

Clinic: Keys to Successful Teaching

presented by Mary West

reported by Annette Caruthers

"I always ask myself, 'Did I teach the very best lesson I can?' for each and every student." This was the opening remark of Mary West at the MNSOTA Fall Clinic and Luncheon last October. She went on to give many short pieces of wisdom she has gleaned from her years of teaching....

Level with students right from the beginning. Tell them what you expect....

how much do they need to practice?...sort of a contract. Sometimes she tells students to "go home and think about it and then call me up and we can talk about how much you are willing to do." She made it clear she does not feel she can tell families what they have to do, but that she does expect the student to take it seriously and



really practice. If they don't work at it seriously, they will never have a choice about what they can do with their music. The choice is made daily and weekly by their own efforts and progress.

Don't always insist on the same order of pieces. Some students will really love and be motivated by a certain piece, and you should take advantage of that by having them work on it. That being said, she did give a suggestions for pieces to study after the Vivaldi *A Minor Concerto*: DeBeriot 9 and 7, *Scene de Ballet*, Viotti 23, Kabalevsky, Bruch, and Mendelssohn.

What about difficult parents? Mary West told us that often the more difficult parents are your best allies in the long run. She tells them that she really wants their help, and then gives them one specific thing to help the student with that week. If a parent corrects their child during the lesson, she explains that it is confusing to the child; there must be only one teacher at a time. Often she will compliment a parent for how much they really do know and notice about their child's playing, but ask them to focus on helping with that one specific item she thinks is most important.

How should lessons be structured? Mary always begins the lesson with the building blocks of technique: 1) Scales — for which

she likes to use books by Whistler, Flesch, and Galamian. 2) Finger exercises — she uses Sevcik, Dancla, and Schradieck. 3) Bowing — Sevcik again. 4) Shifting — she recommends Yost and Sevcik. 5) Position studies — Whistler. 6) Etudes — Wohlfahrt, Preparing for Kreutzer, Dont Op. 37, Mazas, Kreutzer, Rode, Gaviniés, Fiorillo, and Paganini (I think my teacher made me do every one of these!) and 7) Double stops. These technical elements are done first at the lesson. If they are not well prepared, they will take the entire lesson. If they are in fine shape, there will still be 30–40 minutes to work on repertoire.

Solving problems: no matter how carefully we teach, students do develop problems, or encounter sections of a piece that they have difficulty with. Mary says problems are "roadblocks" that must be removed before going on. The standard must always be the highest possible, not just "pretty good for their age." She recommends having the student show you how they will practice: "How will you correct that?" or "How will you find that note?" If they are not sure, then show them how to practice at home. When the student thinks they have a problem solved, have them go back and work from some measures before the problem to see if they can really play through it without slowing down.

Look at students from all angles during lessons. Check both thumbs.... they are terribly important. Be sure the thumbs are curved and not squeezing.

Give students choices on phrasing once they are past the very beginning stages. Listen to several different recordings; sing the passage first; then "sing it with the bow." One day recently when I arrived at Mary's house to discuss some of these items and also to play for her myself, I found her watching

a video of David Oistrakh — watching very intently to discover just how he played something. She told me in great detail what she had learned. That is one of the great things about Mary West — she is always eager to learn more and really works at doing it. She is adamant about continuing to listen to recordings and watch artists play.

To introduce spiccato Mary has students drop the bow as for ricochet — as many bounces as possible. Then drop it for only one bounce. Work next on a broad spiccato, then make smaller motions as you speed up. Use open strings first. The Bohm *Perpetual Motion* is a favorite for teaching spiccato. She has students begin spiccato, and then use sautillé as tempo can be increased. Or, start with détaché and then use sautillé for faster tempo.

For a tight left hand she has children play without their thumb touching the neck of the instrument at all. The teacher may have to hold the violin for them, but this can teach them that they can place their fingers and play without squeezing with the thumb.

To teach octaves be sure students understand how to reach back with their first finger (as opposed to reaching with the fourth finger) and that they relax between notes.

Chords are another item that often need work. Mary tells her students to begin the chord piano for the lower notes, and use the bow faster for the upper notes, making the top notes forte.

Vibrato

Because of lack of time at the fall clinic, Mary West was not able to answer completely how she teaches vibrato. I am delighted that Mary has shared her vibrato steps more fully for this article.

Mary likes to begin the process by having the student place the left hand in about 4th or 5th position, with the thumb barely on the neck of the violin, then tapping on the body of the instrument, beside the fingerboard on the G string side. This starts the hand, fingers, and wrist moving.

Students must work at developing their vibrato every single day.

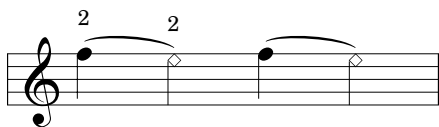
If you ignore it, it will go away!

Another aid in the earliest stages is a small film canister with some rice in it. Hold it loosely in the palm of your left hand and shake, using the hand and wrist motion similar to the eventual vibrato. Teacher and student can hear the evenness of the motion. Also good is the small percussion “egg” sold at many music stores.

The next step is to have the student make a motion like “polishing” or sliding on the surface of the A string, with the hand still up in position as for the tapping. Use of a tissue under the fingertip will help most students, as the string may feel as though it will cut the finger. Mary works on this in the higher position first, starting with a very small gliding motion, gradually making the motion larger and larger. When this seems to work well, begin working down towards first position. For most students the gliding is much easier in the higher position, where the instrument naturally blocks any unwanted opposite motion from the arm.

These processes are designed by Mary to develop the hand and finger motions for vibrato, as she believes the arm motion will come almost naturally as you progress with the student, whereas the hand and finger motions require a good deal of development. All three are needed. The arm motion will be the same movement used for shifting (moving from the elbow, with a slight rotation) as though only shifting one step.

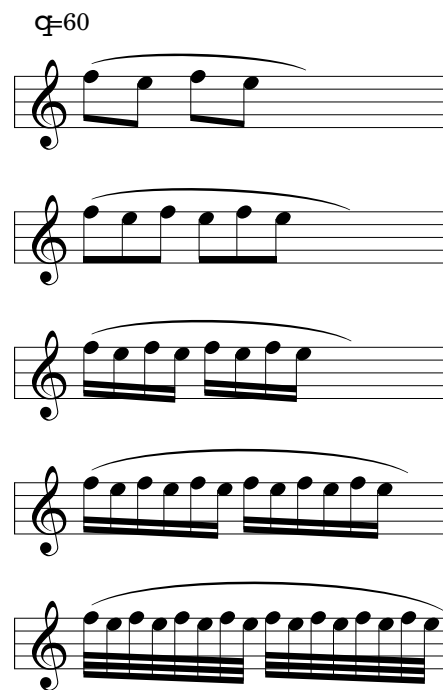
Later comes work on the actual rolling motion that we hear as vibrato. Mary begins in 4th position (approx.) with the second finger on the note F \sharp on the A string. She works with the student to accomplish a half-step roll down to E \natural , with the E being a harmonic. This type of press/release is to get the first joint of the finger moving, and prevent “gripping” the neck. Then work on a wider motion to get the other joints of the finger moving well. She also says, “Check the upper left arm muscle here. If this muscle is tight, work slowly and with wide motions until it’s under control.”



Another tip: Some students will move

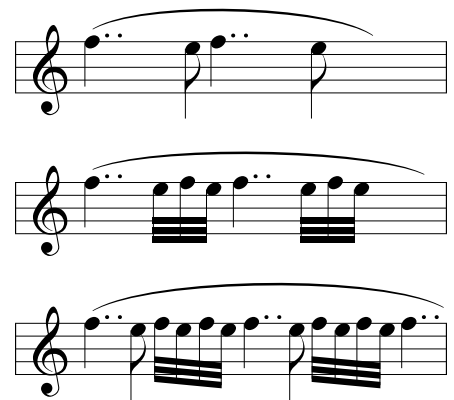
the entire instrument when they begin the rolling process. Show the students how to place a small sponge between the scroll of the violin and a wall to prevent the instrument from moving. They can then do this at home as well.

When a half-step motion with the harmonic works well, move to doing the same motion without the harmonic (keeping enough weight on the finger to hold the string down and make a solid note). Mary sets a metronome at $\text{♩}=60$, and works for a pattern of eighth notes. This needs to be a very smooth, round, rolling half-step...not a more jerky, sharp motion. From eighth notes, she moves to a pattern of triplets, then 16^{ths}, sextuplets, and 32^{nds}.



When these patterns work well, she moves to a quartertone motion (from F back to sharp E), again using the metronome and using the same patterns to speed up the motion.

The next stage is work with rhythmic patterns, again starting with a harmonic on the lower tone of the motion, and moving eventually to solid notes.



Another step is to begin with a very slow vibrato and gradually increase its speed to as fast as possible; then gradually slow it down. Mary emphasized the importance of having a very smooth, even vibrato at many different tempos, moving seamlessly between them. Also work with a very narrow vibrato and gradually increase its width to as wide as possible, then narrow it again.

Mary gives additional exercises as she sees what the student can or cannot do easily. For students who have difficulty moving from one finger to the next without stopping the vibrato she may have them do a simple etude, such as early Kreutzer, keeping the vibrato going on all notes; often using slurs to help keep everything moving. For someone else, it may be scales with a pattern of slurs as: for G Major, play open G string on one bow, the notes A and B on a slur to encourage the vibrato to keep moving for both notes, then B and C on the next bow, then C and D slurred, etc. This helps especially if the student seems to stop the vibrato for bow changes.

Mary is very analytical when watching the student and their mastery of the vibrato, and invents, or pulls from memory, exercises on a very individual basis. She emphasized that students *must* work at developing their vibrato every single day. “If you ignore it, it *will* go away.” If a student is not working on it at home every single day, then the teacher absolutely must do it at every lesson.

Thanks, Mary, for the thorough teaching and the inspiration you give to all!

Annette Caruthers teaches viola and violin at her private studio in Minneapolis and St. Louis Park. She is a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and currently serves as principal violist with many organizations including the Minnesota Opera Orchestra and VocalEssence. ♪