

Practice and Progress

This commentary on the importance of building a regular practice routine was drawn from a letter contributed to Suzuki Chat by Daphne Hughes. Daphne was the founder of the Guelph Suzuki String School, and its longtime music director.

As a long time Suzuki teacher, parent and now grandparent, I am still struggling with the question about rate of progress through the repertoire. Yes, we want to avoid stressful competition between students and parents. Yes, our concern is with quality not quantity. Yes, the amount of time taken to get to the end of book 3, probably won't make any difference to a student as a violinist (cellist, pianist, etc.) when he/she is an adult. Yes, we should be concerned about developing noble character.

I have a niggling feeling that we have, in North America at least, done a little leaning over backwards in not pushing our students and parents to reach a bit beyond what they thought was possible. In our concern to avoid "stressing" our children we sometimes seem to be afraid to challenge them. Frequently, parents have said to me that they don't want to ask too much of their children because they want them to "love music." But surely we love to do the things we know we are good at. The surest way to turn someone off music is to create a situation where they go on and on, day after day, year after year, playing badly.

How do we build competence and skill so that playing is easy and joyful? Certainly not with 15 minutes of practicing done 3 or 4 times a week, sandwiched between 6 or 7 other activities. What lesson are we teaching our children if we encourage them to "sort of" half-way apply themselves to the activities that their parents and teachers feel are vital to their development as mature and responsible and sensitive adults? I sometimes wonder if, in my desire to keep students involved, even the ones that limped forward from year to year putting in the bare minimum effort, I have harmed them more than helped. In continuing to be the "nice guy," smiling and encouraging at weekly lessons, have I really been indicating that it's ok to do such important things without a sense of commitment and without any real effort? What kind of noble character is that building?

It seems to me that it is our duty as teachers to educate parents and students to be excited by and unafraid of the pursuit of excellence. The only way to reach for high standards is to be consistent and demanding about daily practicing. Once the tradition is established the time expands without effort, the accomplishments are motivating in themselves, and success builds success. An accidental result of this is faster progress through the repertoire. The goal is excellence. When excellence is achieved, new tasks become even easier. Consistency and respect for the method, the teacher and the child's incredible potential are essential. Of course, there are students who progress very slowly through the repertoire despite hard and consistent work. If excitement, commitment and respect for all three members of the Suzuki triangle are present, then who cares about how fast a child moves through the repertoire? But I suspect that, if those things truly are present at least a fair proportion of students will learn the repertoire fairly quickly once the essential Twinkle skills are mastered.

Daphne Hughes