



# Cello

## Eight Master Classes with Janos Starker

### Part 2: Right Hand Issues

by David Carter

This is the second of a series of articles about this summer's master classes with Janos Starker. Mr. Starker may be known primarily for his prodigious left hand technique, but equally impressive are his ideas about the bow arm's functions. To begin at the beginning, power in the bow arm comes from the large back muscles, and from the latissimus dorsi that wrap around the rib cage under the arm. To feel these muscles, try the following exercise: circle both arms around behind you, as in the butterfly stroke. Hold the arms, backs of hands facing each other, for a moment at eye level. Then drop the arms into playing position. The cellist should therefore sit in such a way as not to tense the smaller back muscles. This usually means not arching the back, and keeping your weight distributed slightly forward, towards the cello. If you have to shift your weight appreciably forward to stand up, the seated posture needs to be adjusted.

With the body thus poised for action, the basic legato stroke can be considered. In the lower half of the bow, the whole arm is used as a unit, swinging from the shoulder joint. As the tip is approached, the elbow begins to open, and at the same time the upper arm continues to rise, creating leverage through the pronating forearm. At the tip the upper arm makes an elliptical motion, usually in a counter-clockwise direction (seen from the cellist's vantage point!); this is the concept of "following through." Then the process is reversed; the elbow begins to close and the upper arm begins

to fold in towards the body. At the frog the whole arm makes another elliptical motion, lowering to begin the down bow. These elliptical motions certainly vary depending on whether a string crossing is involved or if a different musical effect is called for. A clockwise motion between down and up bows makes an entirely different sound than a counterclockwise motion. An inconsistency in sound can usually be traced to some problem in the legato stroke; for instance an abrupt change in bow speed results when the elbow opens too quickly, and a clunky bow change results when the whole arm does not participate in the change. Each different bow stroke is derived from the legato (hence Mr. Starker's "Legato Rule"). Brushed notes in the lower half use the whole arm, martelé in the middle uses a combination forearm and upper arm, and notes at the point use the forearm.

Spiccato is a special challenge: it also utilizes a forearm motion, but the upper arm cannot be static; it must be able to react to the forearm's motion. Just as the legato stroke usually describes a counterclockwise motion between the down and up strokes, so the spiccato should describe a similar motion. The vigorous forearm motion and a flexible right thumb allow the wrist joint to move freely, and the hand describes a counterclockwise motion. The down bow stroke puts the weight into the string, and the up bow acts as a rebound.

This basic legato stroke is also characterized by Starker saying "feel the

curve in the sound;" because of the arm's motion in the bow stroke there is ample possibility for a sound that has shape rather than a "straight" sound. There is always the interplay of weight (at the frog) and leverage (at the point). This hopefully allows a cellist to relax the right thumb at the frog, creating a tension and release feeling that is parallel to Mr. Starker's belief in the interplay of musical tension and release. The release of bow-arm (and specifically right thumb) tension is also crucial to Starker's use of the term "pedaled sound," in which the end of a note has a released quality much as the end of a piano's note. He often describes dotted rhythms in this way, with a release of intensity just before the short note.

I believe this more than any other playing characteristic sets Starker's playing apart from other cellists; certainly there is the dazzling left hand, the intense and focused sound, the wonderful rhythmic vitality, but most of all there is the malleable nature of the sostenuto and the articulation that creates the musical effect of maturity and elegance. But that is the subject of a future article!

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