

by Joseph Kaminsky



Raise Your Ability With a Piece You Can Play ... Have Played ... Will Play

On stage the angelic child lowered her bow, horsehair dripping from the frog. For just a moment, time appeared to stop breathing. Mesmerized minds struggled to comprehend the enormity of this performance. How could a child at the mere age of 13 play the showpiece *Ziguenerweisen* with such innate musical sensitivity, such technical prowess, and such fiery passion? The old master in the chair transfixed his gaze upon Mia. His countenance beamed total satisfaction with her performance and at the same time magically conveyed that warmth to the audience. Casting a sheepish glance laterally, I wiped my embarrassed eyes when I was sure no one was looking. Quite undignified to have an adult transported to the precipice of tears by a young student's performance. This was obviously one of those rare moments in music that will stick in the memory for years. But what brought this girl to the point where her musical ability can so acutely affect an entire audience, even to the point of tears?

Dr. Suzuki asserted many times in his teachings and writings that "... repeated practice of what one is capable of doing is the principle of fostering outstanding ability." Often lamenting the fact that some parents miss the key point of Suzuki education and believe that moving on to the next piece indicates advancement, he tried to raise the consciousness of the parents. After a student learned the correct notes and bowings to a new piece, Dr. Suzuki would tell him, "Now that your preparation is complete, let's practice in order to build your ability." Clearly, just learning the correct notes and bowings to a piece is just skimming the surface; ability is developed by truly going deeper than that. By not staying on a piece for a period of time after having learned it, you are denying yourself the chance to build your ability.

Geoffrey Colvin in his October 30, 2006, *Fortune* magazine article, "What It Takes To Be Great", implicitly validated some of Dr. Suzuki's core beliefs. Colvin stated that "the best people in any field are those who devote the most hours to what the researchers call 'deliberate practice.' It's activity that's explicitly intended to improve performance, that reaches for objectives just beyond one's level of competence, provides feedback on results, and involves high levels of repetition. For example, simply hitting a bucket of balls is not deliberate practice, which is why most golfers don't get better. Hitting an eight iron 300 times with a goal of leaving

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the ball within 20 feet of the pin 80% of the time, continually observing results and making appropriate adjustments, and doing that for hours every day—that's deliberate practice." The great Suzuki pioneer Bill Starr basically puts forth the same premise in his book, *To Learn With Love*, stating that the way to improve one's playing is to do "meaningful practice with appropriate feedback."

One must devote constant vigilance to one's practice, focusing on improving posture, tone, intonation, dynamics and phrasing. Children who excel way beyond the norm have spent countless hours playing through their review pieces, trying to play them on a higher level, not just going through the motions of drawing the bow. It is so easy to slip into a "zone of complacency" when we play our review pieces. There are *many* reasons to practice our review pieces, the least of which is "to keep them in shape." Children who

are on the path to develop great ability look at review differently than children who are on a slower path. With every note played they are asking themselves, "Is this the best I can sound on my instrument?" "Tuning in" to one's practice means total concentration and listening to the sound produced, gently manipulating the practice to seek the ideal. At first students are trying to sound like the CDs they are listening to; then as they mature they are trying to sound as good (or even better) than the music on the CDs. This devotion to the pursuit of excellence starts with the review pieces. These pieces are where it is easiest to find greatness—great tone, great intonation, great musicality, etc. Sadly, some students never get beyond just learning the notes and bowings to a new piece, practicing it only long enough to get it barely memorized. This is not what Dr. Suzuki wanted. After doing all the hard work to learn the piece, why stop short of going the extra distance to where your practice will actually make you a better player? Incredibly, that is what many Suzuki students do, they fail to get the benefits of concentrated practice because they mistakenly feel the piece is learned when it is played "correctly."

Meaningful practice of our review pieces will definitely improve our ability. Taking an extra two or three weeks on our "current piece" after we have "polished it" will likewise result in increased ability. We need to raise our ability with a piece we can play, and also with pieces we have played. If we have moved slowly and carefully enough through the first few books and have paid diligent attention to correct fundamentals, we may even need to challenge ourselves once in a while with pieces or exercises that might be considered "too hard" for us at present. Learning is not a linear function. There are times when our learning seems to be stagnant on the outside, but what is actually happening is that

assimilation of what we have just learned is taking place, and once this is completed, we will be ready to make a quantum leap in our playing. By occasionally pushing our limits, we may find that we grow faster than we might otherwise. This can be done by taking the hardest passages of our review pieces and pushing the tempo on them to well beyond the standard performance tempo. It could be done by playing a supplemental piece that has elements in it that we haven't been much exposed to, such as artificial harmonics, very high positions, or ricochet bowing. It could also be done by taking a Schradiek and/or Kreutzer etude and adding that to the practice regimen. Perhaps even taking a standard concerto and practicing one line of it with all the practice techniques that we currently know can be of great benefit for making those leaps that some students seem to achieve. Even if the concerto is above a student in level of difficulty, by pushing to learn just a little bit of it, s/he can pave the way for easier pieces coming up that have similar problems in them. As the great Suzuki pedagogue John Kendall always says, "We use the pieces to build our technique."

Describing this element of practice

as *building* our technique may be more accurate than most of us realize. According to the April 27, 2007, edition of *The Week*, the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, is conducting studies on myelin, a white substance that covers nerve fibers in our bodies. Lab Director Douglas Fields states that "... the little saucages of myelin get thicker when the nerve is repeatedly stimulated. The thicker the myelin gets, the better it insulates and the faster and more accurately the signals travel." So by repeated practice of a skill, we are thickening our myelin sheaths around the corresponding nerves, and in doing so are actually helping the nerve impulses to travel faster and more accurately over time. This may help explain how repetition actually increases ability. According to Mr. Fields, "In neurology, myelin is being seen as an epiphany. This is a new dimension that may help us understand how the brain works, especially about how we gain skills." How exciting to actually see (under a microscope) how learning might be taking place physiologically.

When we practice, we must give our myelin time to develop. To know that we have the potential to raise our ability is a

great gift from Dr. Suzuki. Mr. Colvin even states that "the good news is that your lack of a natural gift is irrelevant—talent has little or nothing to do with greatness ... The evidence we have surveyed ... does not support (the notion that) excelling is a consequence of possessing innate gifts." So the next time you pick up your instrument to practice, please realize that you *can* raise your ability! And to do so you need to do meaningful practice on pieces that you *have played, can play*, and even occasionally challenge yourself with a sprinkling of excerpts from pieces you *will play*. ☺

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