



CELLO

4 Steps to Better Shifting

by David Carter

One of the hardest parts of playing the cello is shifting. We certainly practice hours and hours in order to shift accurately and with the desired musical style. I believe one of the hardest aspects of shifting is that we can shift with a relaxed and beautiful motion, only to arrive on not quite the right note. This of course causes the cellist to tighten up, and the motion becomes less relaxed and not so beautiful. I believe that to teach effective shifting students must learn at first to separate these two concepts, refine each individually, and then eventually put them back together. Many factors contribute to the success of a shift, and I believe each factor needs to be in place before we can shift accurately on a consistent basis.

I. Concentrate on the smoothness and ease of the shifting motion. Do a series of upward shifts (gravity helping) to any note, or as I say sometimes “to wherever you end up.” This should eliminate the little awkward corrections we do when we do not quite hit the desired note. The key is to release pressure while sliding, land gently, and to begin with some kind of preparatory motion. The preparatory motion should be in proportion to the distance shifted, a larger motion for bigger distance. At first the preparatory motion can be obvious, and as comfort level grows, more subtle. I think an excellent preparatory motion is a “bounce” down with the left elbow (springboard diving is a good metaphor), which sets the arm in motion to whatever destination you choose. Once you are comfortable with the ascending shift, move on to descending. I think one can create the feeling of “simulated” gravity in a descending shift, replicating the ease of motion gravity enables. Keep in mind that

this initial practice is done without shifting to specific notes — in other words without the worry of intonation to cloud the process. This is the focus of the second step.

II. Use several strategies to conceive the goal of a shift. With the shifting motion now smooth and relaxed, the goal needs to be defined and refined. The more clarity you can bring to the note shifted to, the more accurate the shift will be. Here are several strategies that I have found effective:

- Hear the pitch of where you are going. This is the first and most important strategy, and can be enhanced by the following:
- Know the name of the note (surprising to me how many students still think a finger instead of a note name).
- Visualize the note as it appears on the page.
- Relate it to another note that you know.

III. Calculate the timing of the motion. Timing depends on both the musical context and the tempo involved. The shifting motion needs to correspond to the musical character you have determined; one would use a much different motion in *The Swan*, for example, than *The Elephant*. Similarly, in slow playing you can sometimes even think of the shift only on the note before, but in fast passages it precedes the actual shift by as many as 4 notes. Also long distances often need earlier timing than short, but regardless of the distance covered each shift *must* be approached by thinking ahead and releasing weight. I think students often think of a little shift as not really a shift, and so do not follow good shifting procedures.

IV. All the logistics must be in place. You must know, for example, if you are shifting on the new finger or old finger, the new bow or old bow when a bow change is involved, and of course which finger you are actually arriving on. I find students who have trouble with arriving on a certain finger can try another, and then if that’s successful actually go back to their original choice. Just by trying another option they have introduced a better motion to that particular shift, and then can use the smoother motion with their original fingering. It is also helpful, following this concept, to try shifting to other notes nearby, a half step lower or higher, with the same or different fingering. This can help reinforce the concept of shifting from position to position, rather than just note to note.

Shifting is of course a huge topic, and only one facet of playing in tune. It is also ironic that while we get tense about playing in tune, the best intonation comes from being relaxed, free of excess tension. For this reason, I believe that separating the motion from the result is a vital practice step. The two are easily and instinctively brought back together; the hard part is the separation. Once a student can consistently execute a smooth shifting motion, and the goal of the shift is clarified, real progress can begin.

David Carter is Associate Professor of Music at St. Olaf College and is the Artistic Director of the Bridge Chamber Music Festival. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Indiana University, and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana with degrees in cello performance. ♪