

MMEA: Teaching Strategies for the Developing Cellist

by Dr. Paul Vance (reported by Cristina Seaborn)

As a violinist in a K-12 teacher certification program for orchestra, I was drawn to the MMEA session last February: *Teaching Strategies for the Developing Cellist* by Dr. Paul Vance from Winona State University.

Dr. Vance started with the obvious and discussed how a cellist should sit in a chair. Since we all have different body types and “we come in all sizes and shapes,” there is “an appropriate playing posture” for each person. Some people prefer a chair that slants forward. You might want to lean the chair forward by using wood blocks under the back legs of the chair. He mentioned that Wenger makes an excellent cello chair.

He talked about “getting friendly with your chair!” Stroke the front part the seat! Thighs should be parallel to the floor and feet flat on the floor. The bottom of the cello bout is at thigh level. Sit with your instrument and set the end pin so that you can clear your bow without hitting your right leg. You can use nail polish to remember how far to pull out the end pin.

Long legs and long arms mean a long end pin and a taller chair. It may be possible to get a longer end pin by making an adjustment on the end pin inside the cello. A long end pin may need to be purchased.

The instrument is supported, resting without squeezing the knees. The bottom back bout fits in the hollow of the left knee. Easy access to the A string is the important point, so the cello is angled slightly to the right.

When he was discussing that the button of the cello is above the sternum, a question was asked about what to do in the case of a well developed female cellist. Basically, “the best you can” was the answer. Every body is different!

The C peg is behind the left ear of the student. There should be easy access to the fingerboard.

Start the student with the concept of symmetry of the hand. Put the hands on thighs with the palms up. Touch the thumbs to the middle finger on the

same hand. Flip the right hand over and here is your bow hold. Bring the left hand to the fingerboard and here is your left hand position.

Relax! The first thing students want to do is grip the cello. The cello is supported and does not need to be held. Keep coming back to the symmetry of the hands.

The Bow Hold: With the second finger at the ferrule of the bow, the thumb is where the frog and stick meet. The thumb is not locked, but loose and flexible. The thumb acts as a fulcrum. Feel as if you have a ping pong ball inside your hand. There should be a dome or cave inside your right palm. Fingers are free to move in a passive way with the arm motion.

Your pinkie actually comes off the bow sometimes when you are playing at the tip of the bow. The most important thing is that the pinkie should return to the bow loose, in a relaxed manner.

Should the cello bow be used with the flat of the hair or with a tilted stick? Fournier taught that the bow should not be played with flat hair, but with two thirds of the hair. Vance believes that the flat hair bow placement is better for legato, spiccato, and sautillé bowing. It has something to do with getting your bow hand over the stick.

The Left Hand: The thumb and second finger axis is lined up. The thumb is curved. Impress on your students instead of feeling that you’re squeezing between your thumb and finger, that you are pulling the string towards you. Take the thumb off the neck to demonstrate.

The string as a vibrating body does not end with the bow. “Stroke, don’t choke with the bow!” You get your best sound when you get the string moving side to side. You should feel the string vibrate.

You can choke or squeeze the string off with your left hand. Beautiful bow technique won’t help. Find the least amount of arm weight to still achieve clear pitch. Vibrant sound comes with the left hand too.

It’s almost never to soon to start students on double stops. Geminiani chord gets the left hand set. Playing in tune is a relative thing. A player needs to make choices about playing melodically or harmonically.

Page 34 of Starker’s *An Organized Method of String Playing: Violoncello Exercises for the Left Hand* has double stops practice. This establishes the relationship between one finger and the next. Do those on all three pairs of strings.

Fingerboard Geography: Make the fingerboard more user friendly. It’s never too soon to get the students to fool around with high notes. Vance demonstrated a squeaky “I love you Mommy” in a high position.

Legato: Hold the bow by the tip with the left hand on two to three strings. Stroke the bow with your right hand. Talk about bow speed vs. arm weight. Which part of the arm governs which part of the bow?

Shoulder Forearm: Think of the elbow as an open hinge. Take the pinkie off the bow when you are at the tip. Remember to “stroke instead of choke” the string. Gravity is on our side.

Your bow wrist makes a slight arc (u-shaped) in the bow stroke. The forearm governs the upper half of the bow.

Vibrato: Start in the 4th position. 1st finger vibrates forward; 2nd finger is the balance point; 3rd finger vibrates backwards; 4th finger vibrates backwards.

Thumb Position: It is never too soon to start students on thumb position. If students have good strength and facility in the first position, they are ready for thumb position. Some passages are easier to play in thumb position.

Cristina Seaborn is pursuing a Masters in Orchestral Conducting at St. Cloud State University. She is interested in jazz string ensembles, gives workshops on improvisation and writes for string orchestra. She has self-published arrangements in fiddle, Celtic, Cajun and jazz styles. ♪