Violin

Building Toward Multitasking

by Ian Snyder

I remember a lesson from when I was working on the Bach *A minor Concerto*. My teacher and I were camped out on the first phrase of the piece. We had identified a number of priorities: Keeping the bow direction straight at the tip, listening carefully to pitch, sustaining sound on 16ths, keeping my scroll high. I was always able to succeed at whatever I had just been asked to do, but there was a sort of "carousel" effect at play: just as we brought a couple new goals to the fore, one of the others would disappear from view. I protested that it was difficult to do so much at once on the violin, and my teacher's response was "then you probably shouldn't be playing the violin." I took the comment all in good humor, but it highlighted the tension between the bothersome difficulty of multitasking and the reality that playing a string instrument contains an extraordinary array of multitasking.

This conundrum is addressed quite well in books like Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code* and Anders Ericsson's *Peak*, which are well worth a read for their comprehensive look at the ingredients of skill development from a neuroscience perspective. I want to focus specifically on how the mindful use of single-tasking and multitasking can facilitate the kind of skill development we are looking for our string students to achieve.

I perceive two main advantages to single-tasking: First, we avoid frustration. Second, we are able to gain traction on a skill. Just because a student can do something once doesn't mean it is a habit. In fact, we want to *convey to them* that they will need to reinforce the new helpful action at home until it becomes a habit. I sense that reducing frustration and keeping traction on a skill are quite symbiotic, and to my eye, they are inherent in the no-fail environment of the Suzuki method and in the "zone of proximal development" from general educational psychology.

I think we tend to be more mindful of this with younger and less advanced students, where the mechanical complexities of the violin are laid bare. I'm sure readers have their own favorite tricks; I particularly like a couple in *Minuet II* from Suzuki Book 1: The opening becomes much easier if it is practiced on open strings first. And the first slur comes much more easily if practiced first as stopped bows (AKA slurred staccato) to process the concept of multiple notes sharing one bow direction before adding the legato bowing.

I suspect that the real challenge is remaining aware of when a student needs single-tasking as they advance. Perhaps we get overly excited when our expectations reach new heights, or maybe we worry about boring the student if we break down things in too granular of a way. But I still see instances where intermediate repertoire presents simultaneous rhythmic, shifting, finger pattern, and/or ear training difficulties and leaves students spinning their wheels in the ditch. I encounter this most frequently in pieces such as the Seitz *G minor Concerto (No. 3)* or Accolay *Concerto* that act as gateways to more advanced repertoire. My sense is that certain levels of musical complexity simply demand multitasking as the composer's ideas are mapped out onto the violin. Many students at this level come to lessons with areas of their music that they know are challenging but they don't quite know what they need to get over the hump. I find that by pulling at one thread at a time—pitch, rhythm, bowing directions—and giving the student permission to succeed at just that one thing, we minimize stress and get the ink to dry on each skill before moving on. Most of the time, this flows smoothly in lessons. Sometimes we do get stuck, and I find myself thinking "we can't really spend 15 minutes on a couple shifts, can we?" But I am coming to understand that 15 minutes in one lesson saves 5 minutes in each of 15 future lessons, because we have taken the time to explore how to work through the difficulty and how the student can approach similar difficulties on their own. Much of this hinges on the question of our own patience. We have so many tools as teachers, and they tempt us with the possibility of solving an array of problems in one sitting. But I try to ask myself if I have been patient and thorough enough that I actually gave my student the tool I am using. And exercising our patience in the lesson means modeling how they can be patient at home.

Having extoled the virtues of single-tasking, I intentionally multitask as well. I like doing this when two particular goals cut against each other: the student has automated them in isolation but focusing on one reliably results in the other being let go. So we bundle the goals: lengthen your spine but your shoulders remain low; play fortissimo but keep your left fingers light; listen for a crisp articulation on spiccato strokes while keeping your right wrist/elbow/shoulder loose. This even works with small children. One of my Twinklers had difficulty keeping her bow straight at the tip, so I drew on her strings with permanent marker to show the contact point I was looking for her to maintain (our "sidewalk"). She has a great sense of humor, so I had her play *Twinkle Theme* and if she came too close to the fingerboard, I would "gobble up" her bow with a "hungry" animal puppet I have. She was very successful at this, but after a few weeks, had learned (rather astutely!) to conserve bow in order to avoid straying from the sidewalk. I added animal stickers to the desired portion of her bow and asked her to play past as many animals as possible while still keeping the bow on the sidewalk. She was able to succeed instantly. I should point out that these were skills she did already possess. We were also able to relieve the multitasking burden by using a review piece, where there was no significant bandwidth dedicated to notes, rhythms, or bowings. We should remember that the multitasking burden can always be mitigated with slow practice! Sometimes we can cover a variety of sophisticated skills as long as we have a bit more time to think, listen, and react.

I am attracted to this lens of approaching feedback in lessons because I think it is both an opportunity to be patient and kind as well as to build bulletproof students. We as teachers have a great deal of expertise,

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and I think we are rewarded for being mindful of how we sequence and apply the expertise we are looking to transmit.

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.

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