

Teaching Yourself

By David Finckel

Everyone seems to agree that a good teacher is one who can teach students to teach themselves. This is much easier said than done, both on the part of the student and the teacher.

I come from a family of do-it-yourselfers, so I'll recommend developing the following habits on your way to greater self-sufficiency:

1. Driven curiosity

"Your luckiest moment is when you discover something that you can't do yet."

- Mstislav Rostropovich

The habit of absolutely having to figure out how to do something is essential for mastering any skill or craft. *Methods: (1) Love and respect the material at hand – you will be compelled to do justice to it, (2) Hang around with friends who are naturally curious – they are usually more interesting people anyway, and their excitement is usually contagious (2) Find anything that you are naturally curious about and try looking at music the same way*

2. Impatience

A typical self-teacher wants to get work done sooner rather than waiting around for someone to tell them what to do. *Methods: (1) Simulate as lesson and evaluate your own performance. Think "What would my teacher, or so-and-so whom I respect enormously, suggest? (2) Take frequent looks at your calendar and your watch, and at all the wonderful things there are to do in life besides sit inside and practice. That will get things moving.*

3. Perspective

Performers need to gain perspective on their art, on themselves, and the world around them. This perspective is what older, experienced teachers have. In a certain way, we are always making up for lost time, looking for greater perspective. *Methods: Go to concerts, masterclasses, friends' lessons. Listen to recordings. Study scores. Watch music videos. Read about composers' lives. Get to know other works by the composers whose pieces you are studying. As for feedback. Hang out with people who know more than you, etc.*

4. Powers of observation, analysis, comparison and imitation

Probably the most important assets. Learn from observing the strengths and weaknesses of others. Figure out what they are doing and how they are doing it. Observe yourself; analyze the differences. Assimilate what you like; rid yourself of habits and tendencies that are holding you (and others) back. *Methods: Use technology. Tape yourself, videotape yourself, try to make it sound better. Get observations from trusted friends and colleagues. Compare your performance, bit by bit, to your ideals.*

Acquiring the above habits is a worthwhile project. They form a basis upon which to acquire skill. Why not start now? There hardly any musician too young to learn to teach themselves.

Raising your standards: The great players' characteristics

One of the easiest ways to improve is to learn from players whom you admire. All you have to do is compare what they do to what you do, something I do for myself whenever possible. If you observe top players carefully and consistently, you'll likely notice the following:

1. They play with greater musical and technical consistency
2. They can play both louder and softer than the average player, with better quality
3. They are able to sustain, from a single tone to a whole phrase
4. They generally use more bow, often the whole bow
5. They use a greater variety of sound color
6. They are capable of moving the bow very fast and very slow
7. They vary the bow speed logically, in connection with the music
8. They can vibrate wider, faster, narrower and slower, and with more consistency
9. They are able to play closer to the bridge
10. They play with more articulation in both hands
11. They know more about the music they are playing, and the composers who wrote it
12. They have better source materials (editions)
13. They experiment more widely, musically and technically
14. They take better care of their instruments
15. They take better care of themselves

Some of the above abilities take time to develop, but a surprising number can be incorporated immediately. In many instances, it's simply a matter of expanding the range of what one is already doing.

Practicing

When we say we are going to practice, we've all got to know exactly what we're doing and why. Otherwise it's easy to waste lots of time and become frustrated.

I have a little saying that helps me focus when I'm practicing:

The purpose of practicing is to increase the probability that I will perform a piece correctly.

This definition excludes some very important components of instrumental study, such as experimentation with musical and technical ideas. But it does cover a large portion of what practicing is all about: confronting the most difficult problems, developing technical consistency, memorization, eradicating fear and building confidence.

The application of this principle is not complicated: train yourself to do something correctly, and repeat it correctly many times, over a period of days or weeks. There is not a lot of magic in it, only discipline and concentration.

It's said that "you are what you eat" and the same is true of instrumental study: "You sound like what you practice". If you play a passage fifty times and only get it right ten times, you have a twenty-percent chance of getting it right on stage (or even less if you factor in the fear that you're not really prepared). Play the passage forty times out of fifty correctly, and you're on your way to building confidence. You've got an eighty percent chance at getting it right, so you can have more confidence as well – your nerves have less chance of wrecking your performance.

To practice a difficult passage with a high degree of accuracy and consistency, you may have to slow it down to a snail's pace. This is FINE – you are getting much more done by playing a passage slowly and correctly than by playing faster without detailed attention. Challenge yourself at the slower tempi by playing the passage in different rhythms, at different dynamic levels, with varying phrase shapes, but always correctly. Remember: mastering a piece of music is a long term investment without any definitive end. Be content with doing something right under tempo for days, or even weeks – it doesn't matter. You are building for the future, one solid brick at a time.

Approaching a piece of music

Too much cannot be said for the importance of getting the right start when learning a piece of music. Attention should be paid to the following:

1. Source materials
2. Outside influences

Source materials

In a lesson or masterclass it's often an unhappy discovery to realize that a student's musical problems arise from an inferior edition of a work. When learning a piece of music, *there is no substitute for getting as close to the original source as possible*. This means looking at the manuscript if possible (usually difficult, but getting somewhat easier) and finding the most reliable edition in which the editors have preserved the composer's markings.

The best edition of any piece is that which *has no editing in it by any performer whatsoever*. The unluckiest we can get is to think that we are learning Beethoven's phrasing when we are actually only playing someone else's bowings. Some editions have both – the editor's suggestions in dotted lines on top of the original. At least this provides the option of seeing how the composer wrote the music, but it would be still better to see something for the first time without another interpreter's ideas. After all, it is YOU who are going to play the piece and have to answer for what you do. You have to take full responsibility for your choices, and they should be your own, educated choices, based upon the composer's intentions – not made for you by someone else, no matter how famous or brilliant they may be.

In a concerto, the best way to see the composer's intentions is to look at the solo part in the full score. In sonatas it's easiest to look at the solo line printed above the piano part – usually it's untampered with. Fortunately, for chamber music, there are now many responsible editions: Bärenreiter, Universal, Henle, to name a few. Invest in them – it's a small price to pay for the peace of mind that you know what the composer wanted. And, when you can't get around music that's been massacred by some editor, there's always White-Out.

Outside influences

A recording, a live performance, or the instructions of a teacher can be powerful influences on a student's conception and performance of a work. Undoubtedly, most of us are guided and inspired by mentors and great performers. However, there comes a time in every performer's life where they must take full responsibility for their own interpretation, and when that moment arrives there are only two sources to return to: the composer, and our own educated instincts.

I believe that a good teacher should always ensure that the composer is a part of the student's study, from the beginning. What is the point of excluding the composer's intentions from the learning process? Their wishes should have at least an equal voice with the teacher.