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Making Music As A Lefty

By Ryan Thomson

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Author Interview with Ryan Thomson, seacoast New Hampshire resident, and author of a new book advocating left handed violin playing by lefties. – Playing Violin and Fiddle Left Handed.

This piece started out as an actual interview for an internet website article, but the author has expanded it into its present form, while maintaining the "interview" format.

What an interesting book! What prompted you to put this book together?

Almost every single time I've played in public for the last 10 years a listener has asked me why I hold my violin differently from other players, or has commented on the fact that they've never before seen someone play a violin left handed. For example, If you look at any orchestra, you'll notice that every violinist is playing right handed! Its been this way for hundreds of years. Right and left handed people alike play the violin right handed. Violin teachers instruct all of their students to play right handed whether or not they are naturally right handed. I knew from early on in my own left handed playing experience that I wanted to explore this interesting subject. I found it fascinating that people who didn't know whether I was naturally right or left handed would say things like, "It must be really difficult to play a violin backwards," as if there was some inherent reason why it should be easier to play it right handed.

I listened to such statements from a very unusual perspective. Unlike almost every other violinist in the world, I actually knew from first hand experience what was involved in the process of first learning to play a violin right handed, and then learning how to play it left handed. My experiences demonstrated the fact that its easier and more efficient to use the dominant hand for tasks requiring skill and coordination. For example, I clearly remember practicing to write with my left hand for amusement when I was a child. I learned to do it fairly well, but the results were always less satisfying than writing with my far more coordinated right hand.

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I recognized the similarity between hand writing and playing a violin. I began to put my thoughts to paper when I encountered many right handed "experts" who opined with an air of authority on the topic of playing a violin left handed. They pointed out "pitfalls" based entirely on speculation, and strongly discouraged violators of right handed violin playing traditions. Their statements were clearly erroneous when compared to my own experiences and those of many people whom I had interviewed.

In contrast to that, most of the naturally left handed people I'd met were far more knowledgeable about handedness issues and open minded about the possibilities of doing skilled tasks with either hand. Most tools and implements in this world are designed for right handers, and by learning to use them during their lives, the lefties had a great deal of experience in developing ambidexterity, and so could talk about handedness with some authority. I became driven to write a book about the topic.

You say that a disability made the decision for you to play the violin left-handed. Do you mind talking about that?

I used to feel uncomfortable about discussing my disability. As a former professional violinist I experienced a period of lowered self esteem when I could no longer play the violin right handed. Making music on my violin had not only brought great enjoyment to me, but had also enabled me to make a decent living. During the process of mastering left handed violin playing I've regained both the pleasure of playing and the income derived from performing and teaching.

The illness has helped me grow in other ways as well. In between right and left handed playing I took up the accordion, started a cajun band, and won a Boston Music Award Nomination for my accordion playing with my band! I also have more patience, more focus, and I'm a bit more "bulletproof" to the cards that are dealt to me in the game of life. I'm certainly a better music teacher as a result of it as well. The rare condition that I have is named "focal dystonia," which is a genetically determined neurological disorder of the muscular system. I have what the doctors call an "adult onset" version. 14 years ago my brain started sending spurious signals to some muscles in my back behind my right shoulder.

The continuing randomness of these muscle contractions prevents me from properly controlling the motion of a violin bow with my right hand. The bad news is that the condition is permanent, with no cure. The good news is that it can't get worse, can't spread, and really only affects a small range of activities in my life. I'm actually quite healthy in just about every way. I'm a distance runner, physically fit, and a do-it-yourselfer around the house. In fact, if I wasn't a violinist, I would hardly notice my symptoms.

Coming from a family of musicians, do you think this greatly influenced your musical abilities? Would you still be musically inclined even if you weren't encouraged?

I used to watch my mother play the piano from before I could even play music myself. She was obviously involved in an emotional way with melodies that moved her. She always had good things to say about the various musical ensembles that our relatives had formed. At times she also pointed out music performances that she didn't like. I noticed that my father often made music just for fun, in ways that brought pleasure to him, like singing in the shower, or even just playing a tune on a harmonica. As

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a young child I picked up on all of that.

I always scored higher on school aptitude tests in art and music than anything else. But I also scored very high in science, which I think indicated a talent for analyzing and explaining things. For many years I thought that I was to become a scientist, and have music for a hobby, and so studied science all the way through to the graduate level in college. Doing science seemed like a good way for me to make a living. Meanwhile, I began performing in bands while in college and was taken with the fact that people would pay me for something that was so fun to do. I also noted the great pleasure that music brought to the listeners. This made me want to work harder at improving my musical abilities, and as music became my full time occupation, science became my hobby! I became hooked on the physical "rush" that I would experience when making good music in an ensemble in public performance. It was an feeling similar to that which I'd experience while downhill skiing, a sport which!

I loved to do. I may not have discovered that higher level of pleasure on my own without the efforts of my parents to surround me with music and opportunities for lessons. That's certainly a good case for the importance of music education for young people.

When you first started playing left-handed, is this when you noticed more people complaining about only being able to play right-handed?

No. I heard first from the contrary right handed establishment. When I began playing lefty in public I was still a bit rough at it and some people, particularly other violinists, would often tell me that I was playing the violin "wrong," and that it would be easier for me if I would just play in the "right way." Few of them were interested to hear my explanation as to why I was playing left handed. Not only that, but they didn't even know whether I was right or left handed by nature. and thus their statements seemed counter intuitive to me. I knew that left handed school children got lefty scissors, and righties got righty scissors, and that most children in recent times were allowed to write with their dominant hand, whether it be right or left.

I eventually had a significant experience. I walked off stage after a performance and a man approached me, patted me on the back, and said, "Good job, we lefties have to stick together." I was so surprised at that comment that I didn't know what to say and just nodded at him. After that I started paying more attention to whether people around me were left or right handed in their activities. I eventually met several other left handed musicians, who, noting how I played, and thinking that I was left handed by nature, confided in me that they'd always suspected that they would have been better players if they had played left handed instead of right handed.

They were lefties who had attended grade schools in the 1950's and 60's in which teachers would force them to write with their right hands against their natural inclinations. When they got into music, their music teachers also steered them in a right handed direction, again against their natural inclinations. Finally, when I was well into writing this book, I discovered some lefty musicians who had become so fed up with the right handed bias that they had actually taken the time and effort needed to relearn to play their instruments left handed.

And sure enough, they found that they actually could play better left handed! I've become a lefty

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advocate, and an activist even, but I also tried to take care in my book to point out some reasons why lefties might consider playing in the traditional right handed way, despite their natural inclinations. I think that my book gives them the information they need to make an intelligent and informed decision.

How long did it take to complete this book? You've included a lot of letters and comments from other violinists.

The book evolved gradually. I guess I started unconsciously gathering information on the very day I began playing the violin left handed. Since I travel widely and perform often in public, a number of other musicians with an interest in left handed playing either heard about me, or saw me perform, and then started writing and calling. I saved their letters and kept up communication with many of them for several years. When the internet became popular the flow of information increased, and aided my progress.

What do family and friends think about your book? I know you've written several in the past, but is this one more special?

I'm fortunate that my family is generally supportive of any creative project that I take on. They seem to appreciate the fact that I work hard at things that I'm interested in. And yes, this book is special to me because I'm personally involved with the subject. I believe in the importance of getting it out into the public eye but at the same time I have little sense about the possible level of public interest in such a topic. The reactions of my friends and peers is wildly varying.

Many of my friends, although serious musicians, have no interest in handedness issues, and perhaps

think that my book is a bit irrelevant. One friend, a classical violin teacher trained at Juilliard, is strongly opposed to the idea of anyone playing violin left handed. Another right handed friend who runs a private violin school for children is very excited about the concept. After reading my book she immediately changed two of her naturally left handed students over to playing lefty violin.

She had been teaching them in the standard right handed way for two months. She was delighted to report to me that after a couple of weeks playing left handed both were progressing far more rapidly than when they struggled along with right handed bowing! My friend now has 8 of her students under the age of 10 playing left handed!

Are you going to be working on any more books in the future?

I'm continually working on book ideas in my head. The information gets churned around until the day comes when I feel the urge to put my fingers to the word processor. In fact, I became inspired to start writing another book on music even before this one was finished! I've started slowly and won't really dig into it until winter comes.

Ryan Thomson was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, into a family with a music heritage stretching back to the pioneer days. He grew up in San Diego, California, studied piano as a child, and played in a group recital on live television in 1959. He attended San Diego State University and then moved to New

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Hampshire in 1976 to study violin repair at the Summer Violin Institute in Durham. The following year he enrolled in a graduate school program of experimental psychology. He designed and taught a college course in the "Psychology of Music," while completing his Master of Arts degree.

While attending college he produced a local bluegrass radio show and also hosted a music show on National Public Radio in New Hampshire. In the summers he traveled to music events across the country, and in 1977 became the northeastern regional champion of the National Fiddle Contest in Weiser, Idaho. After college he decided on a music making career and joined a full time Nashville based country band, touring the eastern USA, playing fiddle 6 days a week in dance halls and honky tonks.

In 1988 he acquired focal dystonia, a neurological disease with a genetic origin which causes improper muscular function. He lost control of some muscles in his right back and shoulder area and had to temporarily give up his career of violin playing. He continued in music however, teaching and performing on other instruments, while he patiently retaught himself to play violin left handed. Ryan now plays violin professionally as a lefty fiddler/violinist. He continues to play banjo, guitar, mandolin, piano, and flute right handed. His primary interest is playing fiddle for folk dances, and he also plays chamber music as a serious hobby in his spare time. Along the way he has won numerous awards for fiddle, banjo, and accordion playing.

Ryan presently lives in Newmarket, New Hampshire, headquarters for Captain Fiddle Publications. He is the author of several books on music, and presently teaches music both at the Phillips Exeter Academy during the school year, and at folk music and dance camps nationally in the summer time. You can contact him and find out about his current activities at:

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