



# Viola

## Developing Independent Practice Skills

by Annette Caruthers

We all want our students to be able to learn a new piece with a minimum of correction, but I find that many do not understand how to do this, even though they may be playing on a high level in performances. Some may learn so easily that they have not had to work at systematic learning. Some have always had someone tell them what to do and have never realized that they can use their own senses and logic to learn more independently: they are passive learners. Judging from my experience, it is important to help them become more actively engaged in the learning process right from the very beginning, with help around age 8 or 9 to start becoming independent, and working toward being very effective on their own by age 11 or 12.

With young beginners I work to capture their attention and ask them to play what I play: "Try to make it sound exactly the same." Most students will hear immediately what the differences are and many will also see intuitively how to improve their rendition. For those who do not, I ask direct questions about what I played and what they played: "Is this note the same?" "I feel a down bow here; let's see if you have a down bow on that note." Sometimes I have them play with me, and watch both our bows. When we don't match, we go back to see where we got "off."

I often find 11 to 12 year olds are not confident about their ability to recognize what is wrong with a passage. Many of them learn very quickly if I play and have them point to the notes as I play. Occasionally I will intentionally play a different rhythm than what is printed, and wrong notes as I please, and wait for them to tell me to stop. Then they tell me what was wrong, and how they want me to practice it. I do practice it in front of them until they think it is corrected, and we continue on. Sometimes I will do this for twenty minutes at a lesson; and then stop and point out to them that they can do this same process for themselves at home; that they were

actually being the teacher and that they do know what to do. If they do not know how to go about it, we together come up with strategies and try them out, giving them a plan for practicing on their own. Then the following lesson we check up on how it went and whether they need more ideas to work with.

At times I ask how a student might improve what they just played; or if there is something they want to improve. If they have no response, I have them listen while I play and I am careful to make my performance match theirs as much as possible. If they hit extra open strings, I hit extra open strings. Then I ask again. Almost always they find something I could improve, and they love telling me! From there I begin asking what the instrument is telling us: is it telling us we need to lower the right elbow to avoid that extra string? Did the instrument get moved while the bow was trying so hard to stay on one string? Almost always the instrument tells us something if we watch and listen to its response.

My students' answers also tell me how much they are understanding and whether or not they are passively doing what I show them to do. New students who have been passive with a previous teacher and are happy with their own progress require extra effort to be enticed into thinking this way. They can be helped by taking a very positive "Listen to what the instrument is telling you" approach. Virtually every student becomes more confident once they really believe they can figure out what is happening and correct it themselves.

It also helps to have students identify exactly what the results are in repeating a passage. For example: if working on a difficult shift, try it three times, and then say whether the hand is shifting too far or not far enough for the correct pitch. Just saying it is out of tune is not enough. Identifying what is happening gives us much more accurate information to work with and gives quicker results. I also emphasize that playing a passage

correctly once after many incorrect tries is not effective. If one has played it incorrectly six times and correctly only once, I ask: "Which way will your brain and hands remember the best?" Passages need to be repeated correctly several times in a row before the new sound and feel will become natural and easily remembered. For younger students it can be fun to see if they can play the correct new way five times in a row.

Some passages are complex enough that it is necessary to slow down in order to learn faster. Choosing a tempo that allows the student to play the passage accurately with rhythm, intonation, bowing, dynamics and expression all correct will increase the speed of learning. (Consider what happens when the student tries to only play the correct notes: they are actually practicing with incorrect rhythm and bowing, etc. while trying to become accurate on only one element!) It can seem like a lot to ask at first, so it is often good to start with rhythm, notes, and bowings. I find it is easier to add dynamics and expression when these three elements are mastered, than it is to add any of the three basics once they have been practiced and learned incorrectly. To lighten the atmosphere during what can be a very serious session, I sometimes give "speeding tickets" to students who find it difficult to slow down. Allowing the student to relax by adding the element of fun often makes it possible for them to persist past the point at which they would otherwise stop.

Listening to good performances is essential. It shows students what is possible on their instrument, how to use their technical skills to achieve a more expressively satisfying performance, and even what the correct notes and rhythms are for their piece. I like students to hear several performances of the same piece, especially as they become more advanced. This gives them the freedom to change their interpretation: they begin to realize that every artist has their own

expression and concept of tone, phrasing, etc., and start making choices about how they want to sound themselves. Of course, if they love their erratic vibrato and do not hear the more even version on the recordings, I do point that out and work on it. (This applies to more than just vibrato.) But it is amazing how much is available to all of us on good recordings by wonderful artists, and their examples can help all of us in our teaching and performing.

A notebook in which to write down practice tips, goals, what worked well on a certain type of problem, amount of time spent working on a difficult area of technique, actual repetitions made correctly, student's "record best" at a fast passage, etc. can be extremely helpful. Students often have certain practice techniques they enjoy more than others; perhaps working with changing rhythms, or using a metronome and gradually speeding it up; and will at times come to a lesson with a difficult passage really beautifully worked out. This is one of the great moments of teaching, and I really let the students know it! I have

been known to be absolutely speechless (having nothing to say that could improve what was played) or fall off of my chair in amazement (one particular young student really loves this one) or give effusive enthusiastic praise and tell the student to "go play this for your parents just before dessert tonight." Anything you can think of to praise really effective effort is definitely worth it! Then write down what worked so well, so it can be used in the future. It does much more good to give lots of praise and write down things that work well, than to have to correct and correct.

Notebooks can help keep a student honest, as well. Many students will repeat a passage carefully more times if they need to show the teacher the record of what they actually did. I also find that students are surprised that they are able to repeat a passage many times if they are really trying to improve it and start to hear small improvements as they work, and also that many students are able to improve a great deal with less effort than they expected to make when they are really listening to see

if they are improving, and are making decisions about how and what to work on as they practice. The active listening and trying are key to this.

As students learn to practice more and more effectively, they learn faster and are much more willing to take on new challenges. Music becomes more understandable and accessible to them and they are more likely to want to perform and enjoy making music all their lives.

I am very interested in any tips other teachers would like to add to this! Please send them in! The next topic I plan to write on will be differences between violin and viola; I am also interested in ideas others have on this subject.

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