Clinic: Keep the "Fun" in the Fundamentals

presented by Kirk Moss
reported by Faith Farr

It was 9:00 in the morning at the beginning of our Clinic; teachers were greeting each other and chatting, finding a spot to sit, and wondering if anything had started yet. We knew Kirk Moss was our first speaker, and he was at the front of the room getting ready. The energy of getting reacquainted was high.

"Since you have them, you may as well get them out," Kirk said. And he took out his violin and started playing: D-D-D—, G-G-G—, D-D-D—, A-A-A—. "Join in," he said as he walked around the room playing. Gradually we figured out that class had started and we joined in playing his ostinato. "Add the third of the chord." "Play in another octave." "Play the root, third or fifth." "Find a melody that fits with this." (Think Beethoven.) Without anybody having time to get into "school mode" Kirk had us playing and improvising and listening to the harmony, so engaged in the music that it was impossible to take notes.

Kirk helped us feel the flexibility needed in the bow hold. Rest your forearm on a table or flattened music stand with your hand dangling over the edge and the bow tip pointing to the ceiling (bow tip pointing to the floor for German bow hold). Now write your name or address on the ceiling with your bow tip. Feel the freedom in your wrist and fingers, and the softness of your bow hold (no gripping).

Develop freedom in the bow stroke with jump-pinch-scoop at the tip, frog, upper or lower half.

Develop left-hand freedom for shifting using the one-finger scale (shift for every note). Violin, viola and cello play the G scale with finger 3; basses use finger 2.

Make a round trip to the harmonic and back again. Make multiple round trips with no finger weight at all. Then feel the special "wood magnet: between thumb and finger to add just enough finger weight to sink into the string, but keep the arm doing the round-trip motion. You have just started vibrato. Practice vibrato by playing a scale changing from no vibrato to lots of vibrato on alternating notes.

Be a good ensemble player — give your "dumb neighbor" a nod/signal when you are supposed to come in. (Of course *you* know when to come in, but your neighbor isn't as smart as you and needs you to help them.)

In a running passage of even notes (like *Devil's Dream*), use various uneven rhythmic patterns and reversed bowing to develop control to keep it really even.

Listen to the ensemble. Kirk tapped one person on the shoulder giving them permission to play out of tune or with a goofy rhythm. Can you tell who it is?

Do you keep your bow obeying the One Inch Rule? Not only do you have to be going up and down with the section, but also the part of your bow has to be within 1 inch of everyone else in the section.

Can you survive the Musical Assassin? As we played *Dance of the Tumblers*, Kirk walked swiftly through the room trying hard to mess us up — banging stands, taking the music away and putting it back, twirling the stands around, talking loudly. Our focus on our own playing and how we fit into the ensemble certainly sharpened up with that experience!

Kirk did spend a little bit of time talking to us about his philosophy of teaching. He firmly believes that everything that can be taught in a private lesson can also be taught in a class (and vice-versa). Our challenge is to find mini-games — teaching devices — that can accomplish that. In no other school discipline (math, science, geography, sports) do we tell students that they must have a tutor (private teacher) in order to successfully master the subject. Students with school string lessons should graduate being able to play with good sound, with elements of maturity in their technique, and with the skill to enjoy playing in church or for their family.

Kirk recommends disguising repetition so that you don't do anything the same way more than 3 times in a row. For instance, the mystery person who is playing out of tune can change; students can take turns being the leader. Students can partner each other — one helping the bow to stay straight while the other plays for example.

Kirk strongly encouraged us to teach theory with activity — either with the instrument or singing. As an example, he had us sing solfege with a few tracks from the *Melody (Solfege)* CD of the *MLF Verbal Association Skills Program* by James O. Froseth and Albert Blaser, available from www.giamusic.com. Each track has a light pop backup that is very kid-friendly. The tracks are in pairs — imitate and associate. The imitate tracks are call-and-response with a singer singing a 4-6 note melodic fragments with solfege syllables followed by just the back-up for you, the listener, to sing and repeat. The associate tracks are call and response with a keyboard instead of the singer. The idea is that you learn the solfege syllables on the imitate tracks, and test yourself on the associate tracks. For anyone who would like to do solfege in class but doesn't feel comfortable singing themselves, this is a great resource.

Kirk's final advice — start class, not on time, but early, with a fun activity that none of your students will want to miss, for example your D blues improv segment. Your students will learn by example that it's not enough to be on time; if they are not ready early they will miss out. Kirk's presentation was certainly a great example of how you can just start class and get everyone fully engaged without any pleading, cajoling, scolding, or even announcing that it's time to start.

Kirk Moss is Assistant Professor of Music at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He is a Doctoral Fellow in Music Education at the University of Florida (Gainesville), and chair of the 2006 National Orchestra Festival.

Faith Farr teaches cello at MacPhail Center and her home studio in North Oaks. She has served as editor of String Notes since 1997.

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