

Musicianship: Where Does it Come From?

by Nancy Lokken

Nancy Lokken presented this inspiring talk at the MNSOTA Clinic and Luncheon. Thank you Nancy!

Webster's definition of music is: "An art of sound in time which expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color."

Think for a moment about a performance you have heard in the past that really captured your attention, when you were pulled into the performance and couldn't sit back in your chair inattentively. What was it that spoke to you and touched your soul? Technique can dazzle us, but it is tone and how it is expressed by the performer that touches that inner part of our being.

Imagine that you have just heard a performance by Yo-Yo Ma and are in the lobby listening to what people are saying about the performance. Would you hear people say, "Wow, he played all the notes!?" No, people comment on the tone, style, mood, beauty. Why then are people satisfied at home when a student can just hack through the notes?

In an article I was reading by Henry Charles Smith on *All About Taking Auditions* he says,

There are many accurate and efficient players. There are very few who can do something beautiful, something imaginative, something that will produce goose bumps. There are also only a few who know when to be a gypsy and when to be an efficient, cooperative and accurate ensemble player. It is obvious to the auditioner if you know the notes, but have no concept of what is happening around you... make music that is a lot more than just notes! ... Study good recordings and scores! Don't play in a vacuum! ... [Musical concept] is most important because it embraces everything we have discussed so far. If you don't have a concept in your mind's ear of exactly what you want to produce musically, you probably won't produce anything of value.

Now let us think about how we can go about developing musical playing in students.

1. Establish Freedom of Movement Away From the Instrument

No matter what we do, our bodies are meant to move. Think of an athlete, for example, a runner. When you watch someone run, it looks easy; their body is almost gliding through the air; everything is in coordination.

Musicians are athletes. If we are going to have a chance at being expressive, our body has to be free to move. Generally if you watch a young student move without their instrument, like walk, run, jump around you see ease of movement, delight, fun. Give them a bow and they tense up, clutch or squeeze because they think they have to work hard. Their arm tightens, pressure is applied to the string and the product comes out in the sound. Tone quality is tight, small and narrow. If they continue this it becomes their habit and they know nothing different.

I have the joy of working with many ages, from two to 18 and also teachers. It is so helpful when one can start the musical concept with a young student.

What I love to do with young children is to have them move to music without their instruments. Have them move to a variety of types of music. Let them use their imagination and be creative. While they are doing this I look for freedom in their knees. If you watch students carefully you will notice that many knees get locked and when that happens it freezes the body.

2. Establish the Basic Foundation of Technique

Without the tools to play well, it is very difficult to go to the next level of playing expressively. I will speak as a violinist, but I think you can easily apply the principals to how you sit or stand with your instrument. The physical foundation for natural movement is balance. The body is balanced from the floor up. It begins with:

- the placement of the feet. Add to this:
- the flexibility in the knees. This gives a springiness to the stance, and leaves the body ready to move both actively and responsively.
- balance of the instrument on the shoulder, which is affected by the placement of the head. In other words it has to be easy to hold the violin, so the hand and arm will be



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free to play and not have tension in them. Also, the shoulder must be free of tightness.

- freedom and balance in the left arm as it moves from string to string
- freedom in the left hand. That means it must be soft, so the fingers can learn to move with ease and agility. Have you ever thought about the number of moving parts in the hand including the wrist? There are nearly 30! The hand is designed to move.
- balance in the right arm. It also must know how and where the weight is going to be used. It too moves to various levels, depending on what string is being played.

This is big list and each part of our posture has to be taught in small pieces, so we build on the strength of what is set and not try to put 8 things in place at once. As adults, we would find putting together many things at once to be a

large task. Posture must be taught apart from playing complex repertoire, where “complex” is anything more challenging than a student is ready for.

3. Choosing Repertoire

It is so important for teachers to choose repertoire for their students that has a purpose for development. For example, one could use a lyrical piece to be enriched by a continuous vibrato, or a piece with pizzazz to encourage a performer to experience a totally different style of freedom. Or, we may take a piece to develop a technique such as tone or spiccato, or take a moto perpetuo to develop more flexibility in the bow hand. On top of that it is important that the music not be beyond the capabilities of the player at the time. It is also important to teach to the needs of the student and not to teach our own agenda.

After choosing repertoire that is appropriate for the student’s level, the next area is how to use the repertoire to develop expressiveness within the music.

4. Learn the Notes, Then Live with Them!

This week is recital week in my program. One day we had 3 recitals back to back. Sitting through the 3rd recital I really started getting saturated. I am sure I had heard nearly 40 violin, viola and cello students perform. And then just near the end a young teenage boy played an unaccompanied Bach Bourree. I just sat up and became totally engrossed with the performance. The sound was like silk, the fingers moved with such ease that if I hadn’t seen the hand shifting I would never have known it was floating all over the fingerboard. It was pure beauty. I was deeply moved. I talked with his teacher afterwards and one of his comments was that this was a piece well practiced and learned a few months ago.

When a student performs repertoire that has been lived with for awhile, expressive playing can be developed. We really don’t learn about musicianship until we are working with a piece we already know well and then can bring it to a higher musical level. Now the focus of the practice is at a level beyond the

notes. It is like the saying, “only when the notes are learned does the practice begin.”

5. Involvement by the Student in the Process is Extremely Important

We can talk about movement, building a basic technique, carefully choosing repertoire, but if the student isn’t involved in the process we aren’t going to get very far.

When there is a student who has more difficulty playing with expression, I often ask them to tell me the story of their piece that fits with the character of the music. When they identify with a feeling, mood or character, it often makes a huge difference in their playing. To feel something one must care, get involved and have a passion.

At one lesson I said, “Can you tell me what these words mean?” I gave examples and received appropriate answers. Then I asked the student to play a portion of a piece that gave an example of the word I said. I started with, “Frantic.” The student played *Allegro* by Fiocco. “Melancholy.” I heard *Meditation from Thais*. “Ecstatic.” That example was done with a *Gigue* by Veracini. I was delighted!

6. Breathing

What do you do 24 hours a day? You breathe. Music must sound like it is alive! When you breathe you move. Allow yourself the freedom to flow with the music. When a child is feeling something within the music, there will probably be some movement generated by the music itself. When we see someone move naturally it signals the beginning of music taking power over technique, of movement as an expression of the music. It indicates that the child is free to express the music as he feels it and is not limited to remembering how to play the notes.

Breathing is a simple gesture that can easily be taught with very young children. While students are guided by the piano introduction at recitals, many pieces are so beautifully geared to be played without one. The tone is definitely affected by this breathing preparation, and is usually warmer and more flowing. It definitely makes the sound different!

I don’t look for excessive movement,

but I definitely try to eliminate the statue syndrome. The inspiration for movement needs to come out of a connectedness to the music. One way to foster this is to encourage singing and speaking. This is another dimension and vitally important. I have found that if a student can sing or speak in the dynamic or style a piece needs, he can play it.

7. Tone

Tone is a concept. It is impossible with words to describe or define all of the various aspects of tone. Tone does not describe just sound. Nor does it only refer to the volume of the sound. Tone includes quality of resonance, color, style, articulation. You can’t play with a chocolate sound, full and rich unless you have that concept in your mind! Not only must we learn the concepts which the words attempt to define, but we must learn the physical skills of producing those kinds of sounds on the instrument. With string instruments we must learn about many things such as: the relationship between arm weight, bow speed, placement on the string, contact point, distribution of the bow and vibrato and then discover what effect all of these things have on the tone. For example, how do you make a tone “tender” anyway?

8. Listening

We mustn’t forget the profound effect that listening has on the development of musicality, style and phrasing. How fortunate for those children whose families play classical music in the home. If they don’t, we can encourage it and bring listening to our studio. Scientifically there are articles documenting the benefits to the brain when a child listens. Neurons are being connected that literally are making dormant areas of the brain active, and they help develop the spatial concepts in a child.

What does listening do? It is like learning a language. One listens to a language to improve inflection and nuances to speak better. Music is the same. If a student is studying Mozart and has never heard Mozart’s music, it is like someone trying to speak French without ever having heard it. There is no concept of style.

Listening also inspires creativity

and imagination. I was working on a piece with an advanced student, and I was rather excited about the ending. I had several ideas about how it could be ended and couldn't wait until the next lesson to see what he would decide to do. The next lesson came and as I eagerly waited to see which of the ideas he had chosen, he said to me, "Why can't I do it like this? This is the way Perlman does it!"

Listening builds sensitivity in the player, where *music* is played and not just the notes.

9. Communication

I firmly believe that a teacher has to take the time and make the effort to understand the student being taught apart from the instrument. If we don't know who we are teaching, we cannot begin to get to technique, and certainly not expressiveness. Not all students are responsive. Some we have to work so much harder at than others.

It is easy to teach the student who practices several hours a day, comes back with everything learned, who has no coordination problems, has no anxiety attacks, is totally confident, to whom technique comes so easily, who has no emotional problems, has never dealt with depression, wins all the competitions... The list can go on and on. In reality we know that human beings are more

often than not made up of many layers of complex material. We work with so many different types of students, with so many backgrounds. As teachers we need a vision of where we are going, a means to get there, and then be able to apply this to all the various types of students we work with. For example, those with physical challenges such as double joints have a more challenging task.

Students must know that a teacher believes in their potential and won't give up on them. It is here that the challenge of teaching lies: to find a way to connect. Establish eye contact, use inflection that grabs their attention, set your standard and expectation in the context of a caring environment. When you have to get a little tough, they know it is because you care.

Summary

Musicality comes most easily when the following are in place:

1. Ease of movement without the instrument.
2. Basic technique which gives the tools to go to the next level.
3. Choice of repertoire that is appropriate for the student's level.
4. After the notes are learned, the music begins.
5. Involvement from the student in

the process.

6. Breathing is applied to playing.
7. Concept of tone.
8. Habit of listening.
9. Communication with depth, that is in place or being worked on, between teacher and student.

The study of music develops a person's appreciation of greatness and beauty. A person can get in touch with human emotions as he attempts to communicate those emotions through his or her instrument. Dr. Suzuki believed that we can make a better world by teaching music to children. I think that is what we are all about.

Nancy Lokken directs the Augsburg College Suzuki Talent Education Program in Minneapolis, where she also teaches Suzuki pedagogy. She studied with and observed Dr. Suzuki's teaching in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1974 and 1983, and has been a guest clinician at numerous Suzuki workshops and institutes in the United States and Canada. She is a founding member of the Suzuki Association of Minnesota and served as its first president. Ms. Lokken was presented with the Master String Teacher Award by MN ASTA in 1998. †