

Notes from a Lesson with Dan Laurin

By Glen Shannon

The Swedish recorder rock star Dan Laurin was in the Bay Area for the weekend of April 10-12 for San Francisco Early Music Society concerts with Ensemble Mirabile (which were fantastic, by the way!). After hearing many episodes of friends having lessons with famous players as they were in town, I thought I'd jump on this one and set up a date. We met at the home of his (and his wife's) hosts up in the El Cerrito hills, which is fortunately very local to me (he could have been staying in Fremont or on the moon, which would have made it tricky).

We talked a lot about sound and articulation. I stumbled through, quasi-sightreading, a parody solo Baroque overture by Matthias Maute, which I had only seen that morning, and which we never looked at again. (They are really good solos, though—like the Bach 'cello suites. I digress.) But he said it demonstrated what kind of player I am. Apparently I'm very well trained! But not in the techniques he likes...

Sound

The most fascinating thing about the lesson was that his preferred sound goes against everything we are taught here in the Bay Area—rather than an open throat and resonant head tilted just so for optimal sound clarity, he prefers a more smoky “dirty” sound caused by turbulence in the oral cavity with a collapsed back palate, as when sighing heavily. That was quite strange to do, and I will have to work on it to get it more natural. This is undoing a lifetime of the opposite!

Of course, both the “dirty” sound and the “clean” sound have their place, with the sound getting cleaner as the notes get higher in the range. One must become fluent in them both in order to use them at will to create a more interesting sound palette.

Articulation

Dan could hear that I was doing some “d-dl” double tonguing (even though I deny it!), and so we talked about his much preferred method, which is single tonguing with what he called the “Indian d.” Linguists would call it a “retroflex d,” whereby the tongue curls upward and the underside of the tip touches the edge of the roof of the mouth further in from the teeth, at the alveolar ridge. We did some exercises on middle G saying *d-dl* using the “Indian d” for both syllables. Then we worked on isolating the two syllables so they can be used independently.

The retroflex “dl” was much more difficult on its own than when following the “d.” It was very strange to do! My assignment on this topic was to get comfortable saying the two syllables “d” and “dl” independently with retroflex tongue. Do it smoothly. Now do it staccato with a very conscious space between the notes. Quickly. Slowly. Always with a good sound.

That was about as much I could handle in an hour—I'll check in with him in another couple years.

On a final note, Dan says that practice time is the best time because “it's all about ME. ME, ME, ME!”