



VIOLA

Slow Learners

by Annette Caruthers

You know what I'm talking about! We all have them... the students who just do not learn as fast as others their age. Some have chaotic home lives and cannot focus on music when they come for their lessons, nor find time to do much at home. Some have poorer coordination and require more repetition to learn tasks demanding fine motor skills...and string instruments definitely use fine motor skills! Some are lacking in motivation. Some have learning difficulties. For whatever reason, they keep coming but don't progress the way most of our students do. What do you do with these students?

First, check their instruments. Often they are difficult to play, or do not give the best sound. It's very odd that students who have difficulty playing are sometimes expected to perform on the worst instruments! A better instrument gives so much more reward to the player.

I try my best to get them "hooked" on the viola, hoping they will make a more focused effort and/or practice more...but what works? I believe the very best way to help these students is to help them play artistically and show them how to figure things out for themselves. They seem to love the feeling of an artistic performance (don't we all!) and the ability to understand musical symbols and how their instruments work gives them a sense of mastery that is important.

These things are important to all of our students, but to the slow learners especially so. There is a real temptation to say to ourselves, "This is the best this student can do, and I just cannot set the same high standard for this one," and therefore allow them to move on when a piece sounds close to accuracy. But these are the students who need

the feeling of dynamics and phrasing even more than their more accomplished peers. It is the only thing that keeps them interested...it's the reason they want to play at all.

Try having a slow learner add dynamics they think up themselves to a piece, and see what happens. Pick something they learned recently and play well already; later point out the dynamics right from the first time you work on a new piece. They will remember how good it felt to hear and feel the contrasts, and will probably practice more to acquire that added element. Try tempo changes in the same way.

Have them play alongside a student who has learned their piece really well...or play with them yourself. Often students can pick up a lot of artistic details this way and they love that feeling of being part of something bigger than what they can do on their own. Then have them lead you along with their own ideas. You may have to spend some time teaching them how to "lead," but they need this the moment you add accompaniment for a recital...so do it on an ongoing basis.

Try duets...especially if they have a friend in your studio. They will work very hard to learn their part if they get to play with a friend. I have even been known to take two students out for ice cream when a slow learner has learned their part well enough for both to play a duet together. Telling them ahead of time that I will treat when the piece is mastered gives them an extra incentive to practice. Of course, we cannot do this sort of thing all the time, but remember: rewards given sporadically are more effective than ones given regularly. (Check Pavlov.)

Viola students are often very attracted

to small ensemble work. String trios and quartets are especially rewarding to them, and there are books and books of canons, trios and quartets you can check to find something on your students' levels. Shar has lately been adding "levels" to many of their materials to help with the selection process. Or go to a local music store and peruse the racks...you'll be amazed what is out there.

Ask the student what type of music they love most, and try to find a few pieces of that genre they can learn...or try fiddle pieces. Ask about family heritage, and try to connect that in somehow. If your teaching is Suzuki-oriented, you can use the Suzuki approach with almost any repertoire; just be careful of the skills the new work demands and preview those.

Finally, check your own level of enthusiasm. Do you love this child? Is something in the situation really eating on you? Have you been frustrated in your own performance opportunities lately? Teachers burn out! Give careful thought to your answers; sometimes a change of teachers is good for many reasons. Maybe a different personality and understanding will benefit the child; maybe they need to hear what you've been saying already from someone else, too. And always remember: six months from now, this child may surprise you.

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