



# MIRACLE ON THE MOUNTAIN

Can a two-week practice retreat transform your playing? **ARIANE TODES** travels to New York's Magic Mountain Music Farm to find out

**T**HEY SAY THAT YOUTH IS WASTED ON THE young. I'd go further: studying is wasted on students. It certainly was in my case, when I took the postgraduate violin course at London's Royal Academy of Music 20 years ago. Back then, I had all the time in the world, attention from teachers and no mortgage – but no real idea how to learn. These days I understand more, and I long for the luxury of having no purpose other than to focus on my instrument and the language it speaks.

And so the two-week Magic Mountain Music Farm Practice Marathon Retreat seemed like the ideal place for me. It's one of the courses offered by Manhattan School of Music professor Burton Kaplan, who started running workshops nearly 30 years ago, in an old house in upstate New York. Over those years, the house has grown and evolved into a haven for up to twelve instrumentalists (mainly string players) to come and reset themselves musically under Kaplan's watchful eye.

Starting from New York City's Penn Station, I took a mesmerising five-and-a-half-hour coach ride through the verdant Catskills, feeling excitement but a tinge of apprehension. There needn't have been any of that though. Kaplan manages to create an atmosphere of trust, understanding and positivity so that everyone feels included, whatever their experience. And there was a wide variety of that among the twelve of us – amateur, teaching, orchestral, freelance and student – each of us with our own specific goals, needs and reasons for being there.

**EVERY DAY AT THE FARM** follows a similar structure, starting with helping oneself to breakfast. The kitchen and basement store enough food to live through Armageddon and everyone participates in cooking and cleaning, except for a few nights when a chef comes in. A giant folder in the kitchen lists duties and recipes, as well as individual lesson times – everyone has

three a week. Practice can start at 8am and must finish by 11pm and there are group classes at 11am and 8.30pm each day. Apart from that, one's time is one's own, and one is free to practise or loiter in the well-stocked pedagogical library, or even leave the building (which I did twice).

The structure offers many parallel learning mechanisms. The classes are fascinating – nominally they are about practice techniques (Kaplan uses his own *Practicing for Artistic Success* book as a basis) or musical language. In reality, they veer all over the place in response to individual needs or questions, and Kaplan's own freestyle autodidactic journey with specific subjects. His sense of curiosity about the world, whether about

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technology, science, literature, poetry, art or gestalt psychology, often acts as a route into some important musical concept or practice technique.

We take turns playing in class, which intensifies the learning: being a guinea pig in an exercise certainly focuses the mind, and all is captured on video for us to review. Watching colleagues explore the exercises is just as valuable, trying to tune into subtle changes in phrasing or sound as each player responds to Kaplan's input. In this way it's also a lesson in pedagogy – Kaplan's style is to encourage students to find their own path and solution, rather than telling them something is wrong. As he laments, 'A teacher will say, "Did you hear how the tone in bar three didn't match the music?" You say "uh-huh", but you don't even think. You didn't hear it. They're trying to impart a value system, but it doesn't work. That's why it takes so long for people to learn things. It's your perception that matters, not the teacher's.'

**THEN THERE'S THE WORK** one does in the privacy of one's room. I was worried about still being able to focus in the ways required – technology addiction has destroyed my attention span. But Kaplan's techniques turn practice into a musical experience and somehow this unlocked a relish that I don't remember having as a student. It also helps to know that everyone else is working hard (and that Kaplan is probably wandering around the house listening to our labours).

Lessons happen in Kaplan's study, which is crowded with scores, books on musical and scientific theories, and some of his own inventions (he's created a shoulder rest and once invented a device that rings a bell when a student's wrist collapses out). Here the teaching becomes much more focused – pieces are studied forensically bar by bar, technique corrected, feedback and encouragement given, Galamian fingerings disseminated.

Another more indirect learning mechanism is through the conversations that take place throughout the day – whether speaking with other participants about their musical lives and aspirations, or hearing Kaplan talking about some philosophical concept or cultural insight from his place at the head of the dinner table. >



NORALEE WALKER



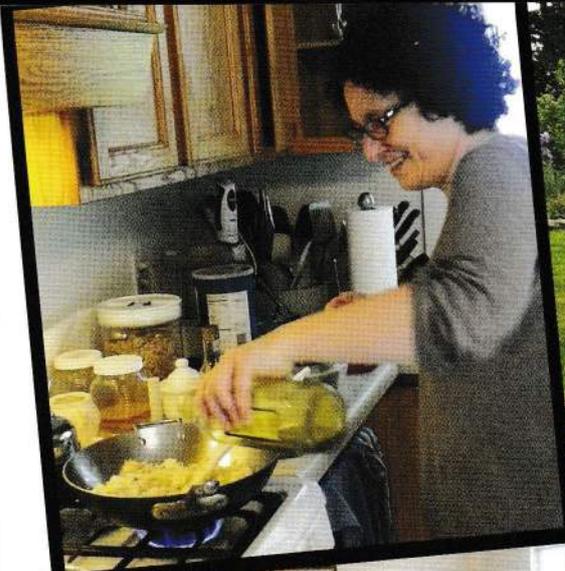
▲ Students take turns playing in class, which intensifies the learning experience

▼ Kaplan gives each participant three individual lessons a week



NORTH WALLACE





Burton Kaplan (second from right) with the 2014 Magic Mountain participants



▲▲ Lending a hand in the kitchen

▲ Comparing notes from the day's practice sessions over dinner

NORALEE WALKER

ESTHER PLATT

So the learning curve is continuous and steep throughout the two weeks, but for me it also contained sharp spikes with specific revelations. The first of these was as Kaplan took us through one of his practice methods in class – the ‘Technique of Observation’. I had brought a recently started Wieniawski etude-caprice and played the first page quite badly in class, I felt. I was focusing on the problems that I knew were coming up, which that I hadn’t practised enough, and the bad intonation.

This is where Kaplan’s ‘Pie Strategy’ comes in. There are four qualities to observe – intonation, rhythm, tone and expression. Rather than being critical about specific bars or phrases, one must play a whole passage while looking for the strongest and the weakest of these ‘pieces of the pie’. To make sure one is

## Kaplan’s style is to encourage students to find their own path and solution

prepared for this observation, before playing one says out loud, ‘I’m going to play from bar x to bar y, looking for the strongest and the weakest slices of the pie.’ Afterwards one immediately states the strongest and then the weakest element. It took me a few goes to get used to the process, and it felt deeply uncomfortable having to talk out loud, but it turned some switch in my brain. Rather than focusing in a negative way on what was bad or what might go wrong, one is forced to step back and observe the whole. And miraculously, things start to go right. This is the fascinating alchemy Kaplan shows us – focus on the right hand and a left-hand problem sorts itself out;

think about rhythm and a shift becomes easy. Improving one’s playing becomes more about psychology and paradox than sheer force of will.

Something about this feels subversive. My memories of lessons with many different teachers are of focusing on intonation and accuracy, so that it’s hard to draw back and let things be. Throughout the pie exercise, many of us instinctively say that intonation is the weakest, a fault of our training, as Kaplan says: ‘This is a fusspot art. It’s sad that people take this fussy quality and impose it on intonation. You should listen for, “Do I want to hear the rest of the story?”’ He sometimes steps in to point out that the problem is rhythm, at which a refocus improves the whole. It’s also telling that most of us automatically state the weakest slice of the pie first, so hard-wired are we to focus on problems rather than our positive impressions: another reason why this is such a useful exercise.

**IF THE PROCESS SOUNDS** a little esoteric, the body of Kaplan’s practice techniques is anything but. In classes we covered time-management strategies that you might find in a business manual, with plans, structures and milestones. At the other end of the scale, in one of my lessons Kaplan took me through the ‘Super Learning’ strategy for pounding through difficult passages. At the beginning of the lesson I confessed that with fast pieces like the Wieniawski I expected myself to fail, but with unerring patience Kaplan showed me how to work on tidying it up, using rhythms and a metronome. This was not particularly original in itself, but the specifics were more detailed and systematic than those I’d covered in the past, and the emphasis was on maintaining the musical content and sound, and a constant bow, even under tempo. After a couple of days of doing this on my own, my fingers were zinging away on the fingerboard, and with Kaplan’s encouragement I’ve now banished my self-perception that I can’t play fast.

As time went by, Kaplan dwelt on more sophisticated musical concepts in class, such as the metric skeleton – how the beats of a 4/4 bar have a certain hierarchy, which creates a flow through the bar and a sense of direction in music. We watched how when one student becomes conscious of this skeleton in a phrase, a shift ▶

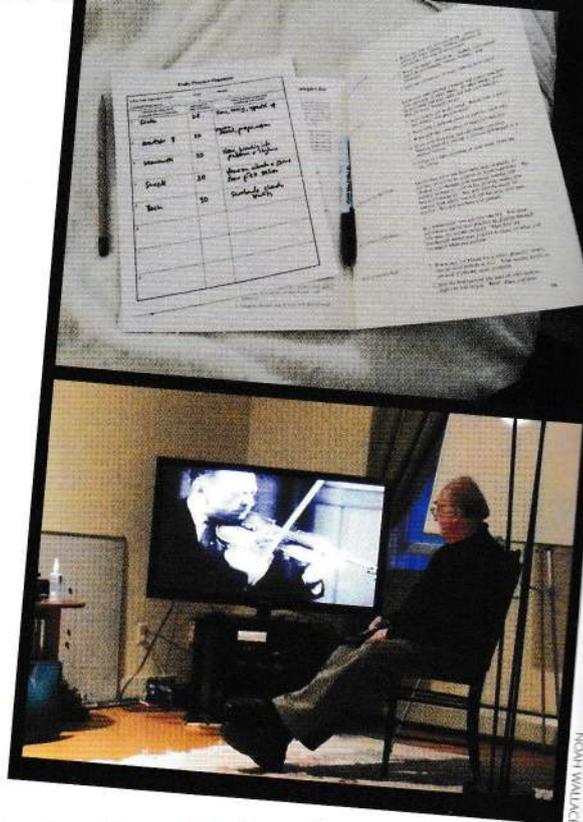
## The learning curve is continuous and steep throughout the two weeks

that has been problematic suddenly comes right. We discussed closure – how to set up the end of a piece – and Kaplan took us through the grammar of music, and how to understand phrases, sub-phrases and musical words. I took all this to the practice room to work on the Sarabande and Gigue of the Bach D minor Partita, excited by the endless possibilities it offered and the joy of picking apart the logic of Bach's musical language.

It wasn't all work, though. I'd hardly expected to watch a documentary on my childhood heroes, the skaters Torvill and Dean, but Kaplan showed it to us as an example of true ensemble. Another evening we watched a documentary on the conductor Carlos Kleiber, whose work I'd barely registered before, to understand the way he created images for the players he was conducting, and how he set up the musical structure. We also watched the infamous Heifetz video where he imitates a bad auditionee, and listened to Jordi Savall's early music group Hespèrion XXI playing follies, precipitating a conversation about authenticity and the evolution of performance skill.

**ALL THESE INPUTS** were leading up to the final Sunday, when we were each to perform for ten minutes. Beforehand we had to set up our performance goals: 'conscious expectations that are possible and reasonable, to give us the greatest possibility of doing our best'. Kaplan encouraged us away from technical goals, though, citing research: 'They've measured the consequences of goals of different types, and if you're a musician and you decide to play technically better, you'll play worse.'

At class the night before, I had been tense playing the Bach Gigue and I had been struggling with the first chord of the Sarabande. For the latter, Kaplan's advice that 'a down bow starts with an up bow' helped. He also suggested that, rather than fixating on the beginning of the piece in the seconds before



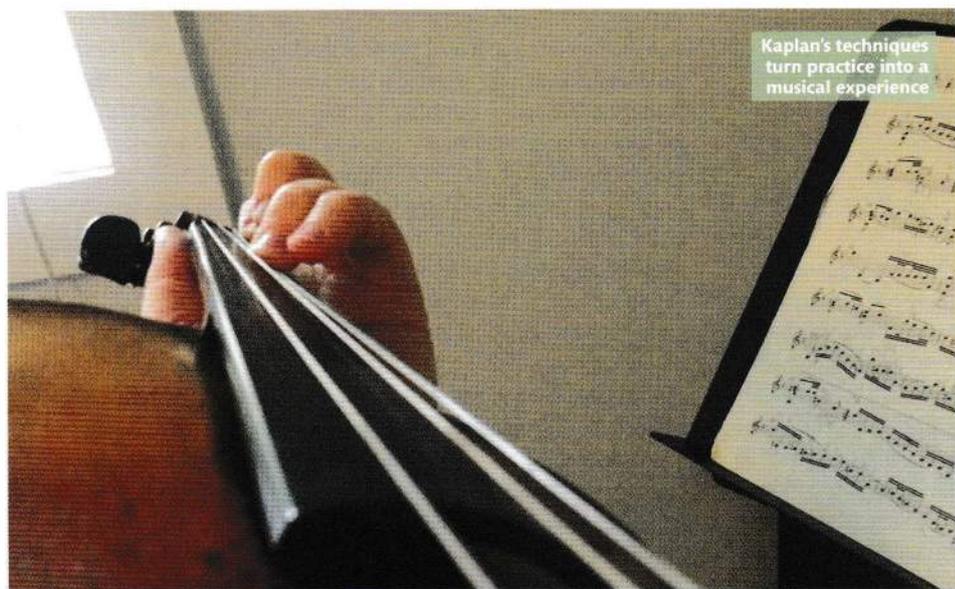
▲▲ Keeping a daily 'practice log' can be useful

▲▲ Studying a video of Jascha Heifetz can be useful

I start playing, I should focus on a point further on in the work. This can help to get in the right frame of mind. So my goals were to be relaxed for 90 per cent of the time and to make a beautiful sound 80 per cent of the time; to enjoy hearing Bach's language and to listen for the beauty of the first bar of the Sarabande.

The final concert was exciting and moving. As a group we'd spent the previous two weeks interacting with each other, cooking and washing up together, learning about each other and our playing and rooting for each other – and this was the final strait of the journey. It was lovely to hear everyone play, to the best of their capacities, by and large fulfilling all the goals they set themselves. As for me, I was happy with how I played – and felt as though I had attained my own personal goals. The concert was followed up by a 're-entry' session, where we talked about what we'd learnt and how we were going to take it forward. We drank sherry together before dinner and packing up. The next day we all dispersed back to our daily lives to see if we could live up to the expectations we shared in the re-entry session.

If I'd spent two weeks in a house full of interesting people, eating good food and practising the violin five hours a day, it would have been enough. If I'd been shown profoundly effective practice techniques, or been offered deep musical insights, or been challenged to think in new ways, or given faith in my violin playing, or even just been introduced to Carlos Kleiber it would have been enough. That I experienced all these things at once makes my experience at Magic Mountain probably one of the most valuable two weeks of violin playing in my life. And it offers proof that one is never too old to learn. ■



Kaplan's techniques turn practice into a musical experience

ARIANE TODDS