Cello

Me, You, and YouTube

by David Holmes

Lately, I've been viewing a number of (mostly) famous cellists perform on YouTube, which is a wonderful instantaneous link to many great (and some not so great) performances. Since I'm eternally curious about the nuts and bolts of cello playing, I've noticed a few things that could be pertinent to our teaching about sitting at the cello, about posture in general, and about several issues related to the bow stroke.

The technical acumen and musical expression of great players whose body sizes vary from just over 5 feet tall (Ha Nan Chang, Pablo Casals) up to 6 feet 5 inches tall (Gregor Piatagorsky) is a marvel. With these cellists there is a wide spectrum of similarities and a number of differences in the technical approach to the instrument. The great players hold the cello differently as a result of their body size: Casals' left knee is literally behind his cello, and Piatagorsky's cello, like Feuermann's, is more inside both knees and the cello is more in the vertical position, which contrasts to Rostropovich's more bent end-pin horizontal cello placement. Sharon Robinson, a marvelous and smaller cellist, has her knees literally in the small arcs of the bouts, but her cello endpin makes her cello as tall as she is, so the cello, despite her size, is quite horizontal. I think, since student cellists come in all sizes and, indeed are constantly changing in size, that remaining open to variations in sitting is always important for us teachers. (Quite frankly, I'm waiting for the ergonomic day when there are no longer pegs sticking out of the G and C-string side of the cello, but that's a topic for another day.)

These variations in the way cellos are held are important, but so are the commonalities that tie these players together. Posture is so primary to all aspects of cello playing and the great players invariably remain tall in their backs, low, released, and stable in their shoulders and always maintain a balanced head position. They hardly ever look at either hand. When we need students to watch the bow, it can be done with a downward glance (sneak peek), or possibly more useful, it can be done in front of a mirror. The natural, and one could argue, *unavoidable* inclination to tilt the head forward when looking at the bow detrimentally affects the torso and shoulders and thus, the quality and ease of our playing. To show students perfect posture I have played a YouTube video of Feuermann playing the Dvorak *Rondo*, and more astonishingly, the *Spinning Song* of Popper. He never even gives a glance in the direction of his own cello. You can tell he is *listening* though, and intently, which reminds me: asking a student to close their eyes while playing can really help them listen more acutely. We are visual by nature, which at times can be a hindrance to the aural. Much more of our brain is dedicated to sight than to hearing. When I turn off the visual I often hear better, whether it's with my own playing or at a concert.

With fine players the whole arm moves the bow from frog to tip. Some teachers use the words "play from the shoulder" to initiate the down bow, and others speak of utilizing the muscles in the back like in swimming. Others focus on the "natural" swing of a loose arm, and still others point out the importance of utilizing a torso movement to initiate the down-bow. Whichever the approach — and all of these are valid — having many descriptions of similar technical issues is always helpful since each student will respond so differently to the same words.

Some great players start a down-bow at the frog in a dropped elbow position, where they are almost "touching base," or literally the forearm rests against the cello. I think this works better for people with shorter arms, for when they "touch base" their elbow doesn't drop too low (below their hand or wrist level). However, for a taller, longer armed person it might be good to do the Piatagorsky approach, which is to leave some air between the forearm and the cello at the frog. If the elbow drops too low on long-armed people (my shirts have 37 inch sleeves, so I know) there are unwanted "broken wing" effects that will bode ill for the entire length of the bow.

The upper half of the bow stroke presents some challenges for comfort and tone production. Simian-type players like my self have some advantages on the D and, especially the A-string, since we can naturally reach out further. One mistake in the upper half on a down-bow is not keeping the upper arm moving (rising) while the forearm is opening. The elbow can end up shoulder high, as long as it doesn't stay there very long. When I played for Starker years ago he focused on this point with every player in the master class that day. One helpful hint in the pursuit of the elusive straight bow on the A and D-string is to start at the frog with a swing out of the elbow and at the point where the forearm is opening, arc the upper arm out *in front* of the body. This gives a feeling of extending the arm's length, and the bow can actually feel shorter by doing this.

Power at the tip is an interesting and controversial topic, but all fine cellists do it well. Just how much (or how little) do we need to work at the tip to get a great sound? The "pouring maple syrup" on a two-foot long pancake (Phyllis Young's analogy) can help keep the bow arm in its proper alignment as it develops frog to tip. This pouring can cause a slight turn (yes, pronation) in the forearm, If I mention "pronation" to a student, however, they tend to overdo it and raise the shoulder and torque too dramatically, so I try to use other language for this issue. The "salt shaker" motion frog to tip with the bow hand (sans bow) can help

Stringfever performing *Bolero*

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2007 (Vol. 10, No. 1)

maintain the proper alignment of the upper and lower arm as it reaches out toward the tip. A slight curve upwards at the end of a down bow can help maintain tone and so can playing with flatter hair.

That's about it for now. If you want a good laugh and haven't already seen it, try YouTube: "Stringfever Bolero."

David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA National Conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2007 (Vol. 10, No. 1)