

Inspirational Teacher Dr. Langston Fitzgerald
A Story by Andrew Wilson

Dr. Langston Fitzgerald, III was my applied trumpet professor during my Master of Music degree studies at The Catholic University of America. Prior to that time I had studied privately with several notable teachers and performed in a variety of high-quality ensembles. But, that final amount of perspective, focus, and accuracy that distinguishes the finest performing artists had, up to that time, eluded me.

Fitz, as Dr. Fitzgerald is better known, has an uncanny ability to help students attain focus, the key for achieving accuracy in the performing arts, and is what allows a performer to conquer all the technical challenges and accurately recreate the composer's work. Fitz's teaching allows a student to attain that key focus.

After a tough half hour of a lesson, the technical challenges of the opening trumpet solo from Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony were defeating me. The chops were feeling tired; the rhythm was inconsistent; the intonation was faltering; the tone was strident. All of these thoughts racing through my mind were creating increasingly poor results.

"Tell me about this solo," said Fitz.

"Well," I answered, "It starts on a C-sharp, which doesn't respond well, and the triplets are to be rushed, but not too much, and two lines down the page there is a crescendo to a high B which is tricky," and so on.

"No, no," replied Fitz. "What is this passage?"

"Uh, a funeral march," I answer.

"Closer. What does the funeral march look like?" he asked.

"I don't know, ah, er . . ." I awkwardly replied.

"That's the problem!" Fitz exhorted. "You don't know! If you don't know, how can you perform this passage?" He then promptly and precisely painted a picture of a dark day, with a funeral procession down a gloomy street for a community struck by the grief of a dire loss. That picture is the proper perspective to create the focus to accurately perform this passage.

Perspective. Perspective allows focus. Focus allows accuracy. I then accurately performed the passage, not with a list of technical challenges to surmount, but with the passion and intensity that the music deserved and Mahler had intended.

Fitz had taught me to look for an emotional answer to a technical challenge. Whenever I, or one of my students, face an apparent insurmountable technical challenge, I remember that particular lesson and recall his ability to create perspective, focus, and accuracy.