Cello

How I Contracted Sazer-Mania

A Review of *New Directions in Cello Playing* by Victor Sazer.

by David Holmes

This past summer I purchased a cello pedagogy book that I had seen before, but on the advice of another cello teacher, had avoided buying. I have been so glad that I decided to ignore what I now consider bad advice and chose to explore *New Directions in Cello Playing* by Victor Sazer (first edition, 1995; 3rd edition revised and expanded, 2003; published by Ofnote; forward by Paul Katz). *New Directions* has been a welcome jolt and a breath of fresh air to my cello teaching and playing and has caused me to reconsider some of my own previously held convictions. After spending several weeks methodically going through Sazer's book, I found myself getting more and more excited about a number of his ideas, as I felt my playing quickly achieve a deeper level of overall integration.

Victor Sazer was born in New Jersey in 1926. He attended Juilliard and studied with Leonard Rose, George Neikrug, and Claus Adam. He was a member of the Houston Symphony before relocating to Los Angeles, where he was a chamber musician, a studio musician in film and television, and a cello teacher at California State University in Long Beach for many years.

Sazer's book is accessible and concise, and contains many helpful illustrations. It is organized into chapters according to subjects such as *Getting Acquainted With Your Body; Gravity, Balance, and Body Use; Sources of Physical Power; Sitting; Aligning Your Body and Cello; Bowing; Exploring the Left Hand and Arm; Fast and Slow Playing*; and *Teaching Beginners*. Each topic is developed with a set of simple and elegant physical "demonstrations" that are elucidated with numerous helpful drawings. The reader cellist is expected to engage in these explorations, which are followed by Sazer's own observations on each demonstration. His approach is gentle and his tone always encourages one's own curiosity.

Sazer's over-arching litmus test is whether one is able to easily breathe while playing the cello. He keeps invoking this breathing point throughout his book. In the past, I had become aware of the importance of breathing while playing, but *New Directions* helped me understand how much breathing and posture are inexorably intertwined. Most cellists' classic tendency to drop the head forward while playing not only disrupts body alignment, but it also makes natural, easy breathing impossible because it contracts the rib cage. Interestingly, the head drop or even head turns to the side do not need to be extreme to interfere with breathing.

Balance and release of tension are concepts that recur frequently in *New Directions*. Sazer is strongly motivated to present a way of cello playing that will avoid injury, since apparently cellists are most likely of all instrumentalists to suffer from back problems. A properly balanced body occurs naturally in our daily movements away from the cello, and it is Sazer's desire to bring those natural principals of equilibrium to our cello playing. For instance, he points out that one's arms always move in the opposite direction from one's body as we instinctively balance ourselves in our

Placing the Cello

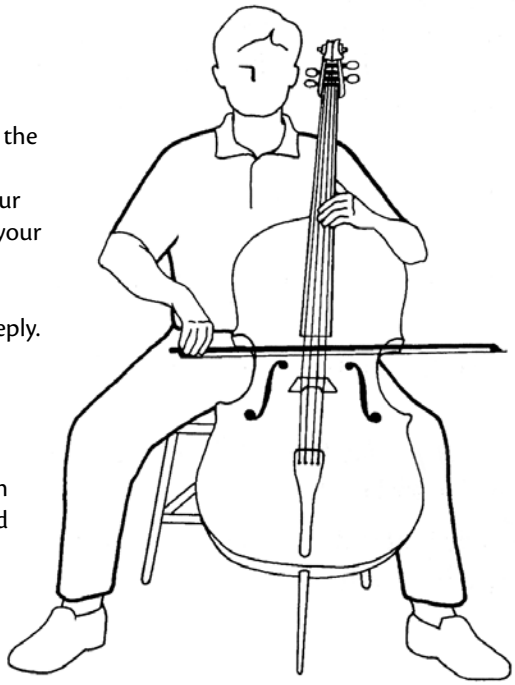
This demonstration explores ways to find your own optimal cello placement.

Step 1. Place your cello on the left side of your body, resting on three points: the floor (through the end-pin), the left side of your chest and your left knee;
Step 2. Experiment with the amount of space between your right leg and your cello. Make the span wide enough to completely support your body and your bow-arm when you play at the tip of the bow;
Step 3. Experiment with the angle of your cello to find the greatest comfort;
Step 4. Expand your lungs with your body erect, so that you can breathe deeply. Be sure to always keep your shoulders behind your cello; and
Step 5. Balance on the heel and ball of each foot.

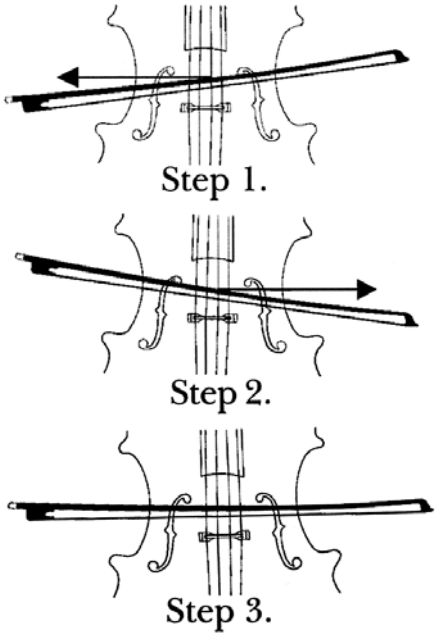
Observations

Placing your cello on the left side of your body with your right leg well away from the side of your instrument provides the best alignment. Your body is balanced and flexible and all of your playing motions are fully supported. You can access all regions of your cello without slouching, twisting or leaning forward. You may feel as if you are semi-standing when you sit this way.

Sazer pp. 82-83.



Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2005 (Vol. 7, No. 3)



Angle of Bow

It is widely assumed that the bow must always be straight and parallel to the bridge. It is neither completely possible nor necessarily desirable, however, to always keep the bow straight. This demonstration explores the differences between straight and angled bowing.

Step 1. Play a short down-bow with the tip of your bow pointing slightly upward toward the fingerboard. Pull your bow across the string at about a 90 degree angle to the string (in line with the arrow).;
Step 2. Play an up-bow with the tip of your bow pointing slightly downward toward the floor. Move your bow at about a 90 degree angle to the string (in line with the arrow); and
Step 3. Play a down-bow and an up-bow, keeping your bow at a 90 degree angle to the string.

Can you draw a more focused sound when the bow is straight or angled? Which feels better?

Sazer p. 96

daily movements. On the same principle, Sazer points out that the body should lead the arms and that the mass of the body can propel the bow arm ("body impulse" bowing) in the opposite direction from the body. So, on a down bow the body moves to the left, although a preparatory motion to the right is a natural precursor of a down bow. The result is a coordination of body and arm motion instead of an isolated arm motion. This balancing motion inevitably affects the torso and legs and Sazer feels it should involve the feet as well, which leads to his ideas on how one should sit at the cello.

Sazer's solution to sitting balanced at the cello is to have the cellist sit on a very high chair, one that is much higher than most of us are used to. Most teachers teach that the upper legs should angle slightly downward in a chair that is the proper height, but Sazer recommends being so high that one feels they are "semi-standing." He proposes that the knees be several inches below the hip level! (I had to put books on my highest cello chair to achieve this, since I am 6' 3" tall. Now I have a stool that is 24 inches high.) One of Sazer's justifications for this added height is that the pelvis rotates backward when the chair is not high enough. (I can feel this rotation now that I am aware of what not rotating feels like.) He suggests having the feet farther apart, slightly past shoulder width, and out **in front of the knees**. The cello is held to the left of center, so that the right leg doesn't touch the instrument. For cello stability, Mr. Sazer recommended in an e-mail to me that having the cello face straight out in front (and not angling to the right) can help. Sazer's unusual idea of having the cello's bridge to the left of the body's centerline is based on his belief — and I concur after trying it — that more power with less work is achieved this way. Since the down-bow starts further to the left, playing at the tip is easier. In the higher sitting position and with the cello to the left of center one can still stay keep the right shoulder square and low as well. (See "Placing the cello," from demonstration 16, reproduced opposite.)

Of course, I have tried Sazer's ideas on sitting at the cello in my own private studio, and have been very pleased with the results. Several students who tended to play with the cello crammed too close to the left shoulder and with their head down have had quite a turnaround in comfort and in tone production with the new sitting position and with the activation of their lower body in the process of playing. Some students have resisted these new and unorthodox ideas, but I keep hammering away at them, because they all sound better and look better when they try it out. These new habits, like all habits, require time and repetition, but I am quite sold on many of Sazer's ideas. There is much more rewarding reading in the rest of Sazer's book: his helpful thoughts on bowing that follows the natural spiral and arc motions of the body and arms is very important (see "Angle of Bow," from demonstration 20, reproduced above), and he has some unique ideas on the left hand that are worth exploring as well. I heartily recommend this fascinating book to any cello teacher, who, like me, appreciates people who think outside the box.

David Holmes is currently cello instructor with the Augsburg College Suzuki program. In the summer, David teaches at institutes in Oregon, South Dakota, and Minnesota. He has a doctor of musical arts degree in cello performance and has been principal cellist in the Bloomington and Minnetonka symphonies as well as a cellist in the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. 𝄽