

A FAST LESSON ON THE FIDDLE

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[Assignment: Choose a process that is usually perceived as frightening or intimidating and describe it so that it seems less forbidding.]

Playing in the orchestra in junior high and high school was not something I found difficult until my senior year. This is when I decided I no longer wanted to play the trumpet, but instead learn how to play the violin. The reason for this late change was that I no longer wanted to be in the school band because I was not very fond of the new director. If I didn't play in the band I would no longer be able to play in the orchestra unless I learned how to play a string instrument, so that's exactly what I decided to do. It took a bit of coaxing on my part to talk my mom into letting me begin an entirely new instrument. She has never been too keen on the sound a violin makes, especially when it's the sound of a beginning violinist. However, I had my mind set on learning to play the violin, and I wasn't about to let anything get in my way. I was determined to be ready to play with the orchestra by the time school started, no matter how difficult it would be.

On the last day of my junior year I brought home a violin for the very first time. I was so excited to take it out and start squeaking away. When I took the bow out the case I saw that it looked slightly different from other bows I had seen because the hair was not pulled taut. My initial reaction was that it was broken, which was a huge disappointment to me. There's nothing worse than to bring home a new toy only to find that it won't work! Then I remembered all I had to do was turn the little screw and tighten in up. Now the bow was in good shape, so I took out the violin and plucked a few notes. Yuck! It sounded awful! The violin was incredibly out of tune, so my next task was to learn how to tune a violin. I did not think it could be all that difficult. I knew the basics; turn the pegs a little bit one way, a little bit the other, and it is all set. This is true, unless, of course, the pegs are turned a little more than what they are supposed to be, as happened to me. I spent the next few minutes trying to figure out how to hook the string back onto the peg, but after some wiggling around I managed to get it back on. Finally, I was ready to begin teaching myself to play the violin.

Each day I would take out my violin and play for hours at a time. I found playing the violin very gratifying because I could hear my progress from one song to the next. The degree of proficiency which I would be able to attain was limited by a time factor; therefore, I knew I had to put as much time into practicing as was feasible. There were several other motivating factors besides the satisfaction I found from hearing my daily improvement. First of all, I was eager to prove my band teacher wrong in thinking I would regret dropping band. I wanted to show him I was capable of playing an instrument in orchestra other than the trumpet, and not only that I was capable of it, but it was something I found enjoyable. Secondly, I wanted other people to know, most importantly the orchestra director, that this was something I would take seriously and put a great deal of effort into. Lastly, if I did not make enough progress, not only would I not enjoy playing in the orchestra, but it would be a constant struggle for me.

I did not begin to take lessons from a teacher until I was into the second week of my summer, so up to this point everything I knew I had taught myself. I had completed the first book on my own, which greatly impressed my teacher. Of course there were many corrections which I had to make, including the angle at which I held my violin, the positioning of my fingers, and many other minor details which all determine how advanced a violinist can become. Now came all the tedious work. I had to correct my mistakes, go over and over songs until they were perfect and also learn new techniques. Now I was beginning to feel frustrated. Patience is something I lack, and I began to believe that how I played was good enough for the time being because I did not feel I had the time to practice a sufficient amount each day. I knew I was not about to become an exceptional violinist over a three month period, and since I was able to play full songs, I became satisfied with my playing ability. My goal was to be able to play all the songs we would be playing in the orchestra, and I felt I had accomplished this.

I stuck with all the violin lessons and practicing, but as weeks went by my practicing slowly tapered off. Despite the small amount of time I spent practicing over the summer, I had made big improvements in my playing. By the time school started in late August, I was already in the second book and had begun on the third. Excelling as much as I did in such a short amount of time was very exciting for me because it takes many people as much as two years to complete the first book. I was not able to play as stylistically and musically as some people can after completing Books One and Two, but I could not afford to linger on minor details at the time. Picking apart my playing would have to be put off until I had the basics down.

Eventually the summer came to an end and my time was up. On the first day of orchestra, the director began by taking attendance and asking each of us what instrument we played. At that point I became very nervous. I felt as if everyone turned to look at me when I said, "violin." Each person in the room, with the exception of the new sophomores, knew I had always played the trumpet. Nobody could believe I had quit band, including myself. Playing trumpet in orchestra and band was something that I found came very easily to me, and I enjoyed it. I was able to play almost any song put in front of me with little difficulty, but playing the violin was an entirely different story. I was no longer able to sight read through a piece of music with little or no errors the first or second time, or even the twenty-first time. This difficulty became very frustrating to me, yet I still stuck with it.

Another problem arose which I was not accustomed to. I was no longer playing a bright, brassy sounding instrument that could easily be heard, but instead I was playing the violin along with twenty others. The large number of us playing the same sounds made it very difficult for me to hear myself. I was not very confident of my playing, which didn't help matters either. Since it was so hard for me to hear myself, I had no idea if I was playing the correct notes and if they were in tune.

Tuning my instrument was another problem I encountered. Never before had I had to rely on only my ear. When playing in band I had an electric tuner in front of me which told me if I was out of tune. If I was not right pitch I would just move a slide one way or the other depending on whether I was sharp or flat. Now that I was in orchestra I had to listen very closely and adjust some or all of the pegs accordingly. This process was not easy for me because I could not do it as quickly as others. If I thought I was out of tune I would turn a peg hoping to become closer to the right pitch, but usually finding that I had turned the wrong way. By the

time I finished, the orchestra was done tuning, and there I was more out of tune than when I first started. This difficulty was extremely frustrating for me because even if I had my fingers in the right places the note would sound wrong anyway.

Toward the end of the year I had to decide whether or not I would play a solo at contest. It was a difficult decision, but I had nothing to lose, and it would be a good experience. The song I prepared for contest came out of Book Four, so I had really made considerable progress. It took a lot of time and patience for me to perfect this song. I also had to learn to play it with an accompanist, which was a challenge because my timing had to be very exact and consistent every time. Not only was I working on a solo for contest, but I also decided to play a duet with a cellist. Both of us had just begun playing our instruments, so we matched up very well. We struggled trying to match each other's style and tuning, yet we managed to pull it together very nicely.

The morning of the contest I was very nervous, as was my duet partner. I knew we had worked very hard on our piece, so we had nothing to worry about. Whatever happened, I knew that we had done our best, and there was nothing else we could do. The first thing in the morning was my solo, which I played with few errors. The judge told me I played very well for the amount of time I had been playing, which made me feel very good. Later in the afternoon came our duet. I was much more nervous for this because if I messed up, not only would I mess up myself, but my partner too. Fortunately, this piece went very well until the end, when the tuning became a problem, but it must not have been too bad because we received a first place on our duet.

Learning to play a new instrument was a very good experience for me. I really felt a great sense of achievement after competing in the contest when my director said, "It really shows a lot about your character that you played at contest with your peers who have had much more experience playing their instruments." Learning to play the violin taught me a lot about myself; if I really put my mind to something, I can accomplish just about anything with a lot of hard work.