

Chamber Music

Heart and Soul

Gillian Rogell gets frustrated with the way some young musicians approach their work. “They think it’s about perfection and dazzling technique—and it isn’t,” she says. “It’s about *connection*.”

The violist and teacher started **Aspinwall Hill Chamber Music Foundation** (formerly the Heart of Chamber Music Institute) in 2001 with the aim of helping musicians and music lovers make those connections. The organization grew out of chamber music workshops that Rogell ran, and its activities have culminated in a DVD, *At the Heart of Chamber Music*, showing cellist Paul Katz and the Jupiter String Quartet working with younger musicians. The DVD lays out Rogell’s core beliefs as a teacher, and expresses her devotion to chamber music—in her words, “the distilled voice of music.”

“Think of it—you’ve got three or four people right in the moment together,” she says. “You connect. You hear the music coming toward you, then you give it to someone else. It’s that unity of purpose we crave as human beings—whether we’re playing in an ensemble or cheering the Red Sox.”

The Aspinwall Hill Chamber Music Foundation goes beyond standard musical pedagogy, taking in Tai Chi, yoga, and acting. The idea is to move past mere note-playing toward the deep communicative properties of music. Ideally, the players lose their self-consciousness—their attention to perfection at the expense of communicativeness. “It’s not about being right,” says Rogell. “It’s about being *together*. Sometimes we take a moment, breathe, and stretch, to demarcate our music-making—to separate it from the rushing and *thinking* of normal activities. Musicians know that, when they play a solo, they don’t want to be thinking. As soon as you start thinking—you make a mistake.”

Rogell tells of a session with three amateur musicians: older women who were working on a Haydn Trio. “I was teaching them that instead of playing all those quarter notes in the cello exactly alike, you have to use the bow and make it into a *shape*,” she says. “Music looks like it’s all at right angles—the stems go up and down; the staffs go across—but we have to make it into a curve. At the end of the piece, one of them said, ‘Wow, that makes me feel better than a massage—and it doesn’t talk as much!’”

The overall aim is to emphasize the spiritual aspect of music. “The concert hall is a place where something very important happens to people,” says Rogell. “I was giving a workshop in a small room, with the Borromeo Quartet playing Bartok’s Fourth. The whole room was breathing together: we became part of a tremendously charged conversation.

“If people from another planet came down to earth,” Rogell says, “they would think that concert halls were religious places.”

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VIOLIST/EDUCATOR
GILLIAN ROGELL