eugène Ysaÿe (Franco-Belgian violin school). After a year at Oberlin, she transferred to Michigan State University, as her parents urged her to seek a broader education than the one she could get at a music conservatory. There DeLay studied violin with Michael Press, a Russian concert violinist and former student of Jan Hrímalý (Russian violin school), while supplementing her education with courses in psychology. Upon earning her bachelor of arts degree, DeLay enrolled at the Juilliard School in New York City to continue her studies in violin performance.



Miss Dorothy DeLay (1917–2002)

Her teachers at Juilliard included Louis Persinger, former student of Eugène Ysaÿe; Hans Letz, former student of Joseph Joachim (German violin school); and Felix Salmond, the distinguished English cellist with whom DeLay studied chamber music.

After the completion of her studies at Juilliard, DeLay studied violin for a short period of time with Raphael Bronstein, former student of Leopold Auer (Russian violin school), while concertizing with the piano trio formed with her cellist sister Nellis DeLay. DeLay moved away from New York during World War II because of her husband's call for military duty (Sand 2000). Upon her return, DeLay decided that instead of pursuing a career in performance, she would start developing herself as a teacher. This led to the beginning of her professional relationship with Ivan Galamian, the highly sought-after violin teacher at Juilliard who studied with Konstantin Mostras (Russian violin school) and Lucien Capet (French violin school). The exposure to studies with string pedagogues from various violin schools (see Figure 1), as well as her studies in psychology while at Michigan State University, appear to be contributing factors in shaping her eclectic teaching and holistic mentoring styles.

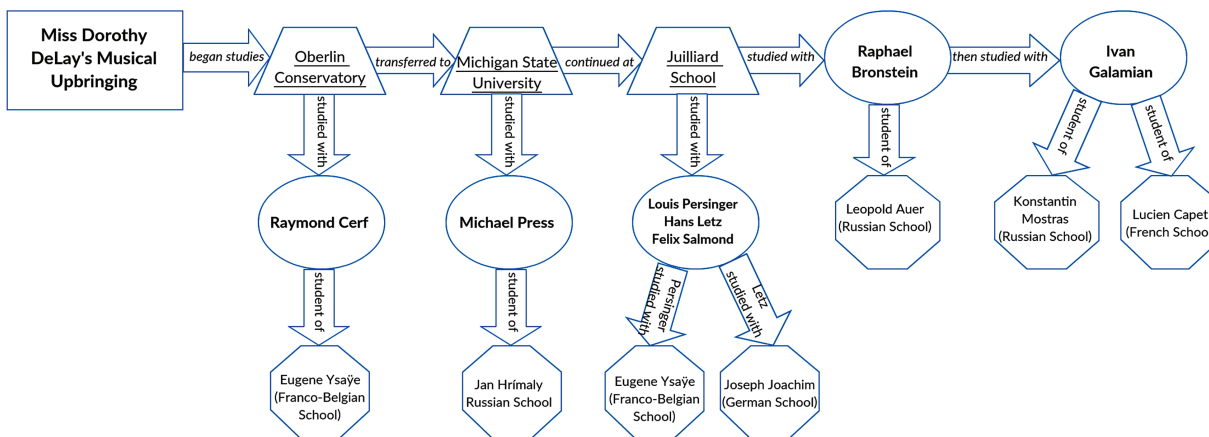


Figure 1. DeLay’s musical upbringing diagram.

Galamian invited the thirty-one-year-old DeLay to teach as his assistant at Juilliard, as well as in his summer string camp in Meadowmount in upstate New York. Their relationship grew fruitful and respectful over many years. That ended when DeLay telephoned Galamian to inform him of her intention to teach on her own at the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado. Disappointed in her disloyalty, Galamian never spoke to her again and he demanded her immediate dismissal from Juilliard. His requests were denied, based on the students’ enthusiasm for her teaching. When students were asked with whom they would like to continue their violin studies, many—including Itzhak Perlman—decided to join DeLay’s studio.

That was the beginning of DeLay’s remarkable career that encompassed five decades of teaching at some of the most prestigious music conservatories, schools of music, and music festivals in the United States and abroad. In 2002, DeLay passed away in New York City, succeeded in death by her husband and two children.

DeLay’s Teaching Philosophy

A review of literature on DeLay’s teaching revealed compatibility of her teaching philosophy with the principles of John Dewey’s *Progressivism* as well as with Lev Vygotsky’s concept of *zone of proximal development*. Like Dewey, DeLay believed that teaching should be rooted in questioning students and in placing a high emphasis on encouraging students to think independently (Sand 2000; Tsung 1993). As Tsung proposed, she used this way of teaching to build “the student’s self-image and confidence through the active choice of goals” (Tsung 1993, 14). Like Vygotsky, DeLay believed that teaching should be informed by the student’s frame of reference and assisted by the teacher’s mindful guidance through zones of proximal development (Gholson 1998). In a recent conversation with one of her former students, DeLay was described as someone who had “a very amazing sense of

when the student was ready to learn something.” In DeLay’s own words, she viewed teaching as “not a matter of passing on secrets of the trade but the process of guiding each student on a path towards progress that is uniquely suited to him or her” (Wen 1984, 518).

DeLay’s Teaching Practices

As explained in the introduction of this article, DeLay studied violin with proponents of several sound international violin schools, including Franco-Belgian, Russian, and German. This diverse experience probably contributed to the creation of an eclectic pedagogical approach to teaching violin that was organized in her unique style.

DeLay believed that the two major principles that are necessary to develop good playing techniques are the *sound* that the player wants to produce and the *comfort* of the player while producing that sound (Tsung 1993). Her view was that the left foot should be forward and pointed toward the music stand and the right foot should be back and pointed toward the audience with weight being freely shifted from one foot to another. She advocated for the violin to be positioned flat or parallel to the floor as much as possible, “although one should be flexible enough to be able to move the violin around if necessary” (Tsung 1993, 24). DeLay’s view on the use of the shoulder rest was unrestrictive. Regarding the bow hold, she believed that the “Franco-Belgian bow hold is the most versatile, since it gives flexibility of the fingers in all the different bow strokes” (54).

DeLay methodically organized the foundation of playing the violin in what she called *Seven Basics*—the first three pertaining to the left-hand techniques and final four to the right-hand techniques. Seven Basics should be practiced for at least an hour every day as a part of her well-known five-hour-long practicing regime: first hour, basics; second hour, scales and arpeggios along with the passage work from concerti;

third hour, études and Paganini; fourth hour, concertos; and fifth hour, Bach, short pieces, recital repertoire, and anything else (Lewis 2003).

Three left-hand basics are as follows: control of lifting and dropping of the fingers, vibrato, and shifting. Regarding the first left-hand basic, control of dropping and lifting motions, DeLay advocated that each drop and lift motion needs to have a double action; the drop motion needs to involve a *drop-relax* motion, while the lift motion needs to include *lift-relax* motion if one is to attain clarity in finger action. When it comes to teaching vibrato, DeLay was particularly interested in helping her students develop the *vibrato ping*—the quality of vibrato that has the potential to tap into energy and relaxation, which is “one of the keys to gauge the communication of human emotions in violin playing” (Tsung 1993, 43). DeLay organized shifting motions in two categories: the Russian shifting (new finger guides shifting motion) and the French shifting (old finger guides shifting motion). Her well-known peculiarity in teaching shifting was the concentration on the speed of the shifting movement right before arriving at the new pitch. For that, she used this car analogy: when parking a car, one needs to reduce the speed of the car right before parking is completed to achieve the desired position of the car. DeLay taught shifting the same way, using the same analogy, and suggested that right before arriving to the desired pitch one needs to slow down the speed of the shifting motion if one is to ensure smooth and correct arrival to the desired pitch.

The four right-hand basics DeLay advocated to be studied on a daily basis are the four basic bow strokes: whole bow legato (e.g., concepts of drawing the straight bow and smooth bow changes), *detaché* group (e.g., playing *detaché* in different parts of the bow, concepts of bow division, combination of separated and connected notes), *martelé* group (e.g., *martelé* as a “hammered” stroke; up-bow and down-bow staccatos; lance, *collé*, and flying staccato strokes), and rebounding group (e.g., *spiccato*, *sautillé* [also known as *saltando*], and *ricochet* [also known as *jeté*]). These four groups of bow strokes need to be practiced in conjunction with three elements of sound production: bow speed, sounding point, and bow weight (Tsung 1993).

When teaching musical interpretation, DeLay stressed the significance of identifying observable details such as the rise and fall of the melodic line, rhythmic patterns, and the alternation of tension and relaxation as the guiding principle in making musical decisions. She advised students to ask themselves, “What is the character of the music?” rather than “What should I feel about music?” (Tsung 1993, 72). B. L. Sand (2000) observed DeLay’s work with Juilliard students over a period of several years, depicting numerous instances in which DeLay explained musical decisions in terms of manipulation of bow speed, sounding point, and weight, as in this example: “Try going to the fingerboard and floating the bow. You can use lots of bow, but only one hair.” (Sand 2000, 103). In DeLay’s own words, “The study of techniques should always be in the service of music.” (DeLay, in Lewis 2003, 76).

DeLay’s Mentoring Practices

The review of literature available on DeLay’s interactions with her students reveals her holistic approach to mentoring her mentees. She mentored students at both the psychosocial (personal) and career (music business) levels, while also serving students as an inspirational role model. One former student described DeLay as a teacher who “loved to deal with a student’s personal life. She loved hearing what troubled you.” She provided students with friendship, counseling, and compassion. DeLay mentored students on music business matters regularly in her studio, as noted by a former student: “We talked quite a bit about the music business in a way, and that was very much part of her mentorship, because it wasn’t just about playing well. She very well knew that that’s not enough.” She did not hesitate to call managers to introduce her students to *gate-keepers* when the right time arrived. This is described by one of her former students:

[DeLay would say] “Why don’t you take this student, this violinist, onto your roster?” More often than not, that’s all it would take to get that person on that roster. I don’t know if it works quite that way anymore, but you always felt like DeLay had that power. Some people were scared of it. Some people embraced it. Some people were jealous of it, but I think everybody was aware that that existed.

A very unique aspect of her mentoring practices was her ability to recognize the strengths of every student and her willingness to invest in developing his or her identified strengths. As conductor Peter Oundjian told Sand, “That is part of DeLay’s genius—to put people in the frame of mind where they can be their best” (Sand 2000, 219). In 1999, American psychologist Stephen Drigotas proposed the term “Michelangelo Phenomenon” to describe the phenomenon that manifests itself in individuals who have the capacity to draw and “sculpt” the best out of another person (Drigotas et al. 1999). The name of the phenomenon was inspired by Michelangelo’s infamous quote, “I saw the angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free.” Reading, conversing, and thinking about DeLay makes one start to realize the magnitude of her psychological insightfulness, which could be an explanation for her producing so many musicians with strong individual voices.

DeLay’s Personal Traits

The review of literature available on DeLay and conversations with her former students portray DeLay as an exemplar of highly developed interpersonal and emotional intelligence. In the memorial service document compiled from letters written by former students, many reflect on her personal characteristics. Ray Iwazumi notes DeLay’s “capacity to understand [others]” and her “curiosity without limits.” In addition, many former students who contributed to her memorial service document noted the fine balance between her teaching and mentoring involvement with students: “her dedication to developing

awareness, individuality and the highest artistic standards was complemented by nurturing support for the student, building self-confidence and providing the tools of solid musicianship” (Sergiu Schwartz, from a letter in DeLay’s memorial service document). According to former student David Kim, DeLay was invested in helping her students become “better people [who] seek beauty and quality in everything” (David Kim, from a letter in DeLay’s memorial service document).

In a recent conversation with one of her former students, DeLay was described as someone who had an extraordinary ability to “understand people, to read people” and as someone who had a keen awareness of other people’s presence and behavior: “After one lesson, two lessons, she would know what you’re about and then sort of tailor her guidance for you.” Her *respect* for other people’s unique characteristics was yet another behavior of DeLay that her students recognized:

I think one of the reasons why people so diverse as Nigel Kennedy and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, stayed in that studio, [was] because they felt that their musicality was being appreciated and nurtured. When 95 percent of all other teachers would’ve said, “You know, this is wrong.” And she would ask, sometimes, “Why do you do it like this?” And the person would give her a very, if not convincing, certain answer and say, “I really feel it should go that way,” and she said, “Then do it that way.”

The ability to understand others and “to notice and make distinctions among other individuals” (Gardner 1983, 239) is considered to be the core capacity of individuals with the highest level of *interpersonal intelligence*. One former student described DeLay as being warm, “sort of the mother away from home,” and someone with “an amazing ability to see the moves, to understand people, to read people.” Warmth toward others and the ability to accurately distinguish the characteristics and behaviors that identify others are key building components of the emotional mechanism known as *empathy* (Mehrabian and Epstein 1972). Empathy is considered to be an essential part of both *interpersonal* and *emotional intelligences* (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 2006).

Summary

DeLay’s remarkable legacy keeps marching on through her former students, through the biennial Starling-DeLay Symposium on Violin Studies, through occasional media reports, and through the admiration of those who had no opportunity to know or study with her but who feel inspired by her insightful teaching and holistic mentoring practices. The list of her former students, many of whom are considered to be the world’s leading violinists and pedagogues, is vast and impressive: Itzhak Perlman, Sarah Chang, Nigel Kennedy, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Midori, David Kim, Simon Fisher, Kurt Sassmannshaus, Brian Lewis, and Paul Kantor are just some of the names on a list that could go on for pages.

The international music-teaching scene remembers DeLay as the first woman who earned a reputation as a remarkable music pedagogue of international stature. In the history of the Juilliard School, DeLay is remembered for making history as the first American-born faculty member and the first woman faculty member to teach at this prestigious school (Sand 2000). In the memories of her students, she is remembered as someone who not only taught them to play the violin, but from whom they also “learned about life and how to live.” (Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, from a letter in DeLay’s memorial service document). As DeLay’s former student Asya Meshberg wrote in the same memorial service document, “Dear DeLay, you gave so much to us both humanly and professionally, that as long as we are here you are with us. Thank you.”

References

- Drigotas, Stephen M., Caryl E. Rusbult, Jennifer Wieselquist, and Sarah W. Whitton. 1999. “Close Partner as Sculptor of the Ideal Self: Behavioral Affirmation and the Michelangelo Phenomenon.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (2): 293–323.
- Gardner, Howard. 1983. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gholson, Sylvia A. 1998. “Proximal Positioning: A Strategy of Practice in Violin Pedagogy.” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 46 (4): 535–45.
- Goleman, Daniel. 2006. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- Lewis, Brian. 2003. “Empowered Violinists: Observations from the Studio of Dorothy DeLay.” *American String Teacher* 53 (1): 72–7.
- Mehrabian, Albert, and Norman Epstein. 1972. “A Measure of Emotional Empathy.” *Journal of Personality* 40 (4): 525–43.
- Salovey, Peter, and John D. Mayer. 1990. “Emotional Intelligence.” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 9 (3): 185–211.
- Sand, Barbara Lourie. 2000. *Teaching Genius: Dorothy DeLay and the Making of a Musician*. Portland: Amadeus Press.
- Tsung, Nancy Hsu-Hsien. 1993. “An Investigation into Realm of Violin Technique: Conversations with Dorothy DeLay.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Juilliard School, New York.
- Wen, E. 1984. “Delaying Tactics.” *The Strad* 95: 518.



Dijana Ihas is an associate professor of music education at Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in music education, serves as an applied viola instructor, supervises student-teachers, and conducts university orchestra. She is a founding director and master teacher of the

Pacific University String Project, the first and only program of its kind in Oregon. While teaching in public schools, her orchestras won numerous state and national competitions. Her research interests evolve around instructional strategies and mentoring undergraduate research. Dr. Ihas holds a MFA in Music Performance (UC Irvine), MM in Music Education (University of Arizona), and PhD in Music Education (University of Oregon).