

## The Student Recital – What Is it Really About, Anyway?

By Katherine Baird

I was talking shop with a cello-teaching colleague the other day and the subject of student recitals was on our brains. We discussed the reactions we've seen from parents over the years about student recitals and it got me thinking about the importance of preparing and helping parents understand the purpose and value of student recitals. As a teacher I have had to take stock of what purpose I place on recitals, and how I can make the performance experience a positive growth opportunity for my family of students.

For many years I viewed recitals as an opportunity to show the best of what the student and I had worked on together, kind of the ultimate demonstration of a polished piece. While I still view the recital experience this way to a certain extent, it has evolved, thankfully, as in the past, really, that perspective came from me viewing my students' performances as a reflection of my teaching! This is not healthy for me or for my students. I think many parents may also view recitals similarly, but seeing their child's performance as a reflection on their parenting. This is the antithesis of what I want to cultivate in my studio.

After pondering my own performance experiences, I have come to see performance opportunities very differently. A performance is another type of lesson. It is a learning environment that reveals very different insights and awarenesses than the weekly private lesson.

A recital is an utterly different experience of playing one's piece than in the practice room or at our weekly lesson, and here's why.

### PERFORMANCE CAN BE UNCOMFORTABLE AND DISORIENTING

#### **Different acoustics present unfamiliarity.**

We are usually in a different physical environment than the lesson, such as a recital hall. This brings with it different acoustics, which means our instrument can sound and feel very different. This change of hearing and feeling can be disorienting, creating potential physical tension as we try to maneuver our way to a better sound or physical comfort level. This shifted attention to navigating our aural and physical challenges throws hurdles in the way of our performance focus.

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#### **We are aware of being watched.**

We have an audience, which is a very different experience than playing alone, even with a parent there, as well as at our weekly lesson. An audience changes the energy in the room and shifts our attention from what is known and comfortable to unknown and, likely, uncomfortable.

#### **We may feel our ego is on the line.**

Particularly more perfectionistic personalities may feel they need to present their very best, so there is increased psychological pressure on some of us to "show our stuff", to make our teacher proud, to make our parents proud. This perspective can lead us to feel that this is our only chance, increasing the pressure on this one performance opportunity to be "perfect".

**How do we support our students and children to prepare for performances with more joy and self-acceptance and avoid self-criticism and judgment?**

First of all, it is important that students choose as a recital piece one with which they feel very comfortable, a so-called review piece, not the newest piece, but something that is easily memorized and played with expression. For some students this may be “boring” (as we know, students often like learning the next new piece).

We need to help parents understand that the pressures of performance make even an easier piece more of a challenge. Artists such as Hilary Hahn, Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Yuja Wang have performed all the major concerti and sonata works hundreds of times. That is in part what makes their performances so stellar: they have such mental and physical comfort with the works that they can be free to experiment and take musical risks.

Second, we need to inculcate in students that recitals are another learning experience, and we will have many more such experiences! Yes, we want to polish our piece and make it the most expressive and compelling that we can; we want to enjoy sharing our music and our skills with our community. But we also can be an observer and reflect on our performance and use what we learn to carry us to the next level. This one recital is not the final determination of whether we are “good” or “bad” at what we do.

Teachers need to share with students our own perceived failures, times we performed and botched it, and what made it not go so well. We are human and no matter how well we prepare, something might interfere and make us flub. We don’t speak perfectly all the time. We stumble over words, or say an embarrassing word instead of what we intend to say, or stick our foot in our mouth. So it is with musical performance.

I see my students’ performances as a success when I see and hear even *one* of the teaching and musical points we worked on in the lessons, and if I see growth in their comfort with the cello as well as greater ease with technical and musical challenges than earlier in the semester. One student who struggles with intonation may still not be entirely in tune, but if she’s *more* in tune and her overall comfort with the cello has grown, I see her performance as a success. If a student botches their performance, and I know they did not prepare adequately, we can talk about why they didn’t prepare, what are the obstacles, how can I support them to prepare better the next time. Sometimes I am just pleased that they did it! That alone is success.

Creating frequent practice performances where students learn to give each other positive feedback sets up performances as a safe learning experience in which they trust that their strong skillsets are being noticed and celebrated (beautiful bow hold, easy shifting, ringing tone, lots of expression and musical character, etc.).

Frequent performance opportunities make the performance experience more familiar, and therefore less threatening.

Let’s enjoy our children’s musical growth at each step, and understand the cycle of learning will provide us performances where we “nail it” as well as those where we perhaps play it safe or even fall apart. It is all part of this wonderful process of *becoming*!