Violin

Encouraging a Desire to Communicate in Students

by Ian Snyder

"Often one sees tired, sad, sometimes frightened expressions on people's faces among a concert audience, only to encounter the same people again at the end of a memorable performance, with shining eyes and beautiful smiling faces. There is no doubt that at such times a wonderful transformation has taken place. The artist has 'communicated.'" I came across this in Kato Havas' *Stage Fright* when reading up on performance psychology for a student. It was refreshing to be reminded of our aspiration as artists, and I thought it was also very perceptive how Havas relates it to stage fright: "The trouble is, that because of the demands of 'success' from early childhood onward, … the over-riding desire to communicate soon gives way to anxieties and fears."

How do we as teachers minimize those demands of success and correctness, in favor of a desire to communicate? My concern is that in delivering an occasional sermon on the inspiring but vague notion of artistic communication, it may encourage the student for a moment, but their anxieties over perfect intonation, rhythm and tone quality resurface as the audition or performance approaches. Is there a way to "infuse" an aspiration to communicate into teaching throughout the year? My hope would be to give the students a sense of freedom and to reduce tension because they are striving to communicate rather than to control their mechanics.

I have been exploring ways to do this from the beginning. Even with young students who aren't disposed to prolonged philosophy, I try to integrate feedback given in terms of the effect that they give to a listener: "Wow, you made the violin really ring! I could hear it all the way across the room." "I could tell you really felt the pulse. You made me feel your beat." "You played with so much energy. It made me sit up in my chair!" Even just a candid, warm response shows their power to move people: "What a warm, colorful sound! I *loved* hearing it."

With a little maturity, we can start to be more detailed. I find pulse and rhythm very easy to talk about in terms of their communicative potential. Sally O'Reilly once told me that visual art takes up space, and music takes up *time*. I tell students that a keen sense of pulse gives the audience *an experience in time*, time being something that is otherwise quite hard to "feel." We talk about the how it feels to listen to music and enter a flow state: We find ourselves tapping a foot or nodding our heads, or we suddenly "awaken" at the end of a piece of music.

Intonation too is an area where I think we can banish considerable anxiety. I find that we as professionals sometimes talk about poor intonation almost as a sort of musical leprosy! Knowing, of course, that we do need to develop true intonation in ourselves and students, I think there are very effective ways to emphasize the communicative properties inherent in intonation: I point out to students who have played a passage particularly in tune how much it sweetens up the tone itself and how the violin rings differently. I also talk about how it reveals the composition more clearly to the listener: Sometimes I jokingly play a passage with every note just slightly out of tune in different directions and ask the student if they see how it obfuscates the musical message – I find it really "clicks" for them. There does come a time when we have to take the microscope out on a given passage, but I feel better doing so when our understanding is that we wish to make the music "come through."

I have found opportunities to apply this mode of feedback across a variety of topics: It isn't that a student was simply "correct" in observing the dynamics. It's that they created contrast that made the music more captivating. It isn't that a phrase was shaped the "right" way. It's that they built and released tension, or that a small gesture conveyed a little "sigh." Tone isn't just "good" or "healthy" but rather resonant, deep, rich, or transparent in a way that conveys the character of the music. (In a sense, this all begins to dovetail with other perennial feedback principles: be observant but non-judgmental; avoid "good" in favor of a specific descriptor. This fusion of principles seems entirely natural to me—I think effective feedback is very much an "all roads lead to Rome" matter.).

With advanced students, we can talk more explicitly in terms of communication. They are beginning to truly "interpret" pieces of music, so we talk about conveying that interpretation to the listener. In cases where a student is playing with a lot of fervor, but there is some coarseness to the phrasing, I talk about *clarifying* the musical message. For instance, in long musical lines, I notice students tend to under-sustain the last note before a bow change. I remind students that it lets the air out of the bag if that note doesn't sing through into the next. Or if there are irregular emphases in a phrase, I point out how hierarchy and inflection points *pace* the phrase for the listener and convey a musical gesture. When there is musical hedge pruning to be done, I like framing it as enhancing the music that comes across rather than trying to avoid imperfections.

There are also advanced students who seem more inclined to tidy, conventionally "polished" playing and may need more encouragement to emote. I often find it effective to talk in terms of "illuminating" the music or even crack a little joke about us being "tour guides" for the composition. A more reserved student might be more at home on the first half-page of Sibelius Concerto than on the G string recapitulation. But they can create a convincing atmosphere at the recap by understanding how a certain application of bow technique generates that sonorous, doleful tone. Although I do believe in personal expression in music, I think it can be helpful for these more reticent students to think of their work as conveying the emotions of the composer to the audience. I also notice that even if a student is very secure technically, this pivot to thinking about communication often gets them out of their head and makes their technique even more fluent and natural.

Seeing that kind of freedom has reminded me of my beloved early teacher, Yuri Merzhevsky, who constantly encouraged me to sing a phrase and then play it on the violin. I've woven this back into my practice more and more as an adult. I feel more at ease physically and I think my

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playing carries more idiomatic musicality. Students seem to need some time to gain comfort with singing and to connect their violin playing to their inner hearing, but they eventually find that same fluency too. I love how this allows us to bypass semantics. And it demonstrates to the student exactly what we are looking for: If you can hear the music a certain way in your ear, and make me hear it too, you've done your job as an artist.

Ian Snyder teaches privately in Southwest Minneapolis and has served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota Bravo Institute for Keyboard and Strings. He has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Opera, as well as a variety of freelance projects, including a recording for Prince. As a teacher, he is particularly interested in developing natural physical motions in playing, enhancing students' awareness of tone, and in integrating musical style from the earliest levels.