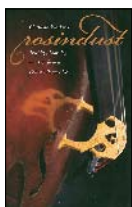


REVIEWS / BOOKS

Cornelia Watkins

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This highly readable and eminently useful book started life as a series of monthly newsletters that Houston-based cellist and teacher Cornelia Watkins circulated to pupils and fellow teachers. The insights of Watkins's 30 years as a teacher – which she modestly compares to rosin dust that can either stick to the cello or be wiped away – boxed text with anecdotes from her teaching, often about particular pupils, and in her ideas she manages to be relevant to a young beginner's first lesson as much as to a conservatoire student.

A lot of what Watkins writes – from her invaluable chapter on preparing for performance, right up to what to do in the 'deer-in-the-headlights' moment when it all goes quiet and you're about to put bow to string – would be of use to any musician. There's a lot of positive psychology, but also plenty of practical suggestions, such as having focus points on Post-it notes stuck over the music, which have to be read then peeled off just before performing.

The book also encompasses scientific insights on connections in the brain and the physics of intonation, which obviously fascinate Watkins, as well as suggestions on teaching interpretation by relating the music to students' life experiences. Watkins of course writes from the perspective of a teacher in the US, but the fact that her pupils are preparing for all-region or all-state auditions rather than Associated Board exams hardly matters.

Watkins is open about her own cello journey, the good and less good things she learnt from her teachers, the stripping bare of her playing after she suffered so seriously from tendinitis – 'The pain was persistent, and I had to live through a cello-less summer with people telling me I had better choose another career because obviously I would never play again,' she reveals – and her continued explorations of what it takes to be a good teacher. Not surprisingly she writes from the heart about tension-free playing, with sections on yoga cello, 'Making peace with your instrument' and 'Trying not to try'.

There is no index, but the detailed contents page – with 16 chapters, ranging from Why We Practice and Positive Teaching to specifics like Shifting and Vibrato – is a big help in finding your way around.

JANET BANKS