Clinic: String Technique

presented by Sally O'Reilly

reported by Faith Farr

Sally O'Reilly became violin professor at the University of Minnesota 7 years ago. She has maintained a large private studio in addition to her university work and has helped many students win awards in local and national competitions. In a fascinating presentation, Sally shared a wide range of ideas on teaching strings.

When first working with a student, Sally recommends some easy tests to gain information about how the student is likely to learn — what will be easy, and what may be hard:

Fold your hands on your lap with your fingers knitted together. (Wait for a moment. Don't peek at the next sentence.) Notice which thumb is on top. If the left thumb is on top, you are left-dominant (not necessarily left-handed); the fine left hand control needed for string playing may be easier for you than for a right-hand dominant person.

Cover one eye and look at a distant object. The eye you are looking with is your dominant eye. People who are right-eye dominant will have an easier time reading left to right. A left-eye dominant person reading music may rely more on a combination of listening and looking.

Hop gently in place on two feet, then hop on just one foot. The foot you choose is your dominant foot. Sally commented that most musicians are mixed dominance — hands, eyes and feet will not all be dominant on the same side. A show of hands indicated that this was true for the audience.

Make a strong fist with both hands. Notice where your thumb is. Sally described three kinds of fists: The baby fist, with the thumb inside the fingers, is the weakest structurally; probably not many adults still feel this as the natural way to close their hands. Women traditionally make a fist with the thumb outside the other fingers — on the side of finger one, not wrapped around it. The strongest fist, the one with the most neurological development, is a fist that has the thumb wrapped around finger 2, like a punching fist.

Sally recommends simply finding out what students tend to do so that you as the teacher find out what the "enemy" is. Since most of what people do is based on tactile memory, if their tactile memory is against them, they will be in trouble. For example, a student who forms a fist with the thumb on the side of the hand instead of opposite finger 2 will likely suffer from wandering fingers on the bow hold; it will not feel natural to have the thumb opposite finger 2. The same student will likely also suffer from the left thumb hitchhiking on the neck.

As well as teaching string technique, teachers will have to train some students in basic motions. Opening the elbow to the tip is *not* the most natural motion of the arm; it must be trained. Think of a newborn's natural sleeping position — its arms are flexed at the elbow (like a person standing and holding onto a subway strap). Remember that good technique is not a vaccination where one shot is enough for life. Technique is a process that needs to be developed all the time.

On reading, Sally advocates reading intervallically, not by letter name. Read "step up," "step down," "same," "skip up" etc. Note names are only so we can communicate with each other. Teach finger numbers by having your students touch their left fingers with their right hand finger. The tactile drill will help to reinforce the finger name.

Sally says be careful not to teach a bow "grip;" after all, the violin bow only weights about 4 ounces. It is *not* heavy; it can easily balance on the tip of one finger. Unfortunately, students often grip and claw the bow too hard. Do this experiment: gently flop your hand up and down being flexible at the wrist. Now press your thumb and finger 2 together and try to flop your hand; you will find your wrist is rigid. Now release the pressure on thumb and 2, but still let them touch. You will find that you can flop your wrist. The trick to a good bow hold is letting thumb and fingers touch the stick without creating the tension that freezes the wrist. Similarly for the left hand, too much finger pressure will lock the left wrist and make vibrato impossible. Sally challenged the engineers to create a biofeedback device for the fingerboard that would turn on a light on the scroll if there was too much finger pressure.

When you watch a baseball pitcher, the power comes from the back, but the release from the fingers defines the direction. It is similar for the bow arm. Power can be cut by a raised shoulder, a tight elbow or a tight wrist. Students must embrace the concept "less is more."

In teaching young students, Sally has a colleague whose simple criteria is "Can the student play the Tchaikovsky Concerto in that position?" If so, the student's position is OK. If not, the position needs to be fixed.

Sally emphasized the importance of slow practice. If you are trying to go from A to B, and you end up going from A to C instead, often you will find that there is no road from C to B. You must go back to A and start over. Practice does not make perfect; only *perfect* practice makes perfect. Students should only go as quickly as they can and *still do it right*.

Sally closed by emphasizing that teachers have an obligation to have some non-negotiable expectations. Letting something slide does the student disservice. Students need us to be strict so they will have confidence in our judgment. Be willing to stop nonsense and be willing to repeat until you feel like a tape loop. Students look back on strict teachers and are grateful.

Faith Farr teaches cello at MacPhail Center for the Arts, Bethel College and her home studio. She has made frequent pedagogy presentations to MNSOTA and MMEA. 𝄽

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2000/2001 (Vol. 3, No. 2)