# Violin

## Building Self-Aware and Observant Musicians

by Katie Gustafson

Last year at a MNSOTA gathering, I heard a fellow teacher mention a topic that struck me as being very important. She wondered how to get students to think independently about their playing. The teacher expressed frustration that many students seem unable to identify how to improve on a piece of music, and will passively wait for her to tell them instead. I have wrestled with the same issue in my own studio.

How do we push our students to take ownership for their playing? How do we get them to think through problems on their own? If our ultimate goal is to create independent players who can learn music without our help, it is a terribly important issue to address.

A good place to begin is with cultivating observation skills, and coaching students to act on their observations. Students of any age can be encouraged to make observations during their lessons or during orchestra rehearsals. We as teachers can maximize this by regularly working it into our lesson routine.

### Practice Noticing

Here is an easy way to get started. I call it the *Noticing Game*.

**Step 1**: Assign something short and simple like a scale. (This will make it easier to repeat several times while the student practices listening.)

**Step 2**: Give your student a broad category to focus on while they play their scale. (Tone, Intonation, etc.) Encourage them simply to notice how it goes. They can observe both positive and negative things.

**Step 3**: Play the scale.

**Step 4**: Debrief. Ask the student what they noticed. Resist the urge to tell them what you noticed. The point is to discuss and affirm the student's observations. Repeat the process as time allows with a new technique category to observe.

*Helpful Hints:*

1. Some honest students might confess that they forgot to listen, did not notice anything, or cannot remember what they sounded like. If this happens, encourage the student to try again, and listen while they play.
2. Observations should be free of judgment. Sensitive students might cringe when observing their flaws. Assure them that noticing things is good and it does not mean that they are doing badly.
3. Any observation should be worthy of discussion, as long as it pertains to their playing. If you asked them to observe their tone, but they noticed their intonation or bow hold instead, run with it. Compliment them on noticing something you wouldn't have expected.
4. When students figure out that the *Noticing Game* isn't that fun of a game, you can say, "How about that? You're making observations already!"

**Step 5**: Act on the observations. Encourage them to continue doing the positive things, and make a plan to address the things that need improving. Older students should come up with some of their own ideas about how to address problems. Have the student write down their practice plan on a sticky note and leave it in a prominent place on their music as a reminder for practicing during the week.

**Step 6**: Tailor the game to your student's needs. For example:

1. Change step 2 so that the student is the one deciding what skill to focus on. As the student's observation and listening skills improve, omit step 2 altogether.
2. Young students may need a little more prompting. For example, if you want them to notice their tone, start the game by brainstorming different words that describe tone, and demonstrate what each one sounds like (scratchy, smooth, squeaky, airy, strong, etc.) Then, when they play their scale, they will have some words to describe what they heard.

### Ask Probing Questions

Once you have established this practice of discussing what your student notices, you can encourage them to notice more complicated things by asking them probing questions throughout your lesson time. *What do you think is the hardest part of the piece? What is hard about it? Is it a rhythmic problem? Bowing? Shifting? On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate yourself on _____?* And my personal favorite: *When you were practicing this piece last week, what did you focus on? How did you address it? Did it get any better?* Students' answers to these questions can give you very useful information about how to proceed with the lesson.

### Group Lessons or Orchestra Rehearsals

These strategies can be easily adapted for a group setting. In my elementary orchestra class I often have the students assess themselves by show of hands. *On a scale of 1-5, how did we do on our dynamics that time? 1 finger means awful, 5 fingers means awesome, 3 fingers means just OK. Hmm… a lot of you think we did awful. OK, let's play it again, and do big dynamic changes this time.*

Having students in groups can also make discussions easier. Students can discuss areas for improvement more easily when the discussion pertains to the whole body of students. They are less likely to feel singled out or insecure about having made mistakes.

### Advanced Students

You can take these ideas to a higher level with older students. Have students record themselves playing, and discuss the recording together during the lesson. Remind students that it is good to observe things they have done *well* just as much as the things that need fixing. This encourages them to maximize their strengths.

When refining a piece for a performance, it can also be helpful for students to chart their progress toward performance-readiness. When I was in high school preparing for college auditions, my orchestra teacher Jim Hainlen gave me a very helpful

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hint. He reminded me that in an audition, you only have one chance to get everything perfect. Yet when we practice, we often allow ourselves to replay imperfect passages—something you cannot do in a performance. He encouraged me to adopt some practices he had learned from the writings of Burton Kaplan and record my progress on a chart he had created. Kaplan's procedure instructs the student to do practice performances every day for one week—at a pre-determined time. Each day, you may warm up in any way you choose, *except* that you may not play any part of your performance piece until the official run-through. This way you can evaluate how the piece sounds on the first try, as it might in an actual performance. The accompanying chart then prompts you to evaluate and make notes on how the first try sounded, and give yourself a percentage grade, deciding whether it would have been an acceptable performance. After completing the initial play-through, you could proceed to practice the imperfect places slowly. When I adopted this routine as I prepared for auditions, I found it very productive. From day to day I would increasingly be able to anticipate the previous day's weaknesses and improve the "First Try" performance. (The accompanying chart could easily be adapted if there were other factors you wanted your student to observe.)

**First Try Chart**

| Day | Piece or Movement | Degree of Success | Acceptable as My Performance? yes/no |
|---|---|---|---|
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I have heard wise teachers say that if we do our job well, our students should outgrow us. It is very gratifying to watch an advanced student take charge of their practicing and make thoughtful observations about their music. I hope these ideas are useful to you, and I would welcome other ideas on the subject from readers who have had success in this area.

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