

# Clinic: The Art of Taming the Prima Donna Parent

presented by Connie Aiken, Vicki Krueger & Sally O'Reilly

reported by Connie Aiken & Faith Farr

Drawing on a deep reservoir of both successes and failures, our panel—Connie Aiken, Vicki Krueger and Sally O'Reilly—shared their experiences and insights in dealing with parents. Working with parents with high expectations has been a major theme of Connie Aiken's career for the past 35 years. She teaches orchestra in Mounds View Schools, has taught in Suzuki studios, and has worked in church music. Vicki Krueger has been Executive Director of the Minnesota Youth Symphonies since 1989. She is considered a leader in the field of youth orchestra administration, having served on the National Youth Orchestra Board, a division of the League of American Orchestras. Sally O'Reilly has been Professor of Violin at the University of Minnesota since 1993. Her students have won international competitions and hold principal positions in major orchestras. She is the composer of *FiddleMagic*, *Fiddle Rhythms*, and the *String Power Series*, and is editor of three volumes of *Quartet Sampler* published by Kjos.

Connie Aiken opened the presentation with wonderful insights that she kindly wrote up for the magazine. Faith Farr wrote the report for the rest of the presentation.

## Connie Aiken

Today, I want to focus on on actions and attitudes that might minimize the extent and frequency of discord.

### Teacher

From the teacher's perspective, for myself, I need to:

- Purify my motivation in teaching
- Be quick to listen and slow to speak (consider word choice and vocal inflection)
- Respond with wisdom, not emotion
- See people as imitators. We need to be what we want others to be.

From the teacher's perspective, for the institution, I need to:

- Set an open, fair program structure to minimize parent issues.
- Create a culture that stresses mutual support and being a team player.
- Be consistent. Eventually the com-

munity helps maintain a teamwork culture—parents and students talk, and will come to know, “that's the way orchestra does things...”

- As much as possible, rotate student musical leadership.
- Find leadership roles for students who are not musical leaders (orchestra manager type positions)
- Minimize competition as a means of motivating achievement. Stress love for music.

### Student

If students are happy and making progress, parents are less likely to emerge as complaining prima donnas. I need to:

- Value *every* person -- no matter how they play.
  - Don't embarrass weak players.
  - Don't continually single out strong players to their detriment socially.
- Give all students the opportunity to grow—quick, middle, slower.
- Stress the importance of learner independence as soon as possible.
- Treat siblings as unique people.

There is a free PDF from “Tiger Mom” <http://amychua.com/>

### Parent

- I must feel genuine thankfulness for parents who provide funds for instruction and create a home environment that lets young musicians develop.
- Active parents want involvement. Give them responsibilities so that they have ownership in the program.
- Clear communication helps all parents know that they (not just their children) belong to the musical community.
- Invest in students and their families before issues appear. Know names. Smile. Be friendly. Take an interest in their lives. Real relationships reap rewards.
- Compassion for the challenges of parenting in today's world.
- Empathy for the balance that is almost impossible to find between support and control.
- Patience. Parents are growing to be parents as much as we are growing to

be teachers and students are growing to be responsible adults.

- In conflict situations, have unrushed conversation, not email.
- Express appreciation for parent and student and their investment in the program.
- Take ownership for any fault on your side. 99% right and 1% wrong have equal weight.
- Self-protection backfires.

When parents are unreasonable, there often is an issue in their lives that is not resolved or causes pain. A graceful approach can help you understand their situation better and know how to be supportive. Talking through an issue without judgment almost always results in a loyal ally. Mercy grows trust.

Strive for sincere love for student *and* parent. “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8 English Standard Version)

## Vicki Krueger

In Minnesota Youth Symphonies, parents feel angst to help their child on a career path. MYS has a policy that no-one besides the student and auditioner can be in the audition room; no-one can listen outside the door. Results are announced soon after the audition, but seating is not done, or at least not announced, until the first rehearsal. MYS administration always supports the integrity of the directors' decisions—explaining to parents that seating is rotated from back to middle to front so that all students see the conductor and hear from different spots. Administration knows that students may be talented but not yet have leadership skills. The principal string players change for each concert.

Vicki explained that by setting a high bar, MYS has found students will rise to meet it. The stress needs to be on what each student can contribute to the orchestra, not on what is in it for them. MYS does invite parents to sit in the audience to listen to rehearsals if they wish. This is a way they can share the experience with their child in a way that they can not with a school orchestra. When parents want to get super involved—one asked to sit on stage beside their child—the technique is to deflect their

energy and invite them to do something else that is useful, such as take attendance.

### Sally O'Reilly

Sally O'Reilly began by remarking that she has found that “white hair” helps—being older than the parents tends to give the teacher more authority than when the teacher is younger. We are in a profession where aging is a plus.

As a private teacher, Sally said she has never dropped a student, but she has dropped parents. When a student turns 18, she stops communicating with parents under privacy rules because the student is now an adult. When parents email frequently, they are looking for reassurance, but you might have to ignore at least some of the emails. But it is useful if you can channel parent energy into doing things that you don't have time to do.

Sally said there is a fine line between parental support and interference. We should not be bullied when parents suggest pieces for their child that we know the student cannot master. The parent may want to brag at their cocktail party, but our job as teachers is to make sure students can perform musically, and not just notes. If a parent says, “Janey isn't as advanced as Joey” we must make sure that Janey knows she is on the best path for her development. What Joey is doing doesn't matter.

Lorrain Fink's book *A Parent's Guide to String Instrument Study*, published by Kjos has useful information—buying vs. renting; instrument sizes; maintenance; practicing; selecting a teacher. Have parents buy the book—only \$3.55 at Southwest Strings.

Sally believes that “advanced placement” is largely a myth. It takes time to develop as a musician, and you have to “buy” time. Possibly taking IB and AP classes will put a student *behind* other musicians in repertoire development because they are weighted down by academics. Besides, Sally says the really top schools don't accept AP placement because they want their students to have *their* prep classes.

### Discussion

In a school setting where there are pull-out conflicts—check with parents to find out what is important academically; talk to classroom teachers to get their point-of-view; try to rotate lessons so students miss different classes, not always the same one. Have lunch regularly with the classroom teachers so that they know you as a person when you ask for a special pull-out rehearsal. Talk to classroom teachers before school starts in September to ask what times/weeks to *avoid* for pull-outs.

To help students discover their priorities and spend an appropriate amount of time on practice, assign a two-part project. First, for a week, a student should keep a simple diary of how they spent their time—when they got up, went to school, came home, phoned their friends, played games, did homework, sports, music practice, rehearsals, meals, chores, job—everything. Second, the student should make a list of all the different activities, and put them into priority order. Then the student needs to compare the time spent with their priority list. As long as they are spending most of their time on high-priority items, their life is in good

balance. What is interesting to the music teacher is where music comes on the list. If music is in the top five priorities, then the teacher can reasonably expect a lot of practice and assign a variety of etudes and technical material in addition to long pieces. If music is of great interest, but low priority, the teacher should consider adjusting the music pace by assigning fewer etudes and shorter pieces so that progress can still be made even if practice time is shorter.

The discussion ended on a very uplifting note:

- Studying music leads to creative problem solving. Thank heavens most of our doctors have a musician's brain!
- Students majoring in other disciplines have a great advantage because music is what got them where they are. They know how to break down a problem and put it back together. One successful scientist explained, “If I can work on 4 measures for 2 hours to get it just right, I can look down my electron microscope until I see what I want.”
- When adults know how hard it is to do well, they will support music. They will fill the concert hall with audiences, and be the people on boards of directors who can write the checks for thousands of dollars.

*Faith Farr self-publishes Foundations for Music Reading, a string-based theory curriculum for young players. She has served as editor of this magazine since 1996. ♪*