

Viola da Gamba Dojo: A Cross-Generational Community Learns to Love the Viol

A recent Dojo session at the apartment of Martha Bixler in NYC.



WHERE DID YOU first run across early music? Did you take viol or recorder lessons at a community music school from someone like Grace Feldman, who has taught for more than a half century at New Haven's Neighborhood Music School? Did your music camp have an early instrument program, like the one that Mark Cudek has directed at Interlochen National Music Camp for four decades? Or did you wander into a collegium rehearsal at college as I did 45 years ago at Oberlin, when I dropped into Dean Nuernberger's office to retrieve a book and left with a tenor viol? In Manhattan, it could happen some Saturday morning if you were to knock on the door of Martha

Bixler's Upper West Side apartment, to find more than a dozen viol players of all ages and abilities participating in John Mark Rozendaal's Viola da Gamba Dojo.

A viol player and Baroque cellist, Rozendaal started the Viola da Gamba Dojo in 2001 as a class at the Music Institute of Chicago in Evanston, Illinois. When he moved to New York in 2004, he brought it with him. He and his enthusiastic students were interviewed at the bi-annual Dojo Play-in held in June.

First of all, why group classes?

JMR: Music students do best when given the chance to meet each other and to have the pleasure and edification of ensemble playing. Choirs, orchestras,

Adopting learning styles from Suzuki, karate, intergenerational choirs, and ballet school, John Mark Rozendaal is a guru of the viol in New York City

By Tina Chancey



John Mark Rozendaal introducing young players to the pleasures of playing the viol. It won't be long before they can join the Viola da Gamba Dojo.

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and bands provide that for singers and modern instrument players but no such institutions exist to bring the viol tribe together. The Dojo was created to provide all of that.

In the introduction to his Level 1 repertoire book, Rozendaal writes, “The Repertoire of the Dojo is designed to support and inspire the work of a community of learners dedicated to sharing the work, play, and growth that we experience with our beloved viola da gamba.” Indeed, the group learning aspect of the Dojo is one of the primary benefits of the experience.

Dawn Cieplensky: As a member of the Dojo, I am part of a loving community that has had longevity and continuity, growth, and development. For me it is a matrix of learning that I would not otherwise have—under John Marks’s direction and teaching, where players of all levels come together and play a repertoire that is ours.

What was your model for it?

JMR: Actually, I had four. When I started the Dojo, I was teaching group lessons for young ‘cellists in the great Suzuki program at the Music Institute of Chicago, observing my son’s karate classes, singing in the Choir of Men and Boys at the Episcopal Church of Saint Luke in Evanston, and I was taking ballet classes myself—four different approaches to teaching performance skills.

In the Suzuki method, students worked in group and private lessons using a standardized repertoire. The common repertoire was carefully gradu-

ated to build skill upon skill in a doable progression—a great vehicle for sharing and reinforcing experience and motivation.

Similarly, in the karate dojo, students memorized and practiced a standard repertoire of “choreographies”—sequences of moves called “katas.” Students earned those famous colored belts in examinations for a given level, analogous to the series of books that contain the Suzuki repertoire. But, unlike most Suzuki classes here in the U.S., the karate dojo was a multi-level group; advanced students worked beside intermediate and very new students. This gave neophytes a model for every step of the path, and it offered more practiced students opportunities for leadership and teaching, both excellent ways of learning.

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At ballet class, I was intrigued by the structure of the class period. Every class at every level begins with plies and simple knee bends at the barre and progresses through a careful varied sequence of simple, compound, and complex tasks until the end, when dancers have the chance to execute a few thrilling riffs across the length of the room. Years of study are telescoped, reviewed, and previewed in an hour; virtuosi do their pliés beside the neophytes. It makes one humble. (In ballet class I also re-learned the feeling of being really bad at something.)

Martha Bixler was one of John Mark’s first students when he moved to New York. She has the luxury of taking class in her own apartment, which she loves.

Martha Bixler: I got involved about ten years ago. John Mark came to New York City, and he had no place for the Dojo;. So we decided to have it in my living room, and we’ve basically been doing it there ever since. He’s the only person who teaches all levels in one class, which is marvelous for me; he keeps going back to the basics. It’s not at all boring for the people who play well. It’s exciting.

Can you describe a typical class?

JMR: The Dojo sets up in a circle, with treble players on my left, tenors in the center, basses to the right. Music stands at first are placed *behind* the chairs. After we take a bow (borrowed from Suzuki classes, martial arts dojos, and zendos), we practice very simple exercises such as open string bow strokes and scales, watching each other so we can concentrate on making blended sounds and gestures. Then we replace our music stands to work from the Dojo repertoire, starting with simple songs and progressing to more difficult pieces. I choose repertoire based upon recent topics, future performances, and current participants (it is a drop-in class, a slightly different crowd each week).

Next, we practice music from outside the Dojo repertoire. For example, last year we included more 19th- and 20th-century pieces so we could perform the “History of Western Music” at our spring Play-In. We have also performed the four-voice mass of William Byrd, Terry Riley’s *In C*, and excerpts from Taverner’s *Missa “Gloria tibi Trinitas.”* The end of the class often includes solo performances by students who have something prepared to share. And class always concludes with a bow.

How does this multi-level class affect participants? Wouldn’t it be frustrating to listen to music that’s too hard for you? Susan Daily, a student from the original Dojo shares her experience.

Susan Daily: I got involved as a beginner when the Dojo first started in Chicago 13 years ago; it’s a life-long method for me. The biggest component is working with people at all different levels. We begin each session with relatively uncomplicated exercises, thinking about the beauty of the sound and the sweep of the bow, and everyone can do that at a certain level. Then we start with very easy repertoire, and everyone feels good about playing along. In each session you reach a point where the music is too difficult for you, and you get to listen and watch the notes go by and think, “The day will come when I can play that.” And that’s inspiring.

If all levels play together, how is achievement measured?

JMR: There are three volumes of Dojo repertoire, each including 15 pieces. Some students have taken up the challenge of performing an entire volume from memory, a “belt test” for which they receive a diploma and the undying

respect of their peers. The names of these graduates are listed on the Dojo’s web page: www.jmrozendaal.com/dojo.

Is it targeted for pre-professionals, amateurs, young students, or all of the above?

JMR: It is intended for and open to all. Lately, the class has been mostly adult amateurs, with occasional visits from children and professionals. I make it very clear, though, that while the Dojo repertoire is designed to be useful to beginners, it is not a complete method; they are urged to study it under the guidance of a private teacher.

For Daily, a former opera singer, one aspect is vially important.

Susan Daily: There’s a component of the Rozendaal Dojo method that I don’t hear as often as I would like to in other situations with the viol: his love of creating a beautiful sound. Conceiving of a beautiful sound, being taught how to make a beautiful sound, shaping the sound—you don’t get away with anything.

JMR: I want the music to sound good. Sounding beautiful isn’t all there is to music, but I am attached to this idea and find it difficult to let it go.

How should the dojo participants be learning?

JMR: However they can. One of the things that I am trying to learn myself is how to work with people who learn differently from the way I think people “should” learn. In the pedagogy that I have been taught, a learner’s progress should begin with very simple tasks performed very well and progress to more



Adult members of the Viola da Gamba Dojo after performing at the 2013 Boston Early Music Festival.

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Young and old assemble for the Dojo Play-in, led by John Mark Rozendall in February 2014.

complex tasks performed very well. But a student who flings himself unprepared at a complex task in a way that seems messy to me sometimes learns and grows through that effort. It makes me very, very uncomfortable, but I am trying to learn to accommodate that both in my mind and in the Dojo.

His students really appreciate that John Mark accepts different approaches, and that he encourages them to apply Dojo teachings to their own interests.

Hans Lie: John Mark is a spectacular teacher. He hasn't forgotten the kinds of problems you have when you're starting out. I've never come up with a problem for which he wasn't able to give me a lot of help. That's what's astounding.

Ann Sikorskis: I joined two years ago. I'd been playing viol a long time without lessons. I think I'm improving—I'm going to be improvising tomorrow! John Mark challenges everyone at all levels at all times.

Nancy Kinnard: I'm a longtime Suzuki first parent and was also trained as a Suzuki recorder teacher. Dojo is Suzuki-like but user-friendly to adults. There's less structure and we read a wider variety

of music. John Mark always has something exciting for us to do. I always find something to practice. The memorized pieces are tools; you can use them to develop different aspects of your technical ability. It's not just memorizing music. You get a chance to hear things and do things without being tied to written music.

What extra-musical skills do you hope that participants are learning?

JMR: Music study presents us with magnificent opportunities to practice humility and courage: when we practice a simple open string bow stroke 10,000 times, so that a beautiful, controlled execution becomes second nature, or when we commit to a complex task (like playing a difficult piece) with the possibility of failure. Honest practice brings our limitations into view, a prospect that always demands humility and courage.

If you were to develop the Dojo method further, where would you go with it?

JMR: I am working now to encourage all of us to spend more time in modes of playing other than reading music off the page: playing from memory, improvising, and composing. In our June play-in we featured a number of students playing their own composed variations on our Dojo tunes.

When I started the Dojo, one possibility that I was looking at was establishing a Suzuki viola da gamba method. I think that it is time for me to revisit and reconsider that idea.

The Dojo method is starting to spread. Dojo student Scot Zoid has just started a Long Island chapter. Two of his students (two-month viol veterans) performed along Scot at the Dojo Play-in.

Scot Zoid: I just started a Dojo in my hometown of Hempstead. It's all kids from my neighborhood—really, really enthusiastic kids. We just got an instrument grant from the VdGSA. You see, I always teach my school music classes from the viol. I play heavy metal on it, and it makes the kids want to experiment with it.

How is the Dojo important to you as a player/teacher?

JMR: For my teaching, the Dojo is essential. To really have a fulfilling musical practice, my students need much that I cannot provide in a private lesson. They need the pleasures of consort playing and the inspiration and mutual support that they get when they meet their peers.

My work is fairly evenly divided between teaching and performing. These are simply two different ways of sharing the love of music. I value the way these two activities complement one another. My growth and that of my students is connected: we are in it together. I can credibly ask my students to extend themselves because I am demanding that of myself.

At the end of the day, what would you like your students to come away with?

JMR: John Cage, quoting the Indian musician Gira Sarabhai, tells us, "The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences." That is what I want for all of us. ❀

Director of Hesperus and a member of Toss the Feathers and Trio Sefardi, Tina Chancey (www.tinachancey.net) plays Medieval fiddles, viola da gamba, and Renaissance, Old Time, and Irish fiddle in roots music from Sephardic and blues to early music and jazz standards.