

Ms. Kavafian in a lesson with Laura Park

PHOTOS BY PETE CHECCHIA



The Perfect Fit

VIOLINIST IDA KAVAFIAN TAILORS HER APPROACH TO EACH STUDENT.

BY DAVE ALLEN

A violin teacher hears something in her student's playing: an unevenness in tone, or restraint where a bolder attack is needed. How can she explain what she wants to hear?

Ida Kavafian has a number of methods for shaping her students' playing: nods, gestures, precise technical instructions, poetic or evocative phrases. When all of those cannot produce the desired result, she can always pick up her violin.

With her career-long mastery of the instrument in solo and chamber settings, one might think she'd prefer instructing through auditory example. But Ms. Kavafian has nineteen students, ranging in age from 10 to 24—and that diversity requires a tailored approach for each one. “For younger students or ones whose first language isn't English, I do more playing,” she says. “For older students, ones who can intellectualize more, I tend to do more talking and less playing.” She cites Oscar Shumsky, her teacher at Juilliard and a 1936 Curtis graduate, as a model for this flexible, individualized style. “He didn't teach every student the same way,” she says. “My job is to make them a better version of themselves.”

There's another remarkable tool Ms. Kavafian has employed since joining the Curtis faculty in 1998: a weekly studio class, with a handful of students performing for and receiving feedback from their peers. It's not a master class—Ms. Kavafian doesn't play and leaves

Ms. Kavafian has nineteen students, ranging in age from 10 to 24. “My job is to make them a better version of themselves,” she says.



In her weekly studio class, Ms. Kavafian doesn't play and leaves much of the commentary to the students. There are always plenty of incisive questions.



The weekly studio class: Ms. Kavafian and student Marié Rossano consult the score; Katya Poplyansky comments on a fellow student's performance; Ms. Kavafian and students as class concludes

much of the commentary to the students—though the arrangement is similar: The designated performers test out something they're working on, especially if an audition or recital is coming up.

The locations vary—Field Concert Hall, Gould Rehearsal Hall, or the Zimbalist Room, Ms. Kavafian's preferred spot for individual lessons, are typical venues—but there are always plenty of incisive questions. Before a mid-November class, she joked that this audience of peers is a tough crowd; after playing for them, she remarked, "you'll get to your recital, and it's a piece of cake!"

Performers and listeners in the studio class take their roles seriously. The discussion is open and honest, but also friendly and constructive. Bouts of rapt attention give way to private jokes among the students, and between them and Ms. Kavafian. In any given week, alumni or other guests may drop in for tune-ups before major performances, or just to listen in.

Katya Poplyansky, a fourth-year violinist, came as a guest to a studio class during her second year at Curtis and was so struck by the supportive musical community that she asked to take lessons with Ms. Kavafian in addition to Joseph Silverstein and Shmuel Ashkenasi, her other teachers at Curtis. "It's so helpful to play for your peers and hear what they have to say," she says. Though she admits it can be scary playing for such an intensely knowledgeable audience, "everyone is very supportive and understanding"

READY AND RECEPTIVE

Ms. Kavafian, who holds the Nina von Maltzahn Chair in Violin Studies, has found that the unique challenges of the studio class—being both ready and receptive if you are performing, making sense of what you hear, and offering your opinion during your time in the audience—makes the students more humble. "Part of what they have to do at Curtis is to figure things out for themselves," she says.

That sense of persistence fuels Ms. Kavafian's performing career and even her non-musical pursuits. She keeps a busy schedule as a chamber musician and soloist, a breeder of prize-winning dogs, and artistic director of Music at Angel Fire, the New Mexico-based chamber music festival. Each year she selects a crop of Curtis students to perform there. For those young artists in residence, the experience of performing and presenting alongside established mentors has become a professional coming-of-age. "They see how we work and see us doing what we love, and they learn to fit in," she says.

She helps her students learn to fit in at Curtis, too: She takes time to ask about her students' lives; and they, in turn, view her as a peer or friend as well as a teacher. "During my first year, she made sure to ask every week, 'How are you? How's dorm life?'" says Laura Park, a second-year violinist. "She makes you feel comfortable, because she really cares."

Students seek her counsel and indulge her proclivity for all things purple; one studio class was officially purple-themed, and a photo from that colorful gathering fills a page of Ms. Kavafian's notebook, which serves as her personal organizer and catch-all.

Her questions, musical and otherwise, come from being a close, thoughtful listener, and her students follow this example in their candid and gracious comments to one another. After hearing Timmy Chooi play Saint-Saëns's Third Violin Concerto in a recent class, a fellow violin student commented, "You made me love this piece. I didn't like this concerto before."

Kavafian called this the ultimate compliment; later, she said the greatest compliment she's ever received also came during a studio class. "One of the students said, 'Wow, I can't believe we study with the same teacher.'" For her, that difference—two young musicians playing at a high level with markedly different styles—is the sign of a job well done. If they can find such diversity in Bach, in this case, what heights could they rise to in a Brahms sonata, or in one of Beethoven's late quartets? Through the blend of excellence and humility that Ms. Kavafian's teaching imparts, they'll surely find out. ♦

Dave Allen is publications and social media manager at Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. His writings on music have appeared in Chamber Music, Symphony, and the Courier-Post.