

Teaching Young String Players Approaches To Practicing

by Dr. Nathan Davis

The nature of most string methods materials is to present teachers with goals to accomplish more than to offer them a guide to the process of achieving them. The assumption of authors is that the process of how to practice and problem solve will be taught in individual ways by each school and private teacher. Gifted teachers do develop their own styles and concepts for communicating instrumental and musical practicing concepts to students. However, I believe that many teachers would benefit from having access to materials that specifically address a progression of steps—that even the greatest of string players need to take—that help students to gain mastery with a particular musical and technical issues. It is the very process of learning and problem solving that bond musicians from young to old, beginner to the superstar soloist. It is a prime area for university teachers to explore with public school string teachers and vice versa. Helping students to find ways to work and to teach themselves is the key to any successful pedagogic endeavor. All music teachers need to find ways to engage young people in the “process” orientation (rather than the “product” mentality) necessary for success.

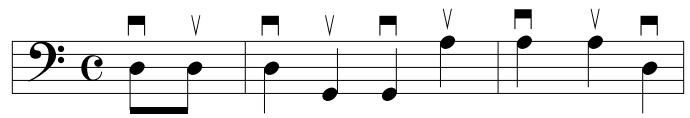
We all tend try learn music too quickly and to immediately follow the directives of musical notation before our bodies and minds are ready to do so. It is actually important to search for ways of practicing that temporally belie what is on the written page. Effective practicing involves separating, at times, the issues of rhythm, pitch, tone, left-hand, and right-hand technique. While hands-separate practice is a given for pianists striving to play and coordinate playing with two hands, young string players often fail to realize how important developing autonomous left-hand versus right-hand coordination can be for themselves.

I would like to offer some suggestions relating to augmenting published materials and teaching the art of practicing. I would like to underscore the importance of notating even simple exercises for students to formalize the process of practicing and to off-set students’ drive to play pieces before they are sufficiently mentally and physically prepared to do so.

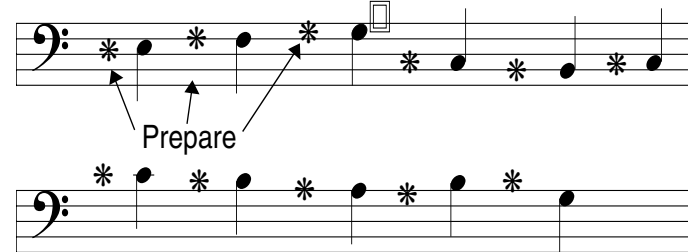


Bach Bourrée

Teachers can write out the open string bowing patterns without the pitch changes effected by left-hand fingerings. It is tremendously beneficial to focus only on the work that bow is actually responsible for when our concentration is often diverted by left-hand fingering patterns. It also can be an interesting and eye-opening experience for a student to discover a piece first in this manner before playing and hearing the pitches.

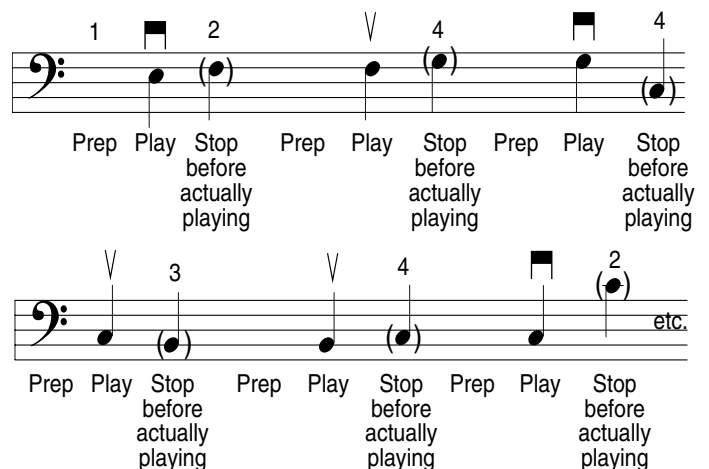


Left-hand note and fingering patterns can be practiced without the bow. Direct students to stop and think ahead to the next finger and note, before moving to find it. This is an excellent drill and takes a lot of discipline to work on in a slow and conscious manner. As a student progresses it is also an excellent way to practice shifting and extending positions. It is important to write out drills with clear visual breaks between notes to clarify this approach.



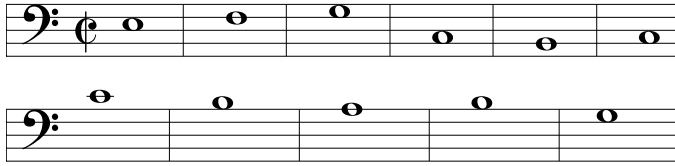
Left hand alone

Using the bow again, left-hand and bow technique can be synchronized by following the same format. This time, however, play one note and without pausing, prepare (don’t play) the next one silently by placing the next finger (left-hand) down and planting the bow in-the-string ready to move. Pause to think (preparing the next note in line) before you proceed to actually play this previously prepared note and to execute the preparation of the note that follows it. Continue through a selection following this format. Mentally absorbing the steps of this drill not only synchronizes the movements of both hands but teaches the all-important musical/technical concept that the follow-through from one physical gesture prepares us for the next.

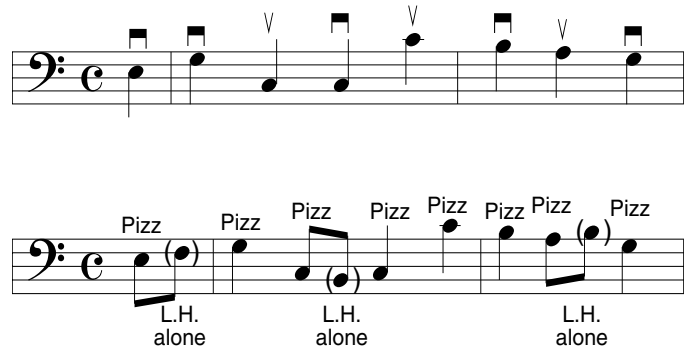


With the Bow

• Most string teachers have their students play notes in a piece “out-of-rhythm” to focus only on pitch and intonation. Don’t hesitate to notate these simple drills preferably using long rhythmic note values.



• Rhythms can be practiced by playing only those notes that fall on the beat. Teachers notating this kind of practice methodology should have the bow choreography correspond to the where the bow placement would be on each beat assuming the piece were to be played as notated. This method of practicing can also be done with pizzicato while the left hand operates normally performing all notes including those that fall between beats.



I try to encourage students to think about training their concentration to operate like a spot-light beam focusing intently on different aspects of musicianship and technique. Indeed it is the ability to separate issues, and then to integrate them again, that creates high level string playing.

Dr. Nathan Davis is Associate Professor of Cello at Moorhead State University. ‡