



# VIOLA

## Planning for Practice Notebooks and Metronomes

by Annette Caruthers

When I was a student the idea of a lesson notebook would have drawn a blank stare from teachers and students alike. It was understood that you came to the lesson to learn and that if music was important to you then you would pay attention and remember what was said and practice as assigned at home. But I also remember that my father would come in for just a few minutes when he picked me up from lessons (I rode the bus from school to get there on my own) and sometimes during dinner in the middle of the week he'd ask me if I had remembered to do something my teacher wanted me to do—and often those reminders were like a jolt out of the blue for me!

I have all my students bring a simple notebook to lessons (the same one every time, please) so it will be accessible if we decide to write something down during explanations, and I also use it for reminders and assignments. Over time this has evolved. Many students remember things best if they make the notes themselves and I try to remember which students need to do this, and some students do best if I give them a very structured “Practice Planner” with assignments down one side, with expected times for each item and with items listed in order so that warm-ups get done first, and days of the week listed across the top. It is easy to draw lines down the page quickly so students can fill in their times and many enjoy doing this!! Several families have noted that their student really responds to this type of organization and want me to continue. One student commented that when she would do what she thought was enough work on something,

and notice I thought it would take more time, she would look at the music again to see if there was anything more she could do with it to improve her playing, and much to our joy she improved dramatically in a short time. She was really happy to figure out, mostly on her own, that she could do better with just a little more work.

I recently had an even more detailed request: a very attentive mom asked me to write down each practice spot in each piece of music and have her daughter check them off each day. I was at first flabbergasted, but she explained that she had no way at home to tell if her daughter was doing what we'd talked about during the lesson or not, and that another teacher working with her family was doing this. She even brought me a sample lesson assignment sheet the other teacher was using. OK—I'm not this other teacher, and this does not come naturally to me, but I tried to do what she asked just to see what would happen, and you guessed it!—her daughter is now doing much, much better and loving her newfound ability. I have even worked things around to the point that this girl now can find her own practice spots, mark them, and work on them unprompted, so it has turned into another tool for teaching her how to practice and evaluate what needs to be worked on for herself. I love it!!

Another new-to-me student seemed always in a hurry with every last thing, which can be exhausting for everyone around him and a real challenge to rein in. I started using the metronome, setting it at what is for him a slow speed (92 is not slow for most kids!) and using it for everything we worked on at his lesson. He was frus-

trated at first, but did say he was actually willing to do this at home, and did follow through. I made a practice planner for him, with metronome markings for each item. When he came back the following week he had discovered several places in his music where he did not know how to count what he was trying to play and we had a very good lesson because I was answering his questions instead of imposing my ideas on him. Toward the end of the lesson I started moving the metronome faster as he played. At first he was surprised, but he did try, and by the end of the lesson was amazed at how fast he could play accurately—always his original goal—and it was a great teaching moment for him to learn the value of practicing slower and really doing things correctly. He was very proud of himself and I couldn't have been happier.

Each student is a bit different, and that is one of the things I love about teaching. Figuring each one out and helping them succeed at something they want to do and can be proud of is a never-ending challenge; it is impossible to get bored teaching.

*Annette Caruthers is a violist and teacher of violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra for many years, she is now teaching full-time from her home studio in St. Louis Park, close to the borders with Edina and southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. To contact Annette email [Annettemusician@gmail.com](mailto:Annettemusician@gmail.com), or call 952-924-0663. ♪*