

"I take the speaker and the speech together, and observe how they sort and harmonize with each other. Such a man is exactly what I understand by "musical" – he has tuned himself with the fairest harmony, not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but has made a true concord of his own life between his words and his deeds..." (Plato, Laches, 188d)

Teaching and Learning Violin Performance in Pre-tertiary Programs at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music

A pedagogical framework
(Goetz Richter, Sydney)

Background: Conservatorium High School & Open Academy

This paper is written as clarification for students, parents and colleagues at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (in particular, those directly involved with the Sydney Conservatorium High School and the Conservatorium's "Open Academy") to outline a pedagogical method which affirms the learning of musical performance as care-of-self. The secondary programs at the Sydney Conservatorium provide a unique educational environment and a special opportunity for musically and intellectually gifted students in Sydney to develop their skills and passions in a balanced way. I am very pleased to be able to contribute to the development of young violinists as thinking musicians in this context and to work together with the educators of the Conservatorium High School and Open Academy in meeting the needs of developing the abilities of violinists in particular.

In my understanding, the Conservatorium High School, the Open Academy and the Sydney University's Sydney Conservatorium of Music have at least two common purposes: to practically affirm the centrality of music and musical performance within education and to develop the brightest and best young musicians and scholars to be able to consider a career in music at the end of their High School years. In my view, the latter purpose is not a demand and any students no matter how gifted and able should consider their choice of career and study when such a decision becomes educationally and practically sensible.

However, it stands to reason that students of the Conservatorium's non-tertiary programs should be able to consider music performance as an option of study at the end of their secondary schooling. By accepting non-tertiary students into my class at the Sydney University's Conservatorium of Music I am assuming that students will wish to reach a standard of musical performance at the end of their high school years from which they can consider music as a tertiary study option if they so wish. This aim demands consistent and thoughtful application from all with the responsibility for the education of these young musicians. It also demands a high level of dedication and active participation from the students themselves.

Studying musical performance properly involves the entire human being and requires autonomous somatic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual attention. Most importantly it develops a continuously developing imagination and capacity to think. It is well known that making music enhances complex and sophisticated skills in areas other than musical performance. This is the reason why the proper and serious study of musical performance is the most beneficial educational and developmental activity for human beings outside any context of music as an aesthetic art.

Method

Violin students in Australia develop in many different contexts. They approach the learning and study of musical performance with very diverse motivations, intentions and expectations. These intentions can often change radically and quickly and as a result of developing educational and parental influence. There are nevertheless those for whom violin playing seems consistently an essential part of their personal identity. They constitute and experience an important dimension of their personal being through making and performing music. It is essential that their aspirations are affirmatively progressed even where pragmatic considerations have to be asserted. To deprive a musician of music and the affirmative opportunity of music making is equivalent to withholding food or drink. While one may survive for a short time, in the long term it will lead to a destruction of spirit and persona.

The conception of the central role of music to the identity and being of a person is at times confused by parents and teachers as an opportunity to push for demonstrable musical and instrumental achievements to gain enhanced opportunities in the market place of education and elsewhere. In this way, public success replaces the concern for a sustainable, organic development or the requirements of the art and subject matter of musical performance. If we consider that at stake here is the essence of a person's identity and being, the responsibility for sustainable development becomes yet more pressing. It requires a clear articulation of method and principles against which any shortsighted "end-gaining" of success and acclaim can be properly identified and corrected.

At the heart of all pedagogical method is the understanding how we facilitate learning and establish foundations of a purposeful and effective study in violin performance. Learning requires evident and consistent progress. It needs to stay clear of frustration and promised, delayed rewards. Instead, the experience of achievement and creativity must accompany the student's learning on a continuous, daily basis. Achievement and creativity are in this understanding not primarily competitively achieved or driven by socially motivated approval. Instead, I refer to achievement here as the experience that the hitherto difficult and even impossible has been achieved or at least has been shown to be clearly achievable. Learning requires the consistent experience that the obscure has become clear, the difficult has become easy, the challenging has become effortless, the unknown has become known and what seemed tentative has become assured. If the study of violin performance is to be an activity characterized by such transformations, then I am suggesting it should be based on five foundational methodological principles:

- 1. The principle of student autonomy: Teaching and its methods aim at the learning, care of self and attention of the student**

The ultimate focus and purpose of teaching is the learning of the student. This principle, properly understood, implies that suggestions, explanations, measures or discipline by the teacher validates itself in the learning of the student. The principle of student-centricity largely rejects methodological dogma. It recognizes that the attention of the student to herself is central to the learning process. Accordingly, its principal challenge is to limit the capacity for discomfort, distraction and diversion. Explanations, exhortation, discipline and direction are only helpful if they have a positive didactic aim and enhance the attention and capacity of the student for a care-of-self.

- 2. The principle of somatic awareness: Performance learning is verified through autonomous and holistic consciousness**

Violin performance is an activity of the imagination which articulates itself through mental and physical intuitions. The sounds of a violin performance are particular – they are the outcome of a musical and somatic

imagination. Any artistic inspiration for sound which is not accompanied by a particular somatic image of a particular and concrete feel is ultimately meaningless for a performer. Thus, teaching needs to build somatic awareness and enhances kinesthetic perceptions (proprioception) in relation to acoustic outcomes. These are always autonomously conceived by the student.

The particular somatic consciousness that will enhance violin playing focuses on the energetic behavior of the human body as a whole. This is experienced directly when the student is asked to identify the energetic centre of movement. In the case of violin playing, if peripheral functions (hands, arms) remain as transparent as possible, a sense of centering movement towards the middle of the body (stomach-pelvis) shifts physical effort into the stronger core of the body and allows for freer co-ordination. Free co-ordination in turn translates into free musical and artistic expression.

The centering of movement is dependent on freeing postural alignment and inhibiting physical effort consciously in the periphery or upper torso, shoulders, arms and hands where needed. This highlights the importance of considering the instrumental set-up and of referring all practice methods to a central, rhythmically organised recovery phase in which musical-physical activity can also be purposefully conceived. The first step then towards the improvement to movement is organizational and rhythmic. Deconstructing movement sequences through stops and stop-patterns assists initially the growth of consciousness in centering movement and leads to an enhanced awareness of the correlation between imagination and movement. Once this temporal and energetic consciousness is achieved the student can rely on a “thinking-in-action” more effectively. Regardless how the student is lead to this awareness, however, unless a combination of clear musical and somatic awareness directs sound and movement the performer may not necessarily attain optimal characteristics of free and creative performance.

3. The principle of the centrality of the imagination: The autonomous imagination of the performer determines all dimensions of performance

While we frequently refer to musical performance as an artistic activity and to musicians as creative and imaginative people, we also often limit our notion of creativity to the inspiration of sound or to an abstract notion of musical form, intensity, expression and temporal organization. However, a performer ultimately requires concrete images of the particular use of somatic energy, structure, direction and importantly temporal application which translate musical intention into physical and kinesthetic gestures. These images can be defined through passivity – in fact, focus on physical passivity, active inhibition and receptiveness are often more productive than analytically conceived direction or activity in finding the best way to play. In addition, the circumstances of performance imply a capacity to think in action and to direct such action consistently through the imagination. This means that the imagination of the performer must be consistently active and must remain comprehensively engaged on all levels of the performance to varying- and structured degrees.

It needs to be pointed out here that this view is importantly distinguished from a method which seeks to automatise the actions of performers relying on their mere unpacking in performance. While automatisms can prove to be reliable under contexts of stress they also have clearly limited scope for development and if prevalent they will in fact prevent the musician from performing authentically according to the principles of artistic creativity. The conception that a musical performance is learnt through a blueprint and that its performance is automatized in its detail is entirely limited as it ignores the essentially dialogical and narrative features of musical performance which qualify it as a free, even improvisatory art- regardless of the existence of a score. This pedagogical framework rejects automated performance and performance patterns as unsustainable for long term musical development. All musical playing is the result of a clear play in the imagination. Such clear imagination, which involves musical, somatic and temporal/energetic forms and representations must take place for a performer to develop confidence in her ability to perform. This highlights the pivotal importance of consistent mental practice or imagined performance.

Affirming the centrality of the imagination exposes the limits and even danger of repetition as a method of practice. Continuous repetition reduces attention and leads to a disengagement of the imagination and (ultimately) passivity, boredom and depression. This fact which has been highlighted on occasion by

pedagogues¹ places essentially in question any view that skills are a result of the quantity of repetition or practice. Interestingly, pedagogues who have emphasized the centrality of attention, thinking and creative participation in practice have also cautioned against the reliance on repetition. They have often advanced surprisingly modest quantitative demands for daily practice time (Flesch, Dounis, Auer, Spohr, Paganini (according to Schottky)). Rather than seeing hours of practice as a benchmark for “hard work” and as a reflection of the virtuous dedication of the student we instead insist on clear conception and refinement of musical idea and execution before a repetition is attempted for the purpose of improving outcomes. This does not deny that professional and artistic violin playing requires a background of repertoire and study which in itself requires significant time commitment to learn, refine, memorize and perform. It does, however, affirm the self-evident truth that no repetition can be effective unless it is done with purpose².

4. The principle of listening as truthfulness: Perceptions of dissonance, discomfort and unease are immediate signals, must be taken seriously and must stimulate a creative response

One of the most challenging aspects for a musical performer is her capacity to adequately perceive the qualities and characteristics of her performance. Such perception occurs on many levels as the performer is engaged in performance in a multi-medial way. Acoustic perception is naturally the most obvious and important way through which we share a musical performance. However, it is by no means an exclusive one. Particularly the somatic awareness of movement which is at the same time a concrete and embodied reflection of rhythmic consciousness is a crucial channel for performers and audiences through which they establish the authenticity and originality of a performance. Listening thus has multi-sensory dimensions. Its critical demand is that it must be truthful. This means, listening is mindful of a capacity for error and accordingly searches for increasing clarity and awareness. Referring to listening as a search, identifies it then as attentive and active. The purpose of engaged and active listening in the first instance is, however, not its self-serving elevation of the listener but recognition that such listening reveals attributes of a use of self. Listening becomes a form of self-care. In listening to music we listen to ourselves. Musicians, who listen, always hear others and improve attention to themselves. Their inclusive consciousness is aware of the other as encompassing essential dimensions of the self.

5. The principle of consolidating progress: Learning follows a path of consistent and incremental success.

Whatever skill level a student has achieved, learning to progress and develop this level requires consolidating progress. The student needs to be conscious of stable and consistent progress of learning from the impossible to the achieved and achievable. This will enable the student to define herself as a creative artist. Identifying flaws or undeveloped skills in this process of learning has an entirely contingent function, namely, to articulate the solution and its strategy of implementation without delay. This will lead to a habit for the student to identify herself with success and achievement. Learning through a perspective of success is critical to build the resilience and active capacities demanded by a performer. This does not imply ignorance to flaws or mistakes, but rather a clearly ordered attitude towards them.

Lessons

It seems clear that these pedagogical principles which I can only briefly sketch will translate into a particular view of the violin lesson. The violin lesson is a place in which students identify the requirements for- and methods of their learning. It develops attention and awareness and must be designed to help students understand themselves, their art and the music in such a way that their practice becomes effective and their performance natural. The lesson is not primarily an opportunity to tell a student what they must do musically or even technically. It is rather a chance to test the student’s attention and probe the clarity of her listening, thinking, imagination or ideas. The lesson does not solve problems- the student does. The lesson assists the student to establish creative strategies. It directs the student’s attention in such a way that solutions and actions become self-evident. The lesson identifies all opportunity it can to promote the autonomous, active direction of the student’s consciousness and learning.

¹ Notably Dounis

²“Insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result” (Albert Einstein)

The lesson focuses in the main on three areas of the curriculum: general technique, applied technique (studies) and repertoire. It should in the first instance provide the student with the opportunity to show what has been accomplished since the last lesson. This is best done in largely un-interrupted performance. The next step then identifies where a particular performance remains unclear or frustrated. This is done by addressing the student's perception in a careful, Socratic manner. Directing the attention and the thinking of the student enables the teacher to lead the student towards a mindful modification of the relevant musical or physical skill and prevents the re-affirmation of automated responses which are largely responsible for frustrations and ignorance. In this process, affirmation, frustration control, modeling, direction of attention (highlighting and questioning) play a critical role. Organizational assistance and outline (preparation or practice program for the next lesson) then forms a context for the student's ongoing attention while on her own in the practice room. It frames expectations and the development of habits and skills.

The conception of the lesson as a place where we scaffold the student's learning is essentially Socratic in approach. It is based on the Platonic view that the student is already in possession of skills and answers which however remain obscure and hidden to her (*Meno*). It is the teacher's and the lesson's role to enhance the student's ability to uncover these. The lesson will articulate expectations but these will be expectations articulated through the student herself so that their presence in practice becomes a positive dynamism of progress. Expectations that are situated outside the student's intentionality function often as a powerful force of frustration and despair. They depress learning as consistent failure to live up to them as articulated by parents or teachers starts to determine the identity and self-perception of the student. The lesson is an opportunity to direct the focus of attention and awareness of the student to herself, her authentic perceptions, her authentic actions and her authentic intentions and to work with these. This attention is largely perceptual and eschews complex causal explanations. It identifies immediately a conception of the "right" thing to do and continues to rehearse this active and concrete conception within the imagination³.

Practice

In this understanding of learning so far outlined, practice is a most important activity of self-care, an opportunity to work with the imagination and to further clarity of thought. Practice needs to be free of distraction, anxiety or panic. It does not necessarily rely on extensive periods of time and can occur in circumstances where the instrument is not even present (mental practice). As learning is propelled by attention rather than repetition, performers need to develop a habit of mindfulness. This refers to a capacity to imagine and conceive their performance in all detail before playing initially and then translate this capacity into the flow of performance and become skilled at thinking while playing. A large part of this ability is determined by the level of somatic awareness the student has developed. The capacity to relax and recover physical effort ("ping") is crucial to the development of clear thinking and acute imagination. Students need to become skilled at thinking and imagining their playing and performance and at working in their imagination on technical skills and somatic states and energies.

Performance

Conditions in public performance differ categorically from merely playing in the practice room or even in the teaching studio. Student-performers need to be guided towards coping with the greater complexities and the increased distractions of public performance, transforming its nervous energy and changing focus to enhance their creativity. Performance, in other words, needs to be practiced consistently under varying conditions. It is particularly important that performance experience enhances our creativity and affirmative outlook. Of the many things we can notice and recall from a performance, the successful achievements are the most powerful agents of learning then. These can be contained in scope, however, every performance has successful components and the student must note and retain their characteristics and the way in which these were achieved. Over time, the student builds a repertoire of positive recollections, ideas and images which function as a resource for their future performance. The common approach to "learn from mistakes" must be

³ The view that teaching follows Socratic approaches is not common among teachers of performance where the instruction, teacher centric model dominates. It, however, has important exponents, notably the twentieth century Greek-American Demetrius Dounis.

understood properly: So-called “mistakes” have a very limited role in providing information only. They need to be expelled from the consciousness of the performer as soon as their information content is understood and practically resolved. Mistakes which remain in the performer’s consciousness erode the creative personality and outlook of the performer. This includes particularly mistakes which become somatically encoded and induce defensive gestures and movements (shifting, string crossings, off-string playing, complex coordination). These “startle reflexes” can be common among performers and even accomplished performers will come across them from time to time. It is important to identify them immediately and return all movement and thinking towards a free balance- and centering.

External Performance Opportunity

Performance opportunities form an important dimension for the development of violinists. Identifying them and using them effectively requires however a thoughtful approach. All public performances including participation in school- or youth orchestras, chamber groups, performance at competitions, eisteddfods, auditions or examinations are essentially performance opportunities. It is important to consider that a student’s performance is successful here. This means that a student’s musical and technical aims can be comfortably realized. It does not mean that all performances have to produce “winners”, but it does mean that all performances are characterized by genuine attributes of success and that the performer is able to acknowledge these attributes of their performance truthfully as achievements. It is vital that a young performer develops an independent notion of success in terms of a developmental understanding of the subject matter, especially in contexts where decisions or judgments cannot be expected to reflect principles of performance quality in a straight-forward sense.

A performance should allow a performer to recollect as maximum a number of successful characteristics as possible. In the first instance, this requires that the challenges or context to which the student submits herself are realistic and do not undermine the comfort and stability of the performer. It requires that preparation is taken seriously, including proper preparation with piano, if required by the performance so that the developing performer can present herself at her best and with confidence. Half-hearted attempts or just “having a go...” do not enhance learning and will undermine development. As schools and youth-orchestras place performance demands on students based on average expectations, parents (and instrumental teachers) will need to assist in defending learning priorities from time to time. As a ground rule for my work at the Conservatorium I require regular conversations about students’ performance commitments, opportunities and aspirations. It is very important that pedagogical directions set in violin lessons are not contradicted by agendas which are not conducive to the student’s musical or instrumental development.

Progress

The crucial dimension of all work on musical performance for a developing performer is the experience of progress. This experience must be evident to the student herself at all times. If the student understands clearly how it is achieved or how it is achievable, motivation for learning and practice will be fundamentally advanced. Where progress is frustrated or not evident, a student is likely to become disheartened and unfocused, her practice erratic or chaotic notwithstanding any assistance with practice strategy or any other supports that are put in place. This pedagogical framework for my work at the Sydney Conservatorium centralizes the student’s own perceptions of their own notable, immediate and consistent progress of learning. This experience needs to be distinguished from an aspiration to achieve public success immediately. Naturally, the progress and learning required to develop a well balanced and skilled performer requires a long-term commitment and approach. This implies patience and structured goals. However, experience and acknowledgment of immediate goals is importantly required to advance learning and enhance motivation. Learning and improvement must be a consistent, daily experience for the student.

Transparency

A balanced and sustainable development of instrumental performance requires consistency and coherence of methodology and actions. It requires the clear articulation of perceptions and sincerity of intent from students, parents and teachers. Accordingly, regular and forthright conversations on perceptions of progress, achievements, ambitions, frustrations or motivations are vital. In my work at the Conservatorium I strongly

encourage autonomy of thinking and I encourage students to take charge of their own development as musicians and people. I am also mindful that tacit agendas or undisclosed ambitions can conceal ignorance and insecurities and are ultimately unhelpful to the collaborative work between student, teacher, schools and parents. I thus encourage regular conversation about the wider context and perceptions of the study of instrumental performance and do not accept agendas which are not in the interest of the student's balanced development. I ask students, parents and colleagues to discuss their perceptions frankly and to challenge mine. This will form the basis for a community of learners to which all must aspire.

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