



Elementary School Orchestra

String Playing: That Most Important First Year

by Diane Wright

In our students' first year of playing we as teachers set the important foundation for their future success. How to get students interested in starting and how to get them to learn the important skills upon which to build is a challenge. I have learned many ideas from many people during my career. Here are some that have proved consistently successful for me.

Our method of recruiting always attracts adequate numbers of students to beginning lessons. We invite 3rd grade students to a demonstration by the 4th grade orchestra students. I tell them about the instruments and the advantages of playing and 4th graders play for them. The most excitement happens when we invite the 3rd graders to play. The 4th graders then help the younger students play their instruments. Even the classroom teacher plays. Everyone leaves very enthused. Interested students then return registration sheets and attend an evening meeting with their parents where I give information and measure students for the correct instrument size.

Our summer lesson program in August offers daily contact when students need regular reinforcement to do new skills correctly. Student are scheduled in groups of 6 to 8 and meet 30 minutes daily for two weeks. During the session I teach the bow and instrument hold and students learn three songs by rote. Two are played pizzicato and one arco on open strings. Lessons then resume during the school year twice a week for 30 minutes.

Teacher's Motto:

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove; but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.

Ronda Cole

Students come with one group of 10 and a larger group of 16. Because our classes meet at the beginning of the day students do arrive early for tuning and set up.

I continue to isolate right and left hand technics throughout the first year to achieve good posture and correct playing position. Early in my career I became interested in the teaching methods of Paul Rolland and Shinichi Suzuki and I use many of their ideas. My goal is to achieve balanced relaxed posture for ease of playing for each student.

I see that many students show unneeded tension in their shoulders. Before holding the instrument I have students "bounce" their shoulders as if they were puppets with strings. We continue to do this often. I have success teaching the violin/viola hold by having students raise the instrument from guitar position to above the shoulder with right hand first finger on the end button. The instrument is then lowered to the shoulder. My students seem to place their instrument correctly more consistently by using this method.

I see that beginning cello players often twist their upper body. To reinforce correct body position we do bear hugs and cello pushups. I find it helps also to remind them where the cello will touch their chest.

To learn correct bow technic, students continue to do exercises holding a pencil. I encourage students not only to bend the thumb but flex it as well. I reinforce opening and closing the arm at the elbow like a swinging gate. Students set cardboard tubes on the edge of their shoulders and play work rhythms with the bows moving in the tubes. Upper strings students start with bows at the midpoint on the strings with the right arm forming the capital letter "L." A down bow opens the gate.

I move slowly with teaching note reading with students playing mostly pizzicato at the beginning. I teach songs

by rote using Stanley Fletcher's book *New Tunes for Strings* published by Boosey & Hawkes. The first song, *Jig*, is great for practicing good posture and hand shape. Students play pizzicato with LH 4th finger in the area of the octave harmonic. Students assume this same posture for tuning. They come up individually and pluck each string with the LH 4th finger. We listen together while I match the pitch to the tuner. I also check posture for each student daily at this time. Another great piece from Stanley Fletcher's book is *Hoedown*. The students never tire of it. It teaches right hand technic including string crossings with and without slurs. We spend the whole year perfecting the variations. I introduce each new technic with a rote song. For example we use 4th finger in *The Macarena*, low two in *Jungle Dance*, and slurring in *The Adams Family*.

Before our first concert I give students song sheets with note names of holiday songs. They play the rhythms by ear. Students become very motivated to remember the names of notes in first position.

Each quarter I fill out and send home a checklist after listening to each student individually. This is very effective in helping students and parents realize what to watch for. I use this same checklist for three years to reinforce the basic skills.

The students who develop good posture habits and skills during the first year will experience success and enjoy playing. It is also a joy for the teacher to avoid doing remedial work with them later. We hope with this success they will continue playing for many years.

Diane Wright has taught strings for ISD #419 in Marshall, Minnesota since 1977. The recipient of the 1998 MNSOTA Master Teacher Award, Wright holds a B.A. Degree from Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. †