

## Clinic: It's all about Focus

by Ellen Kim

“Focus” means “to direct one’s thoughts; to concentrate.” In music study, the student focus is to bring to the lesson a desire to learn, careful preparation and a positive attitude. The teacher focus is to bring to the student a desire to teach, a system for learning and a sense of humor. The parent focus is to bring to the practice a consistent plan, reasonable expectations and unconditional love.

### Levels of Learning

“Education” is “learning new things,” which usually involves both mental and physical capabilities. Playing a musical instrument is difficult because we have to use our *minds* to train both sides of the body to do very different, sometimes awkward, things — find the correct pitch every time, make it sound beautiful, and put everything together at exactly the right time. Also, we have to use our *bodies* to stand or sit properly, guide the small and large muscles simultaneously, express the music, and continue breathing. Playing a musical instrument requires mental, physical and creative capabilities *simultaneously*.

**Knowledge Level** — This is the time students are introduced to new material. They learn the notes, rhythm, and bowing — they are *just able to play the piece*. The new material is not yet fully processed, nor ready to be integrated into what they already know. New skills need to be learned and repeated. Some students love the challenge and relish the move forward; they find this level the most exciting. Other students are uncomfortable moving into unfamiliar territory. What if it is too hard? It may require a lot of practice and still not sound great. For these students, this is the most difficult level.

**Ability Level** — With repetition, the knowledge becomes ability. Students process the piece, *memorize it*, and add it to what they already know. With careful sustained practice, over a period of time, students will reach this level. Celebrate! It requires repetition to build in the muscle and aural memory, as well as maintain the level of concentration. Students may reach that “automatic pilot” stage where they play the piece without listening to themselves. Sometimes students are mentally finished with the piece; if so, they need to be inspired to move to the next level.

**Mastery Level** — Knowledge and ability

combine and become internalized so that the mental and physical skills are automatic. The piece can be refined, experimenting with expression and body language. Bodies and minds are free to express the music. Students reach a high level of excellence and are ready to *perform*. At this point, students should be able to listen to themselves and express the music. At the beginning it may be subtle changes in dynamics, adding accents, a ritard or accelerando or shaping the finish of the final note. Later, they might determine phrase endings, bow characters (techniques), moving forward or taking time to make a musical point. This stage requires an additional level of concentration, beyond just memorization. Some students may feel the music in their heart and be unable to express it with their bodies or bows, but it is important that we encourage students to explore this world in their heart whenever possible.

### Teaching focus

Our ability to help our students reach these various levels of learning depends on how well *we* focus our teaching skills *and* how well we manage to engage our students to focus their practice time. Do they know what to listen for? Do they have a plan for practice? Do they enjoy the process? How well do they listen? How well do they think? Most students, even in the early stages enjoy being part of the process. It requires their *focus!*

### Beginning Students

To help students focus, we need to teach the mind (mental preparation), the body (physical preparation) and the heart (emotional or spiritual preparation).

**The Mind** — Have students direct their eyes. Can they make their eyes look at yours? Have students calm their body. Stop moving and breathe together. Have students direct their ears. Ask them to listen, cooperate and follow directions. Praise them for doing so! Sing to develop a pitch center. Listen to A; see if they can match the pitch. Can they hear it before you play it or turn on the tuner? Your voice can exude calm

and quiet; you can even whisper to get their attention. Or make it lively and exciting to get them smiling and active.

**The Body** — Start students from the ground up. Show them how to stand, using a foot chart for rest and play position, and how to bow. Plant a tall tree; the body has resistance but moves with the wind. Students need flexible knees and head, relaxed arms and shoulders. Teach students

to handle the bow and instrument carefully and respectfully and how to move with the instrument and bow. Show students how to turn their head to hold the instrument, memorizing left hand shape. Show them how to hold the bow, memorizing right hand shape. Students need independence and balance of right and left sides, head, left hand, right hand —

firmness and flexibility

**The Heart** — Students must enjoy the process. Smile; sing. Let them hear music and be a part of the process, even if they are only clapping a rhythm or moving to the music. Even at this early stage it is important for them to experience the end result and know they are making music. Use your voice to let them know you sense their joy. Be joyful!

### Ability Level

Now that we have introduced these concepts, students need a lot of repetition to become integrated and natural. Teachers and parents must be ever vigilant in helping students develop well at this point. There are many skills to balance and we must really be careful not to overload. If students are overwhelmed with things to think about or not encouraged to focus they will shut down and disengage. Success at this level would include:

**The Mind** — Eyes are directed easily; body is calm; student breathes to relax, listens, follows directions, cooperates with ease.

**The Body** — Feet move correctly; body is tall and relaxed; head turns and is heavy; instrument moves easily to shoulder and is comfortable; left hand turns, is flexible and has a sense of correct shape; right hand is



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round and balanced; student can move and still maintain correct body shapes.

**The Heart** – Apply motivation technique if it is helpful; look for the smiles; let them know you enjoy what they can do; keep the music foremost in their hearts; hear good music; play with and for them.

### **Mastery Level**

Is it easy? Are students free? Could they show others what they have learned? Can they perform? A successful student:

**The Mind** – Quickly brings mind into focus, usually without much direction; comes to lesson with ease and is ready for performance in front of others.

**The Body** – Finds correct playing posture and bow hold independently; remembers correct hand shape and can maintain while playing; balances instrument on shoulder with head and left hand; has firm but flexible feet, knees, head, right hand, left hand.

**The Heart** – Can produce a clear articulate sound for everyone to enjoy; wants to perform; is comfortable because of successful repetitions; enjoys the process.

### **Intermediate/Advanced Students**

Intermediate and advanced students build on the foundation established at the beginning. As they are learning to read music, starting a scale and etude system, be sure they gain insight into pitch and rhythm — how the notes on the page relate to their instrument. They may quickly learn where to find it, but do they actually know whether it is B or B<sup>b</sup>? Without this understanding, accidentals and key signatures have no bearing — it is simply a finger on a string. Establish a counting system that works and be sure students have internalized the beat.

**The Mind** – Be sure students understand *what* to practice, *how* to practice and *why* they are practicing whether it be a piece, an etude, or scales. If they understand the direction they are headed they will be more likely to stay involved. Spend time at the lesson practicing with them or asking them to practice a passage for you. Help them determine which tools they need to improve.

Try asking your students *why* they prac-

ice. The fairly universal answer is, “To get better.” But a better answer is: we practice “to make it easier.” The key word is *easier*. As your students play for you, ask them to find the spot that is difficult and then to tell you how they can make it *easier*.

Try asking your students what they don’t like about practicing. The fairly universal answer is, “Because my Mom or Dad interrupts me in the middle of a piece.” This could easily apply to teachers as well! Interruptions are a clear way to disrupt *focus!* Interruptions instill a fear of making mistakes (waiting for the ax to fall), invite frustration, and do not allow students to concentrate fully on their playing or how the piece can become music.

Students should determine in advance if the effort is to practice small spots to make it easier or to play through to gain a sense of the entire piece. The ideal world is a healthy combination of both. Just playing through will encourage stumbling through mistakes, but if the practice work is done, hopefully both before and after the play through, then everybody wins

Help your students learn and enjoy the process of practicing *slowly*. I often will say, “I don’t know how to help you make it better except to slow it down, listen to yourself, and rebuild.”

I believe the greatest gift teachers can give their students is to help them learn how to *really* listen to themselves. Once they can do this they can almost teach themselves and we can become the coach on the sidelines.

**The Body** – Continue to be ever vigilant to maintain relaxed, natural posture, bow hold and body language. Are they breathing with the music? Does the bow move efficiently? Is it comfortable in all parts? Is shifting being done properly? Dr. Suzuki advocates “one thing at a time.” Look for the frustration level in your students; the teacher may be the cause!

**The Heart** – Students need a healthy balance in their lives. While all the adults around them (teachers and parents) may vie for their time, they are very busy kids. Respect them and their time. Help them prioritize and look for ways to help them use time efficiently. Talk with them about how much is going on in their lives and

encourage the discipline needed to stay on track. The emotional part of their development cannot succeed if they are basically overwhelmed or unhappy. It’s almost impossible for the music inside their hearts not to grow, but you have to plant the seeds early, nurture them and watch them blossom.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers and parents travel down a long road, together with their children. All along the way coaxing, encouraging, guiding, celebrating each small step they take. How and why we educate them has a major impact on their development as human beings. It is a privilege and responsibility we take very seriously. Each student has different needs and different ways of learning. I believe it is our job to discover each child’s unique learning style and their capabilities as well as what motivates them to learn — what makes them tick. In the end, we hope to instill a life-long desire to learn and help them develop an expanded mental capacity to be intelligent, independent thinkers with beautiful hearts.

### **Teaching Priorities To Improve Student Focus:**

- Be positive
- Be consistent
- Be patient
- Maintain commitment
- Keep students engaged
- Expect responsibility
- Give clear assignments and follow through
- Develop flexible expectations
- Listen for the music
- Enjoy each moment

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