

To Whom it May Concern:

I spent about 7 or 8 summers working with David at various institutes, mostly Sound Encounters, and every year was a new and fresh touch of that magical eternal musical moment that so many of us long for and try so hard to get. It's the kind of moment where time seems to stand still, and everything seems to come into harmony if for only a fleeting moment. Yet, while there, you feel that moment could go on forever.

I'll never forget a performance we did of Shostakovich's 8th String Quartet, arranged for string orchestra. For those unfamiliar with the piece, it is one of the most dense, and emotionally intense pieces I have ever encountered. Imagine spending most of your life living on egg shells—the fear that at any moment you could say or do something that could get you sent to your death. Not only that, you are in the spotlight, one of the most prominent artists in the country, always teetering on the edge of favor with those in charge. And if you mess up, “Off with his head!” This piece captures the essence of that experience and the struggles of a life living under that while trying to express oneself, and does it under the guise of a “dedication to the victims of war and fascism.” Plus the definition is hardly to be overlooked and needs to be expressed in the music anyway since I believe it was genuine.

Suffice it to say, the subject matter and gripping emotional intensity of Shostakovich's work is no small undertaking even for the most seasoned of professional musicians. Yet in 10 days, with an amateur orchestra made up of mostly junior high and high-school students and a few younger college students, we did just that. Through David Barg's incredible teaching, we understood the music and did it. And the audience got it too.

At the end of the performance there was a moment of silence, which felt like an eternity, and we all knew that not only had the musicians nailed the performance, but all of us, musicians, and audience alike were taking a moment of silence in honor of those who suffered. It was an incredible experience! This is only one example of the so many experiences I had of David's extraordinary leadership and teaching!

David has a way of taking even the seemingly most distasteful piece of music and showing every musician how to fall in love with the piece. I never realized this until later, when I found myself performing, with other ensembles, various works that I had at one time performed under David's baton. In these other performances without David, I have repeatedly heard nothing but complaints from the musicians, “This music is terrible.” Or “The conductor is awful. I don't understand why he picks such crappy music.” In contrast, I'll say it again, David has a way of opening your eyes and mind to the music he selects. He shows you how to make sense out of it, what it means, how to perform it in a fun and musically fulfilling way. This is an ability I have rarely seen in the many conductors I have worked with.

Throughout my musical career I have worked with many conductors and have a few I would consider favorites—conductors who I would play for in a downbeat if they asked:

William Skoog, Gustav Meyer, Klauspeter Seibel, Robert Spano. I would put David right in the midst of those great conductors.

One of the other great things about David is that he doesn't just teach you the music. He teaches you about life, about how to be a better person, about how to believe in yourself and have confidence in who you are, about how to express yourself, and about how to make an impact in the world around you, all while preparing the music at hand.

“We don't practice the music. You guys can already play it. We practice concentration.” This saying is the underlying principle of his teaching. After saying that, he'll say something like, “We got problems all over the world with prejudice, people hating other people. Violence, intolerance, wars. How do we expect to be able to start changing these things for the better if we don't concentrate and play the crescendo that's right in front of us on the page? It all starts with us. The little things we do.”

He is one of the few conductors I've seen who empowers his orchestra by teaching them to take responsibility for themselves, their playing, and their behavior. One of the first ways David does this is by teaching the section principals how to lead their sections: passing on instructions, organizing the seating, building their confidence so they can be confident leaders, etc. In doing this, he also teaches the section how to be more than just cogs in the wheel, but active supporters of the music as a whole. He teaches the kids how to musically communicate with each other, how to follow the conductor, how to follow their principal, how to get out of their own little world and pay attention to the rest of the picture. David does all this in a fun and engaging way.

David Barg is one of the most amazing conductors and educators I have ever had the privilege to work with. I count him among the most important and influential mentors of my life and musical career.

Sincerely,

Jesse Griggs

Assistant Director Omaha Conservatory of Music Institute,
Viola & Chamber Music Teacher: Omaha Conservatory of Music
Section Violist: Omaha Symphony Orchestra