Cello

Focus Pocus

by David Holmes

I spend so much time with students on the physical aspects of playing cello—Is that your best bow hold? Stay tall in your chair! Curve those fingers! Keep the bow in the tone zone! Is your thumb squeezing? blah, blah, blah—the list goes on and on. Part of what I do as a cello teacher is to repeat these same mantras over and over, which is probably inevitable, but by doing that I sometimes think that my priorities can be misplaced. If I am reiterating the same things endlessly, then clearly the student isn't heeding my advice. This can mean one of at least two things: the student is not practicing very much in general, or the student is not practicing the right stuff at home. One needs a body to play a cello, but more essentially, one needs an active alert mind to train that willing but clueless body. Ears are important in music, but what's happening between the ears is paramount. How then, do we get students to engage their brains to empower their cello playing? How do we nurture their ability to focus? Here are some thoughts on that issue.

The simplest and most common technique of encouraging a student's focus in a lesson is to ask questions tailored to the age of a child. Follow-up questions can narrow down a problem to a manageable level. Example: Was that in tune? If, not, what was out of tune? How do we make that out of tune spot better? I certainly hope this analytical approach provides a possible solution to the vexing issue of how to get students to isolate, repeat, and improve "spots" within a piece—to use their minds to problem solve.

To help assure that a student practices intelligently at home, I have taken again (after a long hiatus) to practice charts, with much detail on what and how to practice, including boxes to mark when each item is practiced. This detailed approach really helps, although, since I am not by nature a "chart" kind of guy, it can be a struggle for me to stay on top of this. The merits of daily records, however, certainly outweigh the drawbacks.

Focusing on one point at a time in lessons is better than the easily recurring pattern of the "shotgun approach." At times, I will catch myself addressing too many points too quickly with a student. (Sounds like I might be the one who needs to work on focusing.) This disorganized approach can overwhelm a student and cause lesson unpleasantness and student befuddlement.

The latest scientific research on what "sticks" when practicing verifies that shorter time slots of focus (perhaps 3-4 minutes each) is valuable in retention, largely because shifts in focus every few minutes reawaken a brain that gets habituated quickly to what it is currently doing. With this in mind, I have taken to limiting how much time I drill a point in a lesson before I move on to another idea. After several of these short sessions I will then repeat an earlier activity that we previously engaged in perhaps 15 minutes ago, especially if it is a point I really want to drive home with a student. This approach has helped reduce yawns (mine and theirs) and has lightened the mood and given lessons a welcome simplicity and flow. I thought that students would balk at revisiting what happened a few minutes ago, but I was happy to find that was not the case. They balk instead when I, like a dog with a bone, exhibit unyielding persistence on a point that has no end in sight (the opposite of the shotgun approach!). I can still be dogged in my pedagogical determination, as we alternate or even recycle focus points.

My own focus (how I subdue my flyaway brain) is an interesting participant in lessons. As I'm analyzing a student's playing visually, it can detract from how well I hear what sounds are coming out of their cello. Often it is best if I turn off the visual and listen singularly to what a student sounds like. To do this, I must sit very still or even close my eyes. Humans have much more of our brains dedicated to sight than to sound, which makes the visual mode a wired-in default setting. This is why we hear better with our eyes closed at concerts or when listening to music. To me, the qualitative difference in listening between eyes open versus eyes closed is quite astounding. Our students are wired similarly, which is why having them watch themselves as they play can be helpful, but having them listen without watching their bow or left hand is also critical in their development as a musician. Great cellists don't look at their bodies when they are playing.

For enhancing musicality in a student's playing, I have found it helpful to remind them that they need to be listening to and connecting to what is coming out of the cello as they play. The focus on being involved with the music while listening intently in the moment is the key to better expression. A student's tendency to rush through a piece comes from not really listening—they've spaced out. It is remarkable that the human brain can be thinking about many things other than playing the cello while the body is actually playing the cello! I have many times played through pieces while my mind went on a vacation to goodness knows where.

Occasionally in lessons I am suddenly aware that this little person and I share a common humanity, with all that that means. They feel as I feel, breathe as I breathe, struggle as I struggle, and experience the complete gamut of existence that I do. This makes me feel more compassionate toward them and myself. Perhaps this is a good thing to focus on more often.

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