



CELLO

Home Practice: What *IS* going on there?

by David Holmes

It has always intrigued me to know what is actually occurring during a student's home practice, whether they are parent-assisted or not. I can't install a camera in a family's practice area, so what to do to know more? A student (or their parent) might come to lessons each week and say they have practiced and say they have listened to the recording, but what those activities mean to me and what they mean to them can be very divergent. I can articulate more clearly my intentions through verbal or written instructions, but that's not always enough. If a young cellist is showing little progress, then clearly, something needs to change—at home, which is where students spend—if my calculations are correct—about 100% of their practice time.

As fall rolled around this year, with the above thoughts in mind, I decided to try something different in my studio. Here are the details of a new approach to charting home practice daily that I have initiated in my studio this year. I'm not sharing this because I think it is so great, but in the hope that it might provide some internal musings from you, my colleagues, who are probably more attuned to this issue than I have been anyway.

After ample pondering, I came up with a point system for students. There are four ways to get points.

1. Daily Practice: We agreed on a daily practice amount that is attainable for each student, taking into consideration age and schedule pressures. Each day a student meets their daily practice goal they get 1 point.

2. Listening to the Suzuki CD: For every 20 minutes a student listens, they get 1 point. This is the area where students need to improve the most. (Suzuki was right: Listening is *so* important. I will tell an interesting anecdote later in this article about it.)

3. Repetition and Review: For every 50 repetitions (I encourage students to count reps using tallies) of an assigned spot a student gets 1 point. A "spot" can be as small as 2 notes and can take as little as a minute or two to achieve 50 reps on. Repetition is

always a major stumbling block in practice. For each Suzuki book one piece reviewed a student gets 10 repetition tallies toward the 50 repetitions, so 5 book 1 pieces reviewed = 1 point. Book 2 pieces count as 20 repetition tallies each and book 3 pieces count as 30 repetition tallies. Book 4 and up pieces count as 50 repetition tallies, or 1 point each. This category has taken some tweaking, but it seems to be working pretty well now.

4. Extra Credit Points: Students get 1 point for attending their lesson, 1 point for attending group class, and 1 point a week for school orchestra. Concert attendance is 3 points, and if it's a concert where I play, it counts as 10 points. (I've got to build an audience somehow!)

Rewards: I have been giving compact discs to students when they achieve 100 points. Several of my students have 300 points now. Parents can negotiate rewards with their kids as well. I got some very cheap CDs of *Hush*, with Bobby McFerrin and Yo-Yo Ma, and it has been a big prize hit.

Each lesson, students write their point totals on a giant chart just outside my studio. Everyone sees how everyone else is doing, which adds an element of competition, but also adds a dimension of camaraderie, too. I was tentative to add the "public" element of the chart, but so far it is working. I arranged it by age, so that the youngest student is at the top of the chart and the oldest is at the bottom. Guess where most of the points are being accumulated? Most points are from the top and middle of the chart, which begs another article: "Over-worked teens: how can they find time to practice?"

Depending on age, maturity, innate personality traits, and other things, students vary in their ability to keep an accurate log of home practice. That's OK. I expect that, but also try to encourage diligence and accuracy, and I don't let them off the hook. Besides, if they aren't dealing with it already, most school kids will have to grapple with the great "homework monster" that has taken over the lives of school children

from middle school through high school. (Can you tell I'm a bit angry with that?) So, my cello students might as well get used to keeping track of minutiae (at least it's important minutiae!). It could help them down the road.

An anecdote on the importance of listening that I promised you earlier in the article. I have a cello family with a wonderful mom and an awesome 7 year old. In the fall, at the beginning of each lesson, I would ask, "How did listening go this week?" There would be some head dropping and some mumbling and extolling about how they needed to do better, etc. This happened at least 3-4 weeks in a row. About the fourth week with them not listening to the CD at all between lessons, I sat during their lesson wondering what to do. On a whim, I took a post-it note and wrote on it: "You're grade is D minus" and handed it to the mom. Now truthfully, those of you who know me also know I didn't do this out of spite but did it humorously to make a serious point. The mom was appalled to get this grade ("I have never gotten a D minus before in *my life!*" she exclaimed). Something amazing happened then. They started listening *a lot* and it has made an incredible difference in her son's progress. He is now practicing several times a day (at his initiative) and is ripping through pieces at a rate that has delighted, and truthfully, surprised even me. My student's three-year-old sister is singing all the Suzuki tunes very accurately now (they sent me a video confirming this). It has made me emphasize the listening all the more with my other families, too. It has truly inspired me. After all, if a child isn't listening to the recording, the only cello sound they hear all week is their own, so they have no daily "tone model" at home without listening. They haven't heard a beautifully turned phrase and certainly haven't absorbed the tune they are supposed to eventually learn to play if they do not engage in daily listening. This is all so logical. It's no wonder parents fail to put on the CD enough. It is almost so easy to do that it is the easiest thing not to do. Believe me, I know this is

true: I taught my daughter for 8 years!!

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