
SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE: DEEPER LOOK

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Walk Like a Musician: The actors of *Opus* learn the secrets of string players

By Ian Chant

Julia Child chopping an onion is likely a far cry from you or I preparing vegetables for stew. Few and far between are the football fans who know how to grip a pigskin like an NFL quarterback. And as violist Melia Watras will attest, holding a musical instrument like a classically trained performer isn't something that comes naturally to most of us.

"A musician can spot a non-musician like that, just by seeing how they hold an instrument," says Watras. She should know—she has spent the last 12 years as violist for the Corigliano Quartet, alongside her husband Michael Jinsoo Lim. The pair are lending their decades of experience to Seattle Repertory Theatre's production of *Opus*, training the actors in just a few short weeks to seem like they've been playing in a quartet for years.

But even a crash course has to start with the basics, and that means teaching the cast how to hold their instruments.

There is both deftness and familiarity in the way a musician handles their instrument, a grip that is at once casual and careful. It's a seemingly contradictory touch that comes from decades of devoted practice that render a musician's instrument an extension of themselves. "It becomes a part of your body. It's something that you are with hours a day every day of your life," Watras says.

The stance and grip that a musician takes are important details that could put to lie the rest of an otherwise carefully constructed performance. But they're not the whole story. The cast will also get a boot camp in bow work that will allow them to appear as if they're actually playing the beautiful music that accompanies *Opus*, even though they are very much not. Throughout rehearsals, the cast of *Opus* will receive classes and one-on-one lessons from Watras and Lim. They will also be able to refer to a video of the two performing as a sort of cheat sheet. And

while Watras and Lim will be putting the cast of *Opus* through their paces in bow work, they won't be training them in fingering, an attempt at realism that would simply prove too distracting for audience and performer alike. "That will be plenty," says Watras, "especially since they will have to learn to coordinate what they're doing with the soundtrack."

And as important as it is that everyone be able to create the illusion that they're actually playing, it's also important that it remain an illusion. That's why the props—which are real, functioning instruments—can't make any noise that could disrupt the play. There are several options to prevent a performer's instrument from making a peep, from using a bow with fresh horsehair to soaping a bow so it glides across the strings without producing a sound. The latter technique is a time-honored threat, often issued by frustrated middle school band teachers to their less adept pupils, but has plenty of precedent in the professional world as well. Renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma used a soaped bow while he played along to the pre-recorded performance that accompanied the inauguration of President Barack Obama earlier this year.

But it's not enough to just teach the performers how to hold an instrument naturally and pretend to play. They will also have to hit the right notes on all of the little things. And when it comes to being a member of a professional chamber music quartet, there are a lot of little things.

"They need to know the ways a quartet communicates with each other...the body language, the visual cues," says Lim. But whether it's how a bow should move across the strings or the nearly invisible communication that keeps four musicians on the same page during a performance, Watras and Lim will be there to make sure that the Rep's production of *Opus* gets the details pitch perfect.