

2025 Summer Practice Tip Episodes

Understanding & Supporting Perfectionists in Music Lessons

Christine Goodner:

Welcome to the Time to Practice podcast. If you've never listened to the podcast before, welcome. I'm so glad you're here. My name is Christine Gooder. I'm a music educator, author, and podcaster who has made it my mission to talk about music practice and to support educators and families looking to make home practice more efficient and to reduce conflict and frustration in the practice room. This week we're kicking off a series with special guest violinist, Claire Allen, all about perfectionism, perfectionist thinking, and the balance as musicians for striving for excellence and treating ourselves with compassion. While we inevitably face the fact that we are not perfect, we're not trying to label anyone in this series as a perfectionist or not a perfectionist. Rather, we're noticing patterns, looking for strategies and expert advice about how to support all musicians, especially young musicians and the grownups who support them.

So as we go through this series, we hope you keep in mind that as I said, the goal is not to decide if our child is a perfectionist or not, or our student, but rather to notice patterns that might tell us to proceed with caution, to have more conversations and to carefully balance out all the striving and hide standards that come with what we do with ideas that support a healthy approach to how we see ourselves as individuals separate from what we produce on our instrument. I think everyone can benefit from untangling our self-worth from our accomplishments, and for thinking about how we treat ourselves and learning to treat ourselves with self-compassion. We think anyone who parents or teaches young

musicians can benefit from understanding more about this topic. We hope you enjoy it as much as we have enjoyed putting it together for you.

Well, welcome everyone. I'm excited today to be here to start and kick off a podcast series on supporting perfectionists in the private studio with my friend and colleague Claire Allen. And Claire first came on the podcast in episode 18, so I encourage you to go back and listen to that. If you haven't heard from her before or haven't heard that episode before, I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And Claire, I was hoping for those people who are not familiar with you, if you could give your brief introduction of who you are and what you do in the world of music.

Claire Allen:

I'm Claire and I play and teach the violin and talk about playing the violin and write about playing and teaching the violin. So all of the things. I am based in Northern Virginia. I run a independent private studio where I have just over 20 students. We just finished for the summer, so very excited for my students to get me to get a little break and also already starting to miss them a little bit. And I play in a string quartet with some friends and we've got a concert coming up. So yeah, I teach violin and I practice violin, and that's basically it.

Christine Goodner:

I love it. I love it. I'm really excited today to talk to you more about this topic of perfectionism or perfectionist thinking. Claire and I presented a talk on this topic at the ASTA Conference, which is the American String Teachers Association Conference this past March. And we did title it supporting perfectionists in the private studio, and we loved researching this and thinking about this and gathering information about it. And then our presentation had to be confined to 45 minutes, which felt so short for how much we wanted to share. We had to just talk so fast, like auctioneers or something. And so we're excited to stretch this out over a number of podcasts in a little more relaxed fashion and just to be able to really dig in and talk about this concept. So after the talk, maybe you would agree, Claire, I got a lot of feedback and conversation from people early sharing that this was an important topic or they thought they wish they heard about it more in our music world.

Claire Allen:

Absolutely. And something that is everyone, well, I shouldn't generalize. Many people experienced this, but it's not talked about particularly in the way that we talked about it. So yeah, a lot of people came up to me and said how valuable it was or said, oh, I have a student going through this, what would you do with 'em? And so I'm excited to be able to talk about this without a time limit. I mean, we'll make it a reasonable length podcast, I'm sure, but also to connect maybe with people who heard our presentation and want to know more or people who didn't get to hear their presentation. So exactly. Should be

Christine Goodner:

Fun. Exactly. And this first podcast is going to be more of an overview of how we see perfectionism showing up in our classical music world. We're going to talk about it from a few different angles, teachers, parents and caregivers, supporting students and students themselves. So wherever you might come to this perspective from. And also maybe you do not identify as a perfectionist, but maybe someone in your world who does. And you can kind of think about them as we talk about this topic. So I guess I want to kick off with a few disclaimers that I think are important. First, Claire and I are not mental health professionals and we are not giving mental health advice. So we want to be careful about that and knowing the boundary between supporting our students as teachers and supporting ourselves and supporting the families we work with, but not trying to step into a therapist role. There is a time to refer people out for more professional help than we are qualified to give. And I think it's helpful to have a list of resources in your community or refer people to their pediatrician and just to make sure we're not trying to take on that role, which is not appropriate for us as teachers. I don't know if you wanted add anything about that, Claire,

Claire Allen:

As much as teachers often might joke, oh, this lesson felt more like therapy today than teaching violin or music unless you are actually trained therapist, we are not trained therapists. And the therapist I was working with once was like, you don't need to therapize other people. And I was like, oh, that's a habit I got into from my line of work. So her phrase is always sit in your own chair, which I love.

Christine Goodner:

I love that a lot. So we're sitting in the teacher chair and maybe supporting ourselves and sharing experiences with other teachers who might identify with this kind of chair. And we do think it's really important to know when outside assistance is needed because sometimes it is. And I will share personally that I have worked with a therapist and talked about this very topic, and it's really helpful to get professional advice sometimes and to know when we've reached that point, I guess. And so this is not meant to be that really what we're trying to do is share strategies that might be helpful, signs that may be some more support when is needed or extra care in the way we are offering support to our students or our child if we're practicing with them and maybe understanding what this feels like to the perfectionist or the person struggling with perfectionist thinking.

And so we have a lot of empathy and can work at it from that perspective. So I think that's an important disclaimer as we kick off that we might repeat in a briefer way in future parts of the series. Alright. One of the things that we kicked off our talk with at the conference and that I think is helpful to think about in our context is that as musicians, especially in the classical music world, we walk a delicate balance because we are asked to strive for excellence and correctness and serving the music being as correct and accurate as we can in our playing. And we go to lessons and really work in our practice on how do I get closer to that ideal? And it's sort of trained into us to have really high standards to always look for how we're not quite reaching them and how to bridge that gap and hopefully in a healthy way and in a way that feels like this is a fun challenge, how can I get closer to my ideal? But it's really, I think, easy to cross over to feeling frustrated or negative about ourselves in that process.

Claire Allen:

And what we do requires such a high level of precision to the millisecond in terms of timing or rhythm as violinists trying to play in tune is just a whole thing by itself. But for any instrument, getting to the note on time in the exact precise place, you need to be move your body in that exact way and to be able to repeat it over and over and over again so you get it right. You have to develop a high level of self-awareness and a desire for precision to do well in this field. And being able to do that and simultaneously being able to be kind to yourself while you do that is a very big challenge.

Christine Goodner:

Absolutely. We were thinking as we were talking about this topic that there are other careers where precision and accuracy are also very important. Surgeon comes to mind,

Claire Allen:

Like brain surgeon.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. Yes. I hope they are very accurate and have accuracy trained into what they're doing. Also, like an engineer that's designing bridges we're going to drive over in our vehicles, for example, or walk over. There's a lot of fields that require accuracy and that worth very important to be correct. I think what maybe sets classical music apart in a way is that some of us start at a very young age. I might be considered old to start at eight or nine or 10 years old in our world, even though people start at all different ages, and I think it's important to validate that, but for some of us, we were like three or four. I myself was just under three when I started violin. So this is trained into some of us from a very young age looking for where could I be more cur or where could I strive to improve? For our whole lifetimes, we've been thinking about this concept, which I think is a little different.

Claire Allen:

Well, and starting later, like I did because I was nine when I started, that brings with its whole set of, oh, people started when they were three. I'm just a beginner. And it can really pull in this whole feeling of like, oh, I'm never going to catch up, or I'm never going to be as good as the people who started when they were little, which is totally not true. I have several friends including myself who are professional musicians who started well beyond the age of three and have careers and play beautifully. And yeah, it is really rough in middle school, but middle school's rough for a number of reasons.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, we've had a number of guests on this podcast that have started later at that past eight or nine years old and our professional musicians now. So that is very valid. And still I think compared to training a surgeon or an engineer might get, they're not maybe training in their career of choice at even eight or

nine. So we're still starting very young thinking about these ideas as, I dunno, compared to other fields. I think that's helpful to think about for sure, because then we have a unique challenge of how do we not get our self identity, our self-worth tied up in what are we producing on our instrument?

Claire Allen:

Yeah. I have a student who started very young in my studio who says that they don't remember life without the violin or my studio. They started with me. So it's just like, okay, so that really does become part of your identity. And as musicians, we know that. And as teachers who are helping shape that identity of really young kids or parents, it's just such a big responsibility and it gives us a unique perspective to see how kids are reacting to feedback and criticism and self-criticism and all that good stuff.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. I think all that to say this is really important to think about because we want the students that we're working with to start developing that balance of who I am as a person is valuable. Whatever happens on my instrument, this is feedback about the instrument, not me as a person. And then as teachers or educators, parents, caregivers who are working with young students, we want to be careful to frame what we're saying and feedback as not personal well to help them make that distinction. And we will get into that in future episodes in lots of detail with some ideas for you.

Claire Allen:

Absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

So one resource that I read and loved was a book called The Perfectionist Guide to Losing Control, A Path to Peace and Power by Catherine Morin Scheffler, I hope I'm saying her name. And what she really talked about was the fact that the message we get from society about stopping a perfectionist recover from being a perfectionist leave perfectionism behind. These are article titles that I came across very frequently when I was researching just where do I find information? And that's really not possible for someone who really identifies as a perfectionist because they see that gulf between where they are and where they want to be as just kind of part of who they are. And asking someone who has really high standards to lower their standards or to be happy with not being correct is really not the answer here. They're really probably not going to feel that way.

There's a great quote from her, this author that says, perfectionists never stop noticing the Gulf between reality and the ideal. They never stop longing to bridge the gap. And when we put it that way, it actually doesn't sound terrible to be a perfectionist depending on how you frame that. Of course, I'm biased, I would identify myself as this, but I think there's a lot of experts agree, there's a maladaptive form of perfectionism and then an adaptive form. And we'll get into those differences because really, if we have a student that seems to be wired or a child that seems to be wired, be very frustrated when they're not

reaching an ideal that they have for themselves, then how do we help them get that adaptive form going?

Claire Allen:

And those titles leave perfectionism behind stopping being a perfectionist. Again, if you're really wired into it, for me, I'm like, oh, there's something I identify this way it as part of who I am and how I interact with the world, and now that's wrong. So I'm doing the human thing wrong and then spiral, spiral, spiral. So yeah, it's fun. There's a lot that goes into it and I loved that quote that you shared. I think it's so good. And yeah, reframing it as it's not something that we need to get rid of and it's not something that's a bad part of us, but it is something just, I mean every part of us, it's something that we need to learn to understand how it shows up for us and how that leads to us showing up in the world. And I think it's a long time ago recorded the other podcast, but I think I talked a lot about knowing yourself is the secret to really effective practice. So I think this is just part of that.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly, exactly. And in that perfectionist guide to losing control, there's an example that really struck me that the person who is a perfectionist, if you put them in charge of solving world hunger, for example, and in the book they shared numbers like, okay, 50% of the world was experiencing hunger, and then you put this person in charge and they got down to only 5% of the world is experiencing hunger. A lot of people would call that a success, and the perfectionist is going to feel like, no, I am not going to be happy until zero people are experiencing this. And I think there's a real, we need people like this in the world, even if what they're trying to go towards is not going to actually happen. You still want someone who's going to strive to get as close to that as humanly possible and to not give up and be like, oh, good enough. There's moments where that's really needed. And so I think it's not all bad, it's just how we treat ourselves, I think in the process.

Claire Allen:

So for example, an example of maybe an unhealthy version of it would be my student who told me that they got all A's and B's on my report card, and I said, congratulations, great job. And they said, no, B is for bad. That's not solving world hunger, that's just being hard on yourself.

Christine Goodner:

Right? And there's two things can be true. You can really want to have had all A's, and also not beat yourself up for getting the B. It doesn't mean we have to give up wishing we had all A's or wanting to improve, but it's yeah, deciding it's bad versus like, oh, I really wish that was an A,

Claire Allen:

Right.

Christine Goodner:

There's a fine line there, but it makes a big impact on us as people.

Claire Allen:

Can we talk more about adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism? I hadn't heard either of these terms before we started our research for our presentation, and I was really intrigued by it. So I think maybe defining those more and talking more about each of those could be interesting.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Let's talk about the maladaptive perfectionism first. I am going to read a quote from an article that I will link in our show notes. It says, maladaptive perfectionism involves an intense desire for others' approval, unrealistic expectations, negative self-talk, fresher from others, and guilt, which is unhealthy. Maladaptive perfectionism is tied to low confidence, fear of failure, poor outcomes and relationships and overall wellbeing. And this is from an article called Does Perfectionism lead to Wellbeing, the role of flow and personality traits? So we'll link to that article, but I thought this summed up a lot of the research that I came across in a really nice way.

Claire Allen:

And I think the thing that really sticks out to me is it's focused on what other people think about us. It's not about I want to play this piece beautifully because I love this piece and it bothers me when it sounds bad. I want to play this piece so that I get first chair or am the best student at the recital or all of this other stuff. There's a quote from Brene Brown that I'll paraphrase here. I don't have it exactly in front of me, but she talks about perfectionism is not the same as striving to be your best. It's the belief that if we do everything, and I'm doing air quotes here for the listeners, that if we do everything perfectly, then we can avoid ever having people say bad things to us or getting any kind of critical feedback. So if we just do everything good enough, then no one will ever say, oh, there was a problem with that, or Could you fix this? And it's doing everything to try to avoid that sort of thing. And it's actually very kind of restrictive in your life. Again, it's not about what you want, it's about what you don't want.

I don't want people to say bad things to me. And in school we talked about those a's you can in theory, I suppose, get a hundred percent on a test and at the top of the page you get a hundred percent a plus, I guess it would be. And then there's no red mark saying you did anything wrong. There's no suggestions for things to improve. And especially in the music world, that's not true because so many things are subjective. So there's always going to be things that you could consider in terms of phrasing, in terms of character, even if you're objectively playing all the notes. I won't even get into expressive intonation. That's a whole thing. But there, there's not that objective. I got all the answers on my math problem, my math test, and I know in higher level math there is some wiggle room too depending on what they're doing. But I don't know much about that, so I won't talk more.

Christine Goodner:

No, I think that's really true, and I think it's a good time too to mention, I thought I was not a perfectionist, but I just had some tendencies and then I realized and read more about how people pleasing can be a form of perfectionism. And that's, I think, important to weave in here too, because we might have a child who just seems like they're eager to please everyone, and that can feel like a really easy thing to work with. But that could also be for that same desire to control how other people are treating us. Not in a bad way control, but I can influence how I'm treated by others if I make them happy all the time. That can really be woven into us and can look like, oh, this is a very compliant, easy to work with child, but really internally there's a lot of angst about I need to keep myself safe or I need to get the outcome I want by making everyone around me happy. And then again, it's not about ourselves or what we want at all. It's trying to get the feedback or the response from other people that we are looking for. And it's very outward focused

Claire Allen:

And in music lessons that could look like a student who apologizes constantly for everything or asks, oh, is it okay that I didn't learn this week? And sometimes I just try to push back against this and challenge a little bit, and I said, well, what would you do if I said it wasn't, what are we going to do here? You were busy last week. You didn't learn it. That just really stopped them. They were just totally expecting me to be like, oh, yeah, no, totally, it's fine. It's okay. They wanted me to help them feel better about it, which is totally valid. Or students who come into lessons and their goal is to make the teacher happy and they're constantly looking. They're halfway through the last note, and then they look over at the teacher instead of listening to what they're doing. So those are some things that I look out for in lessons for that type of one.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly, exactly. That can fall in the maladaptive form as well. I think that's important to talk about. And then another thing I will say here before we go on and talk about the adaptive type is that sometimes we can feel like, oh, well, I couldn't be a perfectionist or My child couldn't be a perfectionist because they don't do things perfectly or they don't seem to be trying to strive for high quality from what I can observe.

Claire Allen:

Oh, perfectionism is not about perfect.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly right. Because sometimes perfectionism can be, I'm not even going to start this thing because I'm worried it won't be the way I want, or I'm going to wait until the last minute so that I can say, oh, well, it's because I wait until the last minute, not because I quote couldn't do the thing. And that protects me from feeling like I haven't done it perfectly. I can say, oh, well, this is why, because I put things off to the last minute. So those are some ways that could show up and not look like we would expect because I

think if somebody looks like the overachiever and we can see, oh, this person is stressing themselves out, even though they're always turning out this quote, high quality or perfect product that's easier to spot, but the student who won't or can't get started or who drags their feet or procrastinates or avoid certain things because they know they're not going to be easy at first, those students also might need some extra, we don't have to label them. This is not about labeling people, but just like, oh, this student might need some of these strategies we're going to offer in this series. There could be something going on there too.

Claire Allen:

Well, and especially in all the instances that you just mentioned, it could be really easy to label someone as lazy and to see it as, oh, they don't care, or they don't want to do this, as opposed to they care so much that they're afraid to get started. They don't want to be bad at it.

Christine Goodner:

Right. Understanding exactly where it's coming from. That might be the part for the professional health, but I think we can all look and just be curious, where is this coming from? Could this student need some support to fill this taunted by the task in front of them? That part we can do is just how do I break this down for the student? And like you said, we'll get into that more, but I think those are important considerations too. So then let's talk about adaptive perfectionism. There's some experts who say all forms of this are unhealthy and need help, and that's fair. There's also people who say, well, you might not be able to actually help this inner drive to close the gap that we've been talking about. And so it seems to be at least a step in the right direction to work towards this adaptive perfectionism.

So some of the traits that might tell us we have adaptive perfectionism going on is a high level of conscientiousness, organization striving for excellence, having ambitious goals. Adaptive perfectionism has been linked to career success, high self-esteem, happiness, greater life satisfaction, and the people who see something like, I want to solve world hunger, or I'm going to work on a cure to this disease in the lab, or whatever it happens to be. They don't see that I must to feel good about myself, I must be successful, but just this is a pursuit that I feel gratified by pursuing and I'm going to get as close as I can. That can be a really positive thing as long as our self-worth is not tied up in it

Claire Allen:

Well, and it's directed at whatever the task is. I want to cure this disease. I want to, I'm the type of person who will double check my test twice before I turn it into, make sure nothing got through because I want to make sure that's directed toward the result of whatever task it is that you're completing, not I want to do it this way because I'm scared other people will say bad things about me.

Christine Goodner:

Right, exactly. So I think that internal focus or how we think about things, that's a very tricky thing maybe to sort out sometimes that's why it takes some extra attention. We do want to talk a little bit about

where can perfectionism come from. There is a lot of researchers who will say, I'll give you a short list. It can come from our family of origin. I think the important thing to notice is if we feel like, oh, did I cause this in my child or did my parent cause this in me? Is that anybody who might feel like it comes from their parent of origin? It probably came your great great, great great grandparents going way back. It could have come from them and just been passed down. It's not one person's fault. It's in the atmosphere that we're raised in. Sometimes that just maybe we can break the cycle, but we can't blame one person, peers, academic settings, social settings, feeling pressure externally to be perfect or putting pressure on ourselves internally to be perfect.

There's also, it's important to mention a big overlap between perfectionism and A DHD, autism and giftedness, neurodivergent. Students we work with might really struggle with this in a unique way. And then especially, this is why we just want to say it's really interesting to explore our own perfectionism. If we identify as this and be like, where do I think this came from? Because maybe it'll help us pick it apart or with professional assistance, pick it apart. We just, Claire and I just want to say, as educators, we don't think we need to know where it's coming from and we just want to understand how to support the students that we're working with.

Claire Allen:

And ultimately, I see myself as my job as a teacher sitting in my chair. I'm not being a good support to the child or to the family if I'm saying like, oh, well the parent is doing this and this and this, and that's why this kid is this way. I mean, if a parent is, and no one has done this in ages, constantly interrupting a child, playing in the lesson to say, fix that, do that better, then yeah, I'm going to step in and say, Hey, let's let them play and then we'll talk about things. Sitting and trying to psychoanalyze, again, not my chair, psychoanalyze our children or our students or their families isn't necessarily our job as teachers, but it's more to understand, okay, or if we're coaching parents to work with, practicing with their children at home, kind of say these types of phrases could be really helpful to use and look out for these sorts of responses in them. That might be a sign that this is getting triggered.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. So we just think it's important to not try to place blame on any one thing because it's probably quite a number of factors for any student and like a student with a DHD for example. It might be really coming from that, and it's not fair as a parent to be blamed for our child's support needs. So we just want to be careful that we're not doing that and that as teachers, like we've been saying, we just think about how do I support the students that I'm working with.

Claire Allen:

Absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

Well, we are going to wrap up this first podcast in our series with leaving you with some of those definitions and things to think about with perfectionism. And we have some upcoming episodes on students and perfectionist thinking on teachers who identify as perfectionists, and then also for parents and caregivers about how we can support our students in their lessons and practice sessions. So we're excited to come back in future weeks and share some of those ideas with you now that we've kind of got this foundation of what is Professionism and the way that we're going to talk about it here and how to think about what it might look like in ourselves and our students.

Claire Allen:

Yeah. Lots more to come.

Christine Goodner:

Before we go today, I wanted to mention a couple follow up comments for our episode that you just heard. First is that Claire and I put together a pretty thorough document with a lot of resources following up on this topic, sources we quoted from and ways to go research more and learn more for yourself. And I am going to put a link to that in our show notes for this episode. You may also reach out to me, christine@suzukitriangle.com and send me an email, and I'm happy to send that your way as well. We want you to have all of these resources to do some more reading of your own or listening to podcasts or audio books, whatever source you would like to follow up with. And we also want to acknowledge and we'll mention this in future episodes in this series, that we talk a lot about getting professional mental health resources on board.

Sometimes when we need more help with these issues and we want to acknowledge that access to those resources are really challenging. And even for those who have healthcare that would cover such resources. I know in my own area the wait list to access services is quite long and I know many people have barriers to accessing that resource. So our purpose in mentioning that often in these episodes is to make sure we are not sitting in that mental health professional chair that we talked about a few times, but we want you to know that we see you if that is not as easy done as said. And also, we want to make sure our role as teachers and not mental health care professionals is very clear to you. So hopefully some of the reading resources and other resources we've offered you will give you some further perspective as well beyond what we are sharing ourselves in this series.

So we will be back next week to share with you more about some of the common traits of perfectionism or even some of these traits. You might think, well, I don't fall into a perfectionist category nor does my child, but I see some of these traits, there's some overlap with what my child or student is experiencing. And again, those strategies that we might use to help a young student get a really healthy sense of self separate from their outcomes on their instruments can still be really helpful in those cases. And that's why we think this is so important to talk about. However, we might categorize ourselves or our students or our children as strategies or what we're all in this for. So we can't wait to come back and talk more with you next week. Thank you for being here. Thank you for listening. You can reach out to me or you can reach out to Claire her, you can find her on Instagram at claire Allen violin or Allen Violin studio, and

either of us would love to hear your feedback, your further questions, your comments, and we look forward to sharing with you more in the future.

So Time to Practice listening, community. We're so glad you're here. We're so glad you spent this time with us. We wish you a happy week of practicing. Take good care. I.

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