



VIOLIN

Preparing a Polished Performance

by Sally O'Reilly

Your student is headed for a performance/competition/audition. All the practice has been done properly. Intonation and rhythm are impeccable. Phrasing is sensitive. Dynamics are exciting and dramatic. Memory is solid. Now what!?!?

Let's face it. We live in a world where packaging is everything. A mediocre book may sell millions of copies if the cover is appealing. Doves of no-talent pop singers make millions from slickly produced videos spot-lighting their navels. Glitz is definitely *in*.

Yet here we are... serious musicians trying to meet the challenge of keeping four centuries of classical music alive and relevant. We know the importance that fine musical training can have in a person's life. Medical science now touts the intellectual excellence of people who are strong instrumentalists. So, how do we teach our students to present themselves in a positive and convincing light in the public arena?

First, musicians must understand that the stage is a frame and, from the moment the performer steps on that stage, he is the focal point of the picture. He needs to move with grace and vitality. It is important to rehearse entrances and exits on a stage along with appropriate bows in between. A smile from the performer always communicates a sense of security to the audience. At the same time, we need to remind our students to acknowledge all parts of a recital hall

with their eyes. This means looking up to a balcony and encompassing the entire audience with a look of recognition.

Bows need to be taken slowly, letting the eyes go to the tops of the shoes and staying for a count of three. No curtsies from the girls please! This is *not* dancing school. The Suzuki drill beginning with the violin in "rest position" and returning it there is good for all students to follow.

Specificity is needed with regard to recital clothing. *Never* assume that the student (or the parent) understands what is appropriate. This is the day of low-rise jeans and far too much skin. Boys still look best in slacks, shirts, and ties, or a turtle-neck. When they are older, a jacket is in order. (Be sure that your students practice in their performance clothes.) Girls need to wear dresses that aren't too short, skirts and blouses, or slacks with a tasteful top that doesn't show skin in the midriff area.

Ask your students to purchase one pair of formal or party shoes. Boys need to leave their Nikes at home. Girls should own a simple pair of dress shoes that have no platform, with a heel no more than one inch high. I once watched a very gifted violinist lose the MTNA High School Auditions because she lost her balance on her very chic stiletto heels causing a small bobble in her concerto...a high price to pay for looking trendy. *Caution:* You will have to reiterate this dress code frequently.

Hair needs to be away from the face on both genders. Remember that audiences like to see faces!

There are two on-stage no-nos. No gum. No scents. Symphony orchestras are including no-scent clauses in today's contracts.

In orchestra, seated posture is not only an aesthetic issue, it's a health issue as well. Most string players sit forward on their chairs. A larger player may feel more secure with his back flush with the back of the chair. But the player's back should be erect. There are cushions designed to promote good seated posture and more and more orchestra musicians are using them.

If rock musicians understand the impact of presentation, we must too. At the beginning of the Broadway hit *Masterclass*, based on Maria Callas' classes at Juilliard, Callas enters, dramatically removes a lavish cape, looks at the audience, and says, "In our profession it is important to have a *look*." Let's help our students develop appearances that say, "I'm a winner," when they walk out on stage.

Sally O'Reilly is professor of violin at the University of Minnesota and is internationally sought after as a clinician. Her students have won many local, national and international awards. Her teaching materials, including technical studies for strings, are published by Kjos. †