



GUITAR

Success: it is all in the expectation

by Grant Wilcox

In our planning, we must build success into our routine to meet higher expectations.

It does not matter if I am talking about a first year guitar student, a three-time Minnesota All-State Orchestra Player or any student in between—striving to meet higher expectations always requires thinking outside the norm. The norm in public school may just fall short of what we want in our quality programs. As a private studio teacher I have said to myself and out loud to students, “That level of playing would maybe pass in school but if you really want to play well we need to strive for a higher level.” I think the key word in the last sentence is “we,” for we teachers build greatness into our ensembles when we simply think about the growth of each of our students and expect them each to progress.

Building greatness into our expectations: every student could excel.

I have never met a teacher who does not hope to build upon student skill and strength, but not all of the teachers I know and remember have strived to really teach with individual growth in mind. Rather these teachers have given up the true expectations of all of their students when they teach to the middle of the group. As parents and as teachers we all know that every child learns at his or her own rate. We also know this to be true from our own experience and many of us believe this as a fundamental of the learning process. That said, few teachers in our schools build upon the strength of the individual students. It cannot be said enough, students learn at different rates and our very top students are the simple proof. We build greatness into our expectations when we treat every student like the most advanced and we expect great things from all of our students. We do this when we encourage each of our students to excel and measure progress against his or

her own past success.

Every piece of stone in the great wall—in its own time.

What fool among us looks at the great structures of the world and says, “How fast did they build that?” It is only in education and athletics that we marvel at the speed at which some move or learn. Speed is not the point. The great walls that surround our lives were built by regular people with care to stand the test of weather and time. Once the wall is complete it is the quality of its construction that will determine its longevity.

We do not strive for any sort of greatness in expectation when we simply say to the group, “Well not every one has it yet, but we have to go on.” This happens in every class where not all kids excel. It cannot be repeated enough, “We cannot simply, go on!” This is a very bad thing on so many different levels: it may cause the struggling student who is clueless to quit; it creates mediocrity for the student who had it before they sat down and sets the target speed for the student in the middle different than they may choose for themselves. In fact with this model the teacher maybe just expecting the same mediocrity that they remember when they were a student. It worked for them, so it must work!

We can't just go on.

If we believe the premise that every student learns but at his or her own rate, we must meet them at their level and take their pace. It is one of our jobs to help make this task of learning for our student less difficult than if they were left alone. With some students the speed will be faster than we as teachers could go and in most others situations the speed will be at a pace that we will just have to learn to work with. Most important if every student is to excel and be successful then we must meet them at their level and

we must teach them at their rate.

Expectations that really matter in music.

After the basic kinesiology in relationship to movement and instrument are in place, the important aspects are:

- Is it in tune? Is the intonation correct?
- Does it sound good? Is the tone beautiful or a good as it can be made today?
- Is it lined up? Is the rhythm correct, so that the part may be played with others?

These three little things that we as string musicians strive for our entire lives lay the footings for great music making. If the piece is the Barber *Violin Concerto* or a simple folk song—before the student moves on to the next note the questions are: is it in tune, the tone good and the timing correct? Last chair in the ensemble or first chair in the section, the expectation is the same.

The shape, height and structure of the musical line that is set upon this footing are determined by the musician's skill and aspirations as a performer. After all what is music? Music is an organized system of blending pitch and tone together in time. A non-musician said it best many years ago. “The woods would be very silent if the only birds that sang were those that sing best” or fastest. Expect success in each student and they will pick the pace and level.

Grant Wilcox teaches classical guitar and orchestral music at Brainerd High School. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. Grant's ensembles have performed twice at the ASTA National Orchestra Festival, five times at MMEA State Conference, four times at the MNSOTA Tier 2 Festival in Orchestra Hall, and at the MENC National Convention. †