

Teach the Technique, Use the Repertoire

By Ed Kreitman

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How many times have you witnessed this scenario? It's the first day of classes at the local institute and I am following two young mothers, six year olds in tow, into the classroom building. As we reach the outside door, one stops the other to introduce herself,

'Hi' I'm Joy - and this is my daughter Elise."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Joan and this is Julianne."

(I look at my watch. "four, three, two. one ...)

Joy looks at Julianne and says, "and what piece are you working on?"

It is the classic question. Let's get everyone pigeonholed here so we know where we stand. We all know that we shouldn't do it, but there it is: that common repertoire that we in the Suzuki movement all share. Well, what's wrong with that? After all we're really only asking if we're going to be in the same class, right? Both girls are just finishing Minuet I after struggling for a year through the Twinkles. Both are in the same class and will have a grand time together at the institute.

Perhaps, but consider this conclusion to the conversation:

Joan sheepishly replies for her daughter, "We've been studying the violin now for three years. And we're so proud...we've just finished Lightly Row."

"Loser," Joy mutters under her breath. "We are just about to start the La Folia in Book Six. I guess we won't be seeing you in class this week."

Think about what this can do to the self-esteem of the children in this case.

I coach my parents and students to avoid this comparison altogether and to reply to the classic question "and what are *you* working on?" with this response:

"Good posture, good tone and perfect intonation. What are you working on?"

After that answer, learning the notes to any piece, no matter what level, seems insignificant.

When I first started teaching, there was so much that I didn't understand. One of the most mystifying for me was how other teachers were able to bring their students to such a high level of performance regardless of the technical difficulty of the piece. It seemed to me, that my students struggled so much just to learn the notes, that by the time we finally put the last measure in place we were all so sick of the piece that all we wanted to do was move on to the next one. So they continued to move through the repertoire, but never really developed skill or improved the quality of playing.

After years of experimentation, observation, and practice, I have finally come to terms with this issue. And what I have discovered is that it all boils down to a question of priorities. What I hope to pass on to you today is simply this: if you want

to improve your teaching, create a set of teaching priorities, and then be incredibly consistent.

Here's a little exercise that I do on the first day of my teacher training classes. Take a piece of paper and jot down your three top priorities for living.

If you are like most of the teachers that I work with you have written things that are similar to these:

- My relationship to my family and children
- My relationship to God
- My responsibilities as a teacher
- The quality of my life, etc.

These are all great goals to have for living, but they are not the top three priorities. If you didn't write down these three things, in this order, then you have the wrong answers:

- Breathing
- Eating
- Sleeping

Because without these three, quite simply, you will not continue to live.

How do we know they are really priorities? Consider this: If you were having a cup of coffee with your next door neighbor, and she suddenly stopped. breathing, how would you react? Would you say, "Excuse me, dear, but could you just wait till this cake comes out of the oven, and then we'll see about getting you some help?"

Of course not. Everything in the room would stop while you focused immediately on the crisis.

In the same way that we have mistakenly listed our life goals as our

priorities for living, we may also be confusing our teaching goals with our priorities for teaching.

My goals for teaching are:

- to help the children that I work with feel good about themselves through their positive experiences with music,
- to help parents understand that it is the process, not the product of the educational experience that is important,
- and, for me, to enjoy the opportunity to be a central part of the lives of these wonderful human beings, my students, who come to share their accomplishments with me each week.

Now, what are my *priorities* for teaching?

- Good Posture
- Good Tone
- Perfect Intonation
- Developing musicianship (and finally, at the bottom of the list)
- Learning the notes to a new piece.

These priorities have stood the test of time and have also proven to be as effective with a Twinkler as with an advanced student preparing the Mozart C Major Concerto.

I developed this system of priorities through my work at workshops and institutes and with transfer students who were desperately in need of an overhaul. It seemed that no matter what they thought their problems were--left hand technique, bow hold, shifting or vibrato--what always needed to be fixed first was their posture and the way they held their instrument and bow. After years of doing this type of remedial teaching, it dawned on me that perhaps the answer was to begin students this way and so a few years ago, I decided that I would never have a remedial student of my own again.

So what was different? I had always started off by teaching posture and bow hold to my beginners and they got pretty good at those skills before we moved on to learning repertoire, but it always seemed that as soon as we paid attention to learning pieces, the position went out the window.

Enter priority teaching. Instead of thinking of teaching in a linear pattern- first learn this, then learn that, next learn... I started to think of teaching in layers. First learn this, now can you continue to do this and add to that skill this new task. So when the child is learning to play Go Tell Aunt Rhody, for instance, allow the bow hold to digress into something less than perfect. If I notice that in the third measure of Rhody the bow hold has slipped, I don't say to myself, "Well, the bow hold is bad but let's wait to the end of the piece before we get help". That puts playing the piece on a higher priority than fixing the posture. Instead, I stop immediately and say, let's just get in there and fix that bow hold again, and continue to the end of the piece. Working this way is very tedious in the beginning and requires a lot of work on the part of the parent and teacher, but it develops very consistent playing that eventually becomes the habit, and pretty soon, you notice that you don't have to talk about the bow hold any more.

With this type of teaching, Book One group class takes on a whole new feel. Instead of the emphasis being on playing pieces, or worse, playing games, the emphasis is *now* on having a beautiful position, bow hold, body posture, etc., while playing the piece. So we are really working on the technique and just using the repertoire as a reason for having good posture.

In this series of articles, we'll be taking a closer look at the techniques and skills that I have listed as priorities for teaching. The next article will address the issue of playing by ear. We will be focusing on the specific skills that the student needs to be able to choose the notes to pieces that he or she hears on the reference recording.

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