Violin

When your Routine Becomes a Rut

A Few Ideas to Jumpstart your Lesson Time

by Katie Gustafson

Most teachers experience "the rut" at some point. It starts out as a routine, or the key elements that we like to include in every lesson. For me, the routine is scales, shifting, etudes and repertoire. However, a routine can easily become a rut. We can become tunnel-visioned on a few specific things, and neglect other important areas of musical training.

This can happen for many reasons. Sometimes a student who has trouble in a particular area can cause us to fixate on correcting that issue. We can spend so much attention on it that we neglect other important things. Also, our personal teaching philosophies lead us to emphasize certain issues over others. Sometimes this is good; prioritizing is often necessary. But sometimes it goes too far, and our students end up lacking important skills.

It is wise to examine our own tendencies and recognize where we might be weak. Here are a few common areas where teachers can find themselves in a rut.

Rote vs. Reading

Some teachers prefer to help students learn a piece by rote to develop ear training. Others want students to learn pieces by notation to improve fluency in reading music. Both of these schools of thought have merit, and many of us probably use both of these methods at different times. But ask yourself: do you heavily rely on one or the other?

If you tend to rely on teaching by rote, try informally quizzing your students on reading note names or basic rhythms. If they struggle with it, consider giving them a few pieces or exercises to do where they must say note names and count rhythms without hearing the piece first.

If you rely heavily on note-reading, try having your students listen to recordings of some of their pieces and discuss things that you heard. You might ask them to listen for specific things in the recording, or ask them to make their own observations. You could also try teaching them a few simple tunes by ear, or do rhythmic dictation to develop their ear training.

Technique vs. Musicality

This is my personal Achilles' heel. I am often so concerned about getting students to play with technical proficiency that I forget to discuss musicality and artistry. Sometimes it takes a long time to learn a piece well. I might be so excited that a student finally played a piece in tune with good tone, that I am tempted to give them a new piece even though there was no musicality or dynamic variation. The result is mechanical, robotic violinists.

Some teachers are the opposite. They live for the artistry, but neglect to equip their students with the necessary mechanics to accomplish it. Which are you?

If you are a technique fiend like me, carve out a couple of minutes of your repertoire time specifically to discuss the musicality of the piece. Have your student brainstorm the mood or the style of the piece, and work on playing in that style. Even if the student doesn't have the whole piece learned well, you could choose a couple of short passages to work on dynamics and other style factors.

If you tend to jump right to artistic things, consider adding some short etudes that will help your student refine the techniques they will need for their piece. Give your student at least one technique to focus on for the week so that they have the mechanics to pull off the artistry!

To play along or not to play along?

This issue tends to be a matter of personal style. Some teachers play along with their students on a lot of the music. This can help the student's awareness of what good playing sounds like, and they will often imitate you as they go. You can coach the student verbally as you play, with short instructions like "use more bow" or "check your intonation." Playing along also allows you to move the lesson along at the pace you desire, stopping the student to drill a passage, or forcing them to keep playing if you want them to push through a section of music.

The downside is that if you always play along, students get used to having a partner, and become insecure about playing alone. Also, they can get so good at imitating you, that it is hard to tell what they actually know how to do on their own. For this reason, many teachers choose to have the students play alone most of the time. This helps them develop independence, and allows you to easily hear what their strengths and weaknesses are.

You might find that one strategy works better for one student, and another works better for the next. Try experimenting with this to see how your students respond.

All work and no play…

Most of us have a repertoire list that we use again and again for teaching purposes. However, I occasionally get requests from students to play things like fiddle music, movie music or seasonal songs. Sometimes the timing is bad and I say no. Three weeks before a recital is not a good time to whip out music from *Harry Potter*. However, there is a time and a place! You can get quite a bit of mileage out of a student's excitement to learn a piece. Consider setting aside a few weeks for music that is fun and different. Try some duets during the summer to work on ensemble skills. After a recital, give your students a few weeks of lighter, fun music like fiddle songs or something else that they have expressed interest in. Not only will they enjoy the break from Mozart and Beethoven, you might get to teach them some cool stuff that doesn't usually come up in their solo books. (Funky rhythms or articulations, special effects like tremolos and fermatas, etc.)

All of these things are good for experimentation. I have sometimes found myself wondering to try next with a student—what do I do when my normal tricks aren't working? These are all examples of small changes you might try to get out of the rut and continue making progress.

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