



Learning self practice

the benefits of group performance classes, Alex Laing

We know as teachers that we are getting something right if our students are clearly achieving results from good quality practice. Every student, or seasoned professional for that matter, needs help from time to time. Nevertheless, personal practice can thereafter become mundane; one can slip into routines that lack imagination, thought and care. The best practice is, of course, focussed and understood practice. Essentially, practice should be the rediscovery of what was learned in the lesson, but in the student's own mind and in the student's own terms. In other words, the student learns to become their own teacher. I am fortunate at Uppingham School, in that I have been able to build a strong cohort of young violinists, some of whom play to an extremely high level. One of the ways this has been achieved is through developing a team spirit amongst the

players. Group performance classes have been central to this. These occur only occasionally, perhaps once or twice each term, but the benefits have been very clear to see.

A typical performance class will last about an hour, and will feature three or four students performing to their peers. I have always found performing to my peers much more stressful and nerve inducing than performing to any other audience, and my students find the same. Because of this, the atmosphere of the class needs careful handling, especially at first. It is crucial that the performers find it a positive experience. In introducing the class, I ask the audience of peers first to come up with aspects of the performance that they appreciate, whether it be musical, emotional or technical. Everyone must notice something good and they must express it clearly to the performer. In this way, the atmosphere is always a collegial and

supportive one. When one performs, one tends to focus on the things that go wrong, or that could have been better. It is so useful to be told by a dozen of your peers that they have noticed some good things.

As the leader of the class, you may hear views from your student audience that you disagree with, or that you feel have not been expressed in the clearest manner. It is important not to disagree overtly. If a student is expressing a genuine reaction or a well-thought-out idea, it cannot be dismissed. I do, however, like to be at least as demanding of the audience as I am of the performers. We make the discussion an open one. I may question an audience opinion, but again, always positively. This keeps the whole room focussed, and the experience can be positive in both directions – a shared view arrived at via discussion between performer and audience then becomes reinforcing for all. If a student comments on sound quality or character, for example, I ask them to explain more fully. This is especially important in relation to any positive aspects of what we have all been listening to, as it provides much more specificity to the praise, and gives confidence to the performer and listener alike. For instance, if an audience member says: 'I liked the dynamics', that tells the performer very little and will be forgotten. If the commenter expands to say exactly what diminuendo was effective or which crescendo to the climax was exciting it shows the performer that their clear preparation was noticed, effective and appreciated. I usually take this opportunity to reinforce further by saying 'I could have done with even more crescendo....!' – or whatever it was.

Only after the class has explored the positives in the performance in some detail, do we turn to aspects that the audience felt needed work. This too needs handling with care. We, as performers tend to be our own worst critics and to be negative about our perceived 'failures'. I therefore emphasise that the criticism must be constructive. It seems simple perhaps, but I ban words like 'bad', 'awful', 'screeching', 'painful', etc. The student critics must try to get their point across in a well thought out and positive way. I like to hear phrases like: 'I think it may have worked better off the string' or, 'I am not sure what you meant in the middle section. What was your idea, and could you think of a way to put it across more convincingly?' Phrases like these can lead to bigger discussions, which involve the whole room. The performer then feels a part of the discussion rather than the target of criticism, and thus much more comfortable with addressing issues in their performance.

Technical criticism always provides a very interesting group discussion. We all have aspects of our technique that we struggle with, and these problems tend to be the

very things that block our ability to get the message of our music across. When students recognise technical deficiencies in others, it is often because their attention has been brought to that very same weakness in their own technique. If they are struggling with it themselves, there is empathy and sympathy with the performer. If they have fixed it, or have started to fix it, there can be invaluable advice which can often come across better than from a teacher.

With all of these ideas flying around, it is important that the performers feel they have the space to try them out. At this point I come in and identify which points that have been made are likely to be the quickest to implement. For instance, a very simple technical matter, such as changing the part of the bow being used; or trying out a new sound or character. Briefly the student's performance then becomes like a public lesson, where everyone acknowledges development, and can see and hear just how quickly things may be improved.

The camaraderie that this type of class has produced at Uppingham is striking. The violinists are all comfortable in each other's company. The very best players acknowledge that those who are less good may be able to help them with a unique observation. Indeed, some of the most pertinent points in the classes I have led have been made less able players, who thus discover that they are superior observers. The students are all also happy to ask each other for advice outside the classes. It is such a pleasure to see students occasionally practising together. They try each other's studies and pieces, they talk, they laugh. Practising can be a lonely business; it is good to have another pair of ears to help. The students have a hugely increased ownership of their own improvement, as they are working on ideas that they have themselves expressed to their peers. As a result they address the same ideas in their own playing too. In this way, not only does practice become self-teaching; but in group work, the practice becomes the teaching of each other. If you can explain an aspect of technique or music to someone else, then you truly understand it for yourself.

I mentioned above that the students in a group practice class find the experience of playing to their peers nerve-racking to start with. In the process of the classes they shed these nerves very quickly as they feel supported rather than criticised. One enormous benefit of establishing the kind of rapport, camaraderie and ethos I am talking about, is that when it comes to public performance or to instrumental exams, the problem of nerves is lessened. The performer is much more focussed on the positive. ■
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