



# VIOLIN

## Building a Confident Performer

by Sally O'Reilly

The courage to walk out on a stage and give a poised, compelling performance is the product of hard work and self-confidence. We know how to build strong, accurate techniques and coax beautiful phrases out of students, but what are the elements that instill self-confidence and how can we as teachers maximize our positive impact on our students' egos?

First, we have to come to grips with the fact that ours is a business of criticism. We are constantly working to make students play better, and we certainly can't do that if we ignore issues of posture, intonation, rhythm, bow directions and tone production. At every level of development students need honest assessments of their progress (or lack of it). However, how we deliver those assessments is crucial to how they will be received.

Since we tend to catch more flies with honey than vinegar, it is usually best to avoid frontal verbal assaults. My strategy has always been to find something to praise. Believe me, I know what a challenge that can be in some situations! But praise opens ears, and once they are open it is possible to slip in information about things that need improvement. Often, if there are many things that are wrong, we have to prioritize them so that the student isn't inundated with too much information. It is important to help a student practice in a way that corrects the problem in the lesson. Then both teacher and student can be sure that the right remedy is being applied.

Sweeping indictments, such as "It's so out of tune" or "Your sound is ugly," will do little to raise the student's understanding of a problem, but those words will certainly deflate the ego and undermine confidence. Willingness to put the student on the right path to fixing a mistake underscores the teacher's interest in and commitment to the student's progress. Blanket condemnation reveals the teacher's inability to solve the problem. Of course most students don't realize this and tend to blame themselves for not knowing the solution on their own. I caution my pedagogy students not to tell a student that something is wrong unless they have a remedy for it.

Choice of repertoire has an enormous impact on a student's confidence. If the work is beyond his real level of ability, both musical and technical, he may semi-conquer the piece but he will never reach the level of comfort required for a complete sense of security. We have to resist the urge to give students, especially gifted ones, pieces that go beyond being a challenge to intimidating and undercutting the student's sense of what he can play honestly. We have to ask ourselves what repertoire will build and enforce the student's sense of accomplishment based on what he can truly master. If a student has an immature sound, assigning repertoire that is fast

only delays the process of developing a more mature sound.

I have learned that the student usually knows he's over his head with a particular work before the teacher does. When progress is slow and tedious, we need to reevaluate our choice and find repertoire that fits the student better at that time. I recently heard a young student who has had to spend over a year on one movement of a major concerto when she could have learned many shorter works in many styles and developed a rich, big sound to go with them. Instead, she is sick of the concerto. This is a real tragedy because she should love it and want to play it the rest of her life. But if it only represents months of struggle and frustration, she can't derive confidence or any sense of accomplishment from playing a work that is simply beyond her scope. Her talent is buried under a mountain of challenges that she knows she can't meet.

Every student may occasionally fall short of the goals we set for them. Sometimes this is the result of lack of practice because of illness or family problems. Sometimes it is just laziness or disorganization. These are the moments that challenge us to sort out the situation and find the right remedy. There are limits to what we as teachers can do to enforce a proper amount of practice. The real responsibility lies with the parent of the pre-college student and with the college student himself. However, if we are clever we can have practice contests or memory contests that may motivate even the laziest student to practice. Two things are certain, though. 1) Sarcasm will not work (no matter how verbally adroit we think we are). 2) A student who does not practice consistently can never feel secure in performance.

On this point, let me say that I don't believe in exposing a student to a potentially bad performance experience. If I suspect that a student isn't completely prepared for a recital or a contest, I don't hesitate to pull them out. I explain why and I assure the student that as soon as something is truly solid he may play it in public. Falling apart in front of an audience or a panel of judges is just too traumatic to risk, and it may take months or years to recover from it, if ever.

We must always remember that we are in a position of authority and privilege in our students' lives. They will respond to everything we say although they may not show it.

We never forget the brutal things that are said to us during our studies, and we never forget the inspiring things either!

*Sally O'Reilly is professor of violin at the University of Minnesota and a composer of technical studies for strings. Her teaching materials are published by Kjos. †*