



Cello

On Flexibility

by David Carter

Several years ago a fine young cellist named Darrett Adkins came to St. Olaf and gave an excellent recital. (He was, at that time, playing on the *Duke of Marlboro* Strad owned by Juilliard — quite a cello!) He also gave a superb master class, and of course flexibility was one of the topics dealt with. Darrett related an anecdote about Harvey Shapiro, the legendary cellist and long-time Juilliard faculty: how a cellist must be flexible in the “seat.” The colorful way this was told can’t be reprinted; no surprise to those who know of Mr. Shapiro! The point is that a cellist must be free not only to shift weight from side to side, but also to turn the body in either direction. This turning of the body involves rotating around the spine, and that rotation is felt down into the seat.

The exhaustive book *Cello Technique* by Gerhard Mantel (Indiana University Press, 1975) also deals with this concept. It is presented in the following way: if you sit with the left arm resting comfortably by your side, pushing the left knee forward results in the arm following that motion. The

application for cellists? An ascending shift. (This is one good reason why an ascending shift should be bowed “down” when possible — the arms move in a complementary way.) If the hips and seat are immobile, that beneficial rotation cannot occur. It is easy to see how a descending shift can be helped by rotation in the opposite direction. The rotation also directs the mind’s focus towards the larger muscles in the torso, resulting in smoother shifts. This flexibility is also helpful when bringing the left hand up into thumb position; in this situation rotating the body around to the left relieves strain on the left arm.

Aside from the flexibility demanded by rotating around the spine, it is helpful to shift weight from side to side. This can be either in the direction of the bow (to the right for a down-bow) or in opposition to the bow’s direction. These two types of motion have, as one might suspect, very different musical feelings. Moving with the bow’s motion tends to slow the bow down — great for a student who uses the first half of the bow too quickly. Moving with the

bow also tends to produce a sostenuto musical feeling, though not necessarily a sostenuto sound. (The sostenuto sound is chiefly a matter of the bow arm’s weight and speed.) The opposite motion is musically more active, and can help produce a more sustained sound. This motion, in opposition to the bow’s direction, can be very effective in teaching a student to follow through in bow changes.

These two aspects of a cellist’s movement — rotation around the spine and shifting weight from side to side — show that flexibility is vital, even in our connection to our chair! This flexibility can and should be applied to cellists of all levels. It can be the difference between a good performance and a great one, and can help insure a cellist’s long-term playing health.

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