



CELLO

Make Me Laugh! Using Humor in the Studio

by David Holmes

Eventually, all teachers learn to accept that they need to truly be themselves when working with their students. Inspiration and helpful ideas can come from many places, but a good teacher lives an authentic life, complete with his or her own particular personality, style, and quirks. From my contact with other teachers locally and at the summer institutes where I teach, I have noticed that many string teachers share a fine sense of humor. This may be evident through their words or body movements, enlivened by their natural, spontaneous creative impulses.

I vividly remember the day when I was about 7 or 8 years old that I said something that made my older brother and sister laugh. The fact that I look back at this moment as an exhilarating epiphany shows that it was a sign that a sense of humor—laughing and making others laugh—was to be an essential need for me. With my siblings, humor—even at the darkest of times—was therapeutic and strengthened our bond.

I find that in my teaching I use humor to get a point across or just to make kids and parents laugh, because it *feels so good to laugh!* Over the years, it has become apparent that people appreciate this aspect of my teaching. I seem to get high marks on the “fun” scale, although perhaps this more accurately indicates that I never really grew up. Children are wired to learn through play. It is not contradictory to be outwardly laughing, while intensely pursuing the serious goal of teaching kids to be excellent musicians. The mix of humor and seriousness creates this important duality in a lesson: focus, relax, focus, relax.

With children of all ages, props can be used to hilarious and pedagogical effect. I use finger puppets to “talk” to kids about any number of technical issues. An alligator (simply made with one’s hand), can be a “bow carnivore”, who will consume the bow if it wanders away from the desired lane, making “omnomnom” sounds as he grabs the bow. I issue the warning: “Please, stay out of the alligator pond!” Adding voice inflections to bring a point to life is great

fun. In a high, sad voice, the cello may ask, “Why don’t you hold me with your left knee? I feel so alone!” (followed by crying sounds). I love putting one of my daughter’s now abandoned stuffed animals on my students’ heads while they play. This is a quick way to get to excellent posture, and I enjoy sending pictures of them playing with these silly “hats.” On the more devilish side: for cellists who continually creep back from the front of the chair, I put upside down duct tape right behind them so if they move their rear end back, they will literally get stuck to the chair. Fun times!

To reinforce accuracy in repetitions during a lesson, I enjoy the “wipe out” game. We agree on a number of repetitions, say 5 times for a shift. If the student messes up on rep number 3, she *wipes out* and must start over (teacher might glissando down the C-string like a plane crashing to represent the wipeout). For repetitions I also have a manual counter that I click for each successful rep. I will hold it so they can see as the number rises. I think I get more reps out of students when I use the clicker, which creates a mini-drama that can be full of a playful tension. Sometimes I will play a sports announcer: “Oh my goodness, this could be a world record!!”

When students play too fast (which happens, as you know, *very* frequently) I might start making siren sounds high up on the a-string on my cello (which can *really* sound like a siren) followed by a very serious, “This is the cello police: Please slow down or I’ll have to give you a speeding ticket.” Sometimes to get a student to slow the tempo, I’ll speak in a very low and extremely slow voice: “Pleeeeeeease slooooooow dooooooown”, a bit like Eeyore. Anybody can play fast, I might say, but few can play slowly. If a student is bowing the wrong way on a piece, sometimes I take their bow and yell at it: “*What is wrong with you? We may have to replace you with a bow that does the right bowings!*” I’ll give the bow back to the student and tell them that I think their bow will do better next time.

Group classes provide an excellent venue

for creative and purposeful fun. One of my favorites is to let parents stand behind me with a bunch of nerf balls. They are watching the students’ eyes to see if they are looking at me ALL the time as I lead a piece. If any eyes wander, well, parents hit that kid with a nerf ball. This really gets great focus, and students really rise to the occasion (only one kid has ever cried when hit by a ball, because it hurt his pride). One other group activity that is a good closer is to have everyone move to the left and play the person’s cello next to them. We all play for a bit and then all move again to the next cello, etc., until everyone ends up back at their own instrument. Parents assist this slightly risky endeavor by standing behind the chairs and holding the cello by the scroll when kids are changing cellos. This game is lots of fun because students have to play different sized cellos, including *my* giant cello. They love that, and I am surprised that many can quickly figure out how to play in tune on a smaller or bigger cello.

Sometimes, I think I come up with ideas to fend off the rut of mindless review and repetition. At an institute this summer, one of my groups performed *Crazy Etude* for the concert, which involved them trying to follow me no matter how much I sped up or slowed down or even stopped playing. They did great because it was fun and it piqued their interest because of its novelty and the stress of having to do this on a concert. They listened acutely, and focused like a lion about to pounce on its prey. Anything that isn’t the same old same old is of greater interest. This profound truth applies to all humans, not just kid humans and is a crucial consideration for engaging teaching.

Stories capture the imagination of kids, so I’ll use some that I’ve used before or create one on the spot. Humoresque, with its many moods, is packed with story potential, which kids can help write. An engaging yarn can connect students to the music at a deeper level. In a lesson recently, I went off on a strange tangent about a cat going to Target to buy kitty litter...not sure if that helped the student or not, but we did laugh a lot. Laughter may actually *be* the best medicine,

and a smile may actually *be* the shortest distance between two people.

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