

MARY WEST PEDAGOGY TALK SESSION

by Elizabeth Ericksen

The Mary West Pedagogy Talk Session on January 27 was very successful. Twenty-one people attended, representing the memberships of MNSOTA and SAM (Suzuki Association of Minnesota). Mary is an inspiration. Her vivacity and wisdom communicate in every word. Mary structured her presentation around several issues of technique. She gave her ideas and then asked for suggestions or additions.

Chin Rest/Shoulder Pad

Start with just a sponge for youngsters. Then as they grow you can add to fill in the space. She suggests adding evenly below and above the violin. So a student with a very long neck may need a taller chin rest in addition to a shoulder pad.



Left Hand Pinky

Start early to keep the pinky curved, as this is a difficult habit to fix once it becomes ingrained. This is the habit of placing the pinky with a straight middle knuckle. Encourage the student to place the pinky on the nail side of the fingertip and keep the knuckle in, which is at the base of the pinky. Another way of thinking about this is to keep the knuckles at the base of the fingers more parallel to the fingerboard.

Left Thumb

Work to keep a circle between the thumb and 1st finger. She suggested have students hold something soft there to keep the thumb from collapsing inward. One teacher suggested holding a small tootsie roll; (if the student keeps it in they get to keep the tootsie roll). Another teacher suggested gluing pom-poms together to form a soft caterpillar. Mary has a mirror in her studio positioned so she can keep an eye on the left thumb at all times. She also said that sometimes the thumb goes under the violin when students start vibrato.

Bowing Parallel to the Bridge

Place a white strip of paper around the middle of the violin and have the student follow that with their bow. Several teachers suggested that if you look between the stick

and hair of the bow and try to stay even with the end of the fingerboard, the bow will be straight.

Playing at the Frog

Bow from the shoulder. Have the student try playing with only thumb, 1st and 4th fingers at the frog to learn to balance the bow with the pinky.

Right Hand 1st Finger Gripping

Try wrapping scotch tape around the outer knuckle.

Vibrato

For a slower vibrato, have the student concentrate on the first joint being flexible. Someone suggested practicing pendulum exercises if the upper arm

is tense.

Spiccato

Steps for learning spiccato:

- 1) Bounce bow up and down on the string like a trampoline.
- 2) Add a big horizontal motion, shaped like a smile.
- 3) Use smaller and smaller motions.

Don't hold the bow too tightly. Be sure to keep the ▣ and ▽ even.

Staccato

Mary uses Sevcik *Op. 2, No. 1* – exercise #5 to learn staccato.

Finger and Bow Pressure

As finger pressure gets harder, bow pressure should get lighter. She will ask, "How do you think you can improve the tone?"

Shifting

Mary uses the following books:

- 1) Whistler – *Introducing the Positions*, books 1 and 2
- 2) Flesch – *Scale System*, Exercises #1-4
- 3) Sevcik – *Op. 8*

Intonation

Mary hears scales and arpeggios every week in a different key. She uses the Flesch *Scale System*, exercise #5. She also hears scales with the Galamian turn-around and acceleration, at quarter note = 60 – slurring the half note.

Play the entire scale slurring 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, and then 24 (slurring the dotted half).

Double Stops

Mary uses the following books:

- 1) Josephine Trott – *Melodious Double Stops*, books 1 and 2. She likes these books because they present double stops in a musical way. Each etude is like a short piece and helps develop musicality.
- 2) Sevcik – *Op. 9*
- 3) Flesch – *Scale System*, Double Stops, Exercises #6-12

When teaching octaves, she has the student start using the finger pattern 1–2–3–4. Keep all the fingers down (especially 3rd), relax the hand, and move to the next octave. After learning octaves, the student can lift the 2nd finger, but keep it right over the string.

Musicality

Mary often has students sing a phrase. They don't always like to do this but she insists and it usually has a good effect. Then she tells them that their bow is their voice and has them practice different bow speeds to get different colors.

Concluding Remarks

- Mary expects her advanced students to practice 2 hours a day.
- She emphasized the importance of repetition. Saying something once to a student will probably not be enough. Say it over-and-over and work on the problem again and again. Don't let up.
- Hear their exercises every week. If you don't hear them students will not practice them.
- Take time in lessons to teach students how to practice. If you don't show them, they may not know how to practice.

Elizabeth Ericksen, violin, was a founding member of the Sartory String Quartet and is now in her third year with Ensemble L'Autunno. She teaches violin and viola at Carleton College and MacPhail Center for Music and coaches string quartets in the Augsburg College Suzuki Talent Education program. In the summers, she is managing director and coach for the Sartory String Quartet Institute. †