

Monster In the Music Lesson

Recently I began teaching the guitar to a five year old girl. It didn't start well. Getting her to focus and stay on task was tough. As anyone who's dealt with young children knows, five year olds live in a world of their own. Their emotions are on a hair trigger, and anything that frustrates them even a little can nudge them over the edge. More than once we had to end a lesson early because she shut down when something went wrong, and refused to try any further. And so it went for the first few months.

One day, during her lesson, she pointed to a locked closet door in our lesson room.

"What's in there?" she asked.

With no particular object in mind, I airily replied, "That's where we keep the monster."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes wide with astonishment.

I then explained that one morning we found a monster running around the building. We didn't want him to scare people, so we threw a net over him and locked him in the closet. As I explained this, I watched closely to make sure I wasn't scaring my student. On the contrary, she was enthralled, and peppered me with questions about the monster. So I described him as eight feet tall, green, with red eyes, yellow teeth, and silver claws. But he was also very refined—he wore a tuxedo, top hat, and monocle. (Picture an eight foot tall Mr. Peanut.) I also explained that we told him never to make noise while he was in the closet, as that would scare the children.

By now my student was rapt with an attention she'd never shown before. At the end of the lesson, I left her to pack up her guitar, and went into the hall to explain to her mother our discussion about the monster.

"Oh she loves that sort of stuff," her mother assured me. With this encouragement, I decided to go with the flow. The monster became a third presence in our subsequent lessons. At the end of a lesson, my student would sidle up to the closet door and say "good-bye, monster."

I little realized, however, that his influence would have my student turn a corner for the better. Soon I explained to my student that Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (on which she happened to be working) was the monster's favorite song. Because she was learning it, she was now the monster's favorite student. This brought out a new seriousness in my student. If she began a lesson balking at working on "Ode to Joy," I earnestly explained to her that the monster waited all week to hear her play it. If she didn't play it, then he would be very sad. That put a whole new perspective on her sessions. Soon she looked forward to getting better at the monster's favorite song. When for the first time we finally played "Ode to Joy" all the way through, my student whispered to me: "what's the monster doing now?" I leaned toward her and whispered: "he's dancing."

Meanwhile, my semester student recital was fast approaching. I began to wonder if my five year old student was ready to do her first public performance. Bear in mind, this still was only about a month after she'd ended a lesson with a crying tantrum. Thus, I was leery about putting her into a performance. Her older brother, however, was preparing to play in the recital. So I told her we would pretend she also was preparing for the recital. (By telling her we were pretending, it would tamp down any anxiety she might have. Also, if things didn't work out, we could always pull the plug with the explanation that, hey, we were just pretending to prepare for a recital.)

I also told her that if she played in the recital, the monster would want to hear her. So we'd let him out of the closet to attend the recital. (By now I was indulging my Machiavellian streak.)

“So the monster can come to the recital?” my student asked.

“Yes, but only if you’re playing. If you don’t play, he’ll be very disappointed,” I replied. I further explained that we couldn’t allow him into the theater, because that would scare everyone. But there was a small unused balcony into which we could sneak him. From then until the day of the recital, my student took “Ode to Joy” very seriously. After all, it was the monster’s favorite song, and she wanted him to see her perform it.

On the day of the recital, my student and I rehearsed “Ode to Joy” on stage. I pointed out to her where the monster was hiding. We couldn’t see him because he was in the shadows. But he could see us. My student offered a furtive wave—I warned her not to be obvious, since we didn’t want other people to see the monster and panic. When it was her turn to perform during the recital, she played like a trouper.

After the recital, her parents took her and her brother (who also played well, by the way) for ice cream. She told me that she wanted to get ice cream for the monster. I looked doubtful and said it would melt before she could get it to him.

“But you could give him a gift card,” I suggested.

“Okay, if I find one, I’ll give it to him,” she replied.

Going into this, I never suspected how well things would turn out. In teaching, sometimes serendipity works, and sometimes it doesn’t. This time it worked beyond my wildest dreams. When the fates smile on my lesson room, I accept their favor with gratitude.

But it did leave me with a new conundrum:

What does the monster want to hear next?