Violin

Examining the Witness

by Ian Snyder

As teachers, we work under a great deal of pressure to communicate as much information as efficiently as possible. We have an intrinsic desire to be helpful, we want to see students make rapid progress, and we work under the pressure of the clock, whose hand mischievously accelerates toward the 29-, 44-, or 59-minute mark! With beginning students, I am able to provide a distilled action plan because the repertoire tends to highlight single concepts at a time, the parents are involved in practice, and the child's attention span and lesson time are shorter. As we progress into intermediate, concept-diverse repertoire and the children move toward independent practice, I often find myself trying to stock a student with practice techniques like a bag of groceries for the week.

In the past handful of months I noticed that I felt frustrated at times by students who didn't remember information I expected them to know or who weren't doing things in practice that I expected them to do. This happened even in cases where I had patiently repeated myself over a number of weeks, and had shown and explained a given concept in many different ways. I began to understand that if I expected students to know and do certain things, I needed to prompt the students to come up with that information on their own. Socrates said, "I cannot teach anyone anything. I can only make them think." Indeed, teaching through questioning is the so-called "Socratic Method." My hope here is to shed a little light by sharing my exploration along that avenue in recent months.

One thing I have discovered is that there is a lot of information that students do know, but which takes a bit of time to retrieve. I have one student who I suspected was navigating shifts solely by ear, without knowing what position he was going to or how to get there. His hand looked to me like it was trying to jump onto the right note. We recently began Csardas, and I asked him how he would practice the shifts. He readily described shifting with guide notes, and I began to ask him about individual shifts. "What position are you going from and to?" "Which finger does the shift?" "What note does that finger shift to?" Consistently, he would take around 10 seconds to answer, but he was correct each time. His retention of what I had been teaching was strong, but the retrieval process was the muscle that seemed to need training. In a way, we had stumbled into a form of flash card learning. To my delight, he came back the following week with the introduction's shifts in tune and mechanically smooth. I could have told him what to do in less than a quarter of the time, but seeing the quality of implementation helped me understand that involving him deeply was the true time saver.

Another thing I've noticed is that asking open-ended questions can lead us to the exact information that a student needs. One student recently played about half of *Meditation from Thais*, and the pulse and rhythm made me wonder if I was having a stroke. He knew that he needed to improve the rhythm, but struggled to do so, even after a few attempts and some more questions like "how many beats is X worth?" or "do you change after 2 or after 3?" After a few minutes, I asked him, "What do you feel is the most difficult part of this?" He explained that he kept noticing notes that were out of tune and that he felt like he needed to fix them or get them closer before moving on. I told him that I wanted him to try again and focus purely on rhythm, and that I gave him permission to be as out of tune as he needed to be. He proceeded to play it with impeccable rhythm. (I also asked him what he thought of the intonation and we agreed that it hadn't suffered particularly.) We had spoken before about ways to isolate variables in practice, but he needed permission when merging variables to highlight some priorities and come back to others later. This is something that felt so intuitive to me that I wouldn't have thought to explain it, but it was the clarification he needed and spared him from a lengthy sermon about different aspects of rhythm and pulse.

Even for students who have developed strong executive function on the instrument, I believe that prompting them to come up with clear plans helps them to play with commitment. A student of mine recently began the second movement of Sibelius *Concerto* and came in with the bones of the movement very well prepared but without much of a sound concept. I spent a bit of time asking her for the kind of sound she wanted—dark, brooding, sonorous—and the technical changes she'd need—slower, heavier bow, wider vibrato—and as soon as she began again, bam! It was all there. I have the feeling that if I had spent the same amount of time sharing my interpretation it wouldn't have prompted such an internalized result. And in any case, letting students feel ownership of the process is a worthwhile investment in their long-term learning.

For as many "Aha!" moments as my interrogations prompted, there were as many moments of blank stares and monosyllabic responses. Some students tended to struggle with naming things they had done well, challenges they're facing, or both. Some students were able to name challenging spots, but couldn't point to areas of violin playing or musicianship they needed to work on. My hope in these cases is that I managed to arouse curiosity. For a student who needs a couple minutes to come up with something they did well, perhaps that moment of "taking positive inventory" will feel encouraging and will help them to consolidate good habits. For the kid who thinks their sole difficulties are measures 18 and 44, perhaps they can begin to realize that they don't have to have all technical difficulties ironed out before being allowed (and obliged!) to work on tone, phrasing, vibrato, etc. And in cases where a student is truly drawing a blank, maybe the inevitability of my questioning at the next lesson them will inspire them to begin thinking about their playing from a Bird's Eye view for the first time.

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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