

Virtuosity in Dentistry: Flourishing or Vanishing?

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One can look up the definition of virtuoso in the dictionary. Yet, a personal experience provides a deeper and richer meaning. Probably most of us have seen a virtuoso perform and I, too, was fortunate to experience a virtuoso recently. I heard a cellist at a holiday program last year. A colleague who knew her and arranged for her performance said that her talent was comparable to that of Yo-Yo Ma. And to these classically untrained ears (undoubtedly slightly damaged by a few too many heavy metal and punk rock concerts) it was. Accompanying her on piano was the featured guest of the day — a music professor at a prominent university and an accomplished performer in his own right. As they moved through their program, it became apparent they were different. While he complained about the height of his bench, the tuning of the piano and a few other details, she quietly adjusted her instrument height and settled into one of those hotel chairs that is barely comfortable for sitting, let alone serving as the foundation of a master's performance. He played with intensity, she played effortlessly. He commanded the performance, she was the star. She was a virtuoso, he was not.

Later on, she said her dentist practiced dentistry like she played the cello. At that moment I realized that dentistry, like music, is a performance and the profession of dentistry has its own virtuosos.



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Some are well-known, cherished, and adored by our ranks while others practice their art every day with little recognition from others. What exactly is it that makes up this intriguing character in dentistry, the true virtuoso?

In no particular importance of order, the virtuoso first is someone who makes sacrifices for their art. The primary sacrifice is time. Being a virtuoso takes considerable time practicing, evaluating, reflecting on, and honing one's skill. Necessarily, other activities, even in the most well-balanced lives, must be foregone. Next, a virtuoso is never satisfied with his or her current level of performance. As a result, they place considerable value on constantly improving their skills. They continually educate themselves and practice their craft. Third, they recognize they have a certain level of natural, God-given talent; and they nurture this talent so that it does not go to waste. A virtuoso utilizes this talent toward achieving the best performance each and every time. They possess confidence, yet, not arrogance. Consequently, they inspire us rather than threaten us. This

confidence allows them to perform at the high level they do and remain relaxed and composed even when conditions in their surroundings are not perfect. If you watch a virtuoso perform, they will appear to be doing so, like the cellist, effortlessly and even with noticeable enjoyment. In fact, the overriding force that motivates the virtuoso in practice or performance is that they love what they do with a passion.

So where do we find these individuals in dentistry? Some obviously record their clinical performances, package them onto PowerPoint presentations and go on tour. We see them when we attend continuing education lectures. Occasionally, virtuosos make their home in the academic environment and are thus likely to share their performances with students as well. This is particularly encouraging because a student is likely to be positively influenced by the virtuoso and may likely want to emulate him or her. Virtuosos can also be found in private practice choosing not to lecture but rather to devote the full expression of their performance to their patients. Their reputation is known by fewer individuals, but the work they do is

no less spectacular. Most of us can think of some who practice in our communities. Virtuosos are good for dentistry. They raise the standard of care, and they inspire the rest of us to constantly elevate our own performances.

But sadly, virtuosos are not flourishing in dentistry. In fact, their relative numbers are declining. Why is this so? The biggest reason may be that being a virtuoso does not necessarily pay better. In fact, one's income can always be increased by cutting corners in practice, corners the virtuoso can never afford to cut. Others, who have the potential to rise to the level of a

virtuoso, may feel it is too difficult or even impossible for them to do so. They simply do not believe they have the drive or the aforementioned God-given talent. But these individuals merely lack confidence in themselves. The reality is that most of us do have the potential for greatness. We would not be able to withstand the rigors of dental education and clinical practice if we did not. Furthermore, clinical skills involve nothing more than a repeated set of actions that require as much tenacity as brainpower. About achieving a great performance, Johann Sebastian Bach said it best: "There is nothing to it. You only have

to hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself."

So before the true dental virtuoso becomes an extinct species, all dentists should take time to nurture both their own skills and those of other practitioners and students. We should take solemn pride in the feeling that comes only from giving our best and achieving the highest level of clinical performance possible. We should begin now. The audience is waiting. ■■■■

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