

The First Step

Why so many beginners learn to play without listening, and how the bow decides it.

Sit through a concert of beginners and you will notice something strange. A child plays a short piece, clearly out of tune, and seems untroubled. The face is concentrated, the eyes go from the page to the left hand to the bow. The child is busy, with everything except the sound. The parents applaud, the teacher smiles: it is normal, they are just starting.

Everything in that word, normal, deserves a second look.

Two difficulties, one of them hidden

The beginner faces a visible difficulty: holding the instrument, placing the body, coordinating two arms that do entirely different things. Everyone sees it, and almost all the effort of teaching goes there. On top of it all, the sound is ugly.

The beginner also faces a hidden difficulty: thinking the music. Imagining a sound before producing it, hearing it inside, then comparing what comes out with what was intended. This is the loop that makes a musician: thought, gesture, listening, correction. The gesture takes its target from the thought; the listening tells the thought how close the gesture came.

Teaching usually treats the visible difficulty first and expects the hidden one to settle itself later, once the gesture is in place. It is the nineteenth-century order described in *Two Clocks, One Student*: gesture first, sound expected to follow. The order should be the reverse. A gesture is built from the intention it serves, and research on motor learning points the same way: attention placed on the effect of a movement, here the sound, produces better learning than attention placed on the movement itself. The capacity to think the music is what makes it possible to build the know-how to act.

It is also what draws a child to music in the first place: the pleasure of listening, of finding an inner song and the emotions it carries, and of sharing them. The wish to explore that inner power is the engine of learning. Teaching gains everything by building on it from the first lesson.

The first step

Learning the violin, viola or cello begins with a very high first step. Before the pupil gets anything back, a sound worth listening to, a phrase that sounds like music, there is a long climb of effort with little in return. The steps after it are lower. The first one decides who keeps going.

The bow sets the height of that step. A bow that responds late, sustains little and absorbs a large share of the arm's energy makes every sound more expensive. The child presses, grips, and gets a scratch for the effort. The more limited the bow, the higher the step; with a poor enough bow, it rises out of reach. And since the sound is poor, everyone agrees to stop listening to it.

What “it is normal” teaches

Here the damage moves from the body to the mind. The child imagines a sound, however vaguely, from recordings or from the teacher's playing, and obtains another. Told that the gap is normal, the child learns the most expensive lesson of all: that what one thinks and what one produces belong to two separate worlds. The ear disconnects from the hand. The loop stays open.

This is what the untroubled, out-of-tune beginner shows. These children hear perfectly well: play them the recording of their concert and most of them recognise at once that they were out of tune. While playing, they heard nothing, because their whole attention was taken by the gesture, perhaps by reading the note. The ear works; it is simply left out of the loop. They have learnt that listening is no part of playing.

I watched my own daughter go through this. She was reasonably well equipped and had been playing for more than two years when, one day, she stopped in the middle of a piece and said: “But what I'm playing is awful.” Her playing had not changed. Something had changed in her head: for the first time, her thought and her listening had connected. Two years to reach the point where learning really begins.

The eye in place of the ear

Another habit of the first lessons works in the same direction: the stickers. Strips of tape on the fingerboard show the child where to put each finger; more tape on the stick shows where to place the bow. The reasoning is that they help the child get started and come off later; without them, the playing would be too far out of tune.

What they build, though, is a loop of their own: eye, gesture, eye. The child learns to find a note by looking for it, and to check it by looking again. The finger lands on the tape and the note counts as right, whether it sounds right or not. The target has moved from the sound to a place on the fingerboard, and the ear, once again, has nothing to do. The head turns towards the left hand, and the posture follows.

Removing the tapes then means unlearning one loop before building the other. My hypothesis is that it costs less to spend more time at the start building the link between the imagined pitch, the finger and the ear, which is the loop the child will need anyway. The start is slower; the transition, shorter, because there is nothing to remove.

The tapioca effect

When I lend bows to classes for young children, the teacher sometimes sees the pupil relax at once: the shoulders drop, the sound opens. “Spectacular,” the teacher says. Then the lesson ends, the bow goes back in its case, and life resumes as before.

It reminds me of a plate of tapioca. Draw a spoon across it and for a moment you see the bottom of the plate; then the pudding flows back and the bottom is gone. The observation was made, and the system swallowed it. Because the bow has no place in the method, the method has nothing to hold on to what the bow revealed.

The problem is therefore one of material and of method at the same time. A better bow without a method that uses it is a spoon in tapioca. A method centred on sound, with a bow unable to give it, is the other half of the same failure.

The outfit

For the youngest, the choice of bow is often made before the first lesson, by the shop. The quarter-size violin is sold as an outfit: instrument, case and bow, made in the same factory, at a price that leaves nothing for the bow. And the quarter-size bow has too little weight to draw a sound from the string on its own.

From what I have observed and tested, a half-size bow works better from the start, even on a quarter-size violin. Small children play mostly near the frog anyway, so the extra length costs them nothing, and the extra weight does part of the work their arm cannot yet do. The obstacle is absurdly practical: a quarter-size case will not take a half-size bow. The outfit locks the child into the bow that came with it.

“With this, madam, he will be able to start.” And, quite often, to stop.

Earlier answers

The problem is old, and so are the attempts to solve it. In France, pupils were long required to study one or even two years of solfège before touching an instrument. The intention was right: build the musical thought first. The remedy reproduced the split it meant to cure. Thought was taught without the instrument, as a bitter dose to be swallowed for the pupil's own good, and gesture came later, without thought. Many children gave up in between, for lack of any link between the theory and the playing. It is the same reflex described in *Two Clocks, One Student*: one problem cut in two, each half handed to a different time.

Thought before gesture therefore means before each gesture, in the same lesson, on the same instrument: never a year earlier.

Other traditions put the inner sound first. Suzuki has children listen for months before they play; teaching inspired by Kodály begins with singing. On the order, they are right. Suzuki's aim is that every child plays, and its means serve that aim well: within months, the child plays one or two well-known pieces, and the family is delighted. The tapes belong to that design, and the left hand is guided by them: the eye takes over from the ear at the very moment the loop should close. A conservatoire aims further, at musicians who build their own sound, and the same means take them only part of the way. Add a bow chosen for its price, and the gap between the imagined sound and the produced sound opens at the first stroke. The better the inner ear, the sharper the gap, and the sooner the child learns to live with it by listening less.

Starting the other way round

Lowering the first step means working on both sides at once.

Thought before gesture. Before the stroke, the child sings or hums the note and holds it in mind; after the stroke, compares. One question returns in every lesson: was it what you wanted?

The sound as the first subject of study. An open string, played and then listened to as it dies away, is a first lesson in itself: counting the waves of sound after the bow leaves the string teaches the child that the sound has a life of its own, and that it is worth following.

The ear as the guide of the left hand. Each note is placed by listening for it, with the time this takes at the start, and with no tape to remove later.

The wrong note as information. From the first weeks, the child, rather than the teacher, is the one who notices that a note is out of tune, and decides what to do about it.

A bow chosen for response and sustain from the first lesson: a half-size bow from the smallest sizes, then three-quarter and full size, with a case that takes it. At the start there is no compensation to undo: it is the cheapest moment of a musician's life to get the tool right.

The recording as a mirror. Letting children hear their own playing shows them what their ear already knows, and starts closing the loop.

Teacher, parents and bow maker in the same conversation, so that what a better bow reveals in a lesson stays in the lesson.

The bow first

At this stage, the bow matters more than the instrument. What the child needs first is to hear, under the ear, a sound worth listening to: that is what closes the loop. A correct sound, modestly projected, teaches the ear; a poor sound, projected far, teaches it to switch off. For a beginner, a bow of high acoustic efficiency is the first investment, ahead of the instrument.

How many children stop at the foot of the first step, convinced they lack talent, when what they lacked was a closed loop and a tool that answers? The step can be lowered. It takes teaching the thought before the gesture, and giving the child a bow that rewards listening.

Sources

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