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## Kohut: Ch. 4

### Psychophysiological Principles and Techniques of Learning

Complete undivided attention in the viola lesson immediately draws the mind to the bow. Every beginning viola student can not wait to get their hands on the bow. I see this as an opportunity to get them to focus in the lesson. The bow is very complex and requires immense **concentration** to learn its hold, placement, and later on its' enormous library of strokes. We can cultivate concentration through fascination by taking time at the very first lesson to learn the parts of the bow. Some ideas for learning parts of the bow: Play speed games with naming each part of the bow; draw pictures with details of the tip, frog, slide, and screw; sing the parts of the bow with a silly song. Each of these exercises build a detailed awareness of the bow and thus build fascination and eventually focus for how it will be used on the viola.

Teaching focus in lessons reminds me of “strong eyes” activities. Ask the student to direct their eyes to the bridge for ‘10-mississippi’s’, or focus their eyes on the bow resting on the string for the entire twinkle variation. If the student moves their eyes they have to start again, if kept on the teacher’s directive, they win. Over time, the length of holding grows longer. The benefit is building their ability to focus for longer periods of time.

For more advanced students, concentration is more valuable as a tool to avoid distraction or learning how to “get-in-the-zone”. We can practice purposefully distracting our students with talking while playing, performing in a noisy area, or gently tapping the student’s back or head while playing. These activities can also be carried out by a parent or friend for home practice. I am very interested in any strategies for teaching students how to become completely immersed in the moment. I think it is teachable. As a performer, I am able to get in the moment by thinking of what connects me to the music. If the teacher can find ways incorporate connecting a student to their music then there could be a way to get them into that zone. I have had success in creating

a story with a student before. It was quite funny for us both. The student was working on Dvorak's *Humoresque* and imagined a family driving to the ice cream store, one of the children dropping their ice cream in the car, and then the father yelling at the kid. Every time after that, the student seemed quite engaged during performance in both the lesson and performances.

**Musical Conception** must start at the very first lesson. For viola beginners, they are listening and doing activities while *Twinkle Variations* plays long before touching the instrument. I believe it appeals to the subconscious/Self 2 side of learning. It manifests as the student hearing a piece so much that when they go to play it, they have very clear expectations of what sounds should be coming from their instrument. If they produce anything outside of what they have heard, it will be corrected.

It is extremely important for string players to get an aural expectation of beautiful string tone. We can incorporate musical conception to this objective by assigning listenings to professional videos or recordings, and modeling beautiful tone as a teacher throughout every lesson.

For any level student, we can point out the visual aspects of viola playing to strengthen the student's mental goals. Draw the beginner's attention to the teacher's curved thumb in the bow hold, assign a comparison of artistic movement between Gil Shaham and Hilary Hahn for advanced students.

Is there anything more important in musical learning than **listening**? It is the single most important tool in musical conception. Teachers must incorporate listening not only outside of the lesson but also as activities inside the lesson.

For beginning students, teachers can play the student's working piece on a speaker while the teacher and student air-bow along. Other listening activities can be associating movement with the teacher playing. Reach hands to the sky on loud playing, hands to the floor for soft playing. We can also use listening to strengthen a student's knowledge of a work or passage. When a student is learning a new material, have the teacher play a passage and ask the student how many A's they heard. The teacher can also ask the student to listen for dynamics, slurs, repeated phrases, etc.

**Singing** allows connection between internal and external music making. Students must be encouraged to sing from the very start. If they are able to reproduce an idea from their mind with the external voice, then they can get it from the mind to the viola.

I believe singing gives us expectations and feedback for our instrument as well. With the lack of pitch markers on the viola, singing allows us to match what we want with what comes out of the instrument. For an intermediate student learning shifting, have the student sing both the first and second pitch. Then play the first pitch, sing the second. Finally, sing both pitches again and play both pitches with shifting on the viola.

In regards to singing as a window for an advanced student's musical conception, we can use singing to display phrasing and articulation. Have the advanced student sing along with the teacher and match timing and articulation. Then have the student sing alone.

Gallwey's **Inner Game Techniques** focus on getting Self 1 out of Self 2's way and opening up communication between the body and mind. It would be extremely valuable to teach these strategies in studio lessons. Even for young students aged five or six, taking time to practice being quiet and breathing efficiently can have benefits way beyond playing the viola with ease. This practice could be incorporated as part of the weekly lesson plan. Set a two-minute timer at the beginning of the lesson for the teacher and student to sit and breathe before any playing begins. The student can eventually learn different forms of breathing and become aware of deep versus shallow breathing.

"Letting it Happen through Nonjudgemental Awareness" is a discussion that stimulates me to think on language in teaching. When we use phrases like "you are out of tune" or "you are in the wrong part of the bow", we associate our playing with our emotional person. There is opportunity in altering this language to "the 3rd finger isn't where you want it to be" or "the bow is higher than you planned" puts the student in control of their body in addition to detaching from any emotionally-based judgments. It allows the student to be objective and in control of their body as they use it to play the viola.

Violists often discuss playing position **posture** and how to balance the instrument when it protrudes so far from the left shoulder. Current solutions: position the left foot under the viola, use a shoulder rest, keep the viola generally parallel to the floor, and find a balance for the viola

between the head, jaw, shoulder, and left hand. Each of these work as a solution if they are used together - if they are balanced. I agree that good posture allows for freedom in movement. The head is especially important for violists. If the head is not positioned properly, the neck, back, and consequently arms, wrists, and fingers are tightened. Those extremities are incredibly important to touching the fingerboard and balancing the bow.

One of my favorite ways to teach posture is to purposefully play with extremely poor posture. The student does this quite easily and points the scroll to the ground or hunches the shoulders up to the ears. After fun with poor posture, we return to the desired posture.

There is also a lot of value in teaching how to balance the viola without the left hand. Let the student rest both arms by their side and find a balance for the viola with the shoulder and head alone. The student can also wrap the left arm over the viola, bringing the left hand to left ear, and notice balance.

A lot of posture discussions go hand in hand with psychological fears of dropping the instrument. The two activities discussed above should be practiced over a soft surface, like a bed, in case the instrument is dropped. Over time, these activities should not only help the violist find a balanced playing position but also strengthen the violists confidence in holding the instrument.

Standing in lessons is very normalized for violists. Teaching foot position should be at the very start of lessons. For young students, make a foot chart on a file folder or sturdy piece of paper. We can also teach proper feet position and balance through playing with the feet-body relationship. What limitations does the body have when the feet are too far apart? Too close together? This experimentation solidifies the value of the eventual viola feet positions.

Kohut's discussion of **attention control** comes across as a three step process: 1. quieting the mind, 2. relaxing the body, 3. performing. Quieting the mind and relaxing the body are ways to let Self 2 take control during a performance. How do we teach our student's not to overthink during performance? We apply the first two steps of attention control not only before a big performance, but also in attempting new techniques. I am thinking of an intermediate student who wants to perform a large shift up the A string. The teacher coaches the student to center the mind by imagining and hearing the shift. Then coach the student to relax the body by checking for balanced viola position and releasing any weight in the left thumb. Finally, go for the shift! I believe this is the attention control process at a very simple level.

For performing a recital or audition, teachers need to engage their students in this process of quieting the mind, relaxing the body, and then performing in both lessons and in practice. When the student practices this process at home, they should record their performance for feedback and self-evaluation.