

# PETER HOWARD — PEDAGOGY TALK SESSION

reported by Faith Farr

*Last April, cellist Peter Howard gave a fascinating pedagogy session, full of anecdotes, aphorisms and detailed suggestions for practice. Throughout the 2-hour session it was obvious that he feels passionately what he said in his introduction — that teaching is a privilege; that seeing students achieve and surpass themselves is a rewarding and moving experience. Like every great teacher, his suggestions apply to every level and all instruments.*

Keep students on a piece “too long.” Learn the cello, not a bunch of pieces. You can’t play a piece any better than you can play the cello, so concentrate on learning to play the cello.

You can only learn how to perform by performing. Perform the same piece many (7 or more) times so that you learn what to expect in performance.

Teach students how to tune. Use a tuning pitch so students learn how to relate their A to the sound they hear. Then use harmonics and 5ths to tune the other strings. Don’t tune softly — use your tuning time to hear the sound of your instrument in the hall. After you have tuned, use the “lie detector” feature of electronic tuners to find out how close you were. Using only the needle gauge to tune trains the eye, not the ear.

“It’s better to be sharp than out of tune.” Most orchestras play sharper than 440. When playing with orchestra, be sure of your pitch — don’t try to adjust to the clarinet or violins or whatever section may have strayed from the central pitch.

Use the “tunable” notes to play in tune. The tunables are C, G, D, and A because they resonate with the open strings.

Practice intonation with a full sound. Be clear. Don’t hide. Use a metronome to make sure you don’t go faster than you can hear.

The left thumb should be behind 2, or between 2 and 3. It is a balancer and a position keeper.

Left hand weight comes from ceiling to floor. Practice “thunks” as your fingers flop / plop onto the string from a foot above. At first, keep your thumb above the string. Then let thumb go behind the neck while the fingers thunk, but don’t squeeze! From the thunk position, light quick motions are easy.

The left arm hangs on the fingers like a coat on a coat hanger.

To find the correct left elbow height, extend your arm out to the side from your shoulder. Then fold your arm over to grab the neck. In lower positions, put

your thumb on top to help find the elbow height.

To learn shifting, use a tennis ball to glide up and down the string. Or use a “magic carpet” felt pad. When shifting with a finger, be on the side of the string.

The enemy of shifting is friction. Many students naturally try the wrong way to shift — with a squeezing LH and a light bow.

To be accurate in shifting — know your positions. “Freticize” your fingerboard. Beware that fingerboard tapes develop the eye and not the ear.

When shifting, know which string, which finger, and which bow stroke. The answer to each question can be “same,” “old” or “new.” For instance the shift might be on the same string, old finger and old bow.

For back extension, start in closed position and straighten out finger 1 as if you are pointing at your ear. Then put 1 down on a funny part of the finger. To get a good finger 1 shape, start with a fingered octave, and then reduce to an extension. Your finger 1 will be less straight in the extension.

Tone is produced by weight, speed, and point of contact. The “fringe benefits” to sound are vibrato, angle of hair and ringing sound. Use vibrato to increase a forte. See Galamian’s *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching* for an explanation of the angle of hair to the string. At the frog, the hair is angled, but at the tip, you must roll the bow to use the full flat hair or sound at the tip will be weak with only 6 hairs. The ringing sound of tunable notes increases the power of sound.

The tip is the strongest part of the bow — because it is hardest to bend the stick at the tip.

For rhythmic bow exercises, use a metronome, but make it challenging. For instance, instead of playing exactly with the metronome, set the metronome so you have

to play 2 against the metronome’s 3 to be at the speed you want.

Think of thumb on the bow like a railroad bumper — it is strong, firm and springy. The bumper resists the weight of the railway cars that are shunted onto the siding. The railway cars (bow fingers) push on the bumper; the bumper (thumb) does not push on the railway cars.

Engage the string with the bow hair. Use arm weight from above, not weight against the thumb.

For a power change of bow on the C string — pull the down-bow behind you, deliberately allowing the bow to be crooked to the string, in order to maintain the bend in your elbow and have the strength of your whole arm, not just the forearm ready to start up-bow at the tip. Practice a 6-count bow: down-bow *p* at the tip diminuendos to *p* at the frog.

At the tip, use fingers 3 and 4 to tug the bow towards the heel of your hand. This gives you the power to bend the stick at the tip without p...ing. (Peter says he will spell the “p word” p-r-o-n-a-t-e, but will not say it. He feels we all p... enough without trying to. Learning to get power in other ways is more important.

Always play audibly. “Piano” is an attitude — what you might say to calm someone down on a crowded bus in Rome. To play piano, play loudly and look quiet. Don’t lighten the bow — use less bow, but stay into the string.

Phrases need a destination. Then you have a sense of direction. For phrase direction, use the 2 G’s — Go and Grow.

To avoid arbitrary vibrato, Fournier recommended practicing with no vibrato at all, but with great expression. Then practice with vibrato on everything. Then choose where and how much vibrato to use.

Alternate LH and RH exercises in prac-



tice so that you gradually build strength, but allow each hand to rest after its exercise. Don't worry about relaxing until you are strong enough to have strength in reserve. When fatigue sets in stop! and let your muscles recover. The lactic acid build-up needs to be removed. Release your LH by letting it hang by your side, or wave in the air.

"Easily" is a synonym for "correctly." The "Kilmer Rule" from Dick Kilmer — if it sounds right, it's probably right. If it sounds wrong, it's probably wrong. This is especially applicable to ornaments and trills.

The "Howard Rule" from Peter — if you are doing it and it's hard, you're probably doing it wrong. If you are doing it and it's easy, you're probably doing it right.

In a limited practice session, still cover the whole range of the cello.

Don't practice what you can already do.

But ... Once you get it right — repeat it!

The 5-step practice method:

- identify that there is a problem
- isolate where the problem is
- analyze the problem — figure out what is making it a problem (e.g.

rhythm, bowing, shifting)

- find an effective, creative, imaginative way to practice. For instance, do funny rhythms with displaced accents to help passagework become more even.
- practice!

*Faith Farr teaches cello at MacPhail Center for the Arts and her home studio. She has served as editor of this magazine since 1997. †*