

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

By Craig Timmerman

I have made a list of the secrets that I have learned about teaching music. I do not know exactly where the ideas came from. I rather think that most of these ideas came from someone else, or somewhere else, and at one time I felt suddenly as if I had discovered something. I see now that during the moment of discovery, the idea became part of me—or mine.

I hope they can be incorporated into your teaching also; I hope you can make them your secrets.

1. One-point concentration is the first and most important concept to develop. Physicists tell us that when a force is concentrated on one point, its power is magnified. A knife can cut because of the concentration of force on its fine edge. Likewise, a person can learn the most delicate skill through focused concentration. Without focused attention, we are only half present and nothing we try can work effectively. When we are focused, however, changes happen so quickly they become exciting and motivating. To help develop one-point concentration, devise a one point lesson.
2. The practice period is not only for the child: it is our growth time too. It provides us an opportunity to practice our kindness, nobility and humanity. It's when we practice using our observation powers and our love. To think of practice only as something to benefit the child is to lose half of the worth of the ensemble.
3. Someone needs to set a creative atmosphere before every practice and lesson. If the right atmosphere is established, mutual respect can be developed and self-respect maintained. In a comfortable setting, practice becomes not only a means to a distant end, but also a rewarding, enriching experience in itself. Listening to a tape of last week's lesson on the way to this week's lesson might help to create the mood. A hug or quick backrub could do the same. Although a learning atmosphere doesn't happen by accident, it can be created by a caring adult.
4. Every lesson should be recorded and listened to several times during the week. This allows the student to hear his work as an observer—to hear what the audience hears when he plays. A great deal of subconscious learning grows out of this experience. The results are dramatic, yet so simple to produce.
5. To hear the whole side of a record is effective for getting the sound of the instrument into the ear and developing musical expression in your works. However, for the memorization and in-depth studies of specific pieces, the whole-record approach has too broad a focus. For the best results, pieces should be heard repeatedly for at least an hour a day. For short songs, the endless cassette is a good tool. More lengthy songs can be recorded several times on a longer cassette. Even I am able to memorize pieces when I use this focused technique and hear the works over and over again.
6. Ability grows at home; lessons are for something else. Ability is developed gradually as we repeatedly put our best into what we are already doing correctly. Lessons are where new insight and inspiration are gained. Lessons also allow the student to show his preparation and understanding of what has come before. Make sure your student or child understands the difference; if he expects to become better at the lesson—as opposed to developing his skills later—he may be discouraged.

Develop Ability

7. The term "review" has such remedial connotations that I avoid the use of the word. Doing what we can already do well, with the idea of producing better results and striving to make the process more natural, is "ability development." One third of the practice time should be spent on pieces already mastered. I recommend that no "teaching" be done during this time. This is the time for the adults to sit back and actually enjoy the music. It also allows the technique the child is presently studying to soak into his playing and become a natural part of his talent. Another method of ability development is having the child play along with the record. The idea is to develop to the skill of the record. It is a rather clever idea, I think.

Of course it is also important for the child to play unaccompanied, and sometimes with a metronome. But again, eliminate the idea of "review" which has such a remedial connotation. We are developing ability.

8. To practice less than one hour a day is a grave mistake. Progress slows and motivation drops. Then the teacher must pull the student along as the child doesn't have his own energy and self-motivation. There seems to be some kind of time level under which the student can only develop "hollow ability". When practice exceeds the level, motivation runs high, the learning rate increases, and the student bursts with his own energy.

9. Being bored as a teacher, student or parent makes for dull music. You need to use your imagination to make the learning process exciting. Use anything that works but stop using it while it is still effective. I have found sometimes we need to do something rather dramatic to get a point across, and I must admit I enjoy the drama. What is right in one case, however, is completely wrong in another. But remember, part of the fun is matching up what resources we have with a student's needs. The difficulty comes in overusing something effective. Stop while it still works.

10. Our most important skill as teachers and teaching parents is observation. In using your observations, we must help the student the least amount we can. This encourages the motivation and energies and successes to come from the child, instead of being something we force on him.

11. Music is a language. I speak here of the kind of music that crosses borders of time and cultures. Music is a non-verbal communication of the spirit. In order to develop that language, we must be immersed in it often. Encourage your student or child to "speak" through his instrument. Also, try to keep talking during the practice and lesson sessions to a minimum. As too much verbal communication slows the brain in its learning of this new language.

12. From the first lesson, we must make the student to feel responsible for what comes out of the instrument. If he thinks that the teacher or parent will correct every mistake for him, he will undoubtedly develop a careless attitude. We should strive to give him what is needed to find and develop himself, for himself.

13. Motivation is actually very simple. We all enjoy what we feel successful doing. We don't enjoy what we don't do well. Simply make the student successful and, magically, the motivation will be there.

I emphasize the point that the student must actually *be* successful. Falsely giving praise to someone doesn't make success, but instead gives a feeling of dishonesty to both persons. If we give small enough points to improve, the student can truly succeed. Praise only when you cannot contain yourself. The student can feel deeply within himself when he's successful.

14. Always repeat whatever you are doing enough times so that you and the child recognize improvement. Make the lessons easy enough that the student learns relatively quickly. If success is recognized, then we feel good inside; we have used our powers to become better. If there isn't improvement, we have failed ourselves and withdraw that part of us from the task. This point is closely connected to the one above.
15. For the parent to help develop an intelligent understanding of his own teacher, he should also periodically watch a different teacher. Make it part of your family's lesson to watch at least one other session per week. The results are profoundly powerful and the benefits appear on several levels.
16. We reflect our environment. That is a fact not a choice. As adults, however, we do have the choice of the environment we establish around ourselves and our children. If your life is full of hectic activity, then you can hardly "reflect" anything else. Instead, give yourself time every day for some quiet repose to listen to your inner self; it's the inner self which learns and grows. It requires special attention.

All of the previous points I have made should focus into this final point

17. There is nothing more profound than unconditional acceptance. That's true for every person alive. Once you are unconditionally accepted you become free to be yourself. This is the gift I strive to give my students. I have found one thought that helps me in my personal life and in my unconditional acceptance of others: We are not what we do; we are who we are.

Craig Timmerman is known to many through his appearances at institutes and workshops, and while watching him teach it becomes obvious that he loves young people and the Suzuki method. His desire to share his experiences with a wider audience has led him to writing. Following private teaching in Mankato, Minnesota, he spent a year studying with Suzuki in Japan before joining the violin faculty of the Lexington, Kentucky Talent Education Association three years ago.

Suzuki World Jan/Feb 1982