Accentuate the Positive

BY RUSSELL GAVIN

The ways in which we instruct, respond to, and interact with students profoundly impact everything in our classroom. These exchanges allow us to guide students toward greater or lesser musical achievements, higher or lower self-confidence, and increased or decreased enjoyment of music. We carry an extraordinary degree of influence over each of our students, and whether we are addressing behavioral issues or musical situations, the ways in which we interact with them must be constantly on our minds. More specifically, we need to give special attention to the choices we make when addressing their successes and failures.

WHY GIVING POSITIVES MIGHT NOT COME NATURALLY

As musicians, we spend the majority of our musical training on isolating what is going wrong in our performance or is lacking in our abilities. During the transition from musician to teacher, it is natural for that focus to carry over to the classroom. I imagine most people reading this can easily recall the last several critical remarks they made in their classroom. But do you remember the last several positive or affirming things you said? If so, good for you! If you can’t recall the positive things you told your group, or if you question the need to do so, I encourage you to consider what science tells us about balancing positives and negatives.

POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

For decades, psychologists have been looking at the balance between positive and negative feedback. An overwhelming number of studies have shown that you need many positives to balance one negative. The most consistent finding is that five positive comments or interactions are needed to balance one negative comment or interaction. In circumstances where the interacting parties are well known to each other, the number of positives needed to balance a single negative increases. (One study focused on married couples found that 12 positives were needed for each negative!) How does this ratio look in your classroom?

If the default reaction you experience when you hear students making music is negative or critical in nature, I encourage you to actively seek opportunities to praise students succeeding in class. This praise will have the immediate effect of lifting up those successful students and will have the overarching effect of demonstrating your expectations to the rest of the class. Directing your class in this way will also provide constant models for what to do in class, as opposed to simply isolating the behaviors you don’t want students displaying. This method of responding to the things going on in your classroom is most influential if the comments are specific in nature, thus allowing the other students an opportunity to copy the exact things you are praising.

BLANKET POSITIVES

As you consider adding more positive feedback to your teaching, don’t simply increase the number of general positive statements you express. Giving non-specific positive feedback creates the risk of supporting students who are not doing what you want, while simultaneously lowering the bar of what you expect from the musicians. Imagine sitting in an ensemble in which the director follows every cutoff with “great job” or “nice.” Those words lose almost all value after you have heard them 80 times a day for the last six months. Instead, strive to tell the students precisely what was great or nice.

PERMANENCE

In addition to the sheer weight negative comments carry, it is important to note that the emotions elicited by the criticisms we direct at our students last longer than the emotions elicited by our praise. To say it differently, negatives pile up over time, while positives tend to be temporary. This is important to remember as you consider the overall atmosphere of your classroom. Do the students enter the room fearing you or excited to be led by you? When you say a student’s name, is the reaction dread or optimistic anticipation? It is hard to imagine any of us began our careers hoping to create a fearful or toxic atmosphere among our students, but we know it happens. Luckily, you can begin adjusting that atmosphere as soon as today!
GIVING NEGATIVES

Though we are primarily focused on increasing the number of positive interactions that occur in the classroom, it is also important to address the ways in which we give negative feedback.

When possible, it is best to give negative feedback in a private setting. This is especially true when you are addressing a behavioral issue. Speaking one-on-one about a disruptive behavior will make the feedback more meaningful to the student and will spare them the potential shame of being called out in front of their peers. Though this type of public shaming may have some impact on their behavior, it is just as likely to give them the level of attention they may be craving. In these instances, your public criticism actually serves to encourage the behavior you are condemning.

Additionally, negative feedback should be directed at specific actions or behaviors, and never at the student personally. There is a big difference between a student being told they are “talking too much” and a student being told they are a “talker.” Similarly, telling a student they are “a little flat” sends an entirely different message than if they are told they “have bad pitch.” Though these differences may appear subtle, they are profoundly important when coming from the mouth of a teacher.

WHAT POSITIVE FEEDBACK SOUNDS LIKE

Consider using positive and specific language like the following examples:

**Altos, thank you so much for having great posture!**
- *Immediate Effect:* Altos feel good about doing what you have already asked them to do.
- *Overtaching Effect:* All students are reminded that they should be sitting and standing with great posture.

**Second row, thank you for sitting quietly while I worked with the back row.**
- *Immediate Effect:* Second row students feel appreciated for sitting quietly.
- *Overaching Effect:* All students remember they are expected to remain quiet when other sections are being addressed and realize you are paying attention to everything in the room, even when specifically focused on one group.

**Trumpets, that was the best articulation we have heard in that section yet!**
- *Immediate Effect:* Trumpets know they played it very close to what you are seeking, thus encouraging them to keep working to the goal.
- *Overaching Effect:* All students know the style you want in this section and can transfer that to their own parts should they have a similar line in their part, and it provides a model for the ensemble.

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HOW TO MAKE A STUDENT DISLIKE YOU—FOREVER

One of the clearest memories I have from my middle school experience occurred in the classroom of a favorite teacher. It isn’t, however, a pleasant memory. Ms. Boyd accused me of taking another student’s pencil. She called me out in front of the other sixth graders and told me to give the pencil back. There was only one problem. I hadn’t taken the pencil. I clearly remember the anger I felt at being wrongly accused. I was a good student, and had done the right thing—how dare she accuse me! From that moment on, she was no longer a favorite teacher of mine.

As I have traveled the country speaking about positive feedback in the classroom, I have been shocked to learn that most people can recall a similarly powerful experience in which they were accused of doing something which they were actually innocent of. These experiences may come from teachers, parents, or peers, but they consistently leave the permanent and painful memories. With that in mind, if we choose to publicly criticize a student, it is imperative that we are 100% certain the accusation is founded. If there is even a small doubt in your mind that a student is not guilty of the musical or behavioral transgression you intend to single them out for, it is always best to redirect the class’s attention toward a positive goal.

STAYING POSITIVE

Life is hard. Teaching is hard. And patience is an exhaustible resource. These three realities require each of us to step back and reflect from time to time. Remember that the classroom can be an oasis for you in the same way it is for so many of your students. Work hard to prevent outside forces from making you a short-tempered teacher. Fight the urge to take out your frustrations on your class. But if you do, take a step back and apologize.

Do you have a class that is more challenging than the others? If so, go into that class with a steadfast resolve to guide them in positive ways. More often than you do the other classes, remember to tell this class you appreciate them. In the end, it is often the students in these challenging classes who need our positive support the most. Try giving it to them today! You might just be surprised at the impact this choice will have on those students and you.

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