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Fundamental Concepts in Violin Studio Teaching: Sharing Thoughts with New Teachers

Di Su

In comparison with conservatory teaching, private studio teaching features a more flexible structure. Pupils are from various backgrounds with different learning objectives, giving teachers the freedom of developing their own pedagogy, style, and culture.

To be a violin teacher is a pleasure. We transfer the knowledge we have learned from our teachers to our students. We add new concepts, contents, and methods of our own into lesson plans. We are happy to see any accomplishments, big or small, that our students have achieved along the way through studying with us, and we create the violinists in our own way. The process of teaching a violin student is a creation of a musical person.

Being a violin teacher is not simple. A good player may not be necessarily a good teacher, and vice versa. Each student is unique in his or her own way. The differences are in, but are not limited to, the following areas: musical talent, physical condition, individual character, and specific purpose. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to use a single way to teach all of our students successfully.

When we face challenging situations, we usually try to find possible solutions in method books or from articles on teaching issues, and we often benefit from doing so. We also can use “common sense,” which is so natural that we sometimes neglect it. By stepping back from specific issues and thinking about fundamentals, we may understand the problem more thoroughly and be able to find alternative ways to improve our teaching.

As a “rookie” teacher you may wonder where to start when considering private studio teaching. My suggestion is to continue to be familiar with the fundamentals, which may not be as concrete as how to play a scale, but may appear to be somehow philosophical or psychological. The purpose of this article, meant for new studio teachers, is to share this author’s thoughts and experiences based on decades of violin teaching in both conservatory and private studio settings. It is my hope that the reader may find it useful.

Musical Talent

On one hand, everyone is trainable to play a musical instrument. This belief is the core philosophy in the Suzuki Method, which links the “mother-tongue” concept in acquiring language to music learning. On the other hand, there is such a thing called “musical talent” which comes at one’s birth and shows at an early age. Because of that, mastering violin playing is a very different task for individuals and it will surely turn out to be a different result for each learner. “Musical talent,” defines Seashore (1915, 129) “like all other talent, is a gift of nature-inherited, not acquired; in so far as a musician has natural ability in music, he has been born with it.” Auer (1921, 4) suggests in his book that in order to be a violin student, “there must be a certain amount of auditory sensibility to begin with.” However, we should not be discouraged by general definitions. Seashore’s emphasis is on “natural ability” which many wish they had. Auer’s requirement seems to be limited to future professional violinists. The fact is that some of the musical abilities can be nurtured and acquired through proper training and effective practice. Most learners may be able to achieve a certain level of musical ability. Using pitch recognition as an example, between so-called “tone-deaf” and “absolute perfect pitch” (also known as “perfect pitch”), there exist some other levels of such ability. After all, not all professional musicians possess perfect pitch and yet they are able to make their living playing music. Prospective violin students who lack the natural ability of absolute perfect pitch may have already benefited from doing other musical activities, such as singing or playing the piano, before picking up the violin. If they have had consistent music learning in any other form, then they may have developed a good sense of relative pitch or even gained a sort of near-perfect pitch. Of course, while it will not be instant success, many exercises and much time must be spent and invested in the course of musical ability training.

One of the most challenging tasks for the violin student is to play “in tune.” For beginners, we may utilize the piano to guide the student in matching pitches with relative accuracy. (It seems unnecessary to worry about the difference between Pythagoras’s Circle of Fifths and Equal-temperament Systems at the early stages.) As the student progresses we may begin to teach more advanced methods such as checking with open strings and natural harmonics, feeling vibrations, singing the notes, “hearing” before playing, and connecting relationships between the notes. However, whether or not the student is able to develop something described by de Bériot (Hodgson 1916) as “an exquisite sense of harmony” will depend on his or her natural ability (i.e., musical talent).

Therefore, anticipation of a student’s success should be realistic based upon his or her born talent. We may have to adjust the level of expectation as our observation and discovery continue. Ultimately, what we try to do is to help a person reach his or her highest musical potential, large or small, and play music not only for a possible career, but also for enjoyment.

Physical Condition

Not all children are created equal. Some have longer arms and fingers than others and some have stronger muscles. One of the initial assessments we make when we first meet a young new student is to measure his or her physical size using an instrument. It is crucial to have the right size violin from the start. There are various ways to measure student size. One simple way is to help the student put the violin on the left shoulder and place his/her chin on the chin rest. Then ask the student to stretch the left arm out completely with the left hand facing up underneath the violin and lining up with the violin neck. If the scroll is between the student’s wrist and palm, it is about the right size. For the bow, it should be approximately the same length of the student’s arm. If for any reason we have to choose either a bigger or a smaller size violin for a student (this could happen if the student rents a violin from the school where only limited sizes are available), then the smaller size is recommended because the bigger one creates more difficulties for the learner (i.e., excessive stretches may result in an incorrect hand posture, which will not only slow down the learning pace, but also make it difficult to correct in the future). Muscle strength is another physical aspect that we must consider. A weak muscle condition may affect the student’s ability to trill and vibrate, as well as using the bow. Like in sports, proper training can strengthen a violin student’s muscles. Through careful observations, we can decide what kind of exercises or etudes to use to improve the student’s muscle strength. Traditional exercise books, such as the ones by Sevcik and Schradieck, may be useful.

Individual Character

Studio teaching is a one-on-one activity in which both sides develop the understanding of each other during the course of study. It is more personal than classroom (group) teaching. Students are human beings with different mindsets, but they all need good communication and interaction with the teacher in order to learn well. It is important to encourage students to be actively engaged in the learning process and to be independent, critical, and creative. This philosophy is at the heart of

Yankelevich’s (Lankovsky 2016) successful “psycho-physiological” approach.

There are two kinds of teachers: One who sticks to a single lesson plan to teach all the students; and the other who tailors the lesson plan to fit individual students. The former teaches in a mono-style regardless the student and the latter is flexible in his/her teaching style depending on the character of the student. The former sets up rigid rules for all the students and communication is one-way, the method which Galamian (1985, 1) criticizes as “a dangerous procedure.” Not surprisingly, the latter will result in better outcomes. After the first few lessons—it may take weeks or months according to Galamian (1985, 106)—we may be able to figure out what kind of personality the student has, and then, individualize our teaching style to meet the student’s needs. For example, some students take strict criticism as the motivation while others work better with praises; some students follow verbal instruction promptly while others are more convinced by watching our demonstration. One of the qualities that great violin pedagogues have in common is that they are also psychologists who are able to not only recognize the student’s unique character and the level of musical talent, but also cultivate and bring out the student’s individuality.

Specific Purposes

Creating a complete violinist is our dream. In doing so, the student must receive a systematic training, which involves scales, etudes, and a comprehensive repertoire covering a variety of musical and historical styles. It may serve as a typical design for a conservatory student. Our lesson plan for other kinds of students, however, might be a different story because there are so many factors that will more or less impact our lesson plan. One of the major factors is the motivation to learn the violin. Students come to us with specific learning objectives. The following is a list of common goals and is by no means inclusive:

- To learn a musical instrument
- To explore their musical potential
- To join the school orchestra
- To pass music tests
- To major in music in college
- To become a professional violinist
- To be a violin teacher

On a few occasions, a new student may want to learn how to play the violin “just for fun.” We teach students in different ways in order to help them reach their personal goals. For example, repertoire for a college student majoring in music education may cover a wide range of styles but may not go as deeply as the repertoire for a student in violin performance since the former will be a generalist and the latter a professional player. Pre-college students aiming at playing graded solos for performance evaluation at state events or any authoritative organization, may not need to spend a lot of time learning etude books but instead concentrate on required scales, pieces, and sight-reading skills.

Patience

Patience is a virtue. A good teacher should be a good listener. For example, we should not interrupt the student’s playing even though we hear mistakes such as in the following situations:

- **The first attempt at sight-reading a new piece.** Let the student explore the new piece with freedom. It trains sight-reading skills, develops a proactive learning habit, stimulates curiosity, and builds up one's self-confidence.
- **The subsequent lesson with the first formal presentation of the piece.** Give the student an opportunity to present his or her interpretation of the music and understanding of the composition. It reveals the player's maturity in music expression and competence in techniques, as well as individuality. It updates our overall knowledge about the student and helps us plan for future lessons.
- **A dress rehearsal for a performance.** Let the student experience at least once an uninterrupted performing atmosphere and stage feeling.

Of course, it is not to say we let mistakes stay uncorrected.

There is no short cut in learning the violin. The student has to spend a lot of time on exercises, repetitions, drills, and the enormous repertoire. We should give students enough time to absorb new things and correct wrong things. For example, although some students learn faster than others in general, learning vibrato requires a good amount of time for all since it requires a new habit of playing. We should be patient and let the student learn comfortably without too much pressure.

Tolerance

Tolerance is necessary. Learning to play the violin involves a long process of building technique. Students at various levels need appropriate degrees of tolerance. We must level with the student and give him or her enough time to practice in order to achieve the next level at a realistic pace. For example, when teaching a beginner, one thing that we must bear in mind is imagining the learner's difficulties. It is easy to say but hard to do. Because after so many years our memory of our very first lessons may have, at least among some of us, become vague or even lost. To mimic and/or recall the experience, put yourself in a beginner's position by playing the violin in the opposite way from which you currently play (i.e., hold the bow with the left hand instead of your right hand, or vice versa, and the violin on the right shoulder and try to play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in tune with a correct posture, and honestly follow the bowings, fingerings, dynamics, tempo, and articulation). It can be difficult, if not impossible, for the beginner to handle so many new things simultaneously. What's more, the learner must maintain the posture in a most unnatural way featuring a twisted left arm and wrist while the right hand is doing something entirely different. With better understanding we may be able to tolerate the learner's status more reasonably and focus on one thing at a time in a list of many tasks.

Learning from Failure

Teaching is an art, which does not come automatically even for established players. Teaching is a learning process in which we study theories, methods, literature, repertoire, and we try to put the knowledge to use. We want to have good teaching results and see our students succeed. However, it is possible that we have had and will have failures. Teaching provides opportunities for us to learn from our students and our own mistakes. Instead of being

disappointed when things are not going the way we expected, we should analyze the reasons, causes, situation, and condition, to see if there were any unsuitable steps in teaching the student and if there is a possible solution to overcome the obstacle in the future. A question to ask about a student not making progress could be—were the pieces that the student was learning too advanced for his or her actual level? If so, was it about something technical, musical, or psychological? Failure is an invaluable source for learning how to teach better.

Practice

A large portion of learning the violin takes place outside lessons. Therefore, teaching students how to practice on their own should be part of the lesson. The following points are worth reviewing:

- **Quality above quantity.** It is a tradition to tell the student to "practice, practice, practice," because that is the way to "get to Carnegie Hall." Repetition is one of the principles of the Suzuki Method. It is true that learning the violin is time consuming. However, learning is ultimately judged by outcomes, not the length of practice time. If there is no improvement, what is the point of practice? The more effective way of practice is to put quality above quantity. Contrast hours of playing without paying attention to the purpose of practice to qualitative practice that concentrates not only on tone production, intonation, and interpretation, but also on solving concrete problems (i.e., an arpeggio in a concerto or a phrase in a Bach solo). To stress the point, Gruenberg (1919, 11) of the New England Conservatory of Music writes, "it is better not to practice at all, than to practice incorrectly." It is the teacher's duty to instill the philosophy in students' minds and make it a habit.
- **One thing at a time.** If you look for an example of multi-tasking, look no further: playing violin illustrates exactly what multi-tasking is. It is fascinating as well as challenging. Therefore, while all things are considered, sometimes it may be a good idea to focus on one thing at a time, especially when the student is a beginner.
- **Time distribution.** It is important to spend much more time on difficult parts than to play through the whole piece repeatedly. This strategy will balance out the piece as a whole and result in a smooth performance.

Conclusion

From being a student to becoming a teacher is a turning point. The role change is so significant that one may need some kind of advice. The rookie teacher may have been well equipped with necessary training and techniques, but it is the fundamental concepts that will help the new teacher start a teaching career without being confused or overwhelmed. Welcome to teaching-land!

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Di Su studied violin with Professor Ke-Qiang Li at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and held a faculty position at the conservatory after graduation. He also studied with professors Alexander Meshibovsky, Theodore Arm, and Young-Nam Kim in the United States. Di's research interests in the field of violin include pedagogy, literature, and history. His biographical essays on several American musicians, including Billy Vaughn, Erich Leinsdorf, William Schwann, John Cage, Nadine Conner, and Sarah Caldwell, appeared in *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives*. His feature article, "The Tardy Recognition of J. S. Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo" appeared in *American String Teacher* in May 2011.



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