

Expressive Teaching: The legacy of Alain Marion

By Nina Perlove

On a summer day in 1992, I had a life-changing experience. I was in St. Irénée, Québec at the tucked-away Domaine Forget summer music institute overlooking the St. Lawrence River, standing before a group of my peers in a flute masterclass. The instructor was a small Frenchman with a commanding presence. I had just played a passage from the slow movement of the Bohuslav Martinů *Sonata* and the teacher, Alain Marion, stopped me.

'Nina,' he said, leaning close and looking me straight in the eye. 'You hesitate to tell me your story. Tell me what makes you weep.' He lifted his flute and played the most heavenly sound I ever imagined. When he finished, Alain looked at me and saw the reaction in my face. 'Your turn,' he said. 'Your turn to cry. Let me hear your tears in the flute.'

That was the day I learned the difference between musicality and expression. From this simple exchange, I came to understand that while musical playing involves careful observation of style, dynamics, tempi, accents and phrasing, expressive playing is a highly personal injection of feeling into a performance that comes from an intimate part of the player's psyche. Musicality is principally an intellectual endeavour, while expressive playing draws from the performer's raw emotion. Both musicality and expression absolutely require technical mastery to execute, and both are equally essential to artistic music making. Alain showed me that while strictly musical performances may be great, performances that combine both musicality and expression are magical, and no one could bring out a student's expressive performances like Alain.

Yet Alain himself believed that personal expression cannot be imposed by a teacher. He said, 'You learn style and technique from teachers, but not emotion. Everyone has something different to say. You must find your own sense of self.' Although Alain believed that one cannot teach musical expression, he showed his students time and time again that musical expression can be unlocked, and that his role as a teacher was to help students recognise their own expressive potential and learn how to channel personal emotions into music making. This ability to lead students towards their own expressive discovery is what I call Expressive Teaching, and this, I believe, was the genius of Alain's instruction.

Those who knew Alain Marion were acutely aware of his talent and charisma. The accomplished French flute player Philippe Bernold wrote this about his former instructor:

1 Alain Marion, quoted in Sheryl Cohen, *Bel Canto Flute: The Rampal School*, Winzer Press, 2003, p. 32.

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For [Marion], sound was not a quantifiable part of playing...Its quality depended entirely on its emotional substance...He was as enormously demanding as he was energetic, and we were literally swept along with and transcended by that energy...His teaching style may have seemed outwardly simple, and yet it had tremendous resonance with us, his young students. His presence will remain vivid in our hearts forever.²

American flute player Sheryl Cohen similarly described Alain Marion:

Marion cherished music and had no tolerance for a lackadaisical approach to any aspect of musicianship or flute playing. He savored every moment of music and life, and demonstrated the depth of his humanity in every note he played...Marion's energy and musicianship inspired and invigorated those around him, and his teachings left indelible imprints on students.³

Alain's expectations of students were high. If a student did not play well, he became frustrated. His distress was not directed at the individual performer, but rather at the fact the music was not being served with due respect. Conversely, when a student played well, his joy was doubly evident, because he felt a powerful expressive force had been set into motion. He held himself to the same standard. Alain never stopped pushing himself to new levels and never stopped learning. His recordings got better and more expressive every year. I know Alain was especially proud of his 1993 *Accord* release, *Morceaux de Virtuosité*, which he lovingly dedicated to Joseph and Jean-Pierre Rampal, his mentors. Upon hearing the compact disc, Rampal wrote 'I think that few performers in the world can combine in one recording such feeling, technique, and charm of color.'⁴

During my two years of study with Alain in Paris, he shaped not only the way I practise and perform, but the way I hear music. I can honestly say that every time I pick up my flute I think of Alain and all that he taught me.

It is easy to talk about Alain Marion as if he were a musical superhero. Indeed, to his students, Alain was larger than life. This certainly has something to do with the unique relationship between music instructor and student. I have similar feelings for all my former teachers, each of whom I idolise for their talents and the gifts of knowledge they shared with me. Trevor Wye addressed the risk of mythologising great teachers in the introduction to his book on Marcel Moyse: 'Hero worship does not help the hero; it only makes him more vulnerable to attack by his critics. In fact, Moyse did not need it—he was a very influential and extraordinary man without the fabricated hype.'⁵ Similarly, it is important to remember that Alain was human. Sometimes in lessons he was tired or distracted. Most of the time



2 Philippe Bernold, *A Life in Music*, Analekta AN 2 9850-2, 2006, liner notes.

3 Cohen, 6.

4 Jean Pierre Rampal, *L'Art d'Alain Marion II, Morceaux de Virtuosité de l'école française*, Accord 202182, 1993, liner notes.

5 Trevor Wye, *Marcel Moyse, An Extraordinary Man*, Winzer Press, 1993, p. xv.

he was brilliant. Suffice to say, he was an individual with exceptional talents from whom much can be learned.

Marion's Expressive Teaching: How did he do it?

1. *Opening the floodgates.* Alain Marion understood that to play expressively the player must be able to access his or her emotions, and sometimes to do that he would need to break down the protective walls we construct around our sorrows, fears and vulnerabilities. It was not uncommon to see a student become teary-eyed in lessons. This was the experience I had with the *Martinů Sonata* at Domaine Forget. It was exhilarating and exhausting at the same time. Alain had an instinct for knowing when a student was ready to be approached expressively, and when it was time, he would stand close to the student and speak to the pupil by name. He would ask, in a kind voice, for the player to cry, weep, and always to 'tell me your story.' There was something in the intensity of his request, the way he looked you in the eye when he spoke, that was very powerful. It was as if he were no longer a flute teacher but a loving parent, a caring therapist, or a priest offering absolution. 'I care,' he seemed to be saying, 'I care about you.' It was impossible not to be moved, and when we picked up our flutes to play, that sincere emotion would be channelled into sound.

2. *Doing and listening.* Alain did not spend a great deal of lesson time engaged in discussion. Instead, we played—both of us—back and forth—like a duet. Alain did not want to hear himself talk, he wanted to hear music. Because of this, we covered a lot of material. Flute-playing to Alain was instinctive. He didn't spend time worrying about or discussing mechanics or anatomy. He played, and felt, and most of all, he listened, listened, listened, and he expected us to do the same. I remember one time when Alain told me he was frustrated with a student because whenever he gave her instruction, she asked, 'Why?'

'Why?' he responded, 'because it sounds good!'

Alain preferred to demonstrate what he wanted rather than describe it. When he demonstrated in a lesson, his playing was highly emotional and he expected us to mirror that commitment. He did not necessarily want us to imitate him exactly, but to internalise his style, warmth, and energy. When Alain demonstrated in lessons, you felt that you were part of his music making. He would lean towards you on the dissonant notes and look you straight in the eye as if to say, 'Do you hear it, do you hear my soul in the sound?' His demonstrations were very effective and his total commitment to the expression was always evident.

3. *Expression was a priority.* When Alain did talk in lessons, he spoke constantly of expression, feeling, warmth, and of telling a personal story. 'Chant,' he would shout in lessons, 'Sing! Dance! Play with an open, warm sound.' Playing expressively in



Photographs of Alain Marion at a masterclass in Nice in 1970 by courtesy of Pryor Dodge.



lessons wasn't just rewarded, it was expected. That alone went a long way toward making us more expressive players. We knew that when we played for Alain, expression was not the icing on the cake, expression was the cake.

4. He gave sensual, emotional interpretations of repertoire. When Alain did offer verbal interpretations of repertoire, he gave short little statements filled with insight. At best, Alain's interpretations were brilliant. At worst, unconventional. Without dispute, they were always dynamic and challenged us to draw out the composer's expressive intent.

For example, of the Hindemith *Acht Stücke*, he said: 'It is a very bad time. [Hindemith] wasn't Jewish but he didn't accept the Nazis...and he left. It is a very dark time. The sound should be dark. You know the *Threepenny Opera* by Kurt Weil? It is the same style.' He described the Krishna movement from Albert Roussel's *Joueurs de Flûte* as 'rain, smoke, the smell of opium,' and of the third Schumann *Romance Nicht schnell*, he said simply, 'Smell death.'

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5. *Transference of energy.* A large part of playing expressively is capturing life and energy, and Alain transferred raw energy to his students. He often gave us feedback and directions while we played, including clapping, stomping, and gesturing so we could experience the energy of the music while we were making it. This sounds simple, and yet it was tremendously effective. This was especially true when it came to the fast movements of Baroque pieces. 'Dance!' he would shout as he clapped and stomped to make us internalise the pulse of a gigue or bourée. To this day, I can hear Alain clapping when I play a Bach allegro.

6. 'Technique is expressive, practice is expressive.' Whether talking about breathing, scales, articulation, sound production, or finger technique, it was from the point of view of how these techniques are inherently expressive. According to Cohen, Alain said:

Always begin practice with an adagio or andante...Get your emotions going from the very beginning...You have to play what you feel, but you must feel something. There is no difference between how you practice and how you play in Carnegie Hall. You must be happy to be making music. Even if you make mistakes at this point of the day, it's not important. You should be working for pleasure and to find sensuality in your music. In this way you discover warmth in your sound and find your own self. You have to learn to breathe in such a way that it gives you sensual pleasure—that it gives you goose bumps. In order to be able to give sensual pleasure to others, you have to be able to give it to yourself.⁶

⁶ Alain Marion in Cohen, 31.

Alain Marion's breathing technique was in many ways the foundation of his emotional playing. He taught that the intake of air should always be in the character of the music that followed, just as it does in speech. The breath before a tender declaration of 'I love you,' is very different from the intake that precedes a shout of 'Look out, you are about to get run over by a train!' To Alain, breath was also a channel by which a warm sound is produced. He often had students blow onto the palms of our hands, first with cool air, then with warm air. By breathing warm, the sound would be warm and open.

Alain's approach to articulation was also particularly expressive. He taught us to propel our attacks with a hu-hu diaphragm kick to give them bounce and life, a technique I have come to call 'popping' the sound. Alain 'talked about how articulation should not be produced from the tongue alone, but from the diaphragm, which he felt was the centre of life-force energy.



Expressive Teaching: The path towards artistry

There will always be students who respond to Expressive Teaching, and those who may not. Like all aspects of flute playing (sound production, vibrato, finger dexterity, articulation, breathing, etc and so on) some areas may come more easily to a student and others require more diligence and patience. Some students may adopt expressivity with little or no assistance, others may need more guidance, and as is true with any area in teaching, still others may never achieve the goals we set for them. The variances in individual students' abilities, talents and determination are part of the challenge and wonder of teaching. But like Alain Marion, we as teachers have to be as attuned to the issue of Expressive Teaching as we are to our own expressive performing and it is not good enough to just assume that students can unlock their own expressive potential without our help or to use the excuse that expression can't be taught. We must make the commitment to try to unlock the expressive potential in each student to the best of our abilities, because if we do not, we are depriving our students of one of the greatest lessons in music making, the path toward artistry.

Expressive Teaching should be a priority not only for a student's benefit, but for ours, too, because when we teach this way, it reminds us to be more expressive in our own performances. Alain said that we perform the way we practise. I think it is also true that we perform the way we teach.

What can we become more expressive teachers? Is there a set formula we can follow in textbook fashion? Unfortunately Alain Marion is no longer with us to offer his answer, but I believe that if we could ask him his opinion on the subject his reply would echo his teaching: build expressivity by establishing a student's solid technical foundation; make Expressive Teaching a priority; do not imitate Alain's method, but be invigorated by his energy and commitment, then find specific ways to execute Expressive Teaching which are natural for you and come from a place of sincere, personal expression. Through your teaching, learn to tell your own story, for if you do, that will become your legacy.



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